

**Should I Stay or Should I Go? Exploring the Crisis of Faith Process of Former Members of
the CJLDS within the United States**

by

Kent Taylor Critchlow

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Education

School of Behavioral Sciences

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Abstract

Christians are experiencing a crisis of religious faith throughout the United States at an alarming rate, especially among millennials. For members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, there were 20 primary and secondary reasons that created a crisis of religious faith and there were 13 reasons that motivated each participant to eventually abandon their Church membership. Over 80% of the reasons why the participants left the Church were directly and indirectly tied to the Prophet Joseph Smith and to the authenticity of the Book of Mormon. The use of the Internet played a significant role in expediting a person's crisis of religious faith. Of the 13 participants in this study, nine were self-described as an atheist or being agnostic; three as a spiritualist, but not religious; and one was self-described as a Deist. In all cases, each participant felt suspicious and resentful of religions in general, and they had no desire to seek out a differing religious denomination, a phenomenon not previously documented in prior research studies. When a participant experienced a crisis of religious faith, each individual went through a transitional phase that was highlighted by Six-Stages of Religious Transition that went from questioning and then doubting Church dogma to leaving the Church by forming a new identity through self-determination with the goal of reaching a state of sovereignty or autonomy by becoming agents unto themselves. The average length of time from first questioning and doubting Church dogma to eventually leaving the Church was 6.5 years.

Keywords: crisis of faith, religion, spiritual, apostacy, family, beliefs, dogma, Internet

Dedication

I dedicate my dissertation work to my wife, Marilyn Critchlow, and to my family and friends. Marilyn is my inspiration and eternal helpmate, and is a true disciple of Jesus Christ. Thank you sweetheart for your faith and trust in me. You are the wind beneath my wings. Expressions of love and gratitude fall short for my four amazing children, Cindi, Michele, Andrew, and Mark. Words cannot express my perpetual love for each of them. A special feeling of gratitude to my loving parents, Robert T. (deceased) and Clarene Critchlow, for their example of righteousness, integrity, and life of gospel service. A special place in my heart is for my Grandmother, Anna Taylor Critchlow (deceased). She has no idea the impact she had on my life and for her endless stories of faith regarding our family heritage that enriched my life for the better, which cemented my belief in Jesus Christ, that He lives and is our redeemer. Lastly, for my extended family of 19 grandchildren and one great grandchild, and to my loving sons and daughters in-love – you are the living legacy of Christian values. Keep the faith and endure to the end.

Lastly, I dedicate this work to the many individuals who have, who are or who will experience a crisis of religious faith. I hope this work will enlighten your mind and understanding to a new level of hope and faith that Jesus Christ is the only way back to live with Him again and to have true joy, happiness, and contentment in our mortal journey on earth.

Acknowledgments

First and foremost, I need to acknowledge God as my constant companion and primary source of strength, enlightenment, and partnership throughout this process. Without His love, patience, and mercy, my life would have taken a different course away from hope and faith.

I also need to acknowledge my mentor, professor, dissertation Chairman, and friend, Dr. Richard Green, who has supported me throughout this process. I will always appreciate his love, words of encouragement, and for knowing when and what scripture to use to motivate and inspire me to complete my dissertation. Thank you from the bottom of my heart. In addition, Dr. Jama Davis, my dissertation reader, provided invaluable direction, guidance, and assistance that greatly influenced my dissertation. Thank you for your support.

In the end, no one supported me more than my wife of 47 years and counting – Marilyn Critchlow. She is the love of my life. Without her love, forgiveness, trust, and faith, my dissertation would not have been completed. Thank you from the bottom of my heart and soul. We can now start a new chapter of our lives by serving a mission together, a goal that has been in the works for over 47 years.

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List of Abbreviations

| | |
|---|-----------|
| Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints | (CJLDS) |
| Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies | (FARMS) |
| Institutional Review Board | (IRB) |
| Intelligence Quotient | (IQ) |
| Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transgender Queer Asexual Intersex | (LGBTQAI) |
| Quality of Human Conditions | (QHC) |
| Posttraumatic Stress Disorder | (PTSD) |
| Spiritual Intelligence | (SI) |

Chapter One: Introduction

Christians are experiencing a crisis of religious faith throughout the United States at an alarming rate, especially among millennials (Wahman, 2020); and adolescence and young adulthood are likely the launching points to question, doubt, reconfirm, or amend a person's religious and spiritual beliefs (Fisher, 2017; Roehlkepartain et al., 2006; Wahman, 2020). The primary purpose of this hermeneutic phenomenological approach to qualitative research was to depict the common meanings, themes, and interrelatedness that appeared cohesive as to why, what, when, and how former members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (CJLDS) experienced a crisis of faith by either leaving their religious affiliation or by questioning their belief in God. In chapter one, I provided a synopsis of the following: (a) background overview of the most relevant literature; (b) a problem statement that explained the need for the study; (c) a purpose statement that succinctly stated the focus and intention of the research study; (d) the significance of the study addressed how this research study was related to similar research inquiries; (e) the development of purposeful research questions that were derived from the problem and purpose statement; (f) a list of definitions that were relevant to the study; and (g) a succinct summary that correlated a restatement of the problem and purpose statement.

Background

The background section provided a general summary of relevant literature and how each literature reference was related from a historical, social, and theoretical perspective. Furthermore, the need for additional research on this problem is greatly needed in order to fully understand the shared experiences as to why people developed a crisis of religious faith and how awareness of their experiences can benefit others, especially from a cultural, ethnic, gender,

socioeconomic, and worldview perspective. A brief “situation to self” was explored so I could explain my motivation for conducting this research study, and how I identified philosophical assumptions such as an epistemological and axiological assessment that guided me to create unique constructivism, participatory and pragmatic paradigm assumptions to reach common themes throughout the study. Lastly, I provided a succinct and meaningful summary that showed a strong relationship and affiliation between the problem and purpose statement.

Historical Context

From a historical perspective there were a variety of factors that helped create a crisis of religious faith in people throughout previous generations. In prior generations, such factors as intellectual apostasy, doubt in the existence of God, getting personal feelings hurt, and cognitive dissonance were several of the fundamental root-causes that created the underpinning of people in the United States to lose their faith and give rise to abandoning their former belief system by adopting a new religious creed or by becoming agnostic (Barry & Nelson, 2005; Brooks, 2020; Hinderaker & O'Connor, 2015). From a lifecycle perspective, adolescence was the typical launching point to question, doubt, reconfirm, or amend a person’s religious and spiritual beliefs (Barry & Nelson, 2005; Brooks, 2020). This process of questioning and doubting a person’s religious convictions was even greater today for millennials in comparison to past generations, mainly due to the proliferation of social media platforms, podcasts or other similar Internet forums.

Many deconverts of the CJLDS in the past felt angry, duped, and betrayed as they transitioned away from the Church (Bahr & Albrecht, 1989; Fisher, 2017; Lee et al., 2017). For family members of deconverts, they found it difficult to communicate with one another and they typically avoided confrontations for fear of further alienating themselves from their loved ones

who transitioned away from their former ideals (Bahr & Albrecht, 1989; Fisher, 2017; Lee et al., 2017). Today, nearly one third of religious people in the United States will switch to another religion at some point in their life, while a minority of others will dwindle in unbelief by deconverting their faith in God (Fisher, 2017). Switching or transitioning away from a childhood religion might be a common occurrence for some people in other religious sects; however, for members of the CJLDS, regardless of the generation they grew up in, experiencing a deconversion process of a family member was a significant traumatic event that has eternal consequences.

Lastly, historically, the two principal reasons why members of the CJLDS switched their religious denomination during a crisis of religious faith were due to moral infractions and intellectual apostasy (Bahr & Albrecht, 1989; Fisher, 2017; Harty, 1996). Today, the primary reasons why former members of the CJLDS left the Church were due to doubts about religious doctrine, intellectual apostasy, and for moral transgressions (Fisher, 2017; Lee et al., 2017). In many regards, the deconversion process in comparison to former generations has been significantly sped up, likely due to the propagation of social media platforms, such as Facebook.

Social Context

In comparison to prior generations, the use and exploitation of the Internet has created social platforms for people to feel justified for either leaving or joining a new religious belief system (Avance, 2013; Buckley et al., 2021; Smith et al., 2021). From an affirmative action perspective, some social media outlets through the Internet provide religious denominations an online environment to reinforce their religious tenets, as a safeguard to opposing factions (Avance, 2013; Buckley et al., 2021; Roso et al., 2020). In contrast, access to contrary information and to other anti-forums can contribute to a crisis of faith by reconstructing a new

religious identity through an awareness of emerging ideas and belief systems that were not present in former years (Avance, 2013). For members of the CJLDS, Internet forums help support and threaten their hegemonic status quo (Avance, 2013; Roso et al., 2020). Furthermore, the Internet has provided a social forum that offers alternative views of religious and secular doctrine with unorthodox and “anti-Mormon” rhetoric that can persuade and confuse even the ardent of believers to questions their beliefs, a phenomenon that has bourgeoned in recent years.

Society, family, and close friends play an integral role when an individual goes through a crisis of religious faith, and the role of each has played a crucial function for many generations (Fisk, 2016; Worwood et al., 2020). From a social, family, and community perspective, the following principles were essential when helping a person who is trying to manage a crisis of religious faith, regardless of the era the crisis was manifested in: (a) discuss a crisis of religious faith when it first develops; (b) view the issue from the other person’s perspective, especially from the person’s perspective who is experiencing a crisis of faith; (c) discuss in private, without judgment, and in confidence; (d) do not show shock, hurt or emotional distress when a person decides to share their feelings about their crisis; and (e) the person in crisis should not surrender their beliefs or be afraid to express their viewpoint in an open and frank discussion (Fisk, 2016; Roehlkepartain, 2006; Worwood et al., 2020).

Theoretical Context

The central essence of experiencing a crisis of religious faith was theoretically defined as the process and motivational factors associated with changing a person’s religious affiliation or by abandoning their faith or belief in God. Therefore, the construction and theoretical framework of this phenomenological study was to describe the pattern and methodology of young adults, middle aged adults, and senior adults, who at one time self-identified as members of the CJLDS,

and then they subsequently experienced a religious crisis of faith, which resulted in the abandonment or rejection of that faith or in a belief of God.

Three theories were explored that played a key role in how and why people experienced a crisis of religious faith. First, the concept of truth drove the theory of cognitive dissonance, since truth is viewed as either being static or dynamic, and whether the hypothesis of religious truth validates a person's religious belief system (Albinus, 2018; Felt, 2017). Second, the theory of faith development was critical to understanding whether there was life after death, and how people made sense out of life through a secular, spiritual, and religious lens (Fowler, 1995; Haney & Rollock, 2020; Ton, 1993). Third, the theory of Spiritual Intelligence (SI), which gives meaning to a person's inner cognitive functioning with the ability to assist and motivate people to become more self-aware, how to better integrate in society, how to become more adaptive to transcendent characteristics of a person's existence; which will lead to a richer existential meaning and a mastery of spiritual perfection (King, 2008; Skrzypińska, 2021).

Situation to Self

A primary assumption during a qualitative research design is that the principle researcher can influence the outcomes and he or she is inextricably connected to each phase of the research study (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Heppner et al., 2016). I have been an active and devoted member of the CJLDS since childhood. Two of my four children, after they were married, forsook their ancestral religious denomination by aligning their faith as spiritualists with no current religious affiliation. One of the primary reasons why I decided to conduct this research study was to better understand my children's collective experiences from an ontological standpoint in comparison to others who have left the CJLDS, and to make meaning of their shared experiences by giving a rhetorical assessment of each phenomenon.

From a personal perspective, it is important to understand my top four priorities in life and how I view my duties and responsibilities as a father, husband, provider, scholar, and friend. I rank order my top four priorities in life as follows: (a) my relationship with God as His son; (b) eternal marriage and family relationships are vital; (c) Church obligations and responsibilities provide service to those in need; and (d) professional and civic responsibilities help the community in which I live in.

From a researcher perspective, I integrated all textural comments from each participant by developing an epistemological account that reflected the essence and validity of each phenomenological experience without personal bias (Moustakas, 1994). Each phenomenological experience was captured and was weighted to give importance to the varying experiences from each participant without interjecting my personal perception of their feelings or behaviors (Yuksel & Yidirum, 2015). Finally, from a data analysis perspective, I endeavored to hide my prejudices and preconceptions by giving empirical meaning to the participant's salient sentiments to wholly provide the synthesized importance of each axiological and phenomenological experience (Moustakas, 1994; Yuksel & Yidirum, 2015).

Problem Statement

In general, Christians are experiencing a crisis of faith throughout the United States at an alarming rate, especially among millennials (Scharp & Beck, 2017; Wahman, 2020). The problem was the lack of empirical qualitative research data on former members of the CJLDS that grew up in the United States as members of the CJLDS as children, and then experienced a crisis of religious faith as an adolescent or adult. As a result of this problem, there was insufficient data to fully understand the shared experiences as to why former members of the CJLDS developed a crisis of faith and how awareness of their shared experiences can benefit

others. This was especially true when it came to why there were gender, culture, ethnic, and socioeconomic differences as to why former members of the CJLDS developed a crisis of religious faith in the United States. As an extension to this problem - what caused some people to lose their faith in God, while others clung to hope that better days will come by disregarding or dismissing the concerns of others? From a different perspective, some people experienced a crisis of faith by looking to different religious denominations for answers and guidance; while others, lost faith altogether by becoming agnostic or antagonistic towards religious believers.

Overall, nearly one third of religious people in the United States will switch to another religion at some point in their life, while a minority of others will dwindle in unbelief by deconverting their faith in God (Fisher, 2017). Changing religions or abandoning belief in God might be a common occurrence for other congregants; however, for members of the CJLDS, experiencing a deconversion process of a family member was a significant traumatic event that has eternal consequences. From an empirical and literature evaluation, there were many psychosocial impacts of leaving 'high-control' religions such as Catholicism, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, Jehovah's Witnesses, or Southern Baptists after experiencing a crisis of religious faith. They were as follow: (a) intellectual apostasy concerns; (b) self-worth issues; (c) loneliness from prior social networks; and (d) being perceived as a victim after doubting the trustworthiness of religious dogma and doctrines (Albrecht & Bahr, 1983; Avance, 2013; Fisher, 2017; Scharp & Beck, 2017; Wahman, 2020). Finally, the methodological congruence of this research design depicted the common meanings, themes, and interrelatedness that appeared cohesive as to why, when, what and how former members of the CJLDS experienced a crisis of faith by leaving their religious affiliation or by losing their belief in God.

Purpose Statement

The purpose statement for this hermeneutic phenomenological approach to qualitative research study was to provide a holistic interpretation and to describe the significant factors that likely caused members of the CJLDS within the United States to change their childhood religious affiliation and belief system by either abandoning their religious faith or by questioning their certainty in God. There were three general theories that guided this study, the theory of cognitive dissonance, the theory of faith development, and the theory of SI. All three theories described, explained, and gave meaning to the shared experiences as to why, what, when, and how participants left their childhood religious denomination.

When a person starts to question and then doubt their religious or spiritual beliefs, a new transcendent level of enlightenment or confusion typically starts to formulate within their cognitive and behavioral formation, which typically produces new philosophies and belief systems to emerge (Haney & Rollock, 2020; Millwee-Welch, 2021). The act of conversion and deconversion was a personal process that archetypally starts as a gradual progression from childhood to adulthood (Haney & Rollock, 2020; Millwee-Welch, 2021). On the other hand, it can also be abrupt and divergent, and be considered a major life-changing experience that separates adolescents and young adults from their ancestral and historical cultural belief systems (Haney & Rollock, 2020; Millwee-Welch, 2021). The central apex of this study was to discover and describe the central themes of each phenomenon until a point of saturation was met to confirm the congruence of each shared experience in order to show validity and reliability by resolving the problem statement, and to give meaning and understanding to the purpose statement.

Significance of the Study

The significance of this study was that Church leaders of all religious denominations can better know and understand the central themes and rationale as to why their parishioners lost faith in the tenets of their religious beliefs by seeking shelter from other dissimilar denominations for spiritual guidance. In addition, Church leaders have a duty and moral responsibility to know why, when, what, and how their congregants lost faith in God by becoming agnostic. Furthermore, generational religious families will likely seek for answers when their children abandon their ancestral religious beliefs for other religious affiliations or when they stop believing in God as a source of transcendence from worldly sorrows. If Church leaders know and understand the essential epistemological and ontological dynamics as to how their congregants lost their religious faith, then knowing how to resolve a parishioner's crisis of faith is likely one of the first steps towards prevention of a crisis. Likewise, developing new and innovative Christian interventions that can resolve a crisis of faith, might prove beneficial for the advancement of positive spiritual and cognitive interventions that could be administered at the family and parish level.

This qualitative research design gave deeper substance and more meaning as to why former members of the CJLDS experienced a crisis of religious faith by using a naturalistic approach to how participants view religion and spirituality, how they interpret events, how they acquire meaning from conversations with other people that have gone through similar experiences, and what the phenomena in terms of the meaning they bring to them (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Rockinson-Szapkiw & Spaulding, 2014). Furthermore, this qualitative research study described events that flowed from philosophical and psychological assumptions through an interpretive lens, and then went on to the procedural process that involved studying and

analyzing human problems of behavior (Rockinson-Szapkiw & Spaulding, 2014). The main aspect of this research study was to compare and contrast participants' phenomena to specific research questions by forming meaning, understanding, and awareness to their shared experiences (Boden & Eatough, 2014; Creswell & Poth, 2018; Curthbertson et al., 2020). To sum up, the significance of this research study, helped shed additional illumination on the primary origins as to why some people lost their faith in God, while others clung to hope that better days will come by switching their religious belief system or by becoming a spiritual humanist.

Research Questions

Research questions were formulated using three general categories of hypotheses: (a) descriptive questions; (b) questions exploring differences; and (c) questions that show relationships (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Heppner et al., 2016). In addition, each question was developed to express relationships between constructs that can be measured, explained, and validated to confirm creditability and viability to the research design (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Curthbertson et al., 2020; Heppner et al., 2016). In addition to the types of research questions used in the study, the researcher analyzed the interviews from each participant to develop descriptive themes in an exploratory manner (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Curthbertson et al., 2020; Rockinson-Szapkiw & Spaulding, 2014). Ultimately, each research question was prepared to provide direction for the study as a means to adjust, if necessary, the design and methodology of the research study (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Heppner et al., 2016). In general, each research question was framed to create data that can be empirically tested and validated to demonstrate creditability, reliability, and trustworthiness (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Curthbertson et al., 2020; Heppner et al., 2016; Rockinson-Szapkiw & Spaulding, 2014). For this research study,

descriptive data points, exploring differences, and relationship questions were designed to depict the common meanings, themes, and interrelatedness that appear cohesive as to why, when, what, and how former members of the CJLDS experienced a crisis of faith by either leaving their religious affiliation or by questioning their belief in God.

The below four research questions were derived from the problem and purpose statements and were designed to provide philosophical and pragmatic paradigms to describe the meaning, processes, perceptions, and behaviors as to why former members of the CJLDS changed their religious belief system or how they lost their faith in God.

RQ1: How would former members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints describe their crisis of religious faith and were there distinguishable similarities or differences to each experience (difference question)?

There are a plethora of antecedents to the indicators and manifestations of a crisis of religious faith that have been described by former members of the CJLDS and for Christians as a whole (Kofink, 1991; Wink et al., 2019). Some of the similarities were as follows: (a) drug misuse; (b) lack of meaningful prayer; (c) questioning of Church doctrine; (d) adopting new friends with persuasive secular moral values and negative or fatalistic belief systems; (e) high social and intellectual standing; (f) adaption of cognitive dissonance to justify prevailing sophisticated worldly views; and (g) moral indifferences were just a few examples of how and why some members of the CJLDS first started to question and then doubt their prior religious belief systems.

RQ2: What type of experiences and factors will the participants describe as having primarily, secondarily, and tertiarily contributed to their crisis of religious faith (descriptive question)?

There were several experiences and factors that can lead towards a crisis of religious faith, and most factors can be collated into three essential elements as it relates to spiritual and religious development or to a decline of religious philosophies (Chifeche & Dreyer, 2019; Gray, 2018; Haney & Rollock, 2020). First, faith is manifested through extrinsic values such as family and community associations (Gray, 2018; Haney & Rollock, 2020). Second, faith is exhibited through intrinsic values such as meditation, reflection, prayer, internal convictions, and dedication to keeping covenants (Baker, 2012; Haney & Rollock, 2020). Lastly, the ultimate way for members of the CJLDS or for Christians to sustain their religious faith during a crisis is to develop a Christ like love for mankind that will transcend a person's ego and carnal desires (Baker, 2012).

RQ3: What constructs or events will be related for each participant that played a key factor in how the crisis of religious faith was either resolved or is ongoing (relationship question)?

There were several constructs or significant events that can play a decisive factor when a person leaves one religious denomination for another; when a former religious person decides to become a spiritualist without joining a religious denomination or becomes agnostic; and how a crisis of faith was resolved. First, a crisis of religious faith is not necessarily an act of moving away from God, as much as it is an act of becoming closer to the God of their choice (Hout & Fischer, 2003; Hwang et al., 2022; Tervo-Niemelä, 2021). Second, research has revealed that if members of a religious sect develop a high level of commitment to their existing religious system, it will help them become insulated from potential negative feedback from contradictory religious information, even if the information is given by a person of authority (Chifeche & Dreyer, 2019; Schultz, 2019; Tice, 2001). Third, if a person develops an internal and spiritual

connection to a religion denomination, they will be better prepared to handle a potential crisis of religious faith when it develops (Chifeche & Dreyer, 2019; Schultz, 2019; Trueman & Gould, 2017).

RQ4: What specific factors or events will the participants identify as having predominately contributed to how it made them feel about themselves and how will it affect their interfamily and intrafamily relationships (descriptive and relationship question)?

Social media, and religious and spiritual webpages through the Internet provide a forum for adolescents and young adults to explore a wide variety of divergent religious and spiritual philosophies; and all of which can impact how and why a person feels about themselves, their families, and towards their close friends and associates (Avance, 2013; Buddenbaum, 2014; Roehlkepartain et al., 2006). Former members of the CJLDS face a crossroad when trying to maintain a close relationship with their parents and extended family members who are still members of the CJLDS (Fisher, 2017; Fisk, 2016; Worwood et al., 2020). Family and close friends play an integral role when an individual goes through a crisis of religious faith, and how they interact and show either support or disapproval with a person's decision will largely determine the future relationship with them.

Definitions

The following is a list of definitions that have unique meaning to this hermeneutic phenomenological approach to qualitative research as it pertains to depicting the common meanings, themes, and interrelatedness that appear cohesive as to why, when, what, and how former members of the CJLDS experienced a crisis of faith by either leaving their religious affiliation or by questioning their belief in God.

1. ***Apostasy*** starts when members of a religious denomination start to question Church authority on issues such as abortion, gay and lesbian rights, same-sex marriage, women holding the priesthood, the principles of Sabbath day worship, and the right to drink alcohol and smoke differ from religious doctrine. Once members choose secular or other religious values over their current religious guidelines, they place themselves on the road to apostacy and disfellowshipment (Fisher, 2017; Hinderaker, 2017; Scott, & Petersen, 2018).
2. ***Atheist*** is a person that either abandoned their belief in a biblical God or their original beliefs included no life after death, no supreme being, and they purely believe in a scientific creationist theory of evolution (Gent, 2018; Langston et al., 2020; Thiessen & Wilkins-Laflamme, 2017).
3. ***Cognitive Dissonance*** is the process of causing a person to question their religious belief system and faith in a specific religious denomination (Fisher, 2017).
4. ***Crisis of Religious Faith*** will be generally defined as the transition process of changing a person's religious affiliation or by abandoning their faith or belief in God (Tice, 2001; Toscano, 2008).
5. ***Deconverting*** is when a Church member announces their removal or disassociation with their former Church (Fisher, 2017).
6. ***Dimensions of Religiosity*** can be dissected into a minimum of six dimensions: (a) traditional orthodoxy; (b) spiritual commitment; (c) Church commitment; (d) religious behaviors; (e) Christian behaviors; and (f) home religious observance (Cornwall et al., 1986; Oaks, 2021).
7. ***Disaffiliation*** involves two dimensions - officially ending one's membership or to cease attending all Church activity (Fisher, 2017).
8. ***Discursive Dissent*** is to challenge Church doctrine and it can place nonconformists in jeopardy of losing their Church membership (Hinderaker, 2017; Hinderaker & O'Connor, 2015).

9. **Doubt** is the antithesis of hope and is the precursor to fear and sin, which creates people to wonder if the religious path they are on will bring them back to God (Milona, 2019; Puffer, 2018; Upenieks, 2021).

10. **Faith** is putting the principles of hope and belief to practice through action, by doing and by following righteous principles of the gospels as a means to overcome doubt and despair (Dollahite et al., 2019; Seligman & Reichenberg, 2014; Wahman, 2020).

11. **Faith Development** is the primary description that defines how people make sense out of life through a secular, spiritual, and religious lens (Fowler, 1995; Haney & Rollock, 2020; Ton, 1993).

12. **Hope** is the antithesis of doubt and is simply a desire to want to change for the betterment of self (Hoover-Kinsinger, 2018; Webb, 2004).

13. **Knowledge** is developed through experiential learning through the intervention of the faith process (Kelman, 2019; Morales, 2022; Seligman & Reichenberg, 2014).

14. **Opposing** is to actively combat and to organize opposition against one's former Church or religious belief system (Fisher, 2017).

15. **Quality of Human Conditions** demonstrates a positive relationship that higher social status, IQ level, and more education prominence a person achieves, the less religious they become (Mercier et al., 2018; Scharp & Beck, 2017; Webster & Duffy, 2016).

16. **Questioning** is when a person probes their religious belief systems in a meaningful way (Fisher, 2017).

17. **Reconfigure** is when religious doubts cannot be positively reconfigured. As a result, Church activity and membership will likely change (Fisher, 2017).

18. **Religious Transition** is when a person leaves one religious denomination for another or is the process of transitioning away from a highly structured religious denomination (Hout & Fischer, 2003; Hwang et al., 2022; Tervo-Niemelä, 2021).

19. **Self-Actualization** can be reached through faith, prayer, and meditation, as members of Christ's Church achieve a closeness with God through a community network of similar religious congregants as they transition to a greater self-awareness and self-worth (King & DeCicco, 2009; Paul & Treschuk, 2020).

20. **Spiritual Intelligence** (SI) is the capacity to transcend the physical and material; the ability to experience heightened states of consciousness; the ability to sanctify everyday experience; and the ability to utilize spiritual resources to solve complex problems (Emmons, 2000).

21. **Spiritualism** is an emotional and behavioral connection tied to a higher meaning of life, which is distinctly separate in comparison to a person's need or unwillingness to belong to a religious sect (Borges et al., 2021; Wink et al., 2019).

22. **Truth** is the manifestation of enlightenment through a physicalist or a religious category of illumination (Albinus, 2018; Krems et al., 2017; Ward, 2013). A true test of truth is whether a manifestation of truth and a statement of truth can stand the test of time and is the same yesterday, today, and tomorrow (Albinus, 2018).

23. **Understanding** is simply knowing how and when to use a person's acquired secular and religious knowledge for the betterment of self and humanity (Lewin, 2017; Sloman & Rabb, 2016).

Summary

What causes members of the CJLDS to change their religious affiliations and belief systems in a biblical God is in many ways an enigma and is shrouded with the complexities of

gender differences, cultural and ethnic variations, and socioeconomic distinctions to name just a few. The problem is the lack of empirical qualitative research data on former members of the CJLDS that grew up in the United States as members of the CJLDS as children, and then experienced a crisis of religious faith as an adolescent or adult. This problem is especially true when it comes to why there are gender, culture, ethnic, and socioeconomic differences as to why former members of the CJLDS developed a crisis of religious faith in the United States. The problem statement will propel the emphasis of the research design to depict how and why the common meanings, themes, and interrelatedness of participants that experienced a crisis of religious faith left their religious affiliation or lost their belief in God.

The purpose statement of this hermeneutic phenomenological approach to qualitative research study, described the significant factors that caused former members of the CJLDS within the United States to change their childhood religious affiliation and belief systems by either abandoning their religious faith or by questioning their certainty in God. In general, three general theories guided this study: (a) the theory of cognitive dissonance; (b) the theory of faith development; and (c) the theory of SI. All three theories exhibited the cause and effect as to why and how participants left their childhood religious denomination.

Members of the CJLDS and Christians in general are experiencing a crisis of religious faith throughout the United States at an alarming rate (Fisher, 2017, Roehlkepartain et al., 2006; Wahman, 2020). Adolescence is typically the launching point to question, doubt, reconfirm, or amend a person's religious and spiritual beliefs. Sustaining and retaining a person's religious faith is typically composed of two essential elements. First, faith is manifested through extrinsic values. Second, faith is exhibited through intrinsic values. On the other hand, dissenting or challenging Church doctrine is viewed as a primary challenge to the dogma of religious

hierarchy and places nonconformists in jeopardy of losing their Church membership and is viewed by many as an act of apostasy. This research design shed additional insight as to why and how members of the CJLDS first started to lose their religious self-identity and by outlining the key accelerants that eventually caused each participant to by abandon their religious faith or by losing their belief in God.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

This literature review provides descriptive meaning to the significant factors and dynamics that caused some disenfranchised and former members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (CJLDS) within the United States to change their childhood religious affiliation and belief systems by either abandoning their religious faith or by questioning their belief in God. In general, Christians are experiencing a crisis of religious faith throughout the United States at an alarming rate, and many Christians are either abandoning their former beliefs by becoming spiritualists without joining a traditional Christian denomination or they are questioning their religious beliefs and views on whether there is a God (Scharp & Beck, 2017; Wahman, 2020). Furthermore, some subjugated CJLDS members search for answers and guidance from anti-Church platforms and social networks; while others, lose their religious faith altogether by becoming agnostic or antagonistic towards religious believers by feeling victimized due to their religious transformation by their family and former close friends who still belong to their former religious congregation (Avance, 2013; Scharp & Beck, 2017; Wahman, 2020). Researchers have theorized that religions must evolve in order to maintain dominance and relevancy over their congregates (Oaks, 2021; Preda, 2019). This is done by building a sense of Church community for its members at all age levels, which in many ways is more influential and binding in comparison to a person's religious and spiritual beliefs in a specific Church dogma (Haney & Rollock, 2020; Millwee-Welch, 2021; Preda, 2019). Those suffering from a religious crisis of faith should not suffer alone nor should they feel ostracized for feeling ambivalent to what they formally cherished and believed in.

Conceptual and Theoretical Framework

The concept and theoretical framework of this phenomenological study was to describe the scheme of young adults, middle aged adults, and senior adults, who at one time self-identified as members of the CJLDS, and then had self-described experiences that led to a religious crisis of faith, which resulted in the abandonment or rejection of that faith. From a theoretical perspective, three theories and one conceptual representation were used to help illustrate the theory and development of a crisis of religious faith. They were as follows: The theory of cognitive dissonance; the theory of faith development, and the theory of spiritual intelligence. Additionally, the concept of religious faith development from a life-cycle perspective was used to illustrate the two key components of spiritual and religious development of faith as being mutually inclusive for a person's reliance upon the good word of God. Finally, one of the key criteria for the selection of research participants was that they grew up as members of the CJLDS from childhood and then abandoned, rejected or were excommunicated from their religious affiliation due to a crisis of religious faith when they were either an adolescent or adult.

Theory of Cognitive Dissonance

The central essence of experiencing a crisis of religious faith will be generally defined as the process of changing a person's religious affiliation or by abandoning their faith or belief in God. Pertaining to the theory of cognitive dissonance, it can be rationalized that when a senior leader in a religious denomination makes a statement that is perceived to be contrary to canonized doctrine or when they make a modern day interpretation of a gospel principle found in the Bible or in other religious texts, it may cause a person to question their religious belief system and faith in a specific religious denomination (Tice, 2001; Toscano, 2008). Furthermore,

when religious leaders modernize gospel principles to fit a particular generation or worldview perspective, it may cause people to question the foundation of their faith and question the notion and validity of truth being the same yesterday, today and tomorrow (Felt, 2017; Tice, 2001; Toscano, 2008). Likewise, when new revelation from senior Church leaders supersedes traditional gospel principles, it may cause some congregants to question the authority of current Church leaders to former Church leaders regarding the divinity of old verses new doctrinal tenets of Church policy and guidelines (Albinus, 2018; Tice, 2001). Conversely, some congregants want and expect Church leaders to receive new revelation and guidance for their unique generation, which may cause some Church members to question the validity and motive of new revealed doctrine and guidelines by creating the foundation of a crisis of religious faith (Albinus, 2018; Tice, 2001; Toscano, 2008). Moreover, doubt, dissention, and conflict emerge in some religious members when former doctrine is cast in a new light due to the availability of social media platforms that may or may not use empirical research to fully explain the dissonance in how revelation and truth emerged to form updated or prevailing religious principles and doctrine (Albinus, 2018; Felt, 2017; Tice, 2001).

The concept of truth drives the theory of cognitive dissonance, since truth is viewed as either being static or dynamic, and whether the hypothesis of religious truth validates a person's religious belief system (Albinus, 2018; Felt, 2017). For some former members of the CJLDS, truth is viewed as being dynamic, and it should be adaptive and malleable to modern changes of moral values. As a result, a crisis of religious faith can be directly and indirectly connected to cognitive dissonance, since new concepts and ideas may challenge traditional rituals and practices, and in some circumstances, a number of Church congregants begin the process of cognitive dissonance by challenging Church doctrine and current Church leadership practices.

Theory of Faith Development

The theory of faith development as elaborated by Fowler and Ton (1995 & 1993) is critical to understanding why a person makes sense of the purpose of life and whether there is life after death. Faith is the primary description that defines how people make sense out of life through a secular, spiritual, and religious lens (Fowler, 1995; Haney & Rollock, 2020; Ton, 1993). Faith is a dynamic occurrence and it is comprised of values, morals, life images, spiritual and religious experiences, secular values and belief systems, and it becomes amalgamized in a person's motivation and commitment to act as a guide to the direction they will take or diverge from as they advance and morph through their various life stages (Ferguson et al., 2018; Fowler, 1995). From a worldview perspective, faith is a universal phenomenon as people make choices from the various external voices on how they will live as perceived by their faith belief practice (Ferguson et al., 2018; Fowler, 1995; Haney & Rollock, 2020). Conversely, it is just as important to understand the contrivances as to who, where, when, how and why people lose their faith in either religious, spiritual, or human environment phenomena (Ferguson et al., 2018; Fowler, 1995; Haney & Rollock, 2020). Fowler (1995) built his perspective on faith development and diminution from theorists such as Piaget, Erikson, and Kohlberg. Fowler (1995), outlined six junctures on how people cultivate meaning to their temporal existence, and then posits that there are seven stages in how people develop faith to explain their purpose and meaning of life. Likewise, when people develop a crisis of faith in religion, it may or may not impact their faith belief approach in their spirituality or in a current worldview of their human existence (Ferguson et al., 2018; Fowler, 1995). Faith can be impacted as people discovery new theories that may challenge their current religious beliefs. When religious faith is challenged, questions about

Church doctrine can turn to doubt, which can reverse the process of faith by losing hope in former belief systems.

Cognitive and emotional theories of religious faith development fixate the enhancement of religious faith experiences to specific brain activity (Chifeche & Dreyer, 2019; Ferguson et al., 2018; Haney & Rollock, 2020). This theory postulates that the brain can likely substrate religious, spiritual, and secular phenomena (Chifeche & Dreyer, 2019; Ferguson et al., 2018). The association of abstract ideas and brain reward circuitry may interact with frontal attentional and emotive salience processing, suggesting a mechanism whereby religious or spiritual doctrinal concepts may come to be intrinsically rewarding to a person's sense of wellbeing and self-fulfillment (Chifeche & Dreyer, 2019; Ferguson et al., 2018). Furthermore, brain reward circuitry may motivate behavior in religious individuals, which may guide a person to go towards or away from a specific religious denomination or to a complete abandonment of their religious faith by becoming agnostic (Chifeche & Dreyer, 2019; Ferguson et al., 2018). If people start to believe that going to Church stimulates their spiritual and secular growth, some Christians might gravitate to other religious denominations or to secular social groups to obtain internal and external rewards of self-fulfillment.

Studies have found that faith based religious communities can be a productive resource of hope to the disadvantaged in the wake of economic and political upheaval, lack of staples, and when natural disasters occur (Chifeche & Dreyer, 2019; Gray, 2018; Haney & Rollock, 2020). The poor and those suffering from poverty are more inclined to believe in God through faith for better times, and they will likely seek out Churches that will offer economic and spiritual salvation by leaving their former denominations that do not provide these types of services and support systems (Chifeche & Dreyer, 2019; Gray, 2018; Haney & Rollock, 2020). Similar to

Maslow's hierarchy of needs - safety, security, and lack of food can motivate people to seek out religious support, which begins the underpinning of finding and creating a religious belief system by cultivating faith in a particular religious denomination because an actual religious faith institution was able to provide for their basic temporal needs (Chifeche & Dreyer, 2019; Gray, 2018). Once temporal needs are met through religious support communities, some people might lose interest in faith based religious groups by going back to their former lives by withdrawing their association and membership in a particular religious denomination.

Theory of Spiritual Intelligence

Emmons (2000), identified no less than four key components of Spiritual Intelligence (SI), "the capacity to transcend the physical and material; the ability to experience heightened states of consciousness; the ability to sanctify everyday experience; and the ability to utilize spiritual resources to solve problems" (p. 19). Furthermore, empirical research has demonstrated that SI can likely be categorized as a sixth dimension of personality, in comparison to the context of the main Five Dimensions of personality (e.g., openness, extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, and neuroticism), (Emmons, 2000; Skrzypińska, 2021). Spiritual Intelligence represents a significant paradigm shift to further understand the psychological determinants of human cognitive and behavioral functioning (Emmons, 2000; King, 2008; Skrzypińska, 2021). Additionally, SI is a form of intelligence and self-awareness that is likely innate and it helps facilitate a person's ability to perform and solve complex tasks, set and obtain goals, and to achieve self-mastery and wellbeing (Emmons, 2000; Skrzypińska, 2021). People who develop a crisis of religious faith use their innate SI to make behavioral and emotional choices to enhance their level of consciousness by making appropriate selections to further their essence and meaning of life.

King (2008) interprets SI as an inner cognitive functioning with the ability to assist and motivate people to become more self-aware, how to better integrate in society, how to become more adaptive to transcendent characteristics of a person's existence, which will lead to a richer existential meaning and a mastery of spiritual perfection. A variety of spiritual practices (e.g., Buddhism, Shamanism, Hinduism, Taoism, Spiritualism), to include several influential psychological publications emphasize transformation of consciousness and self-meaning as critical variables to advance a person's spiritual development as a core personality dimension (King, 2008; Skrzypińska, 2021). Conversely, spirituality and religiosity are not one and the same; however, they have some matching characteristics that can be interpreted as either spiritual religiousness or religious spirituality, which can be conditional on whether a person views religion as the microorganism that spawned spirituality or whether spirituality is an independent personality dimension (Emmons, 2000; King, 2008; Skrzypińska, 2021). A person with deep-seated spiritual behaviors is more capable of forming and adopting religious belief systems, which can explain why many phenomena related to religiosity can be linked to a person's spiritual belief system of a supreme power (Emmons, 2000; King, 2008; Skrzypińska, 2021). For some people, developing a sense of spirituality is more fundamental to personal growth than joining a religious denomination, which can cause some people to question the need of organized religion.

Conceptual Scheme of General Religious Faith Development

Children and adolescents typically develop faith and belief in God within a family setting, and when they reach the age of adolescence, they start to question and discover for themselves their own perspective about their internal and external belief systems regarding religion and spirituality (Emmons, 2000; Haney & Rollock, 2020; Millwee-Welch, 2021). When

a person starts to doubt their religious or spiritual beliefs, a new transcendent level of enlightenment starts to formulate within their cognitive formation, which produces new philosophies and belief systems to emerge (Haney & Rollock, 2020; Millwee-Welch, 2021). The act of conversion and deconversion is a personal process that archetypally starts as a gradual progression from childhood to adulthood; however, it can also be abrupt and divergent, and be considered a major life-changing experience that separates adolescents and young adults from their ancestral and cultural belief systems (Haney & Rollock, 2020; Millwee-Welch, 2021). The process of developing a crisis of religious faith can amplify at an early age, especially as adolescents start to share their feelings and beliefs with their peers, and their awareness of religious ideas can foster doubt if their new feelings are incongruent with their prior perceptions of their religious tenets and belief systems.

Sustaining faith, especially religious faith, is composed of two essential elements as it relates to spiritual and religious development (Chifeche & Dreyer, 2019; Gray, 2018; Haney & Rollock, 2020). First, faith is manifested through extrinsic values such as family and community associations that are linked to religious and spiritual affiliations (Gray, 2018; Haney & Rollock, 2020). Second, faith is exhibited through intrinsic values such as meditation, reflection, prayer, internal convictions, and dedication to keeping covenants from belonging to a specific religious denomination (Baker, 2012; Haney & Rollock, 2020). In addition, religious and spiritual faith provides a forum for likeminded people to form associations and relationships in order to foster the perpetual and evolutionary advancement of growth to a higher being according to their perceived perceptions (Chifeche & Dreyer, 2019; Gray, 2018; Haney & Rollock, 2020). More importantly, the ultimate way for Christians to sustain their religious faith during a crisis is to develop a Christ like love for mankind that will transcend a person's ego and carnal desires

(Baker, 2012); and by enriching a person's cognitive capabilities that will enhance their transcendent self by becoming a master of their spiritual personality dimension (Baker, 2012; King & DeCicco, 2009). Once adolescents and adults start to gain friendships and relationships with their peers that believe in a slightly different version of God or to no God at all, it can start a perpetual trajectory of development away from their former belief systems by assimilating different extrinsic values that are concomitant to a different religious denomination or to a disbelief about the existence of God.

Related Literature

The ensuing related literature review will delineate why and how Christians are experiencing a crisis of religious faith throughout the United States at an alarming rate, especially within the rising generation of new adolescents and young adults (Scharp & Beck, 2017; Wahman, 2020). There are several variables that cause a crisis of religious faith with adolescents and adults - such as intellectual apostasy, doubt, spirituality over religiosity, and cognitive dissonance that can cause a crisis of religious faith to flourish, which might result in abandoning a person's former belief system by adopting a new religious creed or by becoming agnostic. Adolescence is typically the launching point to question, doubt, reconfirm, or amend a person's religious and spiritual beliefs (Chifeche & Dreyer, 2019; Scharp & Beck, 2017). Dissenting or challenging Church doctrine is viewed as a primary dispute to the dogma of religious hierarchy and places nonconformists in jeopardy of losing their Church membership (Hinderaker, 2017; Toscano, 2008). Furthermore, to stand-up and challenge long-standing religious or Church doctrine is viewed by many as challenging the word of God and is viewed as an act of apostasy (Hinderaker, 2017; Toscano, 2008). Dissent is considered by some Christian

traditionalists as being in opposition to the norms of acceptable religious behavior, and is a primary step towards developing an existential crisis of religious faith.

More research is needed to further explain the differences in developing a crisis of religious faith in the United States by using such metrics as gender differences, ethnicity, economic and social status, intergenerational divides, and by casting a vaster geographic and cultural dimension of participants. It would also be beneficial to review the experiences of converts, deconverts, and reconverts to see if their experiences follow a similar pathway, such as from pre-affiliation, affiliation, conversion, and then to deconversion or to reconversion. In addition, does the Internet provide the primary platform of deconversion and then to reconversion or does the Internet provide the forum for people to justify their doubts about their religious or spiritual identity by abandoning their former religious beliefs once they affiliate and bond with likeminded individuals that have preceded their self-awareness journey of questioning followed by doubt? The desire for cognitive and affective happiness, realignment of beliefs to fit a new purpose of life, redefining the existence of life after death, and developing a camaraderie with others from the same ilk are shared phenomenological experiences that seem to generate great interest and demand via the Internet in comparison to finding these answers from former personal associations once sought after by reaching out to religious leaders, religious communities, family, friends, and through the power of God.

There is insufficient data on this problem to fully understand the shared phenomenological experiences as to why people develop a crisis of religious faith and how awareness of their experiences can benefit others. What causes some people to lose their faith in God, while others cling to hope that better days will come by remaining committed to their religious beliefs - is still an enigma for many religious scholars. From a different perspective,

why are some people experiencing a crisis of religious faith by looking to different religious denominations for answers and guidance; while others, lose faith altogether by becoming agnostic or antagonistic towards religious believers.

Another noteworthy area for future examination through an extensive literature review would be to conduct further research on those that left the CJLDS without much controversy, as well as from those that remain within the Church, but go on being inactive and disenfranchised with Church doctrine and policies. In addition, why is it easier for some people to leave the Church without regret in comparison to those who experience significant emotional and mental anguish? Additionally, why do some people leave the Church and then return as more ardent members? Lastly, there is insufficient data on this problem to fully understand the shared and divergent experiences of former members of the CJLDS, and in Christians generally, as to why people develop a crisis of religious faith and how awareness of their collective experiences can benefit others.

Precursors to Developing a Crisis of Religious Faith

There are a plethora of antecedents to the indicators and manifestations of a crisis of religious faith that develop over the course of a person's lifecycle (Kofink, 1991; Wink et al., 2019). When religiosity is questioned, there are basic psychological mechanisms by which a person can become less religious, but grow to be more spiritual (Roberts, 2017; Wink et al., 2019). Furthermore, there are rudimentary psychological mechanism by which beliefs about God affect the structure of virtues and moral beliefs in human beings that can lead to a crisis of religious faith (Hinderaker & O'Connor, 2015; Kofink, 1991; Roberts, 2017; Wink et al., 2019). Such precursors as drug misuse, lack of meaningful prayer, questioning of Church doctrine, adopting new friends with persuasive secular moral values, negative or fatalistic belief systems,

high social and intellectual standing, and adoption of cognitive dissonance to justify prevailing sophisticated worldly views are just a few examples of how members of the CJLDS first started to question and then doubt their prior religious beliefs.

Lack of Meaningful Prayer

According to a Pew Foundation survey that was published in 2018, nearly 90% of Americans believe in God; however, only 50% of those that believe in God, believe in the God of the Bible (Belief in God, 2018). In addition, only 30% of those that believe in a biblical God, believe that God listens and answers their prayers (Belief in God, 2018; Falsetti et al., 2005; Felt, 2017). For religiously unaffiliated groups composed of atheists, agnostics or others, belief in a higher power or deity unrelated to a Christian biblical God is a common theme amongst most members (Belief in God, 2018; Falsetti et al., 2005; Felt, 2017). Conversely, for practicing Christians that believe in a biblical God and pray on a regular basis (once or more daily prayers), over 90% of active Christians believe that God directly or indirectly speaks to them through prayer and that God is a great source of strength during times of crisis or stress (Belief in God, 2018; Cornwall et al., 1986; Felt, 2017). Prayer is a basic component for most people that believe in God, and if people routinely pray to God for support and guidance, developing a crisis of religious faith can be minimized.

Traumatic Events

Immediately after traumatic events, cognitive functioning starts to disrupt and modify the processing of information, which can alter and revise a person's religious beliefs by becoming less religious and spiritual (Gray, 2018; Falsetti et al., 2005; Levers, 2012). Traumatic events can eventually lead to posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), which in time can amend a person's intrinsic religiosity by questioning the existence of a caring and loving God (DeVoe et al., 2018;

Falsetti et al., 2005; Gray, 2018). People diagnosed with PTSD are more prone to question whether there is a God, even after a single traumatic event (DeVoe et al., 2018; Falsetti et al., 2005). Additional studies have linked PTSD to communication deficiencies, decreased marriage satisfaction, diminished family interaction, and a rapid deterioration of religious practices (DeVoe et al., 2018; Straus et al., 2021). There is strong empirical evidence to suggest that PTSD causes loneliness and isolation, which weakens cognitive and religious wellbeing (DeVoe et al., 2018; Levers, 2012; Straus et al., 2021). From a pastoral leadership perspective, when trauma impacts congregants' lives, even ministers, clerics, vicars, and pastors can be negatively affected by its transference effects by becoming less effective and motivated to care for the health and welfare of their flock (Gray, 2018; Levers, 2012; Straus et al., 2021). Traumatic events, such as near death experiences, divorce, combat zone experiences, depression, and loneliness can begin the process of questioning whether there is a loving and caring God, which can directly influence whether people will remain committed to a religious denomination.

High Social and Intellectual Standing

Christians who do not attend Church on a regular basis (attend Church 12 or fewer times per year), scored lower on extraversion and agreeableness, and they were more inclined to be open to new secular and nonreligious experiences in comparison to their peers that attend Church on a regular basis (Hui et al., 2015). Furthermore, adolescents and young adults who were predisposed to the values of self-direction and self-stimulation were more inclined to abandon their religious faith by seeking greater self-awareness and spirituality once a crisis of religious faith was experienced (Hui et al., 2015; Lee et al., 2017; Worwood et al., 2020). Lastly, inactive or non-Church attendees with higher social standing within a secular community and were self-described as “intellectuals” endorse fatalistic and predestined beliefs, and they place higher

importance on social status, educational pursuits, and dominance over people, such as titles and power symbols, in comparison to those who attend Church on a regular basis (Hui et al., 2015; Lee et al., 2017; Oaks, 2021; Worwood et al., 2020). People who seek after secular titles, positions, and greater wealth, and individuals who are self-described as intellectuals, are more predisposed to lean on their own understanding and are more inclined to believe in scientific evidence of the meaning of life, rather than rely on spiritual and religious rituals and dogma for the purpose of self-fulfillment and enlightenment. Pride and the vainness of secular development at the expense of religious and spirituality maturity, can impede the growth of Spiritual Intelligence in adolescents and young adults, especially if they experience a crisis of religious faith.

Negative Belief System

People who develop negative, pessimistic, and deleterious belief systems are more likely to cultivate a religious crisis of faith (Hvidt et al., 2017; Zmigrod et al., 2019). Individuals who foster a negative belief system were less religious and were more likely to realize a disorderly and immoral lifestyle (Hvidt et al., 2017; Zmigrod et al., 2019). Negative belief systems cultivate secular, finite, and invariable epidemiological forces that gather the underpinnings of agnosticism and unhealthy lifestyle choices (Hvidt et al., 2017; Webster & Duffy, 2016). A negative attitude promotes self-image problems, self-esteem issues, and it can adversely affect a person's religious belief system, which can begin a crisis of religious faith.

Cognitive Dissonance and Analytical Thinkers

Cognitive dissonance postulates that when people experience psychological opposition to existing norms and mores, religious individuals can exhibit behaviors and attitudes that are inconsistent with their prior thoughts and beliefs (Hinderaker & O'Connor, 2015; Kofink, 1991;

Mercier et al., 2018). College students and emerging adolescents are more susceptible to experience cognitive dissonance by learning advancing critical race theories, progressive evolutionary origins of mankind, and new religious principles that can reshape their behavioral and cognitive thought processes (Kofink, 1991; Toscano, 2008). Cognitive analytical thinkers are less likely to believe in God by becoming more scientific and empirically driven to replace belief and faith systems with scientific approaches to actualities, evidences, and facts that are empirically proven (Felt, 2017; Mercier et al., 2018; Tice, 2001; Toscano, 2008). Analytical thinkers generally score higher in standardized tests and are more inclined to seek after scientific learning over religious dogma (Felt, 2017; Mercier et al., 2018; Tice, 2001; Toscano, 2008). On the other hand, people who view themselves in a positive manner and want stability and control in their lives are more prone to seek after God for answers that seem contrary to public acceptance (Felt, 2017; Hinderaker & O'Connor, 2015; Mercier et al., 2018; Tice, 2001; Toscano, 2008). From a cognitive perspective, a person is more predisposed to gravitate towards secular manifestations of truth that are empirically driven, instead of relying upon emotional or spiritual feelings that have no evidence of fact, especially when a person achieves a higher level of education. A crisis of religious faith and the pursuit of secular knowledge and attainment can be congruent to finding temporal happiness over eternal joy and self-actualization.

Substance Use and Abuse

Adolescents who experiment with drugs and alcohol, and become desensitized to the intrinsic moral decay of illegal drug use will likely lose faith in their religiosity by becoming agnostic to their former religious belief systems (Miller & Rollnick, 2013; Moscati & Mezuk, 2014). The regular use of tobacco, alcohol, or illegal drug use are significant variables that influence the level of spirituality and religiosity in adolescents, young adults, and adults in

general (Moscati & Mezuk, 2014; Wyner, 2018). When adolescents and young adults chose to stimulate their bodies with artificial elements, they start the process of desensitizing the influences of the spirit by becoming more reliant upon physical gratifications (Miller & Rollnick, 2013; Moscati & Mezuk, 2014). Physical indulgence and the inability to control a person's carnal desires can desensitize a person's ability to distinguish between their personal desires and appetites from those of the Holy Spirit.

Scriptural Contradictions and Quality of Human Conditions

Youth from the CJLDS and from the Methodist denomination took part in a study that examined their reading understanding of the Book of Mormon and Bible (Rackley & Kwok, 2016). The comparative analysis of both youth groups revealed two primary areas of concern: (a) difficulty in understanding and relating to scriptural language, and (b) perceived contradictions within scriptural verses (Hinderaker & O'Connor, 2015; Rackley & Kwok, 2016). The study revealed that most of the youth struggled with scriptural text contradictions that included intra-textual inconsistencies that created individual conflicts with the true and factual meaning of the word of God (Rackley & Kwok, 2016; Scharp & Beck, 2017). For many of the youth, what they read and personally understood from the meaning of the scriptures were different from what they heard during Church sermons, which created questions and doubts to the validity of gospel verses and whether the Bible or the Book of Mormon were actually translated correctly or were written by men for control and power (Rackley & Kwok, 2016; Scharp & Beck, 2017). Understanding the scriptures takes time, which includes developing spiritual patience and maturity; however, when scriptures become confusing to understand due to the type translation and when scriptures mean one thing to some and the opposite to others, it can become confusing to decipher the truth from a person's opinion with those in Church authority and leadership

positions. As a result of this type of scriptural confusion, some adolescents and adults chose to turn away from the written word of God by becoming more spiritual and less religious or in some cases, turning away from God altogether.

Keep Scriptures Simple and Understandable. To motivate youth and young adults to study the gospel and become more entrenched in living gospel principles, the scriptures must be simple, relevant, and understandable (Rackley & Kwok, 2016; Scharp & Beck, 2017). Many youth find the first English translation of the Bible as being difficult to read and to understand, and as a result, they lose interest in religion, and they eventually succumb to a crisis of religious faith (Rackley & Kwok, 2016; Scharp & Beck, 2017). When the King James version of the Bible was revised by many Christian scholars and theologians, a balance was attempted between accuracy and understanding of the original Hebrew and Greek texts of the Bible (Rackley & Kwok, 2016; Scharp & Beck, 2017). For novice and neophyte readers, understanding the Bible was paramount, and for many youth and adults, gaining a superficial understanding of the Bible was more important than comparing accuracy by going back to compare modern translations of the Bible to the original Hebrew and Greek texts of the Bible. Gaining a shallow understanding of God's Word will not sustain a person when the trials of life emerge, especially when their peers challenge them with conflicting ideas and concepts.

Socioeconomic Conditions Matter. The quality of human conditions (QHC) such as social status, intelligence quotient (IQ), income level, and education level - demonstrates a positive relationship that higher social status, IQ level, and more education prominence a person achieves, the less religious they become (Mercier et al., 2018; Scharp & Beck, 2017; Webster & Duffy, 2016). Losing religious faith is amplified as a person increases their cognitive ability to analyze and progress at a higher cognitive level; however, research has implied that losing

religious faith upon attainment of higher social, IQ or education status, appears more prevalent in people than in countries, likely as a result to varying variables across a variety of cultures and demographic regions (Rackley & Kwok, 2016; Scharp & Beck, 2017; Webster & Duffy, 2016). People with high QHCs become more self-reliant and less prone to rely upon God or a higher being for temporal assistance (Rackley & Kwok, 2016; Scharp & Beck, 2017). On the other hand, people with low QHCs seek after God for assistance by joining religious congregations that can provide economic and community support (Mercier et al., 2018; Rackley & Kwok, 2016; Webster & Duffy, 2016). When temporal needs are met and are exceeded, the natural desires of humankind is to progress to a higher level of social achievement without seeking out spiritual or religious nourishment from a divine source, which in some cases, separates men and women from God.

Dimensions of Religiosity

The concept of religiosity is best described as being a multidimensional phenomenon that can be dissected into a minimum of six dimensions: (a) traditional orthodoxy (Bible is the word of God, Satan is real); (b) spiritual commitment (I love God, obedience to God's word, religion is important); (c) Church commitment (Church programs and rituals are important); (d) religious behaviors (I encourage others to follow God, daily prayer, I seek God's advice); (e) Christian behaviors (I am religious in all facets of my life, I live a Christian life, I forgive and trust others); (f) home religious observance (frequency of family prayers, regularity of family scripture study, rate of recurrence of family discussions on right verses wrong) (Cornwall et al., 1986; Oaks, 2021). When a person's social and individual behaviors become incongruent with their professed multidimensional concept of religiosity, a crisis of religious faith can begin to erode their spiritual and religious beliefs regarding what is right verses what is wrong (Cornwall et al., 1986;

Fowler, 1995; Haney & Rollock, 2020; Ton, 1993). A person's religious commitment is more reflective by the friends they chose and the behaviors they manifest outside of Church and home, especially as adolescents (Cornwall et al., 1986; Fowler, 1995; Haney & Rollock, 2020; Ton, 1993). When physical desires outweigh a person's spiritual and religious belief system, a natural chasm will emerge that will start to separate a person from their prior religious tendencies since childhood. This chasm will naturally be filled with concepts, ideologies, and practices contrary to God's commandments, which will form a barrier between themselves and others who remain true to their former religious observances.

Crisis of Religious Faith

From a gender, cultural, ethnic, and age perspective, there are a variety of variables that create a crisis of religious faith as people advance along their respective lifecycles of development. Crisis of religious faith variables such as intellectual apostasy, doubt, spirituality over religiosity, and cognitive dissonance are several of the root-causes that create the seeds that may possibly mature into a crisis of religious faith that give rise to abandoning a person's former belief system by adopting a new religious creed or by becoming agnostic (Barry & Nelson, 2005; Brooks, 2020; Hinderaker & O'Connor, 2015). Adolescence is typically the launching point to question, doubt, reconfirm, or amend a person's religious and spiritual beliefs (Barry & Nelson, 2005; Brooks, 2020). When religious questions surface, most adolescents and young adults believe it is their duty to raise their concerns to Church leadership, to their family and friends, and they believe that dissent is ordained of God and is necessary to keep the Church current and aligned with social and political issues of their generation; which in some cases, causes turbulences and a rippling effect throughout the Church's congregation (Fowler, 1995; Ton, 1993; Toscano, 2008). Dissent to some people is a form of questioning, while to others, it is an

act of apostacy, and is an expression of disharmony with Church doctrine and practices. When differences cannot be resolved by promoting change to meet their expectations, then some people feel it is their duty and responsibility to reject their former faith and belief system by resolving their differences from outside the Church verses as an active or inactive member.

Religious Belief Systems are Questioned

From a cognitive and behavioral perspective, people develop a crisis of faith regarding their religious and spiritual beliefs in at least four fundamental pathways (Le Poidevin, 2021; Scharp & Beck, 2017; Wahman, 2020). First, people develop a faith crisis that moves their external and internal belief systems from faith to agnosticism (Hinderaker & O'Connor, 2015; Le Poidevin, 2021; Wahman, 2020). Second, people experience a life-altering incident that fundamentally transforms their former agnosticism to a spiritual and religious awakening (Le Poidevin, 2021; Scharp & Beck, 2017). Third, religious beliefs are challenged by modifying or altering former religious beliefs to a new religious ideology (Le Poidevin, 2021; Scharp & Beck, 2017; Wahman, 2020). Fourth, people emerge from humanism to a mystery of enigmatic exploration (Le Poidevin, 2021; Wahman, 2020). People can either be acted upon or act upon others by either drawing closer to God or away from His presence. The choices people make are largely based upon their level of commitment and devotion to their former or current belief schemes.

Discursive dissent from members of the CJLDS incur several risks to their membership and endearing association with their family, friends and community (Hinderaker, 2017; Hinderaker & O'Connor, 2015; Le Poidevin, 2021). Dissenting or challenging Church doctrine is viewed as a primary challenge to the dogma of Church religious hierarchy and places nonconformists in jeopardy of losing their Church membership (Hinderaker, 2017; Hinderaker &

O'Connor, 2015). To stand-up and challenge long-standing Church doctrine is viewed by many within the CJLDS as challenging the word of God and is viewed as an act of apostasy (Hinderaker, 2017; Le Poidevin, 2021). The foremost step to apostasy is open dissent of Church doctrine, and is viewed by many members of the CJLDS as a crisis of religious and spiritual faith (Hinderaker, 2017; Wahman, 2020). Once the first step of doubt is taken towards apostasy, the proceeding steps are easier to navigate as people become more vocal and faultfinding to former ideals and beliefs, especially as they align themselves with similar thinking and likeminded individuals who endorse and embolden them for their courage and freethinking, independency, and progressive mentality.

Negative Life Events

People with positive life events and individuals who experience few traumatic episodes are more likely to remain satisfied with their religious affiliation; however, once negative life events become more routine, people will inevitably start to associate negative life events with an unloving and uncaring God (Chou, 2010; DeVoe et al., 2018; Gray, 2018; Levers, 2012; Meye, 1992). Once negative life events become more profound in a person's life, a natural inclination starts to develop that creates the grounds to question and then doubt a person's religious beliefs (Chou, 2010; Gray, 2018; Meye, 1992). Research clearly demonstrated a link between positive and negative life events with people raised in the CJLDS, and if Church members perceive an imbalance of negative life events, their religiosity and commitment to remain active in their religious faith starts to erode (Chou, 2010; DeVoe et al., 2018; Levers, 2012; Meye, 1992). Adult Christians in general, and specifically members of the CJLDS who experience multiple life changing negative events over a short period of time, are more likely to experience a religious

crisis of faith by questioning whether God actually exists, especially veterans after experiencing the death of friends and colleagues while serving in combat zones.

Adolescence and Peer Friendship

Faith is tacit during childhood and it becomes self-evident during puberty (Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 2013; Weil, 2017). One of the most dominant factors of losing faith is the influence of close friends, especially during adolescence and as a young person matures to young adulthood (Roehlkepartain et al., 2006; Weil, 2017). Adolescents face religious discouragers in the form of peer pressure, personal hardships, Church dogma, perceived loss of love from God, emerging cultural and worldly challenges, and from scientific incongruencies with faith based religious tenets (Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 2013; Roehlkepartain et al., 2006; Weil, 2017). Adolescents and young adults struggle with these or with other discouragers before they settle upon their own pathway as to - does God really exist, does God love all mankind, is the Bible the sole-source of spiritual and religious doctrine, is there only one source of truth, what is truth and does it change, is there life after death, and can people be saved without joining a religious denomination (Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 2013; Roehlkepartain et al., 2006; Weil, 2017)? Resolving spiritual and religious doubt can cause a recursive cycle of questioning and doubt until an adolescent becomes comfortable with their own choices without feeling pressure to conform to a particular voice, such as a from a specific religious denomination, especially with high-structured Churches such as the CJLDS, Jehovah Witnesses, and Baptist denominations.

Gender and Racial Differences

There are several factors that separate men and women when they start forming their personal religious belief systems (Hinderaker & O'Connor, 2015; Jung & Park, 2020; Popescu et al., 2009). Women face moral and emotional decisions on a constant bases that will influence

whether they will develop a crisis of faith (Jung & Park, 2020; Popescu et al., 2009). There are several reasons why women move away from God, while other women gravitate towards God as a source of enlightenment and truth (Barry & Nelson, 2005; Popescu et al., 2009). First, some women feel that religion is a patriarchal system that favors men over women (Popescu et al., 2009). Second, the Bible teaches that women should be subservient to their husbands (Popescu et al., 2009). Third, women want to be considered as an equal or full partner in a marital relationship (Popescu et al., 2009). Conversely, some women believe in the traditional roles and values of men and women as outlined in the Bible or in other religious texts (Popescu et al., 2009; Jung & Park, 2020). For some men, they interpret scientific discoveries and religious theories to be in conflict with one another, and they tend to give more weight to science over religion (Barry & Nelson, 2005; Popescu et al., 2009). Men are typically more influenced by logic and reason, and not by emotional feelings of the spirit; and since many religious experiences are built upon feelings and emotions, some men are more prone to lose their religious faith over logic if they are in conflict with one another (Barry & Nelson, 2005; Jung & Park, 2020; Popescu et al., 2009). Men and women view religion and spirituality from a different lens. Men typically are drawn to religion for cognitive and logic reasons, while women assess spirituality and religiosity from a behavioral and emotional optic.

Race and ethnicity play a significant role when adolescents transition to adulthood and whether they will remain religious as adults (Barry & Nelson, 2005; Jung & Park, 2020; Popescu et al., 2009; Roehlkepartain et al., 2006). Four key findings surfaced that either bridged or created a gap of sociology of religion when adolescents transitioned to adulthood: (a) religion plays a lesser role of importance in young adult lives, regardless of race or gender; (b) greater emphasis is placed on secular acquisition of knowledge in comparison to religious learning; (c)

importance of self-determination over religious dogma and control; (d) and reliance upon self-identification and secular teachings that change to fit a generational perspective and outlook on the meaning of life and happiness (Jung & Park, 2020). Adolescents and young adults need a strong religious foundation that is based upon experiential learning when they are young. If a biblical foundation is not personally built, adolescents and young adults are more prone to develop a crisis of religious faith by abandoning their former beliefs by either joining a new religious denomination or by losing their faith in God.

Lifestyle Changes

For some adolescents and young adults, their dress standards, ideas on abortion and gay rights, and viewpoints on whether it is acceptable to smoke and drink alcohol are in direct conflict with the policies and doctrines of the CJLDS (Bauer & McAdams, 2004; Harty, 1996). Over a period of time, some adolescents and young adults question whether their lifestyle choices and political views are compatible with Church doctrine and whether they should look elsewhere for acceptance (Harty, 1996). Once questioning turns to doubt, some adolescents and young adults within the CJLDS turn to anti-Church support groups for answers and solace (Harty, 1996; Roehlkepartain et al., 2006). For disenfranchised women, they begin to feel an emotional disconnection with some Church doctrine that does not fit their renewed lifestyle choices, while men become more angered if their lifestyle choices are judged to be incompatible with Church tenets (Barry & Nelson, 2005; Harty, 1996). For some adolescents, their personal lifestyle choices are more important than biblical standards of moral conduct. Furthermore, if their individual preferences are not in harmony with Church standards, a crisis of religious faith can take root, which can cause a number of youth to abandon their childhood religious values for secular beliefs and philosophies.

Another research study determined that certain lifecycles are more vulnerable to religious transitions, especially as lifestyles change to fit a new awareness of self (Bauer & McAdams, 2004; Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 2013; Weil, 2017). Some research studies have found at least four themes of individual progression (e.g., integrative, intrinsic, agentic, and communal) in adolescent and adult life stories that highlighted transitions in religious belief symptoms (Bauer & McAdams, 2004; Weil, 2017). The four themes impacted personality development, specifically with social-cognitive maturity and with social-emotional wellbeing, as it relates to religiosity (Bauer & McAdams, 2004). Themes of agentic (ability to control individual goals and destiny) and communal-growth (community members unite for the betterment of the individual) were mainly responsible for changes in religiosity and spirituality (Bauer & McAdams, 2004; Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 2013). If individuals felt they could control agentic themes in their lives without the assistance of religion, and if people felt the community in which they live in had dissimilar religious views, then the religiosity of a Christian would diminish in importance.

Attendance and Devotion at Church Meetings and Participation in Church Assignments

There are distinct measurements that can determine the differences between Christians who attend Church on a regular basis in comparison to those who do not (Hui et al., 2015; Oak, 2021). In addition, it is now possible to predict with a high degree of probability, if a Christian will stop attending Church or whether they will continue serving and believing in their current religious ideology (Hui et al., 2015). Additionally, there are certain predictors that can foresee which Christians will eventually leave their faith altogether by joining another religious denomination or by becoming either agnostic or atheistic (Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 2013; Hui et al., 2015). First, meeting attendance and devotion to fulfilling Church assignments are primary indicators whether a person is becoming disaffiliated with Church doctrine (Hui et al., 2015;

Myers, 2000). Second, Christians who seek after service assignments and share their testimony of the divinity of Jesus Christ are more likely to remain active within their religious community (Hui et al., 2015; Oak, 2021). Third, if Christians pray and seek after God's assistance on a daily basis and if they regularly read the Bible, they are more likely to remain active members (Hui et al., 2015). Fourth, if their close friends remain active Christians within their Church, they too will likely stay involved within the community of Christian believers (Oaks, 2021; Hui et al., 2015; Weststrate & Glück, 2017). Active involvement in Church activities, reading the scriptures on a daily basis, and seeking God through prayer, can act as a protective shield when opposition or trials come to challenge the homeostasis of daily religious living.

Relationship Turning Points During a Crisis of Religious Faith

When a religious crisis of faith has emerged in an adolescent's lifecycle, there are at least nine overarching junctures that can dramatically impact a relationship between an adolescent or young adult with their parents and family, if they decide to disaffiliate or abandon their faith as a member of the CJLDS (Kofink, 1991; Wink et al., 2019; Worwood et al., 2020). First, was there an open conversation prior to the rejection or abandonment of religious teachings - if so, then relationships can heal and mend at a faster pace (Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 2013; Worwood et al., 2020). Second, was there a restatement of love and respect between a child and parent, even when disaffiliation was eminent (Worwood et al., 2020)? Third, personal withdrawal from family events and relationships will occur when mutual respect of the manifest destiny of others is not valued (Wink et al., 2019; Worwood et al., 2020). Fourth, when a child reveals doubt about their religious affiliation, will parents confront and seek conformity or will they seek understanding as to why their child changed his or her religious ideology (Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 2013; Worwood et al., 2020). Fifth, will a child view coming out as a new person in

a positive or negative light and will a child be forthcoming by explaining the background and circumstances as to why they decided to leave their childhood religious upbringing (Worwood et al., 2020). Sixth, will an adolescent feel abandoned both physically and spiritually by their parents, if they decide to leave the Church (Worwood et al., 2020)? Seventh, will a child feel unable to conform to their existing religious ideology or feel empowered to join a new religious creed (Kofink, 1991; Worwood et al., 2020)? Eighth, will a child feel free or inhibited to attend third-party events that do not align with their parent's religious beliefs (Worwood et al., 2020)? Lastly, will parents establish authoritarian boundaries and restrictions to impede and malign a child's desire and ability to seek new religious ideas that are contrary to their own (Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 2013; Kofink, 1991; Wink et al., 2019; Worwood et al., 2020)? For some adolescents, the seeds of rebellion will start to flourish if baseless boundaries are placed to impede their social and cognitive development. Children and adolescents need boundaries for safety and moral conduct; however, when restrictions and strict rules are used to govern their agency, many youth will push back by aligning themselves in opposition to their parents' guidelines, especially when it comes to religion.

Finding a New Religion after Developing a Crisis of Religious Faith

Research has indicated that there are a minimum of five concepts that most adolescents and young adults use to find a new religious denomination after denouncing their former religious affiliation: (a) is the conversion difficult – does joining a new religious denomination fit my unique needs and belief systems and is it easy to do; (b) how much time does this new religion expect of me; (c) what are the financial costs associated with joining a new Church and what do I get in return for my contributions; (d) how many new friends will I receive once I join this new Church and will they align with my new self-identity; and (e) how large is this Church

from a worldwide perspective – larger is more influential (Harren, 2005; Harty, 1996; Millwee-Welch, 2021; Wulff, 2009). For many adolescents and young adults, religion is viewed as a social platform to express their opinions and to find likeminded individuals who share their philosophies of life. Changing religious denominations is much like finding a new set of friends who share similar interests.

Moving Forward after a Crisis of Religious Faith

Moving forward after a religious transition takes time, patience, understanding, and love (Page, 2021). The one constant denominator among most ex-members of the CJLDS is that they will never be the same again (Avance, 2013; Page, 2021; Scharp & Beck, 2017). Like the mythical Phoenix, former members of the CJLDS must rise up from the ashes and begin anew. The Lord taught that those that lose their life for His sake, shall find it once again (*King James Bible*, 1769/2017, Matthew 10: 39). Many former members of the CJLDS described their religious rebirth as a reawakening to new ideas, concepts, and friends, even though the process was long, hard-fought, and spiritually taxing (Page, 2021; Wahman, 2020). With this sense of rebirth, many former members of the CJLDS still find happiness and contentment elusive with their new lifestyle, especially as they struggle to find a new religious denomination that can resolve their former religious ambivalences with their former Mormon faith (Avance, 2013; Page, 2021; Scharp & Beck, 2017; Wahman, 2020). As a result, many former Mormons refer to themselves as self-described spiritualists without the need to attach themselves with one particular religious sect.

The Need for Counseling

There are several family system counseling methods that can help former Mormons transition to a non-Mormon life without the baggage of guilt and shame (Butler et al., 2021;

Gattis, 2017; Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 2013; Limb et al., 2018; Miller & Rollnick, 2013).

Motivational Interviewing (MI) is a good source of counseling for many former Mormons since it is Christian based and is non-directive in its approach to counseling (Butler et al., 2021; Miller & Rollnick, 2013). There are four key interrelated elements of Motivational Interviewing that can help former Mormons transition to a new self-identify (Evans & Nelson, 2021; Miller & Rollnick, 2013). They are as follows: partnership, acceptance, compassion, and evocation (Butler et al., 2021; Evans & Nelson, 2021; Miller & Rollnick, 2013). Many former members seek out mental health practitioners for solace; however, in many cases, therapy failed to alleviate their anxieties and stress, mainly due to a lack of religious transitional training by the counselor (Brooks, 2020). Paradoxically, some former members felt re-traumatized when secular therapists provided misinformed or unsolicited guidance to meet with former members and estranged family members to discuss their crisis of faith in a group counseling session (Bentley, 2019; Brooks, 2020; Scroggs et al., 2018). Even though a Christian MI counselor might not agree with a client's decision to abandon their former religious belief systems, they will always try to understand a client's perspective without judgment, as they try to help the client make sense of their decision and come to peace with their resolution to leave their religious faith.

Another tool that is used by some pastors and Christian counselors to help retain membership or to succor people during a crisis of religious faith is to help them create a spiritual genogram of their ancestors (Alexander et al., 2022; Limb et al., 2018; Owens et al., 2019). A spiritual genogram is used by counselors to comfort their clients when they are going through a religious crisis in order to help them evaluate and to remember their spiritual and religious upbringing as a means to help them recollect the sacrifices of their ancestors on their behalf (Alexander et al., 2022; Limb et al., 2018; Owens et al., 2019). When members of the CJLDS

link their ancestors together by doing genealogy and family history work, they naturally gain a greater affinity for their past, which might help them overcome their trials in their present state of mind. Lastly, many secular therapists have insufficient training on how to properly give advice to Christians experiencing a crisis of religious faith.

Religious Transition is not Necessarily Moving Away from God

Ruth told Naomi to not turn her away, for wherever you go, I will follow; and your people will become my people, and your God shall now become my God (*King James Bible*, 1769/2017, Ruth 1:16). Ruth left with Naomi to escape an oppressive environment and to find a more suitable location to practice her knew religious beliefs with Naomi. When a person leaves one religious denomination for another or when a former religious person decides to become a spiritualist without joining a religious denomination, it is not necessarily an act of moving away from God, as it is an act of becoming closer to the God of their choice (Hout & Fischer, 2003; Hwang et al., 2022; Tervo-Niemelä, 2021). The principle of faith can apply equally to religious and secularism, and a person can develop faith in both without losing their sense of identity (Hout & Fischer, 2003; Hwang et al., 2022; Tervo-Niemelä, 2021). Valuing materialism for the good of others, can be just as rewarding as seeking after religious virtues, such as meekness, humility, and kindness (Hout & Fischer, 2003; Hwang et al., 2022; Tervo-Niemelä, 2021). Religious transition can best be defined as finding a new set of philosophies that are tailored to a new self-identity.

Become Part of a Community of Christian Believers

For departing members of the CJLDS, many former members start looking outward for religious support by joining faith-based communities that offer activities on Sunday, and by feeling less guilty for their new life-style choices (Preda, 2019; Schultz, 2019). The American

Christian Fundamentalist movement has connected with children, adolescents, young adults, adults, and senior adults by persuading them to abandon secular attachments by embracing the exclusive company of likeminded Christian Saints of God (Preda, 2019; Schultz, 2019).

Parishioners are given an alternative to earthly materialism and activities by offering weekend retreats and spiritual activities by creating an atmosphere of community worship that can fit a modern lifestyle for most faith believing Christians (Preda, 2019; Schultz, 2019). Religions that offer greater family activities, while limiting guilt for not strictly following the commandments of God, offer refuge to many seeking an alternative religious sect.

The feeling of faith and worship comes in many forms and the feeling of believing in something greater than oneself can help a person overcome former traumas of abandonment, resentment, and guilt (Chifeche & Dreyer, 2019; Gray, 2018; Haney & Rollock, 2020; Schultz, 2019). Christian Church leaders encourage new converts of the importance of being good by being motivated to hear the voice of God through their actions of service and obedience to God's commandments (Schultz, 2019). For many Christian fundamentalists, the slogan of "work while it is still daylight" becomes their mantra of serving their fellowman and by becoming closer to God by keeping His commandments (Chifeche & Dreyer, 2019; Gray, 2018; Haney & Rollock, 2020; Schultz, 2019). Service, sacrifice, and fellowship are important religious tenets that should be offered by a religious denomination before potential converts decide to join a specific religious sect.

Commitment to Religious Beliefs is Vital. Research has revealed that if members develop a high level of commitment to their existing religious system, it will help them to be insulated from potential negative feedback from contradictory religious information, even if the information is given by a person of authority (Chifeche & Dreyer, 2019; Schultz, 2019; Tice,

2001). Furthermore, if a person develops an internal connection to a religious denomination, they will be better prepared to spiritually handle a potential crisis of religious faith when it develops (Chifeche & Dreyer, 2019; Schultz, 2019; Trueman & Gould, 2017). For older adults, an internal connection of spiritual truths have a significant impact on their spiritual and physical wellbeing than do changes that evolve around external or ritual acts of Church participation (Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 2013; Trueman & Gould, 2017). Developing a high level of commitment to another Church once a person decides to abandon their former beliefs is fundamental for spiritual and personal growth, and in many cases, a high level of commitment to their existing Church will impede the desire to look elsewhere for religious or spiritual wellbeing.

Act of Rebellion or Awareness of New Self-Identify

When an adolescent or young adult makes a decision to chart a different religious course contrary to their religious upbringing, is it an act of rebellion or simply a desire to become more self-aware of their differences in comparison to their parent's religious beliefs? For some adolescents and young adults growing up in the CJLDS, there are inherent tensions among Mormons about their agency and to a lesser extent, their willingness to follow strict moral principles of Mormon teachings and doctrine (Avance, 2013; Buddenbaum, 2014; Roehlkepartain et al., 2006). Social media and religious and spiritual webpages through the Internet provide a forum for adolescents and young adults to explore a wide variety of divergent religious and spiritual philosophies (Avance, 2013; Buddenbaum, 2014; Roehlkepartain et al., 2006). For a few adolescents and young adults, exploring and discovering new religious and spiritual philosophies through social chat groups or from other social media forums is a means to compare and contrast their current views with alternative viewpoints in order to foster a greater awareness of the richness of differing concepts that may be less restrictive and open to current

worldviews from a philosophic perspectives (Avance, 2013; Buddenbaum, 2014; Roehlkepartain et al., 2006). Adolescents and young adults are like pioneers when they try to discover new concepts and ideas as they compare religious and spiritual phenomena to their cognitive understanding of social class, race, gender, ethnicity, and solidarity to humanity.

When Apostasy Starts

For most members of the CJLDS, they view their Church leaders as oracles of God with the authority to receive modern day revelation for the Church (Scott, & Petersen, 2018). When Church members question the viewpoints of senior Church leaders they place themselves at the crossroads at either becoming rebellious to Church philosophies or becoming part of a minority of silent critics (Fisher, 2017; Hinderaker, 2017; Scott, & Petersen, 2018). When secular views on abortion, gay and lesbian rights, same-sex marriage, women holding the priesthood, the principles of Sabbath day worship, and the right to drink alcohol and smoke differ from religious doctrine, some disenfranchised members of the CJLDS choose secular values over religious guidelines for their moral standard of living, and once they do, they place themselves on the road to apostasy and excommunication from the Church (Fisher, 2017; Hinderaker, 2017; Scott, & Petersen, 2018). Dissent and opposition to established doctrine are viewpoints contrary to the mainstream of most traditional Christian Churches, and if members choose to express their differing perspectives and opinions in public, they place themselves in jeopardy of losing their ecclesiastical membership and fellowship.

For many former members of the Mormon faith that become critics of the Church, they were part of the silent minority of Church critics when they were members or they were vocal critics of Church doctrine and were marginalized believers at best (Bahr & Albrecht, 1989). Among the minority of former fervent or marginalized followers, factors associated with

disaffiliation include family break-up, intellectual apostasy, the 'push' of unmet needs, placed on Church probation, were disfellowshipped for disobedience, intellectual apostasy or they were excluded from mainstream Church practices due to moral choices deemed unacceptable by Church leaders (Bahr & Albrecht, 1989; Fisher, 2017; Scott, & Petersen, 2018). For many former members of the CJLDS, a crisis of religious faith was first initiated through disobedience to established Church policies of moral and ethical conduct, followed by a disbelief of Church doctrine.

New Awareness of Self

Ex-members of the CJLDS experience a religious disintegrated loss and a sense of self-loss “lack of identity” once they lose their faith in the CJLDS, and they subsequently struggle to find a new identity to satisfy their new lifestyle and belief systems, which in many cases, might take years to form (Bentley, 2019; Brooks, 2020; Scroggs et al., 2018). Many former Church members experience acute psychological and behavioral distress after undergoing a crisis of faith (Brooks, 2020). As self-described victims (former members of the CJLDS), this new identity resulted in strained relations with friends and family, a loss of personal identity, bouts of anxiety and regret, and depression (Bentley, 2019; Brooks, 2020; Scroggs et al., 2018). Various former Church members view themselves as victims and they believe that former Church friends and family members turned their backs on them once they removed themselves as members of the CJLDS, and many former members of the Church perceive that family and friends were the ones that changed and shifted their attention away from them because of their new religious belief system or with their new spiritual identify.

New Identities of Former Members

Research reveals at least five prominent identities of former CJLDS believers: (a) the disenfranchised victim, (b) the redeemed spiritualist, (c) the liberated self, (d) the (wo)men of science, and (e) the Mormon in name only (Fisher, 2017; Scharp & Beck, 2017). Recent research on family estrangement suggests that former CJLDS members experience traumatic familial relationship issues by changing their cultural and religious beliefs (Bentley, 2019; Brooks, 2020; Fisher, 2017; Scharp & Beck, 2017). Even though relationships might heal for a time, a reemergence of guilt and hostility often exists on an on-again and then off-again occurrence, and in many families, this roller coaster of family ambivalent feelings continues with no end in sight (Fisher, 2017; Scharp & Beck, 2017). Since family ties are linked for eternity by many members of the CJLDS, when a family member decides to leave the Church, some members of the family view it as act of separation, not only from the Church, but from the eternal family structure as well.

Cognitive and Emotional Maladies of Rebellion

Many former members of the CJLDS report acute psychological distress and emotional anxiety after going through a crisis of religious faith (Brooks, 2020; Fisher, 2017). Individuals who transition to a new religious faith or by becoming agnostic often feel ostracized and misunderstood by their parents and from former religious friends (Brooks, 2020; Scharp & Beck, 2017). Some parents view their children's decision to leave the Church as the ultimate act of betrayal and rebellion, which causes many children to feel a loss of personal identity and connection to family members (Brooks, 2020; Fisher, 2017; Scharp & Beck, 2017). During the early stages of disaffiliation, some individuals experience bouts of depression and loneliness, regret, and symptoms of mental anxiety (Brooks, 2020; Levers, 2012). When former members of

the CJLDS seek out counseling to remedy their feelings of loss and to seek solace, mental health practitioners are typically ill-equipped to resolve these issues due to little or no training on the exigencies of religious dissatisfaction and transition (Brooks, 2020; Butler et al., 2021; Gattis, 2017; Limb et al., 2018). For many families and loved ones who have experienced a family member switching or transitioning away from their religious denomination, they go through the five stages of grief (e.g., denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance). In some cases, acceptance is the most difficult stage to manage for a number of family members.

Moral Factors that Lead to a Crisis of Faith

Religious faith is often associated with deontological reasoning, which is the ability to determine right versus wrong and the proficiency to be obedient to Church and religious principles found in the Bible or in other religious books (Barak-Coren & Bazerman, 2017; Dehlin et al., 2015; Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 2013). Individuals who belong to a structured Church often feel ambivalent about the consequences of making moral decisions and whether Church dogma can be altered to adapt to the changing moral climate of a current generation as a means to alleviate stress and anxiety by making contrary decisions to Church doctrine (Barak-Coren & Bazerman, 2017; Dehlin et al., 2015). When the pleasures of life seem more appealing and gratifying to a person's temporal existence, the structures, tenets, and doctrine of systemized religious denominations seem like a burden and in direct opposition to a new lifestyle.

Some members of the CJLDS experience religious conflict due to their sexual identity as lesbian, gay, or bisexual (Dehlin et al., 2015; Shurts et al., 2020; Woodell & Schwadel, 2020). Some members elect to keep their sexual identity hidden for fear of rejection and possible disfellowshipment, especially if their sexual identity and practice of their sexual orientation becomes known (Dehlin et al., 2015; Shurts et al., 2020; Woodell & Schwadel, 2020). Research

on keeping sexual identity hidden may be difficult to sustain and the longer a person's sexual orientation is masked, the consequences of acquiring psychosocial disorders remains high (Dehlin et al., 2015; Shurts et al., 2020; Woodell & Schwadel, 2020). Lastly, integration of revealing nonconforming sexual orientation while maintaining Church doctrine is extremely difficult to achieve, unless a person suppresses their orientation of nonconforming sexual practices at the detriment to their mental health and wellbeing (Dehlin et al., 2015). Lesbian, gay, and bisexual individuals or others with a nonconforming sexual orientation are welcomed members of the CJLDS; however, if they openly advocate for change in Church doctrine and if they persist in openly displaying an alternate lifestyle contrary to Church doctrine, they might be in jeopardy of losing their Church membership for disobedience to biblical standards of moral conduct.

On the Road to Becoming an Atheist

When a Christian pastor or a parishioner becomes an atheist by abandoning their Christian beliefs, it normally comes at an enormous emotional and cognitive cost with many negative side-effects (Gent, 2018; Langston et al., 2020; Thiessen & Wilkins-Laflamme, 2017). The reasons why pastors and parishioners abandon their belief in God vary; however, the common themes included betrayal, worldwide suffering, inhumanity, rejection, personal loss and suffering, and whether there was life after death (Gent, 2018; Langston et al., 2020). For Christian believers, changes in religiosity are indirectly linked to life course transitions and by dramatic changes within the family dynamics, such as divorce, death, and health issues (Lee et al., 2017). Changes to religiosity also included lack of religious attendance, personal importance of religion, whether prayer was habitual and meaningful, and whether individuals received positive religious support from family and friends (Lee et al., 2017). Furthermore, sociological

studies on religion make it clear that forming a religious identity and whether a person maintains their current belief in God are a part of a fluid and dynamic process of self-identity that can change from one life stage to another (Langston et al., 2020; Lee et al., 2017; Thiessen & Wilkins-Laflamme, 2017). The leap from going from a believer to an atheist is normally experienced after a traumatic event, typically after a harrowing experience such as death and worldwide misery.

Choice of Differing Voices

Research has implied that some members of the CJLDS feel there is little room to deviate from the dogma and strict rules of moral and religious conduct within the Church (Buddenbaum, 2014; Long, 2018). Disenfranchised members of the Church have stated that the CJLDS retains spiritual authority at the expense of religious liberties by attempting to express a differing perspective on biblical meanings of the scriptures (Long, 2018; Ransom et al., 2020). As a result of a perceived spiritual control by senior Church leaders, some members feel stymied to fully express a countering view of gospel principles, and as a result, some members seek out differing voices of opposition by engaging in anti-Church social media platforms (Buddenbaum, 2014; Long, 2018). Moral consequences by the choices people make create inherent tensions between Church doctrine and the ability for a person to obtain full autonomy and moral agency to make their individual choices in comparison to being obedient and faithful to Church doctrine without dissent or opposition (Buddenbaum, 2014; Ransom et al., 2020). Some disenfranchised members of the CJLDS wanted greater latitude when it came to bending Church doctrine to fit current cultural and worldview dynamics, and to realign Church restorative tenets to reflect updated contemporary research.

For individuals who voluntarily abandon highly control religions, such as Jehovah's Witnesses or the CJLDS due to perceived control issues, they reported a higher level of ostracism than those that were excommunicated for moral infractions (Buddenbaum, 2014; Ransom et al., 2020). In addition, former members with a higher level of commitment and devotion were associated with a post-religious identity crisis and their religious transition diminished their self-esteem and ability to relate to other members and friends that were still religiously affiliated with their former religion (Ransom et al., 2020). Transitioning or switching to a new religious or spiritual lifestyle, can have a rippling effect upon family and friend dynamics that were not fully considered when the final decision was made to change religious belief systems.

Five Key Questions on Religiosity. Adolescence is a vulnerable phase in a person's life, mainly due to pressures to individualize religious beliefs by not mimicking their parent's religious philosophies (Buddenbaum, 2014; Roehlkepartain et al., 2006; Weil, 2017). Religious questioning and doubt are a recursive movement during adolescence and young adulthood, and for some adolescents and young adults, five key questions would normally surface before a person could reconcile their faith differences by either becoming more or less religious: (a) if God is a caring and loving God, why is there so much turmoil and suffering in the world; (b) is there really an eternal God; (c) is Jesus really a God and by following His teachings, is it the only way back to Heaven; (d) is the Bible trustworthy and factual; and (e) is a person's salvation secured by God's grace or is it dependent on an individual's actions on a daily basis (Roehlkepartain et al., 2006; Weil, 2017). Personal experiences that either compliment or distract from a belief in God, are typically the deciding factors on whether a person will succumb to a crisis of religious faith.

Doubt, Hope, Faith, Knowledge, Understanding, and Truth

Doubt is the antithesis of hope and is the precursor to fear and sin, which creates people to wonder if the religious path they are on will bring them back to God (Milona, 2019; Puffer, 2018; Upenieks, 2021). The primary inhibitor to happiness are the choices people make that come from doubt, fear, and sin (Lee, 2018; Milona, 2019). In the Bible, the word “doubt” is usually associated with negative connotations. For example, Peter doubted after walking on the waters and nearly drowned (*King James Bible*, 1769/2017, Matthew 14:31). The Pharisees doubted that Christ was God and they demanded that Christ show them signs of His messiahship after many signs were already given (*King James Bible*, 1769/2017, Matthew 12:38-42). The Lord also told His disciples that if they had faith of a mustard seed and doubted not, they could move mountains (*King James Bible*, 1769/2017, Mark 11:23). Thomas, one of Christ’s first apostles, doubted that Christ rose from the grave, and he would not believe until he saw the nail marks for himself (*King James Bible*, 1769/2017, John 20:27). Christ’s mild rebuke to Thomas after he saw the nail marks on the Savior’s hands and wrists was a rebuke to all, for the Savior’s implied message was to stop doubting and start believing by having Hope. In James 1: 6-8 (*King James Bible*, 1769/2017), the Lord revealed that an unstable or doubting man lacks sufficient faith to receive the promises of God. Doubt questions the validity of God’s law, and a doubting person is without hope, belief or faith (Lee, 2018; Puffer, 2018; Upenieks, 2021). Doubt stunts or shuns hope, belief, and faith, which allows sin to permeate the thoughts of mankind.

Through the Holy Spirit, doubt can be confronted, marginalized, controlled, and changed to create hope, faith, knowledge, understanding, and the ability to seek after truth by being a true disciple of Christ (Lee, 2018; Milona, 2019). Doubt can permeate a person’s mind when they cannot resolve religious questions, and doubt is magnified when prior beliefs collide with new

evidence that another religion or belief system may provide a better way back to Christ (Lee, 2018; Milona, 2019). Additionally, for most theologians, doubt means to dispute, which is to take the first step towards unbelief (Schliesser, 2012). Once a person no longer seeks for answers to religious questions, doubt becomes the dominate force that drives change, and in some cases, doubt is the motivating precursor that drives a person away from their current religious denomination.

Hope, Hope, Endless Hope

Hope is the antithesis of doubt (Hoover-Kinsinger, 2018; Webb, 2004). Hope is simply a desire to want to change for the betterment of self – it is a feeling or emotion that something is wrong, and that change is needed (Hoover-Kinsinger, 2018; Webb, 2004). The Lord instructed His disciples that He was the God of Hope, and that through the Holy Spirit of promise, the Lord will fill your minds and heart with joy and peace through hope in Christ (*King James Bible*, 1769/2017, Romans 15:13). The essence of religious hope is an idea that all people were created in the image of God, and that all mankind are sons and daughters of God with a divine purpose to grow in His image.

Hope is the springboard to faith, and is the key principle of the gospel that can overcome a crisis of religious faith (Hoover-Kinsinger, 2018; Webb, 2004). People who have hope in Christ, will use hope through prayer to overcome despair and doubt when traumatic events such as developing a crisis of religious identity permeates their soul. Hope is the core gospel principle that will motivate mankind to overcome sin and doubt.

Faith Through Action

Faith is putting the principles of hope and belief to practice through action, by doing and by following righteous principles of the gospels as a means to overcome doubt and despair

(Dollahite et al., 2019; Seligman & Reichenberg, 2014; Wahman, 2020). Faith demonstrates a person's devotion to religious ideals, even when modern secular and scientific evidence prove otherwise or even when other religious philosophies profess a different point of view (Chifeche & Dreyer, 2019; Seligman & Reichenberg, 2014; Wahman, 2020). James, the apostle of Jesus Christ, told the disciples of the Lord that faith can be manifested through work (*King James Bible*, 1769/2017, James 2:18 & 26). Faith is an action word that connotes obedience to God's commandments by doing or keeping the commandments of God through obedience.

Empirical research has revealed that faith based religious communities can be a valuable resource for the disadvantaged, especially when hope is needed the most due to lack of food and employment opportunities (Chifeche & Dreyer, 2019; Dollahite et al., 2019; Wahman, 2020). The poor in spirit and in body are more inclined and receptive to believe in God through faith, and they will likely reach out for assistance to religious institutions that can provide the necessary resources and spiritual guidance when in need (Chifeche & Dreyer, 2019; Seligman & Reichenberg, 2014). In addition, many individuals struggling with finding work and humanitarian assistance will leave their current religious denomination for another if their Church does not or will not provide welfare assistance (Chifeche & Dreyer, 2019; Seligman & Reichenberg, 2014; Wahman, 2020). Faith is the successor to truth and righteousness; and spiritual faith in God is greater than worldly knowledge of dynamic truth that changes as time evolves from generation to generation or from culture to culture.

True and False Manifestations of Faith. For some Christians, they struggle with knowing the difference between true and false manifestations of faith (Dunn, 2013; Hawkins et al., 1999). Many well-meaning Christians confuse the true key of faith with counterfeit keys, keys that bear a strong resemblance to true faith, but are merely facsimiles of faith (Dunn, 2013;

Hawkins et al., 1999). Real faith never ceases to achieve its desired outcome; however, the key is knowing how to distinguish truth from fiction by knowing how to discern the spirit of God from worldly or secular look-alike replicas (Dunn, 2013; Hawkins et al., 1999). To determine true religious faith from secular faith, the Lord instructed His servants to listen and hear by faith, because the word of God speaks by faith to those that know His voice (*King James Bible*, 1769/2017, Romans 10:17). The power of discernment and godly prayer are divine gifts of God that can teach mankind to know God's will through faith. Conversely, many non-Christian counselors believe that faith is a universal term that can be equally applied to Christians and non-believers and that cognitive-behavioral approaches to counseling can use faith to modify client's emotions and behaviors in a positive manner (Hawkins et al., 1999). Faith in secular beliefs and faith in religious principles have some things in common; however, religious faith is prompted by the Holy Spirit, while earthly faith is primarily motivated by worldly gain and temporal pleasures (e.g., wealth, position, prestige).

Knowledge is the Beginning Stage of Spiritual Intelligence

Knowledge is developed through experiential learning through the intervention of the faith process, which is accomplished through trial and error, and then through the confirmation of the spirit that the Lord is aware of their personal needs, and that the Lord is blessing them through their faithful obedience by keeping the commandments of God (Kelman, 2019; Morales, 2022; Seligman & Reichenberg, 2014). Knowledge comes after the application of faith – it is a realization that faith works, and once faith is proven through knowledge, faith succumbs to knowledge because it is now known (Morales, 2022; Seligman & Reichenberg, 2014). Joshua instructed one member from each tribe to carry the ark of the covenant upon their shoulders across the river Jordan to Jerusalem so the Israelites could cross the river in a symbolic fashion

as when the Israelites crossed the Red Sea forty years earlier to flee from the Egyptians when Moses was their prophet. The Lord wanted the Israelites to know that the mantle of priesthood authority was shifted from Moses to Joshua. The twelve Israelites had to walk into the water of Jordan with the ark upon their shoulders and get their robes wet as a symbolic act of faith before the waters were removed. Walking into the water took faith by action, having the waters parted and removed as an obstacle gave them the sure knowledge that Joshua was truly the appointed prophet of God after Moses; and from knowledge, they can better understand and know the love of God through righteous obedience (*King James Bible*, 1769/2017, Joshua 3:14-17). Faith cultivates knowledge as a byproduct by doing the Lord's will through obedience.

Secular and religious knowledge are derived from religious teachings, political orientation, social upbringing, educational achievement, spiritual development, and from personal experience through trial and error (Metz et al., 2018). Each life experience is interpreted by the lens in which it was experienced and is supported by an internal or spiritual understanding as reasoned through the attainment of knowledge (Kelman, 2019; Metz et al., 2018; Morales, 2022). To change a person's knowledge, especially after developing a crisis of religious faith or from other traumatic events, may require altering an individual's epistemic norms and mores (Metz et al., 2018; Sloman & Rabb, 2016). From a counseling perspective, some clients need to ascertain between the knowledge of a therapist and religious authorities, especially if the guidance differs from the Bible (Metz et al., 2018; Sloman & Rabb, 2016). Knowledge is the beginning phase of understanding truth, and knowing truth postulates accountability to one's actions.

Understanding is Spiritual Intelligence in Application

Understanding is simply knowing how and when to use a person's acquired secular and religious knowledge for the betterment of self and humanity (Lewin, 2017; Sloman & Rabb, 2016). Understanding is also the constant or repetitive process of the application of knowledge in order to overcome maladaptive behaviors, distresses, and it is used to demonstrate how to properly use spiritual knowledge for the betterment of humankind (Albinus, 2018; Sloman & Rabb, 2016). Knowledge and understanding go beyond theory, and understanding is the usage of experiential learning through the application of knowledge (Albinus, 2018; Sloman & Rabb, 2016). From a crisis of religious faith perspective, the gravity of a person's need to find answers to their questions and doubts by acquiring spiritual knowledge and understanding begins the transformation process through the mourning, disorientation, and search for reorientation by finding answers that were not possible to find by means of their former religious convictions (Krems et al., 2017; Ward, 2013). Finally, the true test of understanding is the ability to put their own will behind the will of God, and be willing to unconditionally follow God's guidance, even if their search for happiness and truth brings them to the origins that first precipitated their quest for enlightenment (Krems et al., 2017; Ward, 2013). Understanding is the endless use of knowledge for the betterment of self and mankind, and is the catalyst for resolving a crisis of religious faith when it formulates.

Truth is Eternal

To define religious truth or truth in general, a person must make a proposition about something (Albinus, 2018). Truth is a well-known statement of fact that cannot be disputed in an empirical manner, "I am the way and the truth and the life" (*King James Bible*, 1769/2017, John 14:6). Truth is based upon consensus of thought through perceived statements of religious or

secular pieces of information (Albinus, 2018). Truth is the manifestation of enlightenment through a physicalist or a religious category of illumination (Albinus, 2018; Krems et al., 2017; Ward, 2013). A true test of truth is whether a manifestation of truth and a statement of truth can stand the test of time and is the same yesterday, today, and tomorrow (Albinus, 2018). Truth should not change with the tides of human understanding or cultural beliefs from one generation to the next, but it is a constant guiding light, similar to the north star that was used by early navigators to chart their course of travel.

People who question their religious faith must take responsibility for their actions without shifting blame to others for teaching them what they perceived to be incongruencies of truth in gospel principles and doctrine (Albinus, 2018; Brown & Taghehchian, 2016). As stated by Brown and Taghehchian (2016), faith regulation through self-awareness is defined as the process by which individuals influence which emotions they have, when they have them, and how they experience them, and how they express those emotions through faith practices that will eventually propagate religious truth by gaining a testimony of gospel principles and ordinances. Gaining a testimony of gospel truth is enhanced through faith, but the regression of a testimony can also take place through doubt, by either being misled or enlightened by secular or religious precepts.

The Cycle of Conversion, Deconversion, and Reconversion

The act of conversion, deconversion, and reconversion evolve around a person's ability to question and define their religious understanding and whether they believe they are on the true path of redemption (Fisher, 2017; Millwee-Welch, 2021). Developing religious questions are very common and are considered normal, especially for adolescents, but this process also occurs in adults as well (Fisher, 2017; Millwee-Welch, 2021; Roehlkepartain et al., 2006). The most

common source of questioning comes from issues related from religion and science as they collide with one another from a theoretical perspective (Fisher, 2017; Millwee-Welch, 2021; Roehlkepartain et al., 2006). When questioning turns to doubt, people switch their belief systems by either switching within the same broad religion (e.g., from one Hindu or Buddhist tradition to another) or by switching from one broad religious tradition to another (e.g., Christian to Muslim) or from switching to being an atheist or to a Christian and vice-versa (Fisher, 2017; Millwee-Welch, 2021). Most people experience a dynamic process in their religious maturity, and as a result, a number of individuals will experience a crisis of religious faith as they advance along their own path of discovery for truth, enlightenment, and righteousness.

Conversion and Reconversion Process

Research has demonstrated that the religious conversion process is typically done at a gradual process; however, at times, conversion to a new religious denomination can be extremely accelerated (Millwee-Welch, 2021; Page, 2021). Events, such as divorce, death, or the conversion of a close friend can bring about a rapid conversion process in people (Fisher, 2017; Millwee-Welch, 2021). In contrast, friends, family, and close associates can bring about a slow or gradual conversion process overtime (Millwee-Welch, 2021; Page, 2021; Welch, 2021). It is theorized, that a gradual religious conversion has greater staying power in most converts to a new religious sect.

Converts' normally change their personality, self-definition and identification, and meaningfulness of life following conversion (Bentley, 2019; Brooks, 2020; Fisher, 2017; Page, 2021). Converts typically develop a closer spiritual relationship towards God upon conversion or reconversion and how they interact with others (Fisher, 2017; Page, 2021). In addition, converts have a more positive view about themselves and others (Fisher, 2017; Page, 2021). Converts

typically maintain a positive view about themselves if they remain committed to their new self-identity and religious ideals.

There are several empirical studies that have presented behavioral and cognitive models to represent converts' and reconverts' motivation to change their religious belief systems (Bentley, 2019; Brooks, 2020; Page, 2021). There are usually seven elements that are found when a person converts or reconverts their religious tenets: (a) questions of doctrine emerge; (b) doubt overcomes perceived beliefs; (c) answers to doubts are sought from external sources instead of from former religious leaders; (d) a life-altering event occurs; (e) joining of external relationships start to emerge; (f) outside sources support and encourage conversion or reconversion; (g) and fellowshipment with an external source becomes transformative (Page, 2021). Another theory that explains why people either convert, deconvert, or reconvert are centered around a person's primary motivation of "coherent arbitrariness" and by peoples' heterogeneous experiences to change or revert back to their prior belief systems (Bentley, 2019; Brooks, 2020; Page, 2021). The more times a person changes their religious beliefs, the easier it will become to change their religious or spiritual convictions in the future.

Social Media Platforms can Accelerate Change. The use of the Internet creates a link with others that share similar beliefs. Internet forums create a safe sanctuary for people to feel justified for either leaving or joining a new religious belief system (Avance, 2013; Buckley et al., 2021; Smith et al., 2021). In contrast, social media outlets through the Internet provide religious denominations an online environment to reinforce their religious tents (Avance, 2013; Buckley et al., 2021; Roso et al., 2020). Access to contrary religious information and to other anti-religious forums can contribute to a crisis of faith by reconstructing a new religious identity through an awareness of emerging ideas and belief systems (Avance, 2013). For members of the CJLDS,

Internet forums help support and threaten their hegemonic status quo (Avance, 2013; Roso et al., 2020). The Internet provides alternative views of doctrine with unorthodox and “anti-Mormon” theory to confuse and persuade even the ardent of believers (Avance, 2013). Recent converts, questioning adolescents and young adults, and those facing life-changing events can find solace in the Internet as the forerunner or catalyst of a crisis of faith (Avance, 2013; Buckley et al., 2021; Smith et al., 2021). Many former members of the CJLDS have used the Internet as their primary sanctuary and as their crucial source to explain their new religious or spiritual identity, not only to themselves, but with others as well.

Reasons for Religious Transitions. There are many reasons why members of the CJLDS transition from their former belief system (Harty, 1996). Some of the key reasons why members of the CJLDS transition away from their former beliefs were as follows: (a) normal life transition from adolescence to adulthood; (b) to rebel against an authoritarian or sole source of truth and moral doctrine; (c) to break free from a structured cultural upbringing; (d) recent and childhood trauma; (e) new self-awareness and identity mindfulness; (f) progressive educational values; and (g) doubts about the authenticity of revealed doctrine (Fisher, 2017; Harty, 1996; Roehlkepartain et al., 2006). Two of the primary reasons why members of the CJLDS switch their religious denomination during a crisis of religious faith were due to moral infractions and intellectual apostasy.

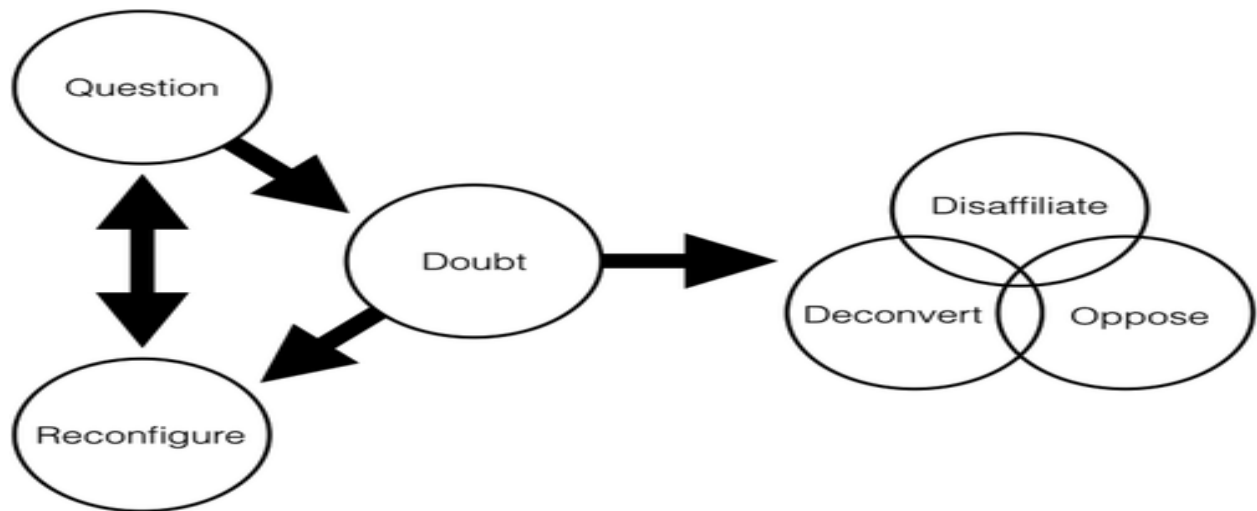
Transitions are an Emotional Endeavor. For some former members of the CJLDS or for disenfranchised members of other religious faiths, if their doubts are not adequately resolved in favor of their existing religious doctrine, one will eventually gravitate towards the realization that they just do not belong to that religious creed (Bahr & Albrecht, 1989; Fisher, 2017; Lee et al., 2017). Some married spouses will switch their religious affiliation and will bombard their

believing spouse with reverse proselytizing as a means to help their spouse understand and gain meaning as to why they changed their religious beliefs, and to eventually join them in their religious or spiritualist pursuits (Bahr & Albrecht, 1989; Fisher, 2017). Many deconverts of the CJLDS feel angry, duped, and betrayed as they transition away from the Church (Bahr & Albrecht, 1989; Fisher, 2017; Lee et al., 2017). For family members of deconverts, they find it difficult to communicate with one another and they typically avoid confrontations for fear of further alienating themselves from their loved ones who transitioned away from their ideals (Bahr & Albrecht, 1989; Fisher, 2017; Lee et al., 2017). In the end, nearly one third of religious people in the United States will switch to another religion at some point in their life, while a minority of others will dwindle in unbelief by deconverting their faith in God (Fisher, 2017). Switching or transitioning away from a childhood religion might be a common occurrence for some Christians; however, for members of the CJLDS, experiencing a deconversion process of a family member is a significant traumatic event that has eternal consequences.

Deconversion Model. Figure 1 is an illustration of deconversion that either leads a person towards becoming an agnostic or atheist, or being reconverted to another religious faith system (Fisher, 2017; Copyright was issued in 2017 by the American Psychological Association; and Figure 1 was used with permission, see Appendix B for details).

Figure 1

Visual Representation of the Processes Involved in Transitions Toward Irreligion



- *Question: When a person questions their religious belief systems in a meaningful way.*
- *Doubt: Questions turn to doubt when believers are unable to resolve their religious questions. Doubt is an unstable action that can produce a collision of evidence against a previous belief system.*
- *Reconfigure: If doubts cannot be positively reconfigured, then Church activity and membership will likely change.*
- *Deconvert: When a Church member announces his removal or disassociation with his or her former Church.*
- *Disaffiliation: It involves two dimensions – (a) officially ending one’s membership or (b) to cease attending all Church activity.*
- *Oppose: To actively oppose and to organize opposition against one’s former Church. Normally, atheists are more resentful towards religion and were more active in denouncing the fallacies of Church dogma.*

Picking Up the Pieces after a Transition. Those who leave the Mormon faith experience a relationship crisis and a loss of self-identity with their past relationships (Fisher, 2017; Taylor, 2021). For many former members of the Mormon faith, they believe their former

friends and associates who still belong to the CJLDS treat them differently since their deconversion, and as a result of their misplaced feelings, they feel victimized and resentful for how family and friends treat them since their self-proclaimed reawakening (Fisher, 2107; Taylor, 2021). For months and sometimes years, a sense of belonging becomes all-encompassing as many former members of the CJLDS seek for other support groups and religious denomination to feel the void of loss and sense of community they once esteemed (Taylor, 2021). For some former members of the CJLDS, switching religions during the first several years after a deconversion becomes common place, and for others, the transition to becoming more spiritual without joining a particular religion has a stronger appeal, while others question the existence of God.

Disaffiliation of CJLDS Membership

The most typical pattern of disaffiliation for former members of the CJLDS is for them to drop out of religious activity altogether and to renounce their membership (Albrecht & Bahr, 1983; Burris et al., 1997). Research has indicated that disaffiliation of all types, which includes switching to or away from all religious denominations, will cause people to exhibit lower levels of religiosity in comparison to lifelong members or converts to the CJLDS (Albrecht & Bahr, 1983). The level of unresolved dissonance (e.g., two unsuitable religious elements that collide, which will cause conflict) in a person will determine whether a person will experience a need to disaffiliate with their current religious creed or become agnostic (Albrecht & Bahr, 1983; Burris et al., 1997; Le Poidevin, 2021). Transcendence (e.g., an experience beyond the physical world by going through a spiritual event) is a tool that can help some individuals recapture or relive their former testimony experiences or belief system that will help them reduce the negative effects of doubt (Albrecht & Bahr, 1983; Burris et al., 1997; Le Poidevin, 2021). A common trait

for many former members of the CJLDS when they renounce their membership is to become less religious and more self-described as being a spiritualist or as an agnostic, with a noteworthy reduction in their time by not praying, lack of tithes and offerings, reading the Bible or doing other Christian acts of service.

How to Handle Disaffiliation. Religious disaffiliation has been proven to cause poor mental health and physical wellbeing, and those going through disaffiliation are less prone to engage in meaningful social activities and are more likely to engage in high risk-taking behaviors such as binge drinking, drug misuse, promiscuity, and other negative life encounters (Felt, 2017). Religious leaders and Christian counselors recommend that when individuals go through a disaffiliation process, the following criteria should be considered: (a) do not take a child's apparent religious involvement for granted; (b) parents should encourage their children to explore, question and seek out answers in a safe, secure, and in an uplifting environment; (c) parents, religious leaders, and educators should work together to create safe learning environments for children (Felt, 2017). Research has also found that when highly organized religions discourage dissent, disaffiliation will foster as a silent killer to faith promoting experiences (Felt, 2017; Hinderaker, 2015). Dissent will likely serve as a sensemaking tactic by providing dissonance to naturally run its course by providing meaning and understanding, which should be required in all religious organizations (Hinderaker, 2015; Williams, 2015). Cognitive religious dissonance is becoming common place amongst college students as new philosophies and theories are explored that collide with traditional religious views (Felt, 2017; Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 2013; Williams, 2015). Open and honest communication, especially when children are young, will encourage children and adolescents to ask meaningful questions to their parents

and religious leaders about their religious preferences without feeling guilty or judged for doing so.

Trajectory of Disaffiliation. Two theoretical constructs were observed when people go through a crisis of religious faith and become disaffiliated (Ingersoll-Dayton et al., 2002). First, a person's religious beliefs will follow a stable, upward or downward trajectory (Ingersoll-Dayton et al., 2002). Second, a religious person will start the process of transitioning away from their current religious affiliation due to doubt issues (Ingersoll-Dayton et al., 2002). Several factors were involved that determined the type of trajectory a person would experience, which included child rearing experiences, adverse life events, disillusionment with Church associates, and inconsistencies in Church dogma and rituals (Ingersoll-Dayton et al., 2002). Emotional distress is likely a key motivator for religious disaffiliation, since it is associated with poor relationships with parents, siblings, and religious leaders (Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 2013; Le Poidevin, 2021; Roehlkepartain et al., 2006). Once a person starts to doubt their religious beliefs and convictions, it is difficult to turn the tide of opposition, especially if the disillusionment is focused around Church doctrine and senior Church leadership.

Disaffiliation has been related to extraversion, irregular emotional temperament, lack of agreeableness, and whether a person has a low level of consciousness (Le Poidevin, 2021). Children raised in a religious home by two practicing and religious parents have a higher probability to advance in a positive manner through the various life-stage cycles, and they will likely retain their religious upbringing and will not become disaffiliated (Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 2013; Le Poidevin, 2021; Roehlkepartain et al., 2006). In a minority of cases, when people become disaffiliated, they will reject their religious heritage by becoming an atheist or by becoming agnostic (Power, 2012). For some people, psychology leads to atheism by superseding

the benefits of a highly structured religious denomination (Power, 2012; Taylor, 2021).

According to some research, religions are merely a social system created by charismatic leaders for power and dominion (Power, 2012). Approximately 30,000 religious sects have been invented by men or women to create a universal psychological experience to fit the needs of a particular people, generation or culture (Power, 2012). Additionally, millennials are becoming the largest group of disaffiliated members and they are leaving fundamentalist religions at an alarming rate (Taylor, 2021; Wahman, 2020). As more millennials leave organized religions, a sense of loss, confusion, isolation, and betrayal seem to follow in their wake (Taylor, 2021; Wahman, 2020). Young adults, especially millennials and many adolescents, are becoming more involved in social causes outside of religious activities, and they are starting to believe in a God or higher power that is outside the mainstream of Christianity.

Intrafamily and Interfamily Relationships

Former members of the CJLDS face a crossroad when trying to maintain a close relationship with their parents and extended family members who are still members of the Mormon faith (Fisher, 2017; Fisk, 2016; Worwood et al., 2020). When adolescents or adults are going through a crisis of religious faith, there are several effective ways to broach this important, yet sensitive topic with their parents, siblings or with their close friends when they face a crossroad of religious discovery (Fisk, 2016; Worwood et al., 2020). First, it is important to discuss a crisis of religious faith when it first develops and not when a final decision is made to transition (Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 2013; Fisk, 2016). Second, when the crisis of religious faith is broached, it is important to view the issue from the other person's perspective by discussing how, why, and when the issue was first discovered (Fisk, 2016; Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 2013). Third, make sure when the crisis of religious faith is discussed, it is done in

private, without judgment, and in confidence (Fisk, 2016). Fourth, do not show shock, hurt or emotional distress when a person decides to share their feelings about their desire to explore new religious concepts or to transition to another religious denomination or that they are to open to the idea of being agnostic (Fisk, 2016). Fifth, for the person revealing their decision to potentially leave their childhood religious affiliation, they should not surrender their beliefs or be afraid to express their viewpoint in an open and frank discussion (Fisk, 2016; Roehlkepartain et al., 2006). Family and close friends play an integral role when an individual goes through a crisis of religious faith, and how they interact and show either support or disapproval with a person's decision will largely determine the future relationship with them, and whether an individual ever chooses to come back to their childhood religious sect.

Split Home Religious Affiliations

There are many dynamics when one or both partners in a marriage decide to change their religious belief system (Fisher, 2016; Mehta, 2018). Features such as the age of both couples; if one of the spouses was in good religious standing, while the other partner was not in good standing; length of marriage; what were the cognitive and spiritual implications if one or both of the spouses changed their belief system; what were the positive and negative effects of a religious change; and how did orthodoxy contribute toward predicting dyadic adjustment (Fisher, 2016; Mehta, 2018). For many couples, when one of the partners decides to transition to a new religious faith or to reject the existence of God, they apply pressure by proselytizing to their partner about the fallacies of their former faith (Mehta, 2018; Page, 2021; Riley, 2013). In some cases, the pressure to remain faithful to their religious beliefs becomes secondary to the daily bombardment of why their decision to remain active in their Church practices; and over time, they acquiesce to their partner's demand to follow them, not out of belief, but out of fear of rejection

and possible abandonment (Mehta, 2018; Page, 2021; Riley, 2013). Dual religion households are growing within the United States; however, if a marriage starts with both partners belonging to the same religion, and if the male member decides to change their religious beliefs, the likelihood is greater that the spouse that changed their religious views will apply pressure for their spouse to follow them.

Marrying Outside of their Religious Faith. When people marry outside of their religious denomination, one or both spouses will likely experience a faith or belief transformation (Barlow, 1977; Mehta, 2018; Riley, 2013). In approximately 33% of the circumstances, when women who are members of the CJLDS marry outside of their religious denomination, their non-member spouses will decide to transition to the Mormon faith (Barlow, 1977). Interfamily relationships and the need to belong to the same family religion and community organizations are key dispositional factors that influence people towards an external need to gravitate towards God as a need to belong and to seek relief of sorrow and suffering from personal distresses and from trying to raise children in dissimilar religious belief systems (Kay et al., 2010; Mehta, 2018; Riley, 2013; Roehlkepartain et al., 2006). Furthermore, when a spouse decides to transition away from the CJLDS, they typically self-silence dissent when confronted with the risk that could jeopardize their family relationship and the fate of their eternal soul (Hinderaker, 2017 & Kay et al., 2010). Spouses who become doubters to Church doctrine within the CJLDS become marginalized by the power structure of Church leadership, which is backed by the perception of divine authority (Hinderaker, 2017 & Kay et al., 2010). Couples face unique challenges when they belong to different religious denominations, and marital relationships can suffer, if one of the spouses changes their religious beliefs and mandates that their spouse do likewise.

The Need to Unite and Be as One

There is a strong need to be united in all things within a marriage, especially in religious matters (do Rosário & da Silva, 2020; Loewen, 2009; McClendon, 2016). When there is a split religious marriage, there is usually a strong urge by one of the spouses to convert, so the family can be united in how they raise and discipline their children (Loewen, 2009). The following concepts were the major themes that were experienced by a religious conversion process by one of the spouses. First, the converting spouse lacked being part of a religious family as a child and adolescent (Loewen, 2009). Second, the converting spouse was open, curious, and was agreeable to change (Loewen, 2009). Third, the converting spouse did so voluntarily and was moved upon by a spiritual or emotional experience (Loewen, 2009; McClendon, 2016). Fourth, the converted spouse attained a higher sense of self-worth (Loewen, 2009; McClendon, 2016). Fifth, the converted spouse felt more united as a couple (Loewen, 2009; McClendon, 2016). When both couples want a religious and spiritual marriage, there is a strong tendency to be united in both secular and religious matters.

Proclamation to the World on Family Roles and Responsibilities

In 1995, the CJLDS issued a “Proclamation to the World” regarding the roles and responsibilities of the family (Huston, 2021; Scott & Peterson, 2018). Through the “Proclamation to the World” the CJLDS disseminated a heteronormative view on family roles and responsibilities that provided religious guidelines for parents when secular family values differ or compete with beliefs propagated by Church leaders (Huston, 2021; Scott & Peterson, 2018). For most members of the CJLDS, general Church leaders are viewed as oracles of God and they speak on behalf of God for the betterment of the Church, and when individual views differ from Church leaders on whether marriage is only ordained between a man and a woman or

that God created man and woman without other social gender choices, it places members on the crossroads of apostasy, if they vocalize and implement a differing opinion on Church doctrine.

Family and Friend Relationships Become Strained

Those who leave the Mormon faith experience a relationship crisis and a loss of self-identity with their past relationships (Fisher, 2017; Fisk, 2016; Taylor, 2021; Worwood et al., 2020). For many former members of the Mormon faith, they believe their family, former friends, and associates who still belong to the CJLDS will likely treat them differently since their deconversion, and as a result of their misplaced feelings, they feel victimized and resentful for how family and friends treat them since their self-proclaimed reawakening (Fisher, 2017; Fisk, 2016; Taylor, 2021; Worwood et al., 2020). For months and sometimes years after a transition, a sense of belonging becomes all-encompassing as many former members of the CJLDS seek for other support groups and religious denominations to feel the void of loss and sense of community they once esteemed (Fisher, 2017; Fisk, 2016; Taylor, 2021; Worwood et al., 2020). Disaffiliated former members of the CJLDS usually become chief critics of the Church by openly criticizing their former Church friends and associates for their lack of awareness as they use anti-Church literature and scientific evidence to buttress their remarks of opposition.

My Religious Beliefs Should Keep My Family Together

There are several factors that influence conservative Christian women to either change or stay in their religious denomination (Mahoney, 2010; Popescu et al., 2009). Overall, women have a tendency to face moral decisions on a more constant basis in comparison to their male spouses (Mahoney, 2010; Popescu et al., 2009). A number of studies have identified a religious connection when women are faced to leave their husband when confronted with an abusive relationship or when their spouse loses their faith in God (Mahoney, 2010; Popescu et al., 2009).

For many Christian women, the need to keep their family religiously tied together is stronger than divorcing their spouse for abuse, neglect or for spiritual separation issues (Mahoney, 2010; Popescu et al., 2009). As a result, the vulnerability of abuse becomes greater for religious women since they are more likely to believe their abuser spouse's promise that they will change and that God will help them overcome this problem together (Mahoney, 2010; Popescu et al., 2009). Eventually, if a spouse does not receive help from the Church to curb an abusive relationship or resolve a crisis of religious faith issue, they will likely abandon their religious affiliation for another Church in the hopes that religious change will foster a redemptive change in their spiritual lives and in their marriage.

Preserving Religious Faith Through a Crisis

People living in the United States or in most Western hemispheric regions are more disposed to practice faith to achieve religious and spiritual happiness in comparison to nonbelievers (Haney & Rollock, 2020; Myers, 2000). Furthermore, people who practice religious faith on a regular basis have a higher likelihood of achieving happiness, recover quicker from cognitive and physical maladies, handle death in a more positive manner, and are more predisposed to seek after and discover a higher purpose of earthly and post-mortal life (Espindula et al., 2010; Haney & Rollock, 2020; Myers, 2000). Furthermore, hierarchical multiple regressions have demonstrated that when a person attains a higher level of religiosity, it can protect them from traumatic events, and highly religious people are associated with better mental health and live a healthier life-style (Haney & Rollock, 2020; Schultz, 2019). Additionally, researchers have revealed that believers should develop faith in something through their personal actions and choices (Haney & Rollock, 2020; Myers, 2000; Schultz, 2019). According to many researchers, just believing and not knowing casts uncertainty and doubt, and when opposition

surfaces that creates a crisis, people who have questions about their faith will stumble and fall, and will then seek after worldly sources for assistance as their first line of defense.

Sustaining faith, especially religious faith during a crisis, is composed of at least two essential elements as it relates to spiritual and religious development (Haney & Rollock, 2020). First, faith is manifested through extrinsic values such as family and community associations that are linked to religious and spiritual affiliations (Haney & Rollock, 2020; Schultz, 2019). Second, faith is exhibited through intrinsic values such as meditation, reflection, prayer, internal convictions, and dedication to keeping covenants from belonging to a religious denomination (Haney & Rollock, 2020; Schultz, 2019). In addition, religious and spiritual faith provides a forum for likeminded people to form associations and relationships to foster the perpetual and evolutionary advancement of growth to a higher being through self and community support (Haney & Rollock, 2020; Myers, 2000). Even from health care professionals, they have witnessed the difference between religious and non-religious patients when it comes to recovery and how quickly religious people recover from sickness or emotional trials in comparison to non-religious patients (Espindula et al., 2010; Haney & Rollock, 2020; Myers, 2000). When people turn to God immediately after experiencing a traumatic event by seeking spiritual assistance to sustain and preserve them from earthly sorrow, most people recover sooner and experience fewer side-effects in comparison to those who suffer alone without religious assistance.

The Need to Belong

The need to belong to a religious denomination is an inherent desire for many people and it can be a strong motivator to believe in a God who is caring, loving, and who is directly connected to them on a personal basis (Gebauer & Maio, 2012; Gutierrez, 2018). People who seek after God have a greater belief that a higher being exists (Gebauer & Maio, 2012; Gutierrez,

2018). Conversely, people with a lower belief in God, struggle with a caring and loving God that personally knows of their individual circumstances (Gebauer & Maio, 2012; Gutierrez, 2018). Furthermore, people with a strong need to belong to a religious organization or desire a sense of belonging, seek out like-minded individuals by joining a religious denomination for fellowship and companionship (Gebauer & Maio, 2012). People who join a religious denomination primarily due to relationship and belongingness issues, will likely deconvert and then reconvert to a new religious affiliation due to external conflicts with one group by aligning their new beliefs and ideas with another likeminded group.

Belonging to a religious denomination brings stability and assurance that a higher power is watching over them, and is a source of great comfort when trials come to challenge their religious beliefs (Gebauer & Maio, 2012; Gutierrez, 2018). Research has proven that religious sects like Catholicism and Protestantism can retain their membership during a crisis, while agnostics and atheists are more inclined to transition by becoming religious or by becoming a spiritualist (Gutierrez, 2018). Religion is like a healing balm during a crisis and more people are drawn to it so they can become cleansed and sustained through the grace, mercy, and love of God.

Faith and Devotion to God. Empirical studies have revealed that faith in God provides inner strength and greater meaning to life (Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 2013; Levers, 2012; Paul & Treschuk, 2020; Roehlkepartain et al., 2006). Obstacles and trials that cause a crisis of faith can be resolved through faith in a higher being (Paul & Treschuk, 2020; Roehlkepartain et al., 2006). Research has revealed that religion promotes faith in God, but it also recognizes that people who have inner faith outside of their religious beliefs are stronger to overcome maladaptive behaviors (Levers, 2012; Paul & Treschuk, 2020; Roehlkepartain et al., 2006). Faith

is personal, subjective, and can be transformative (Paul & Treschuk, 2020; Roehlkepartain et al., 2006). Faith is deeper than organized religion (Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 2013; Levers, 2012; Paul & Treschuk, 2020; Roehlkepartain et al., 2006). If faith is only associated with religion, then individuals will eventually succumb to fear and doubt, and they will likely lose their belief in God.

Christian Counseling to the Rescue. Christian faith interventions are a proven source of counseling that can help couples and families overcome a crisis of religious faith (Butler et al., 2021; Gattis, 2017; Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 2013; Limb et al., 2018; Miller & Rollnick, 2013; Ripley & Worthington, 2014). Through Christian counseling, people who experience a crisis of religious faith will be given an epistemological perspective as to the origins of their crisis and how to combat their religious ambivalence with faith based resources (Miller & Rollnick, 2013; Ripley & Worthington, 2014). Furthermore, Christians going through a crisis of religious faith will be encouraged to talk with their parents and other loved ones about specific spiritual memories and events in their lives as a means to recapture lost feelings of joy and happiness (Tan, 2011; Webb, 2001). Additionally, spiritual symptoms of traumatic stress may vary from person to person, and pastors and Christian counselors must first make a thorough assessment as to what intervention can best be applied to help a person go through a spiritual and cognitive crisis of religious self-awareness (Webb, 2001; Tan, 2011). Specific interventions that are appropriate for members of the CJLDS who are experiencing a crisis of religious faith may include reading specific scriptural verses, teaching and meditating on spiritual concepts, forgive and trust at a higher level, provide service to the community, fasting for a righteous purpose, and to conduct a thorough self-assessment of their religious and spirituality needs (Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 2013; Martinez et al., 2007; Miller & Rollnick, 2013; Ripley & Worthington, 2014).

Christian counseling can also preserve a person's religious and spiritual identity, which will rely upon prayer, religious retreats, journaling, and by recapturing the spirit of God's faith in them.

Level of Religious Faith Matters

The level of religious faith matters when it comes to coping with difficult matters in a person's life (Harren, 2005; Kay et al., 2010; Weil, 2017). Past blessings and spiritual experiences are an indicator that future blessings will come to those that believe and trust in God (Harren, 2005; Kay et al., 2010). For religious believers that have gone through a religious crisis, community and family support helped them through life's most painful episodes, especially if a crisis of religious faith was eminent (Harren, 2005; Kay et al., 2010). Furthermore, experimental evidence has proven that religious conviction can be an effective defense mechanism of compensatory control when traumatic events surface and when personal sources of control are low (Kay et al., 2010; Levers, 2012; Weil, 2017). If people can put their own will behind the will of God and be willing to unconditionally follow God's guidance, then a person will truly reach out to God as an external source of support in their lives (Kay et al., 2010). Additionally, faith is normally tacit during childhood and it becomes self-evident during puberty (Harren, 2005; Kay et al., 2010; Roehlkepartain et al., 2006; Weil, 2017). The most dominate factor of losing or gaining faith is the influence of friends, especially during adolescence and in young adulthood (Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 2006; Kay et al., 2010; Weil, 2017). Finally, a person's cognitive persistence to develop faith in God or in a higher being is related to a minimum of three elements: (a) deep routed religious affiliation; (b) fervent religious practices; and (c) righteous religious upbringing (Kay et al., 2010; Weil, 2017; Zmigrod et al., 2019). People who practice their religion on a daily basis through prayer, reading the scriptures, service to others, and by

developing and maintaining close family relationships are more inclined to weather traumatic events in their lives, such as going through a crisis of religious faith.

Missionary Work to Find and Retain

For some Christian Churches, the need to retain membership is only felt when their congregants start to leave their denomination for another religious faith (Lamb & Bryant, 1999; Manktelow, 2019; Rink, 2018; Ventura, 2014). To help combat the rate of transitions from many Christian Churches, proselyting efforts are starting to become more routine as a means to not only expand their flock, but to keep their current membership from leaving (Lamb & Bryant, 1999; Manktelow, 2019; Rink, 2018; Ventura, 2014). Conversion to a new religious denomination is a universal phenomenon and has been since the mandate by Christ was given to feed His sheep and to become hunters and fishers of men (Lamb & Bryant, 1999; Manktelow, 2019; Rink, 2018). Church missionary work to maintain current membership and to increase new membership is the flow of living water taught by Christ to His early disciples, and it can be a healing balm for those experiencing a crisis of religious faith.

Developing Spiritual Intelligence - a Sixth Personality Dimension

Recent research is pointing towards the inclusion of a sixth personality dimension in people (Emmons, 2000; Jucevičienė & Škėrienė, 2016; Sharma & Jain, 2016; Skrzypińska, 2021). Spiritual Intelligence (SI) is considered a form of intelligence involving a set of capacities and abilities that can enable people to solve complex problems and attain goals in their everyday lives (Emmons, 2000; Jucevičienė & Škėrienė, 2016; Sharma & Jain, 2016; Skrzypińska, 2021). The assumption of spirituality can best be defined in adaptive and cognitive-motivational terms that can enable a person to internally process information that was once thought to be solely in the realm of a religious connotation (Emmons, 2000). Spiritual Intelligence is being recognized

as an integral part of a person's personality development and is indirectly connected to how a person views their state of happiness and wellbeing, and it can be a source of great strength, especially when an individual is going through a traumatic event or a religious crisis in their lives.

Components of Spiritual Intelligence

Emmons (2000) identified at least four components of SI: (a) the capacity to transcend the physical and material matter; (b) the ability to experience heightened states of consciousness; (c) the ability to sanctify everyday experiences; and (d) the ability to utilize spiritual resources to solve everyday problems. Emmons (2000) also claimed that according to Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences, SI meets the criteria for an independent intelligence modality. As a result, spirituality now serves as a potential sixth personality dimension that can expand the understanding of human reasoning as it relates to several other phenomena, such as why people believe in a higher power and why people want to achieve a sense of self-awareness through self-actualization and mastery of their mortal dimensions.

Many spiritual sects such as Hinduism, Taoism, and Buddhism, to include an abundance of psychological literature, highlight the transformation of agreeableness and consciousness to finding the meaning of life as important spiritual developments in self-awareness (Emmons, 2000; Jucevičienė & Škėrienė, 2016; Sharma & Jain, 2016; Skrzypińska, 2021). Spiritual Intelligence helps explain a person's level of self-consciousness and use of wisdom to make appropriated moral choices with the many alternative and conflicting voices in society (Emmons, 2000; Jucevičienė & Škėrienė, 2016; Skrzypinska, 2021). The dimension of SI helps encourage a person's search for happiness and fulfillment in life, which can foster enlightenment in how people can improve and expand their level of religiosity, especially when a personal crisis is

developed (Emmons, 2000; Jucevičienė & Škėrienė, 2016; Skrzypinska, 2021). Overall, SI appears to be a sixth dimension of personality and is an outgrowth throughout the various life-stages of anthropological development.

Origins of a Crisis of Religious Faith through a Personality Assessment

Determining the origins of a crisis of religious faith in former members of the CJLDS is to study the personality findings and commitment level of former members (Allen et al., 2019). Research has revealed that members of the CJLDS as well as other Christians who remain faithful to their religious tenets scored higher on agreeableness and conscientiousness, while scoring low on social interaction anxiety and anger (Allen et al., 2019; Fox & Piedmont, 2020; Limb et al., 2013; Worthington, 1989). People with a high level of agreeableness and conscientiousness were able to mediate the relationship between religious commitment and anger, and extraversion also moderated the relationship between religious commitment and social interaction anxiety (Allen et al., 2019; Limb et al., 2013; Worthington, 1989). Conversely, people with anger, trust issues and lack of Spiritual Intelligence, and those that score low in agreeableness, extraversion, and conscientiousness were malleable to doubt when religious conflicts surfaced (Allen et al., 2019; Limb et al., 2013; Worthington, 1989). Agreeableness, Spiritual Intelligence, and conscientiousness were three variables that sustained people during a crisis of religious faith, while anger, extraversion and social interaction were traits that inhibited spiritual and religious growth in peoples' lives.

Spiritual Intelligence and Gospel Principles

The level of religious faith was another barometer that determined whether a person experienced an enduring crisis of religious faith, and faith was tied to a person's sense of commitment and agreeableness to existing religious principles (Allen et al., 2019; Shawn et al.,

2013). On the other hand, researchers have found that having faith in truth, such as in religion, does little to persuade public opinion (Allen et al., 2019; Shawn et al., 2013; Wahman, 2020). According to some scholars, faith is something that cannot be proven or disproven nor is it a prerequisite for anything of worldly value.

Spiritual forgiveness is considered a universal term and is typically found in all cultures and demographics (Mróz et al., 2021; Sandage & Jankowski, 2010; Shawn et al., 2013). How spiritual forgiveness is viewed and governed is in contrast with Christians and non-Christians; however, what all can agree upon is that spiritual forgiveness through mercy and judgment is needed for the welfare of mankind (Mróz et al., 2021; Sandage & Jankowski, 2010; Shawn et al., 2013). Whether a person uses spiritual or secular forgiveness, the act of seeking or giving forgiveness contain similar qualities for either Christians or non-Christians

Religiosity and Spiritualism and Whether they are Mutually Inclusive

Basic psychological mechanisms infer that there is a difference between religiosity and spiritualism (Borges et al., 2021; Paul & Treschuk, 2020; Wink et al., 2019). Research studies have established a unique and differing developmental trajectory for religion and spirituality in people's lives (Borges et al., 2021; Paul & Treschuk, 2020; Wink et al., 2019). Both religion and spirituality are decidedly associated with distinct personality traits and are exceedingly responsive and malleable to macro societal change and can vary in intensity and meaningfulness with different life-stages of development (Borges et al., 2021; Paul & Treschuk, 2020; Wink et al., 2019). As a result, spiritualism and religiosity have a diverse trajectory, which are affected by the cognitive and behavioral motives and needs of an individual and how they are affected by family formations, cultural upbringing, and societal expectations (Borges et al., 2021; Wink et al., 2019). Religious transitions can dramatically impact a person's understanding of their

spirituality and religiosity by either increasing or decreasing their motive to remain part of a religious sect.

Spiritual and Religious Transformation to Self-Actualization

A crisis of religious faith can either drive a person closer to God or it can propel an individual to abandon their religious beliefs by rejecting the existence of God (Paul & Treschuk, 2020; Wink et al., 2019). When a person transitions within another Christian denomination, there is research that explains that a person can achieve a higher meaning and purpose to life by switching denominations to achieve a transformation towards self-actualization (Paul & Treschuk, 2020). Jesus taught His disciples during the sermon on the mount to be perfect, even as your Heavenly Father is perfect (*King James Bible*, 1769/2017, Matthew 5:48). Through the atonement of Christ, all mankind can be cleansed from sin, and the very nature of being perfect is to be without sin as we keep His commandments and follow in His pathway using the repentance process. In essence, as a person repents and is forgiven of their sins through the infinite atonement of Christ, people can attain perfection for moments of time or at least from the time of repentance to the next time sin is committed. Through faith, prayer and meditation, members of Christ's Church can achieve closeness with God through a community network of similar religious congregants as they transition to a different religious denomination for greater self-awareness and self-worth (King & DeCicco, 2009; Paul & Treschuk, 2020). A spiritual and religious reawakening after a crisis of religious faith can transcend one's mortal existence to a greater existential reflection through a more meaningful enhancement of meaning and finally to a mastery of a spiritual and religious state with God.

The Need for Christ's Church

The scriptures as taught in the Bible, clearly reveal the need for a place of worship when Christ organized His Church and ordained apostles, teachers, and other ministers to carry on His work after His death (Michaelson et al., 2015; Niemandt, 2019; Oaks, 2021). The Bible teaches that Christ is the “head of the Church” (*King James Bible*, 1769/2017, Ephesians 5:23-24); and that through His disciples, the ministry of perfecting the saints and the edifying of the body of Christ will continue through His Church on earth (*King James Bible*, 1769/2017, Ephesians 4:12). People attend Church to worship God, and showing our devotion and love for God is an individual responsibility and duty, since no one can worship and gain salvation on a person's behalf (Michaelson et al., 2015; Niemandt, 2019; Oaks, 2021). Christ's Church is a collection of likeminded individuals who all fall short of the mark, and when people attend Church, they do not attend alone as they associate with others to grow as one in the Body of Christ by being perfected through Him.

Brain Reward Circuitry to Perfection

As people strive to overcome trauma and other calamities in their lives, there is an association of abstract concepts and brain reward circuitry that may interact with frontal attentional and emotive salience managing mechanisms that strongly suggests a method and neuron pathway to facilitate doctrinal processing to achieve a higher state of religiosity (Ferguson et al., 2018; Ingersoll-Dayton, 2002; Levers, 2012). The brain reward circuitry is a powerful force that can propel people to achieve a higher state of awareness (Ferguson et al., 2018; Ingersoll-Dayton, 2002; Levers, 2012). This process of brain reward circuitry can motivate people to change their religious behavior to new dimensions.

Cognitive and Behavior Patterns of Higher Religiosity. There are usually four distinct patterns of developing and maintaining a higher state of religiosity: (a) belief in a higher being; (b) grace and mercy can be achieved through God; (c) through constant obedience to God's commandments, a deeper and more fulfilling level of religiosity can be achieved; and (d) people can experience a curvilinear trajectory of their religious beliefs through service to their fellow mankind (Ferguson et al., 2018; Ingersoll-Dayton, 2002; Roehlkepartain et al., 2006). A person can also restructure their thought process by placing more importance on spiritual needs over physical appetites by regulating their virtues and vices to control their desires, emotions, pleasures, and pains by becoming more temperate and compassionate (Roberts, 2017; Ingersoll-Dayton, 2002; Roehlkepartain et al., 2006). Research has proven that people who are raised and stay in highly structured Churches, such as the CJLDS or Jehovah's Witnesses, have better self-esteem, report better health, and keep closer ties with family and friends in comparison to former members who transitioned away from their traditional core values and belief systems (Scheitle & Adamczyk, 2010). Religious faith relies upon spiritual awareness and discernment through the Holy Spirit through the power of prayer and righteous living, and the higher levels of religiosity and Spiritual Intelligence a person possesses, the more likely a person will weather the storms of religious doubt and opposition.

Reliance Upon Love of Mankind

The primary accelerant to achieving self-actualization is to love God with all your heart and soul; and to love your neighbor as yourself (*King James Bible*, 1769/2017, Matthew 22:36-40). To show love and reliance on a self-transcendent goodness and benevolent spirituality is to show trust and faith in a higher being (Ton, 1993; Wyner, 2018). Through love, people can find meaning in suffering by becoming perfected in their imperfections and to know that people can

be transformed to a better way of life (Ton, 1993; Wyner, 2018). The principle of love can help transcend a person's benevolent super-ego to trust and seek after a higher being, and love is the central process of healing and is the central theme that transforms individuals to want to become self-actualized.

Wisdom is Hard-earned. To achieve self-mastery, research has demonstrated that people must achieve wisdom through experiential learning and understanding of a collective base of knowledge about the purpose of life (Baker, 2012; Weststrate & Gluck, 2017). Wisdom is realized through an acquisition of mental, behavioral, and spiritual characteristics that are manifested by a righteous and spiritual character of a person (Weststrate & Gluck, 2017; Wilkinson, 2018). People must be open to new life experiences, to become reflective of their faults and deficiencies, to achieve higher learning, and learn to solve complex problems by fostering greater self-development (Weststrate & Gluck, 2017; Wilkinson, 2018). Furthermore, higher frequency of keeping the commandments of God, and more meaningful prayer can sustain people during a crisis, which can propel them to a higher level of religiosity (Baker, 2012; Wilkinson, 2018). Understanding, knowledge, faith, belief, and hope are the prerequisites prior to wisdom and enlightenment, which can help people overcome a crisis of religious faith by becoming reborn in Christ as a new person.

Summary

There are many explanations, reasons, and motivations as to why members of the CJLDS change their religious affiliation and belief systems by either abandoning their religious faith or by questioning their conviction and trust in God. The literature review highlighted several central themes that explained why people abandoned their Church heritage since birth. Several of those reasons were questioning Church doctrine and philosophies, intellectual apostacy, doubting the

origins of the Church, moral indiscretion, and inflexibility or unwillingness to modify Church policy to conform to modern or cultural sensitivities or by openly criticizing Church canonized scriptures as being less than divinely inspired.

When a person starts to doubt their religious or spiritual beliefs a new transcendent level of enlightenment or disillusionment starts to formulate within their cognitive formation, which produces new philosophies and belief systems to emerge (Fisher, 2017; Harren, 2005; Millwee-Welch, 2021). The act of conversion and deconversion is a personal process that typically starts as a gradual progression from childhood to adulthood (Fisher, 2017; Millwee-Welch, 2021). Religious transitions and switching religions can also be abrupt and in opposition to former religious belief systems (Bahr & Albrecht, 1989; Fisher, 2017; Lee et al., 2017; Millwee-Welch, 2021). For former members of the CJLDS, their transitional process can lead towards new life-changing experience that can separate adolescents and young adults from their ancestral and cultural belief systems, and in some cases, back again to their former belief organization (Bahr & Albrecht, 1989; Harren, 2005; Millwee-Welch, 2021). For religious believers, community and family support helped them through life's most painful episodes, especially if a crisis of religious faith was eminent.

Moving forward after a religious transition takes time, patience, understanding, and love. The one constant denominator among most ex-members of the CJLDS is that they will never be the same again (Bahr & Albrecht, 1989; Page, 2021). Like the mythical Phoenix, former members of the CJLDS must rise up from the ashes and begin anew. The Lord taught that those that lose their life for His sake, shall find it once again (*King James Bible*, 1769/2017, Matthew 10:39). Many former members of the CJLDS described their religious rebirth as a reawakening to new ideas, concepts, and friends, even though the process was long, hard-fought, and

spiritually taxing, and in some cases, a sense of bewilderment if they were doing the right thing (Bahr & Albrecht, 1989; Harren, 2005; Page, 2021). Even though some former members of the CJLDS regret their decision to leave the Church - the one constant denominator in all of their decisions was the resolve of agency to govern themselves, and the hope that family and friend relationships can be enduring, forgiving, and accepting of their life choices.

Chapter Three: Methods

Overview

In this hermeneutic phenomenological approach to qualitative research, the methods section will outline the design, research questions, setting, participants, procedures, researcher's role, data collection, data analysis, trustworthiness of the interviews, and ethical considerations for the purpose of exploring related themes to acquire a deeper understanding of shared human experiences through empirical research design procedures. The methodological congruence of this hermeneutic approach is valid for this study since it depicted the common meanings, themes, and interrelatedness that appeared cohesive as to what, why, when, and how former members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (CJLDS) experienced a crisis of faith by either leaving their religious affiliation or by questioning their belief in God. Additionally, ethical considerations and the role of the researcher were assessed to confirm the creditability, dependability, and confirmability of the data garnered for the research study.

Furthermore, the method section allowed each participant to provide awareness and meaning to their religious transition experiences, which were a catalyst that provided change to their childhood religious affiliation and belief system. Adolescence and young adulthood were typically the launching points to question, doubt, reconfirm, or amend a person's religious and spiritual beliefs. Incidentally, the method section highlighted the shared experiences of participants to see if their crisis of religious faith proceeded along a similar trajectory of pre-affiliation, affiliation, conversion, and then to deconversion or to reconversion.

Design

This research design was a hermeneutic phenomenological approach to qualitative research for the purpose of achieving greater awareness and enlightenment to a specific problem

statement (Curthbertson et al., 2020; Jackson & Naidoo, 2007). As a qualitative research study, it used a phenomenological approach to a research enquiry, which described and contributed to finding a deeper level of understanding and mindfulness into why, when, how, and what were the shared crisis of religious faith experiences of former members of the CJLDS. This particular qualitative research design specifically observed the world in which former members of the CJLDS experienced a crisis of religious faith, which used a set of interpretive data concepts that gave meaning to their shared experiences.

This qualitative research design gave deeper substance and more meaning as to why former members of the CJLDS experienced a crisis of religious faith, since it used a naturalistic approach to how participants viewed religion and spirituality, how they interpreted events, how they gained meaning from conversations with other people that have gone through similar experiences, and what the phenomena in terms of the meaning they brought to them (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Rockinson-Szapkiw & Spaulding, 2014). Furthermore, this qualitative research study described events that flowed from philosophical and psychological assumptions through an interpretive lens, and then on to the procedural process that involved studying and analyzing human problems of behavior (Rockinson-Szapkiw; Spaulding, 2014). The main aspect of this research study compared and contrasted a participant's specific phenomenon to explicit research questions by forming meaning, understanding, and awareness to their shared experiences.

Specifically, phenomenology is a subdivision of psychology, which is concerned with a phenomenon as it materializes and advances in a person's consciousness (Boden & Eatough, 2014; Creswell & Poth, 2018; Curthbertson et al., 2020). In the 20th century, the construct of phenomenology was developed by Husserl, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, and Sartre (Boden & Eatough, 2014). Phenomenology was first used in the field of psychological research by Van

Kaam, Fischer, and Giorgi, as they established concepts to understand human interaction through exploratory learning (Boden & Eatough, 2014; Creswell & Poth, 2018). Phenomenological psychology offers access and understanding to human experiences that are habitually challenging and often difficult and complicated, especially when analyzing subjectivity material, which are restrained by informal and broad paradigms (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Rockinson-Szapkiw & Spaulding, 2014). Using a phenomenological approach in this research study allowed me to pinpoint when, why, what, and how the participants perceived their crisis of religious faith in all its forms, practices, rituals, and characteristics.

A hermeneutic process in phenomenological analysis developed a systematic interpretation of interview transcripts, questionnaires, and journal writings for the purpose of extracting common themes from the various experiences of participants as their common experiences created a conceptual link that provided awareness to their shared religious or spiritual practices (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Rockinson-Szapkiw & Spaulding, 2014). Additionally, this study developed a deeper understanding of each participant's shared experiences as they underwent a crisis of religious faith, which was driven by an epistemological perspective, which relied on quotes and personal experiences from each participant (Curthbertson et al., 2020; Rockinson-Szapkiw & Spaulding, 2014). The development of this research design on a crisis of religious faith also included an axiological view point, where I shared my perspective and value systems that helped shape and gave meaning to the narrative.

Research Questions

RQ1: How would former members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints describe their crisis of religious faith and were there distinguishable similarities or differences to each experience (difference question)?

RQ2: What type of experiences and factors will the participants describe as having primarily, secondarily, and tertiarily contributed to their crisis of religious faith (descriptive question)?

RQ3: What constructs or events will be related for each participant that played a key factor in how the crisis of religious faith was either resolved or is ongoing (relationship question)?

RQ4: What specific factors or events will the participants identify as having predominately contributed to how it made them feel about themselves and how will it affect their interfamily and intrafamily relationships (descriptive and relationship question)?

Setting

Qualitative research is normally collected in the field or at a site where selected participants either experienced the issue or problem or where they normally ruminated about their feelings and emotions in a secure environment (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Curthbertson et al., 2020; Heppner et al., 2016; Rockinson-Szapkiw & Spaulding, 2014). Researchers try to avoid bringing participants to a contrived environment nor do they typically send out collection instruments, such as surveys, for participants to complete (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Rockinson-Szapkiw & Spaulding, 2014). Overall, the setting for data collection should feel natural and noncontrolling from a participant perspective.

The setting for each interview session for this research study was at the residential home of each participant. The residential homes were located in urban, suburban, and rural settings in the states of Ohio, Texas, Utah, Idaho, Missouri, and Virginia. The foremost reason for conducting each session at the residential home of each participant was to establish a place of safety, familiarity, comfort, and to project a sense of control for the participants (Rockinson-

Szapkiw & Spaulding, 2014). Due to travel distance to each participant, the interviews were conducted from my home to the participant's home through Microsoft Teams Video Communications, a secure online video conference meeting forum.

Participants

The first step in the selection of participants was to define the target population by determining the researcher's scale and scope regarding the type of information he or she wanted to gather and collect to answer predesignated research questions (Heppner et al., 2016; Schwandt, 2015). As the primary researcher, I systematically and methodically considered a wide variety of factors and characteristics when selecting each participant, because each component eventually defined the group of participants that were selected for this study (Heppner et al., 2016; Rockinson-Szapkiw & Spaulding, 2014). Specific features and characteristics of this selection process included diagnostic categories such as gender, race, age, religion, marital status, educational status, and country of origin (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Heppner et al., 2016). Additionally, a key issue when selecting each participant was to decide how heterogeneous the population should be and whether there was a correlation between the participants and the problem statement (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Heppner et al., 2016). Lastly, I tried to maximize the variation of the participants as a means to achieve a significant disparity of the phenomena to show validity and creditability to the research questions and problem statement (Heppner et al., 2016; Schwandt, 2015). For this research study, the survey questionnaire ensured that a direct correlation between the participants and the problem statement was obtained.

In a qualitative research study, it normally takes a minimum of 10 to 12 participants to reach data saturation, and in some qualitative research studies, it was recommended to use less

than 20 participants for ideal data collection and analysis from a targeted audience (Braun & Clarke, 2021; Creswell & Poth, 2018; Crouch & McKenzie, 2006; Fugard & Pott, 2015).

Regarding the gender and diversity of participants, it was advised for best results to have each participant's gender, culture, and ethnicity to be reflective of the general population of the research study; however, the ideal participant should be an honest person without any preconceived notions or biases, and he or she should be motivated to respond in a truthful and helpful manner without strict geographic, gender, and diversity criteria (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Heppner et al., 2016). For this research study, each participant responded truthfully and was honest as they shared and gave meaning to their crisis of faith experiences that eventually led to the abandonment of their childhood religious belief systems as a former member of the CJLDS.

For this research study, the purposive sample size of participants was a mixture of six male and seven female participants. Each participant was purposively selected from a survey questionnaire to determine whether they were former members of the CJLDS and if they experienced a crisis of faith by either changing their religious affiliation or by losing their faith in God (Appendix C). In addition, each former member of the CJLDS grew-up in the United States as a member during childhood and then subsequently abandoned their religious affiliation during adolescence or as adults. The participants had an age span from the early twenties to late fifties, with an average age of approximately 40 years of age. Furthermore, the ethnic diversity was 12 Caucasians and one Asian. Additionally, no monetary compensation was proffered for participants' assistance during the research study.

Procedures

The procedure section included several sub-sections that reinforced the validity of the researcher's role; data collection; survey questionnaire; interviews; document analysis;

trustworthiness; credibility; dependability and confirmability; transferability; and ethical considerations (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Heppner et al., 2016). In addition, the qualitative procedures in this research study sought to recognize and capture the depth of the research being explored through the four common themes that were revealed during a thorough analysis of the interviews (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Heppner et al., 2016; Rockinson-Szapkiw & Spaulding, 2014). The research procedural process was accomplished by selecting a small, but purposive sample population of 13 participants that acquired an in-depth and narrow scope of first-hand experiences during a naturalistic setting.

The primary research procedure for this study was a purposive sampling of potential participants. The sampling size grew until 13 qualified participants were selected that fit the parameters of the study (Curthbertson et al., 2020; Heppner et al., 2016; Rockinson-Szapkiw & Spaulding, 2014). The study began when I contacted one person who fit the profile of a former member of the CJLDS who grew up as a member during childhood; and subsequent participants were selected through a snowball referral sampling of potential participants. Each potential participant took a survey questionnaire (Appendix C, as provided to each participant via Google Survey Forms) to determine whether they met the minimum qualifications of participating in the research study. The survey questionnaire also included the purpose of the research study. The researcher reviewed the completed survey questionnaires and purposely select 13 participants who met the minimum qualifications for the research study. Once all 13 participants were selected for the research study, they reviewed and signed a participant consent form. No monetary compensation was proffered for participants' assistance during the research study.

Prior to the selection and identification of the 13 participants, I submitted an Institution Review Board application for approval of the research study to Liberty University, Institutional

Review Board (IRB). Liberty's IRB reviewed the research design regarding the health, welfare, safety, rights, and privileges of human participants, and approved the research study (see Appendix A for details). In addition, Liberty's IRB ensured that the research study was conducted in an ethical manner as defined and required by the Department of Health and Human Services (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Curthbertson et al., 2020; Heppner et al., 2016; Rockinson-Szapkiw & Spaulding, 2014). No data collection or contact with participants was started until after final approval was given by Liberty University's IRB.

Once the IRB approved the research study and the 13 participants were selected, the next step entailed scheduling a date and time to meet each participant via Webex during a personal interview that lasted approximately one hour or longer. During the in-home interview session via Webex with each participant, I used an audio recording device as a back-up to the transcription service Webex provided during an audio and video meeting with each participant.

At the conclusion of the personal interview meeting, each participant was asked to write a comprehensive reflective narration of their crisis of religious faith and whether their individual experiences resulted in a transcendence of self. Of the 13 participants, 10 participants agreed to submit a narrative, which were uploaded by each participant to my secure drop box account, which used a 256-bit AES encryption model to ensure security. The results of each narrative reflection were analyzed and correlated to show linkage of themes (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Heppner et al., 2016). Each participant understood that the survey questionnaire results, interview transcripts, narrative reflection comments, observation and interview notes, and audio and video recorded transcripts would be securely retained by me in a secure manner and that access to recordings and all other data would be restricted for a minimum of three years. In addition, hardcopy narrative reflections of participants, interview and observation notes, and

survey questionnaires would also be maintained by in a cypher combination safe and controlled by me. All audio, video, and transcript data would also be maintained on a USB flash drive that was password encrypted and stored in my cypher combination safe.

The Researcher's Role

A primary assumption during a qualitative research design is that the principle researcher can influence the outcomes and he or she is inextricably connected to each phase of the research study (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Heppner et al., 2016). Qualitative researchers recognize that their life experiences are shaped by personal experiences and identities, and that their life experiences might be similar or contrary to those participating in a qualitative study (Heppner et al., 2016; Rockinson-Szapkiw & Spaulding, 2014). In order for the interactive process to occur between a researcher and participant, a qualitative researcher is expected to engage in a thorough process of reflection and to openly acknowledge their positions in the written manuscript (Heppner et al., 2016; Rockinson-Szapkiw & Spaulding, 2014). Lastly, qualitative researchers cannot realistically separate themselves from their inherent biases and beliefs, and they are expected to acquire an understanding of how their worldview can influence their research (Curthbertson et al., 2020; Heppner et al., 2016). As the primary researcher, I did everything feasible to ensure neutrality by suppressing any inherent biases to ensure that each participant felt secure, safe, and confident that all data collection and subsequent analysis of all relevant data would be conducted in a professional manner.

Primary Researcher

Kent T. Critchlow, doctoral candidate, was the sole-researcher for this research study. I retired as an Army Colonel, Military Intelligence, after 28 years of military service. During my military service, I was deployed or assigned to combat zones in Somalia, Iraq, Bosnia, and

Jordan for over seven years. Upon my retirement from the military, I worked for the Defense Intelligence Agency for eight years as a Senior Intelligence Supervisor. I was also a secondary high school teacher, and varsity football and basketball coach for five years upon graduation from college in 1980.

From a potential bias perspective, I have been an active and devoted member of the CJLDS since childhood. Two of my four children, after they were married, forsook their ancestral Christian denomination by aligning their faith as a spiritualist or as a humanist with no current religious affiliation. I have been married to my high school sweetheart of 47 years. I rank order my top four priorities in life as follows: (a) my relationship with God as His son; (b) eternal marriage and family relationships; (c) Church obligations and responsibilities; and (d) professional and civic responsibilities.

I have no familial or friendship ties to any of the participants. The participants knew of my religious affiliation and of the purpose of the research study. I had no prior interaction with any participant prior to the study to ensure the creditability and trustworthiness of the research design. In addition, each participant signed a “Participant Agreement and Release Consent Form” as a condition to be part of the study (see Appendix D, Consent Form, for details). Lastly, I intentionally set aside any perceived biases or opinions that might have seemed incongruent with the life-style choices made by each participant. This was accomplished by masking my body language to show neutrality to a participant’s comments; by asking a participant to verify my analysis of their comments; and by including all aspects of the data research without eliminating comments or themes that would have contrasted with my personal beliefs.

Furthermore, the research process was scrupulously analyzed from a trustworthiness perspective

by bracketing relevant data from suspected tainted data, which helped ensure that any potential researcher's bias was minimized or nullified as germane.

Data Collection

Data collection is a series of interrelated activities that are aimed at gathering information to answer emerging research questions (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Curthbertson et al., 2020). A vital aspect of data collection is to find viable participants through a randomized selection process, and to interview selected participants at a site conducive from the participant's perspective (Boden & Eatough, 2014; Creswell & Poth, 2018; Heppner et al., 2016). In addition, for participants to be forthcoming with sensitive and confidential information, it is critical that the researcher gain rapport before probing for data (Boden & Eatough, 2014; Creswell & Poth, 2018; Rockinson-Szapkiw & Spaulding, 2014). Overall, data collection is comprised of seven components that are all linked to ethical considerations: (a) locating a viable site and selection of participants; (b) develop rapport; (c) purposefully use a variety of sampling techniques; (d) collect all relevant data; (e) video and audio record the collection of data; (f) minimize field issues; and (g) securely and confidentially secure data (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Heppner et al., 2016). Lastly, for a qualitative research design, data collection is done using a representative sample of a population.

For this qualitative research study, the hermeneutic phenomenological research method used helped describe and identify the experiences of 13 participants that appeared cohesive and related as to what and how former members of the CJLDS experienced a crisis of faith by either leaving their religious affiliation or by questioning their belief in God. Data collection was used to gather, collate, interpret, analyze, and define all common themes by using five different typologies of collection: (a) presurvey questionnaire; (b) research questions; (c) interview

questions; (d) writing samples; and (e) observations (Heppner et al., 2016; Rockinson-Szapkiw & Spaulding, 2014). The methodological congruence of this hermeneutic approach to this research study was valid, since it depicted the common meanings, themes, and interrelatedness that appeared cohesive among the various participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Heppner et al., 2016). Participant selection and data collection was started once Liberty University's IRB granted final approval of the research proposal (see Appendix A, IRB approval).

Once the researcher received the final approval from the IRB, I initially contacted each participant by telephone by using the recruitment template, which provided a verbal script to follow when talking with each potential participant (see Appendix E for details). In general, the recruitment template covered the following main topics: the researcher was a graduate student in the School of Behavioral Sciences at Liberty University; the researcher was conducting research as part of the requirements for a doctoral degree in Community Care and Counseling; the purpose of the study was to provide a descriptive meaning and describe the significant factors that likely caused members of the CJLDS within the United States to change their childhood religious affiliation and belief systems by either abandoning their religious faith or by questioning their certainty in God; and each participant had to be 18 years of age or older and were self-identified during childhood as a member of the CJLDS within the United States, and then subsequently experienced a crisis of religious faith, which resulted in the abandonment of that religious faith or belief in God. Furthermore, once each participant verbally agreed to be a potential participant in the study, I forwarded a screening survey and consent form through Google Forms, a secure data-link, to each potential participant.

Instruments Used

In a qualitative research study, the primary researcher will act as the key instrument to collect data through examination of documents, observing traits of behavior, and through a thorough interview process of each participant (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Heppner et al., 2016). Through a variety of instruments used, I built complex patterns, identified key categories of content, and developed themes from the “bottom up” by organizing the information into narrow categories and themes that related across all of the collected data areas (Heppner et al., 2016; Rockinson-Szapkiw & Spaulding, 2014). During the interview process, I used open-ended questions, which helped me design all applicable common themes that related to the research problem and purpose statement.

Survey Questionnaire

Each potential participant was provided a survey questionnaire to determine if they met the minimum qualifications to become a viable candidate (e.g., grew-up as a member of the CJLDS, gender identification, demographic information, and ethnic diversity), (see Appendix C for details). The survey questions were sent to each participants using a secure link on Google Forms.

Participant Interviews

Participant interviews are considered a social interaction based upon direct conversations in which knowledge is constructed between a researcher and participant (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Curthbertson et al., 2020). Interviewing is the predominant mode of acquiring information in a qualitative research design and is deemed to be one of the most difficult and advance skills to master (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Curthbertson et al., 2020; Heppner et al., 2016). There are normally three common formats of interview questions utilized: (a) structured interviews; (b)

unstructured interviews; and (c) semi-structured interviews (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Heppner et al., 2016). In addition, there are generally seven typologies of qualitative interview questions: (a) background; (b) behavioral; (c) opinion or belief; (d) feeling questions; (e) knowledge questions; (f) sensory questions; and (g) experiential (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Heppner et al., 2016). The information gathered from the 13 personal interviews were collected by note taking, and adequate video and audio recording procedures (Curthbertson et al., 2020; Rockinson-Szapkiw & Spaulding, 2014). I also used a data collection template that was utilized during each interview session (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Curthbertson et al., 2020; Heppner et al., 2016). Likewise, I used a semi-structured interview format, which utilized all seven typologies of qualitative interview questions in my research study. Furthermore, each participant had the opportunity to review their recorded responses for accuracy.

Standardized Open-Ended Semi-Structured Interview Questions. Before each interview began with each participant, I started each conversation by explaining my professional and personal background, and by engaging in four icebreaker questions as a means to build rapport and trust with each participant (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Heppner et al., 2016). The following semi-structured interview questions were used as a means to guide the conversation. In addition to the below rapport and interview questions, extemporaneous and clarifying questions were solicited during each interview session.

1. Now that you know a little about me, can you tell me about your personal background and your likes and dislikes?
2. What was your favorite vacation and why?
3. Describe one or two of your personal strengths?
4. What matters most in your life and why?

5. Describe whether you developed a testimony and had a spiritual experience of the divinity of the CJLDS?

6. Describe the primary factors and variables that first started your crisis of religious faith (knowledge and belief)?

7. Describe an event or how a situation primarily, secondarily, and tertiary influenced your crisis of religious faith (knowledge and belief)?

8. Describe how a person or persons influenced your crisis of religious faith (feeling and belief)?

9. Describe your prior and current definition of faith, and how it has evolved since your crisis of religious faith (knowledge and belief)?

10. What type of experiences contributed to your final decision to change your faith and belief system (background and belief)?

11. How did changing your faith and belief system resolve your crisis of religious faith (experiential and belief)?

12. What were the relevant factors that contributed to the resolution of your crisis of religious faith (experiential and belief)?

13. How has the experience of your crisis of religious faith affected your family and close personal relationships (sensory and feeling)?

14. How has the overall experience of your crisis of religious faith affected you (sensory and behavioral)?

15. How are you using your crisis of religious faith experience to help others who are or who might have a similar experience (experiential and belief)?

16. How has your crisis of religious faith reformulated your understanding of God (belief, feeling and sensory)?

17. How has your crisis of religious faith changed your belief in a religious denomination (knowledge and belief)?

18. How has your crisis of religious faith changed your perception of religion and spirituality, and their role in your life (behavioral and belief)?

19. How did changing your religious affiliation resolve your crisis of faith (feeling and knowledge)?

20. How did changing your belief or understanding of God resolve your crisis of religious faith (sensory, feeling and belief)?

Semi-structured interview questions offer a balance between structured and unstructured interview questions since they allow the participant to provide a richer and more personalized response to each question (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Heppner et al., 2016). In addition, semi-structured interview questions allowed me to set response protocols with each participant as a means to adapt or modify inquiries by asking extemporaneous and clarifying questions to each participant as new insights emerged (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Heppner et al., 2016). In addition, I devised each question to gain a meaningful saturation level on the background, behaviors, opinions, feelings, knowledge, sensory understanding, and how each participant experienced a crisis of religious faith in their life that eventually caused them to either change their religious denomination or alter their belief in God. Lastly, each standardized open-ended semi-structured interview question was conceived from the problem and purpose statement (see Appendix G for details).

Narrative Reflection Writing Sample

Each participant was asked to write (two pages or less) a condensed reflective narration of their crisis of religious faith and whether their experience resulted in a transcendence of self (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Heppner et al., 2016). The participants were all asked to write a narrative reflection after the interview session as a means to capture their emotions and other thoughts that might have surfaced during or after the interview session. Of the 13 participants asked to write a narrative reflection, 10 agreed and submitted a narrative reflection approximately three days after their interview session. Each participant submitted their narration to me by uploading their narrative writing sample to my secure drop box account, which used a 256-bit AES encryption model to ensure security, and the results of each narrative were analyzed and correlated to show linkage of themes. Lastly, each narrative reflection writing sample was correlated with each participant's responses to their respective interview questions (see Appendix F for details).

Data Analysis

Data analysis is the process of giving meaning, understanding, and by theorizing the various collected concepts into cogent themes of importance (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Heppner et al., 2016; & Schwandt, 2015). From a qualitative research viewpoint, data analysis includes collating information, synthesizing relevant themes, drawing conclusions through an interpretation of meaning, and by ensuring the trustworthiness and ethical standards of data garnered is empirically driven (Schwandt, 2015). Additionally, data analysis includes coding and organizing of information into themes, depicting and representing the data, and by forming an interpretation of all relevant collected data, which is void of research bias.

The overarching method for data analysis for this research study was Moustakas' human science research appraisal system to data analysis. Moustakas (1994) developed a process of data analysis, which included the following categories: (a) epoche; (b) phenomenological reduction; (c) imaginative variation; and (d) synthesis of meaning and essence. This process of data analysis allowed me to determine whether the collected data reached a point of saturation of information to answer the research problem (Moustakas, 1994; Rockinson-Szapkiw & Spaulding, 2014). In addition, I tried to purge myself of all feelings and emotions from previous personal experiences about the research phenomenon. I also attempted to view each participant's experiences from an independent and neutral perspective, and I monitored the various experiences to determine the level of saturation.

In addition to using Moustakas' human science appraisal system, the following main data analysis and representation of information were used to describe the research process: (a) create and organize all data files and collection points; (b) read and understand text comments and take margin notes and form initial coding of data; (c) describe participants' experiences through epoche and then describe the essence of the phenomenon; (d) formulate developing and significant statements and then group statements into meaningful categories; and (e) describe what happened, how the phenomenon was experienced, and then use a composite description of all relevant data, i.e., constant comparison of all collected data (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994).

Epoche

Epoche or bracketing of information is accomplished when the data is viewed from a new perspective without any hidden biases (Creswell & Poth, 2018 & Moustakas, 1994). This process was started when I developed a complete description of the research phenomenon as described

by each participant (Yuksel & Yildirim, 2015 & Moustakas, 1994). Once the research phenomenon was described, I outlined the participant's experiences with the phenomenon, which will allowed me to relate and gain rapport with each participant.

Phenomenological Reduction

The phenomenal reduction step outlined the participant's experiences in written form and was summarized into five steps: (a) form a horizontal perspective (linked all relevant information into topics and I assigned equal value to each topic); (b) reduced each phenomenological experience (I categorized all data into themes and I split the themes into singular ideas); (c) created core themes (I clustered invariant constituents into shared themes); (d) phenomenological reduction phase (I compared core themes to confirm trustworthiness and creditability of data); and (e) I wrote individual comments of each participant (I provided a narrative explanation to what and how each experience was felt and understood by find meaning to each phenomenon) (Moustakas, 1994, Yuksel & Yidirum, 2015).

Imaginative Variations

Imaginative variation sought to find meaning through varying participant's reference points, by giving meaning to different perspectives, and by employing polarities and backtracks (Moustakas, 1994; Schwandt, 2015). In addition, I created a composite outline from all participants' descriptions into a universal application of each shared experience (Moustakas, 1994; Rockinson-Szapkiw & Spaulding, 2014). Lastly, I found the "what" and "how" from each interview narrative, which led to a shared phenomenological experience from all of the participants.

Synthesis of Meaning Essences

I integrated all textural comments from each participant by developing an organizational account that reflected the essence of each phenomenological experience (Moustakas, 1994). Each phenomenological experience was captured without bias and was weighted to give importance to the varying experiences from each participant (Yuksel & Yidirum, 2015). Finally, from a data analysis perspective, I never fully captured the essence of each phenomenon, since time restrictions, hidden biases, accuracy of remembering historical data, and other factors, likely inhibited my ability to fully and accurately describe each salient sentiment and comment to wholly provide the synthesized meaning of each experience.

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness of a research study can be defined as the inherent quality of a research design that uses empirical methodologies by finding a gap in research that is of interest to academia (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Schwandt, 2015). From a qualitative research perspective, trustworthiness is a process that ensures credibility of data, dependability of the research process, confirmability of reported analysis, and is transferable and meaningful to an audience (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In addition, qualitative research should address internal and external validity, and from a researcher's perspective, he or she must address their external and internal validity with their level of neutrality (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Rockinson-Szapkiw & Spaulding, 2014). In this research study, I ensured that trustworthiness was obtained by acquiring data in a methodical and systematic manner by using proven qualitative research methods to address external and internal validity matters.

Member Check of Data will Ensure Trustworthiness of Data

Each participant had the opportunity review their responses for accuracy (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In addition, verification of information by each participant helped improve the veracity and reliability of all assessed data (Heppner et al., 2016; Rockinson-Szapkiw, 2014; Spaulding, 2014). Furthermore, by having each participant check their recorded data, it helped ensure that all collected data was captured accurately, and it also provided an additional opportunity for each participant to enhance their reported information by providing supplementary comments to their prior remarks.

Bracketing of Information will Improve Trustworthiness of Data

I separated personal perceptions and feelings from the information gathered from each participant (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Heppner et al., 2016). All reported data was a reflection of the information from the participants and not from my conscious and subconscious views (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Elo et al., 2014; Rockinson-Szapkiw & Spaulding, 2014). Lastly, each phase of the research process was analyzed from a trustworthiness perspective by bracketing relevant data from suspected or tainted data.

Reading and Memoing of Emergent Ideas will Improve Trustworthiness of Data

I took notes, summarized my notes, and recorded emergent ideas as they surfaced, and I reread all relevant data from each participant several times for understanding (Creswell & Poth, 2018). I also correlated the causation of important themes by highlighting the similarity of life experiences of each participant, and I methodically reviewed each phenomenon to determine whether a level of saturation of information was obtained (Rockinson-Szapkiw & Spaulding, 2014). Memoing helped me ensure a worthy investment of time was used by conducting an audit trail that was reviewed, analyzed, and examined for trustworthiness (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Lastly, memoing of information was a guard against transferring my biases into the analysis process.

Credibility

The credibility of the information gathered and analyzed was accurately reflected by the quotes and findings as generated from each participant (Houghton et al., 2013; Patton, 2015). To assist in this process, I used the process of triangulation, the continuous dialoging of data, the habitual observation of participants, and by conducting a thorough member check of all collected data (Korstjens & Moser, 2018; Patton, 2015). I acted as the singular filter by removing data that did not fit the research problem, and I continuously observed participant's body language for internal meaning (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Korstjens & Moser, 2018). Finally, I ensured that every participant reviewed all of their recorded information for accuracy to include having each participant provide further insight that likely surfaced as each participant reviewed their comments for accuracy and credibility.

Dependability and Confirmability

Research dependability for this research study focused on reliability and consistency of gathered and analyzed data (Cope, 2014; Heppner et al., 2016). Research confirmability was achieved through attentive objectivity through my research design, as it was related to my ability to take a neutral stance, and by my interpretation of the data to ensure that it was solely derived from the participants' shared life-experiences (Cope, 2014; Houghton et al., 2013). In addition, the reported data seemed believable and was derived from creditable sources.

Another dependability and confirmability test measured in this study was illustrated through triangulation by expressing how the collected data originated from multiple sources, such as from the survey questionnaire, personal interviews, narrative reflection writing samples,

and from each participant's body languages (Houghton et al., 2013; Patton, 2015). Furthermore, the triangulated data was garnered from multiple sources and was vetted and validated for accuracy by me as a trained researcher in qualitative research (Houghton et al., 2013).

Additionally, the methods section demonstrated an audit trail that helped explain the rationale for the collection of data and how I interpreted the data by keeping extensive notes without showing my bias towards a participant's phenomenon (Silverman, 2010; Bringer et al., 2004; & Richards, 1999). Research tools such as my research notes, and developed figures and tables that were derived from all of the participants' life experiences were gathered and reviewed for data analysis, which allowed me to conduct an audit trail of the data as a means to avert a subconscious bias from my personal interpretation of the data.

From my perspective, the dependability and confirmability of the information gathered from each participant was acquired by using empirical collection techniques (Basset, 2009; Bergin, 2011; Creswell & Poth, 2018). Furthermore, the setting of the study was at the home of each participant, which allowed consistency and fairness by ensuring that I did not exert dominance or undue influence during the various interview sessions (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Silverman, 2010). Moreover, I took copious notes and I actively looked for discernable observation signs from each participant. Lastly, as an astute researcher, I tried to demonstrate a high level of transparency and dependability for the integrity of the study.

Transferability

Transferability is similar to external validity and it is increased when the researcher provides deep, rich, and descriptive textual information so the data and findings can be judged as relevant and meaningful to the phenomenon being researched (Rockinson-Szapkiw & Spaulding, 2014). Furthermore, in qualitative research, the reader of the research design determines the

validity of transferability of results, as opposed to the researcher (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Rockinson-Szapkiw & Spaulding, 2014). Additionally, qualitative research is designed to demonstrate theories and categorical structures that can be transferable, generalized, and relevant to other contextual frameworks (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Sousa, 2014). For transferability to be viable to other population samplings and in other contextual structures, I provided appropriate descriptive information of the phenomena being studied (Thomas & Magilvy, 2011). Finally, the principles of transferability was demonstrated in this research study through a deep and descriptive narrative of each participant's phenomenon.

Ethical Considerations

When a researcher first starts to conceptualize a qualitative research design, ethical considerations should be explored and a strategy must be formalized to determine how to avoid ethical concerns and how to remedy them if any ethical matters surfaced during a research study (Creswell & Poth, 2018). One of the primary ethical concerns in a qualitative research study is protecting the safety and confidentiality of each participant (Creswell & Poth, 2018; McCosker et al., 2001). Ethical considerations in this study were guided by three primary principles: (a) respect for persons (participants should be free to make their own choices with the ability to terminate their participation in the study without any consequences); (b) beneficence or “do no harm” (benefits should be maximized, while potential harm should be minimized); and (c) justice to all (all people should be treated fairly, and experiments should not take advantage of one population group, for the betterment of another population group) (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Rockinson-Szapkiw & Spaulding, 2014).

For this qualitative research study, each participant knew the details of the research design by being told that the research scheme was a phenomenological study to describe the

experiences of adolescents, young adults or adults, who from childhood self-identified as a member of the CJLDS, and had subsequent encounters that led to a crisis of religious faith, which resulted in the abandonment of that faith. Participants were informed that a pseudonym will be used for their true name, site locations will be masked, and that all personal voice recordings will be secured and protected in a secure safe. In addition, each participant voluntarily agreed to participate in this research dissertation study by signing a “Participant Consent Form” without any prospect of monetary compensation. Each participant also acknowledged that there were very few known risks associated with participating in this study and that I would avoid deceiving them in any way. I also told each participant that I would avoid the appearance of trying to create outcomes from potential conscious or subconscious biases. Lastly, I received permission from Liberty University’s Institutional Review Board to conduct this study after they determine that the research study would be conducted in an ethical manner as required by federal regulations; and that all human subjects signed a voluntary consent form and understood their rights and responsibilities to participate in the study.

Summary

This hermeneutic phenomenological approach to qualitative research outlined the design, research questions, setting, participants, procedures, researcher’s role, data collection, data analysis, trustworthiness of the interviews, and ethical considerations for the purpose of exploring related themes to acquire a deeper understanding of shared human experiences through empirical research design procedures (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Rockinson-Szapkiw & Spaulding, 2014). The methodological congruence of this hermeneutic approach was valid for this study since it depicted the common meanings, themes, and interrelatedness that appeared cohesive as to what and how former members of CJLDS experienced a crisis of faith by either leaving their

religious affiliation or by questioning their belief in God. There were several similar religious faith factors that caused some members of the CJLDS to amend their religious affiliations as spiritualists or by disavowing their belief in God. For this research study, adolescence, and young and middle-aged adulthood were typically the launching points to question, doubt, reconfirm, or amend their religious and spiritual beliefs.

Even though the sample size was small, 13 participants were ultimately selected after taking a survey questionnaire to determine their eligibility. Overall, there was insufficient data on this problem to fully understand the shared experiences as to why people develop a crisis of religious faith and how awareness of their experiences can benefit others. In general, Christians are experiencing a crisis of religious faith throughout the United States at an alarming rate (Wahman, 2020). This research study helped shed additional illumination on the primary causes why some people lose their faith in God; while others cling to hope that better days will come by continuing their belief in God whether as an active member in their current religious denomination, by switching their religious belief system or by questioning their belief in God.

Chapter Four: Findings

The primary purpose for this hermeneutic phenomenological approach to qualitative research study was to provide a holistic approach to research in order to capture the mental, emotional, psychological, and symbolic events in a person's life that likely caused members of the CJLDS within the United States to change their childhood religious affiliation and belief systems by either abandoning their religious faith and/or by questioning their certainty of God. Furthermore, there were three general theories that guided this study; the theory of cognitive dissonance, the theory of faith development, and the theory of spiritual intelligence. All three theories described, explained, and gave meaning to the shared experiences as to why and how participants left their childhood religious denomination.

There were 13 participants that took part in this research study. For most of the participants, their crisis of religious faith was defined as an intense cognitive, spiritual, and emotional experience, which resulted in the uncovering and dismantling of Church historical events, rituals, doctrines, and policies that did not correlate with their prior religious beliefs in certain events, policies, and practices in comparison to long-established CJLDS traditions, teachings, and policy statements. From the time each participant started to question and then doubt the divinity of the CJLDS, and to eventually decide to officially leave the church - the average timeframe was approximately 6.5 years. Of the 13 participants that left the CJLDS; eight were self-described agnostic, three were self-described spiritualists (not religious), one was self-described as a deist, and one was self-described as an atheist.

Generally, each participant went through six "Crisis of Religious Faith" transition stages. The First Stage was to question specific dogmas, policies, and practices of the CJLDS. The Second Stage was highlighted by a shift from questions to doubts about the authenticity of their

religious denomination. Stage Three was when a person's doubts about the authenticity of the church was magnified by cognitive dissonance (current thoughts and beliefs become different in comparison to their prior religious behaviors). Stage Four resulted in an apex or breaking point of a person's religious belief system. This was highlighted once a person reached a firm understanding as to why, when and how to officially end their church affiliation. The Second, Third, and Fourth Stages of religious transition, generally resulted in each participant going through the five stages of grief, e.g., denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and then acceptance. Stage Five was the formulation of a new identity and self-awareness, which was the process of deconstructing or purging of prior religious beliefs and practices with the reconstruction and formulation of new guiding principles of behaviors and belief systems. Stage Six or the final stage of transition was the pursuit of *Self-Determination and Autonomy*. This occurred when a person started to chart their own moral and ethical standards by making, controlling, and enforcing their own decisions on how to live their life, which resulted in a person becoming an agent unto themselves.

Participants

For this research study, the purposive sample size of participants was a mixture of six male and seven female participants. Each participant was purposively selected from a screening survey to determine whether they were former members of the CJLDS and if they experienced a crisis of faith by either changing their religious affiliation or by losing their faith in God (Appendix C). In addition, each former member of the CJLDS grew up in the United States as a member during childhood and then subsequently abandoned their religious affiliation during adolescence or as adults.

The participants had an age span from the early twenties to late fifties, and the participants were living in one of six states. The average age of the 13 participants was approximately 39 years of age. There were seven female and six male participants in this research study, and of the 13 participants, 12 were self-described as White, and one participant was self-described as Asian. Regarding their education level, six participants had an undergraduate degree, four participants had a master's degree, two participants had some college, and one participant had a doctorate degree. Overall, eight-five percent of the participants had an under graduate degree or higher. Moreover, eleven participants had one or more significant spiritual experiences about the divinity of the CJLDS during their adolescence and as an adult, while only two of the participants could not definitively testify to a personal spiritual experience of the divinity of the CJLDS. Eight participants self-described as agnostic, three participants self-described as spiritualists, but non-religious, one participant self-described as a deist, and one participant self-described as an atheist.

From an implication perspective, all of the participants now feel suspicious and resentful of religions in general. From a researcher's perspective, not having a single participant deconvert and then reconvert to another religious denomination was an outlier to previous empirical research, a phenomenon not previously documented. Additionally, no monetary compensation was proffered for participants' assistance during the research study.

Table One*Demographics and Religious Data of Participants*

| Participant | Gender | Race | Age | Educational Level | State of residence | Testimony of the CJLDS | Religious Affiliation |
|-------------|--------|-------|-------|-------------------|--------------------|------------------------|--------------------------------|
| Lynn | F | White | 40-59 | Some College | Ohio | Yes/Maybe | Spiritualist/ non-religious |
| Jody | F | White | 40-59 | Undergraduate | Ohio | Yes | Spiritualist/ non-religious |
| Aiden | M | White | 40-59 | Masters | Idaho | Yes | Agnostic |
| Aaron | M | White | 18-39 | Masters | Ohio | Yes | Agnostic |
| John | M | White | 40-59 | Undergraduate | Missouri | Yes | Atheist |
| Jacob | M | White | 40-59 | Doctorate | Ohio | Yes | Agnostic |
| Axel | M | Asian | 40-59 | Undergraduate | Utah | Yes | Spiritualist/ non-religious |
| Lisa | F | White | 18-39 | Undergraduate | Virginia | Yes | Agnostic |
| Carry | F | White | 18-39 | Undergraduate | Virginia | Yes | Agnostic |
| Margo | F | White | 40-59 | Masters | Texas | Yes | Spiritualist/ non-religious |
| Mike | M | White | 18-39 | Some College | Utah | Maybe | Deist |
| Sarah | F | White | 40-59 | Undergraduate | Ohio | Yes | Agnostic |
| Alice | F | White | 40-59 | Masters | Texas | Yes | Agnostic |

The following descriptive paragraphs will depict the demographic profiles with a succinct statement about why and how each participant initially experienced their crisis of religious faith and then what and why were their ultimate factors that prompted each of them to leave the Church:

Alice (pseudonym)

Alice left the CJLDS when she was 38 years old. She left the church approximately one year after her husband left the church, which was a prominent factor in her final decision to leave the church. Her current age was between 40 to 59 years of age. She currently lives in Texas with her husband and children. As an adolescent and young adult, she had at least one or more spiritual experiences that confirmed the divinity of the CJLDS. Alice first started to question and then doubt some of the church policies, mainly dealing with gay rights and with social issues in

general. She said the following, “For me, I really started to question when the church took a hard stand on gay marriage. I worked with a lot of people that were gay and were wanting to get married to their significant other and they're really sweet and beautiful people. The Church's stance was that they treat it more like an addiction or as a choice.”

Alice was very reserved during the interview and was soft spoken. She is still searching for answers to whether there is life after death and whether she believes in a God. She currently self-describes as an agnostic and has trust issues with organized religions. She has a master's degree. Her final decision to leave the church was based on the following, “There's things that like the patriarchy of the church. I didn't like it. How women are not equal...and men are the ruler of the household. Things started to hit me harder than they normally would have, so I left.”

Sarah (pseudonym)

Sarah left the CJLDS when she was 47 years old. Her transition away from the church took approximately three years and the catalyst for her questioning the divinity of the church, first started when her husband told her that he no longer believed that the church was true. She said, “About 10 years into our marriage, he said something about the church, and I looked at him, and I asked him – do you still believe in the church? And he said no, I don't.” Her husband's profound revelation to her about his new beliefs in the church, devastated her and at first, she seriously considered leaving her husband. “It broke my heart. It really did. His keeping his feelings from me was a façade, you know, fake. So that kind of shook me a little bit.” Instead of leaving her husband, she decided to prove that the various anti-church literature was false by reading a variety of opposing church articles, listening to podcasts, and by reading the Church Educational System (CES) letter by Jeremy T. Runnells, a letter penned to Church leaders to answer his Mormon doubts, which eventually morphed into a book. Instead, her search had the

opposite effect, as she noted when she said, “I immediately emailed the Bishop and said I want to be released from my calling. I'm stepping back. Um, so, yeah, just reading that publication made me decide to join my husband.”

Mike (pseudonym)

Mike currently lives in Utah and is in his early twenties. He is single and is dating men. He was self-described as gay and as a Deist. Mike was respectful, polite, and was guarded at times with his responses during the personal interview; however, his statements were more forthcoming and insightful as he penned his narrative reflection. Mike was raised by a domineering military father. Mike had few friends while growing up, mainly due to moving frequently as a result of his father's profession. Mike first started to question his beliefs in the church when he was 15 years old, and he officially left the church when he moved to Utah after high school, primarily as a means to be out of reach from his domineering and controlling father. His parents and two younger siblings are still members of the CJLDS. Mike could not definitively say whether he had a spiritual experience about the divinity of the CJLDS, even though at times, he thought he did. At times, he thought his church attendance and belief system were forced upon him by his father. Regarding Mike's questioning of the divinity of the CJLDS, he said the following, “I had one friend who was born again and we would talk for many hours...our discussions were probably the turning point. Regarding doctrinal issues, it was about the Trinity. Saying it's one person and three at the same time, made more sense to me at the time.”

For Mike, there was one situation that influenced his belief system that finally encouraged him to leave the church. Mike said the following, “I started finding things that I liked

outside of the church. They weren't sins, but they were looked down upon by members. I started liking this over here and I knew I couldn't be both.”

Margo (pseudonym)

Margo is between 40-59 years of age and is married with several children. Margo currently lives in Texas and has a master's degree. She is white and was self-described as a spiritualist, but not religious. Her crisis of religious faith lasted approximately three years. Her husband was experiencing similar feelings about his religious beliefs. Margo and her husband with their kids left the church for several reasons. Margo left the church when she was approximately 36 years old. According to Margo, her crisis of religious faith started as follows, “The big thing for me, honestly - was learning that the Mormons are only .02% of the world population. This is the plan that everyone must go through, this plan, and it's point .02% of the world, and I just started thinking that's not a very good plan.” In addition, the word faith, as well as other religious terms, especially in a religious connotation, are not in Margo's new lexicon. She said, “I don't think faith is a part of my language anymore or are other religious terms.” At the conclusion of a three year struggle to find meaning to her questions about the divinity of the CJLDS, she reached an apex as she started to open her mind to other worldly philosophies. She said the following, “Sexism, homosexuality, anti-gay marriage, inaccuracies in the Book of Mormon – all of these things contributed to my belief that it's a man-made organization as opposed to something that is from God.”

Carry (pseudonym)

Carry was bright and very forthcoming about her faith transition. She is a white female in her mid-thirties. She has an undergraduate degree and is working fulltime. She left the church when she turned thirty years old after a ten year struggle with her faith crisis. She now self-

describes as agnostic with a strong distrust of religious faiths in general. Her husband and their young children are no longer members of the church as well. Carry lives in Virginia and had a strong testimony of the divinity of the CJLDS when she was an adolescent and as an adult. Her crisis of religious faith first started as follows, “The first factor was the Churches stance on gay marriage and then it was the CES letter as it explained the Church history that I had no idea about and, you know, I was like this cannot be true.”

Eventually Carry became consumed with reading anti-church literature. After reading the CES Letter and Letter to My Wife, she felt shocked and duped for not knowing about the apparent fallacies of the Book of Mormon and in the restoration of the Church. After years of research, her final decision to leave the church was as follows, “If the Book of Mormon is the cornerstone of my faith, then taking down the Book of Mormon crushes everything else. I'd rather grapple with questions than be uncomfortable in truth. So, I left.”

Lisa (pseudonym)

Lisa came across as a warm, loving, and compassionate person. Lisa is currently separated from her husband due to her husband's infidelity. She is a white female, who is currently living in Virginia. She has an undergraduate degree and is in her late thirties. She had a testimony of the divinity of the CJLDS when she was an adolescent and as a young adult. Her testimony was first questioned when she found-out about the infidelity of her husband, which started a three year crisis of religious faith transition before she decided to leave the church. She started to question the validity of Joseph Smith as a prophet, women suffrage under polygamy and polyandry, women issues in general, the divinity of the Book of Abraham, and LGBTQ issues within the church. She now self-describes as agnostic.

For Lisa, her faith transition process was a slow and methodical process as follows, “Polygamy was number one. Number two was plural marriage. Number three was Joseph Smith. As I matured and grew up, I was more able to inspect what I believed in, and why I believed it. So that's probably what really started it for me.”

Similar to other participants, learning about the history of the Church and about its alleged false history, became a passion with Lisa, which eventually resulted in her final decision to leave the Church. According to Lisa, “I listened to podcasts. I read books. I read articles. Then I started talking to people who left the Church, and it was very helpful in my final decision to leave the Church.”

Axel (pseudonym)

Axel was forthcoming, open, and communicative about his crisis of religious faith. Axel is an Asian male in his late forties. He was 45 years old when he officially left the church. Axel believes in God and was self-described as a spiritualist, but is suspicious of organized religion. Axel served a fulltime mission for the CJLDS and had a strong testimony of the divinity of the CJLDS for most of his life. His religious transition took over 10 years before he could not rationalize his ambivalence about his former religious beliefs, specifically about polygamy and his belief that Joseph Smith kept plural marriage and polyandry a secret from his wife. He also had doubts about the authenticity of the Book of Abraham and Book of Mormon being the Word of God. Axel's current core beliefs stem from Jesus Christ's two most important commands - love God with all your heart and to love your neighbor as yourself. According to Axel, his beliefs in the church started to crumble and fall apart as follows, “It was when Joseph Smith lied to his wife and plural marriage. It is not okay to lie to your wife.”

Ammon is still struggling with his transition and in some regards with his crisis of religious faith. Ammon said the following, “I don't know if there's such a thing called a resolution. Leaving the Church has allowed me to become more open minded and less judgmental.”

Jacob (pseudonym)

Jacob is a white male in his late fifties. He lives in Ohio with his wife. He has a doctorate degree in counseling. He served a mission for the CJLDS and for a majority of his life, he thought the CJLDS was true. He experienced a faith transition when he was thirty years old and for three to five years, he struggled with his church identity. The Internet played a huge part in his religious transition. Jacob is agnostic and is comfortable in his inner beliefs about whether there is a God. Jacob had several concerns about the Church. First, he had doctrinal issues with the validity of the Book of Mormon and in the practice of plural marriage. Secondly, he also disagreed with the church's policies on Gay rights and whether individuals within the LGBTQIA community who practice homosexuality should be members in good standing. His wife eventually left the church for similar reasons.

According to Jacob, his religious transition was a gradual process, but was accelerated during the last years of his crisis of faith due to the Internet. According to Jacob, his transition was as follows, “My religious crisis was more an accumulation of knowledge about the Church through the Internet. My first problem was about polygamy and then it was about the Book of Abraham and then it was the truthfulness of the Book of Mormon.”

Aaron (pseudonym)

Aaron is in his late thirties and is a white male. He is married with a master's degree. He was self-described as agnostic, but open minded to new ideas and philosophies. He enjoys

practicing Buddhism, not because he believes it is a true religion, but because it helps his overall mental health. His wife and children are still practicing members of the church. He served a mission for the CJLDS and has held senior leadership positions in the church before his transition away from the church. His church crisis of faith lasted over ten years. He was very forthcoming with his responses; however, at times, he became very emotional when retelling some of his religious experiences and why he left the church. He had several spiritual experiences that led him to believe that the church was true when he was an adolescent and as an adult. According to Aaron, his crisis of religious faith started as follows, “I eventually learned that people of Black African descent could not hold the priesthood prior to 1978. That was kind of shocking to me. Then the Church disavowed previous theories why there was a racial restriction.”

Aaron kept many of his ideas and doubts to himself for fear of influencing his wife and other church members from doubting their religious beliefs until he knew for himself that the church was not true. The final moment of decision for Aaron to leave the Church came when he needed to renew his temple recommend to demonstrate his worthiness to perform church ordinances. This situation unfolded as follows, “I thought my Stake President was going to listen to my concerns, but I was just completely shut down. That was the turning point. I finally started opening up to other people. I found communities online to help me who were not judgmental.”

John (pseudonym)

John is a white male in his mid-forties. He is married with a family. He currently lives in Missouri and has an undergraduate degree. John was very passionate and emotional when retelling his crisis of religious faith experiences. His religious transition was between three to five years before he decided to officially leave the church. He left the church when he was forty

years old. His wife and children are no longer members of the church nor are his parents. He is now a strong advocate of those searching for answers to their crisis of religious faith. He has vacillated from being an atheist to an agnostic and back again. For John, the primary factors that first started his crisis of religious faith, stemmed from the following, “My top two concerns were the Book of Abraham and its translation by Joseph Smith. And then it was polygamy and polyandry.”

Like most participants, John was reluctant to discuss his doubts with his church friends and church leaders, and especially to his wife due to fear of being misunderstood as to why he was searching for answers to his questions and doubts. He said the following about this topic, “I was worried about talking to church leaders about my questions. And then being able to resolve my questions before they judged me. I was really afraid to talk to my wife about my concerns.” John struggled to gain answers to his doubts, mainly to prove church critics wrong, but in the end, he was more determined to unmask the truth than to remain in a state of fear. For John, his enlightenment to leave the church was as follows, “I would say there were two things that finally broke the camel’s back. First, Helen Kimble’s plural marriage to Joseph Smith. Second, the fallibility of prophets. I do not believe that these people speak for God.” (I selected one personal interview that reflected the majority of the participants. John went through the Six-Stage of Religious Transition, and transformed his belief in God from being a Christian to a spiritualist, but non-religious, to being agnostic to being an atheist to switching back to being agnostic, and finally settling on being an atheist but open to new ideas, a metamorphous that was similar to eight other participants. See Appendix H for John’s full transcript.)

Aiden (pseudonym)

Aiden is a white male in his mid to late forties. He currently lives in Idaho and has a master's degree. He was a fulltime missionary for the CJLDS and he had a strong testimony of the divinity of the church when he was an adolescent and as an adult. He is married with children. His wife and kids are still active members of the church. Aiden suffered from depression before and after his church transition, a situation common for many of the participants that took part in this research study. Aiden was bright, well-spoken, and was forthright during the interview. At times, he became emotional while retelling his crisis of faith experience. In addition, it appeared by his body language, that he was trying to convince me or himself about his final decision to leave the church and whether his decision was correct. On more than one occasion, he told me that he wants religion to be successful, and for people to find happiness in their chosen belief system. He misses doing community service through his former church positions and he wants to be more active in local community service projects, mainly for his children, so they can learn to give back to society, like he did when he was a youth. He left the church when he was forty years of age, mainly as a result of trying to bring about positive change to the church's teaching curriculum; however, he was allegedly met with scorn and criticism by church leaders.

For Aiden, he went through an 11 year transitional period before he finally left the church, and likely many other participants, he kept his feelings and his questions and doubts private from his family, church friends, and church leadership. As stated by Aiden, his doubts first started to blossom when he met a church friend getting her theology studies from a prestigious eastern university, "I had a good friend and she was studying at the divinity school.

She said, I'm learning a lot of crazy stuff about the Church. It made me curious. So, I started to read everything about Mormon history, Mormon theology and on Mormon culture.”

After years of study and research, Aiden wanted to bring about positive change from within the church by reforming its teaching curriculum, especially to the youth of the church. In addition, he was struggling with keeping his temple recommend active and whether he was fully honest with his answers to specific questions asked during a temple recommend interview by his Bishop and Stake Presidency. For Aiden, he finally decided it was time to leave the church after the following event, “I felt really strongly that we need to address some of these historical topics with the youth. My Bishop said, we're not going to do that. And it was the last straw that broke the camel's back. The weight of my cognitive dissonance was simply too great for me, so I left.”

Jody (pseudonym)

Jody is divorced with children and lives in Ohio. She earned an under graduated degree and has several children. She is a white female. Her divorced husband is still an active member of the CJLDS. She became very emotional when describing the circumstances of her crisis of religious faith. She mentioned on several occasions that she became tired and exhausted from trying to raise the perfect family and trying to reach perfection herself. She is in here fifties and she left the church when she was approximately 45 years of age.

Jody struggled with her religious crisis of faith for over a decade. She finally decided to leave the church when one of her twin sons could not be ordained to the priesthood due to being gay, while her other son received the priesthood. According to her, it was very hard watching one of her sons receive the priesthood, while the other son watched in disbelief. She became angry and disillusioned with the Church's policy on gay rights. If the church could not accept her gay son for his apparent inherent life-style, then she could not be a member of the church.

According to Jody, she started to question and doubt the divinity of the church as follows, “I have a gay son. My gay son struggled from the time he was born. Being gay is scientifically based and it is not a choice as taught by the church.” Jody struggled with how to teach her son to live by the church standards, while trying to suppress his feelings of being gay and to not date and engage in homosexual activities, since it was a moral choice, and not a biological inherent outcome, as allegedly taught her by the church. For Jody, the final straw that broke her resolve to remain in the church went as follows, “My gay son’s twin brother was getting the priesthood and my son had to sit and watch. That did it for me.”

Lynn (pseudonym)

Lynn is a white female living in Ohio. She is between forty to fifty years of age. She is married with several children. She left the church when she was approximately 37 years old after going through a transitional period of at least ten years. She was threatened by church leaders with excommunication unless she dismantled her support group, which she refused to do. Lynn, her husband, and all of her children left the church after she refused to comply with the church’s alleged request to discontinue her support group. She has earned some college credits and is a health and wellbeing therapist. She had a testimony of the truthfulness of the CJLDS when she was an adolescent; however, she described several of her spiritual experiences as being in a controlled environment without other options to choose from. Lynn’s transitional phase started to mature as related as follows, “I started being aware of the sexism in the Church. I also read the CES letter. It was the beginning point of my crisis of religious faith.”

Similar to other participants, Lynn became consumed with reading, studying, and researching anti-church literature and by joining support groups on the Internet. As Lynn became more aware of the information that didn’t support her prior understanding of Church history and

by seeing her friends and others become disillusioned with the Church, she became more inclined to doubt her convictions as well. Lynn eventually felt manipulated and betrayed by her perception that the church was hiding facts regarding polygamy, the multiple first vision accounts not fully revealed to church members, translation inconsistencies with the Book of Abraham, sexism within the church, and the church's policies that do not support gay marriage and equality of the sexes. As a result, Lynn felt she had no other option, but to feel honest about herself and to stay true to her inner convictions. "It was a process by uncovering the history of the church. We are going to hurt our children if we pretend to believe. So, we made a decision to leave and be honest with our kids."

Results

This qualitative research study described and identified the experiences of 13 participants. Their shared religious belief experiences resulted in the identification of four central themes that appeared cohesive and related as to what, why, when, and how former members of the CJLDS experienced a crisis of faith by either leaving their religious affiliation and/or by questioning their belief in God. The use of a screening survey, research questions, interview questions, narrative writing samples, and personal observations were all used in the collection of data that was used to gather, collate, interpret, analyze, and define all four common themes. The methodological congruence of this hermeneutic approach to this research study was valid, since it depicted the common meanings, themes, and interrelatedness that were cohesive among the various participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Heppner et al., 2016).

As the primary researcher for this qualitative research study, I acted as the key instrument to collect data through examination of documents, observing traits of behavior, and through a thorough interview process of each participant (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Heppner et al., 2016). As

a result of the various data collection methods used, I developed and built complex patterns, identified categories of content, and developed four central themes from the “bottom up” by organizing the information into narrow categories and themes that related across all of the collected data areas (Heppner et al., 2016; Rockinson-Szapkiw & Spaulding, 2014). During the interview process, I explained my professional and personal background, and I engaged in four icebreaker questions as a means to build rapport and trust with each participant prior to the interview (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Heppner et al., 2016). After building rapport and trust, I used 16 semi-structured interview questions to guide the conversation, and as needed, I asked follow-up questions to each semi-structure interview question for clarification and depth of understanding.

With the development of four central themes as to why, when, how, and what caused a former member of the CJLDS to lose their religious identity, there were six-stages of religious transitions that each of the participants went through to finally reach a state of homeostasis, where they felt comfortable with who they were as human beings; however, for a minority of the participants, this process was still ongoing.

Table Two

Central Themes and their Respective Use of Code Words

| Four Central Themes | Code Words | Use of Code Words |
|--|--------------------------------|--------------------------|
| Theme One – Questioning Turns to Doubt | Question/Questions/Questioning | 243 |
| | Doubt/Doubts/Doubting | 148 |
| | Joseph Smith | 42 |
| | Religion/Religious | 326 |
| | Polygamy/Polyandry | 24 |
| | Book of Abraham | 10 |
| | Faith | 376 |

| Four Central Themes | Code Words | Use of Code Words |
|---|--------------------------------|--------------------------|
| | Church/CJLDS | 489 |
| | CES Letter | 21 |
| | God/Supreme Being | 258 |
| | Pray/Prayer | 70 |
| | Prophet/Prophets | 17 |
| | Mormon/Mormons | 171 |
| | Jesus/Jesus Christ | 55 |
| | Gays/LGBTQIA | 31 |
| | Book of Mormon | 44 |
| | Blacks and the Priesthood | 2 |
| | Multiple First Vision Accounts | 7 |
| | Adam-God Theory | 2 |
| | Witnesses to Book of Mormon | 11 |
| | Restoration of Church | 30 |
| | Patriarchy System of Theology | 5 |
| | Spiritual/Spirituality | 191 |
| | Belief/Beliefs/Believe | 325 |
| | Bible/Scriptures | 9 |
| Theme Two – Insatiable appetite for answers and exploration of meaning to Doubts | Facebook/Social Media/Internet | 56 |
| | Mentor/Friends | 154 |
| | Support Group | 48 |
| | Manipulate/Manipulation | 6 |
| | Duped | 5 |
| | Control/Controlling | 8 |
| | Stages of Grief | 9 |
| | Crisis | 130 |
| | Cognitive Dissonance | 4 |
| Theme Three – Separation of religious beliefs and the formation of a new identity | Transition | 68 |
| | Atheist | 15 |
| | Agnostic | 29 |
| | Spiritual/Spirituality | 191 |
| | Resolve/Resolved | 44 |
| | Deconstruct/Reconstruct | 18 |
| | Shelve/Shelves/Collapse | 15 |
| | Lonely/Alone | 18 |
| | Mental Health Issues | 9 |
| | Stages of Grief | 9 |
| | Support Group | 48 |

| Four Central Themes | Code Words | Use of Code Words |
|--|--------------------------------|-------------------|
| Theme Four – Self-Determination and Autonomy | New Awareness | 44 |
| | Understanding | 42 |
| | Happy Life | 37 |
| | Joy/Joyfulness | 10 |
| | Stages of Grief | 9 |
| | Freedom/Agency/Self-Conviction | 22 |
| | Reborn/Transformed | 28 |

Note. Through data analysis, specific code words were identified, which resulted in the development and promulgation of four central themes. The codes and themes has enabled the researcher to formulate interpretation of all relevant collected data, without perceived research bias.

Theme One – Questioning Turns to Doubt

Eleven of the 13 participants described one or more spiritual experiences while in their youth and as adults that confirmed the divinity of the CJLDS. The other two participants were unsure if they had a spiritual experience or whether they were just raised to believe that the church was true. All thirteen participants had questions that turned to doubt about certain doctrinal and policies issues, which eventually resulted in their re-examination of their theology and religious belief system.

While each participant’s story was unique, many of their stories shared common outcomes that defined the theme of questioning that eventually turned to doubting their religious convictions. Many participants spent months and years analyzing their disaffection, mainly by themselves for fear of being ostracized or by not being fully understood by their spouse, family, friends, and church leaders, especially if they were able to reconcile their differences by still

outwardly believing in the church. In addition, the more devout a participant was to the church, the more prolonged each stage of transition was experienced before a final resolution was determined to sever their official ties to the church. For Aiden, his questions turned to doubt as follows, “I had a good friend and she was getting her master’s in theology, and some of it touched on Mormon history, and it was crazy stuff that I didn’t know about. At that point, I started to read everything I could get my hands on to answer my doubts.” For John, his doubts started as follows, “If I am not willing to look and get my questions answered, I am always going to have one foot kind of out. My doubts were on the Book of Abraham and polygamy.” For Carry, her doubts started to fester about the Church’s stance on gay marriage. She said the following, “I gave myself permission to disagree with a prophet of the Lord. I never considered it before, and for the first time, I was like, they are wrong about gays. I felt the infallibility of church leaders.” Lastly, for Margo, her doubts were about social issues, such as gay marriage and women rights. However, her strongest concern was on the following, “The Mormons are only .02% of the world population. This is the plan or religion that everyone must go through? This cannot be the one and only true church, and then I started to question and doubt other specific doctrines.”

The following figure will highlight the primary and secondary reasons why each participant started to question and then doubt their belief in the divinity of the CJLDS, which eventually started a crisis of religious faith within each participant.

Figure 2

Primary and Secondary Reasons That First Started a Crisis of Religious Faith



Note. There were 20 primary and secondary reasons that first started each participant to question their faith and belief system in the CJLDS.

Theme Two – Insatiable Appetite for Answers and Exploration of Meaning to Doubts

The proliferation of the Internet can be a driving force for positive and negative change throughout the world. The Internet and social media in general, can be a disruptive use of technology that can expedite a person's crisis of religious faith, mainly due to an unfettered

access to unsubstantiated and non-empirical facts, material, and evidence that can either drive a person to or away from a religious belief system.

Former members of the CJLDS and those facing life-changing events can find solace and refuge in the Internet as the forerunner or catalyst of a crisis of faith (Avance, 2013; Buckley et al., 2021; Smith et al., 2021). Many former members of the CJLDS have used the Internet as their primary sanctuary and as their crucial source to explain their new religious or spiritual identity or disbelief in God, not only to themselves, but with others as well. For all 13 participants that took part in this research study, the use of the Internet, podcasts, and social media platforms were either the catalyst for change or it acted as the primary or secondary venue to acquire sufficient information to substantiate their fears about their crisis of religious faith that eventually encouraged them to continue with their transition away from their childhood religious upbringing.

The following excerpts were from four participants about their personal exploration regarding their doubts and fears about their crisis of religious faith. According to Aaron, “I would have all these doubts and I would spend hours on Church websites as a means to build up my testimony against those doubts. I was going through that process from 2000 to early 2010.” Jacob also used the Internet to resolve his doubts. He said the following, “The Internet played a crucial role in answering my doubts. Over a period of a couple of years, I just processed everything. I do not think the Church is true in the way I was taught that it was true.” Sarah had a similar experience, as she was exploring the meaning to her doubts. She said the following, “If my husband had doubts, then maybe I should have doubts, too. I just did a lot of research on the Internet. I spent months, just reading. I am still trying to find out who I am. But it is exciting and also liberating.”

Theme Three – Separation of Religious Beliefs and the Formation of a New Identity

Approximately 70% of the participants that initially lost their faith and religious beliefs in the CJLDS remained active or semi-active in their church attendance. For the most part, they continued to fulfill their church assignments and obligations until they reached a point of frustration and saturation due to a specific event, situation or doctrinal belief that became too much for them to handle or to remain as a silent dissenter. For all participants, their crisis of religious faith resulted in them losing their faith in one or a combination of 13 primary and secondary factors that finally resulted in their decision to leave the CJLDS.

The primary factors associated with each participant losing their faith and deciding to leave the CJLDS were the lack of historical candor regarding the restoration of the church (e.g., polygamy, multiple accounts of the first vision, translation of Book of Mormon), Joseph Smith was not a prophet of God, the DNA of the Book of Mormon (e.g., use of cement, steel, silk), and the treatment of marginalized populations (LGBTQIA). For Lynn, she had to shed her former beliefs and then start a new identity. She said, the following, “First, there was a shedding of my former beliefs. So, when we believe the same, when we dress the same, when we talk the same, when we believe the same – we are then safe. So, I would say a huge part of my new construct is differentiation.”

Moving forward after a religious transition takes time, patience, understanding, and love (Page, 2021). The one constant denominator among most ex-members of the CJLDS was that they will never be the same again (Avance, 2013; Page, 2021; Scharp & Beck, 2017). Like the mythical Phoenix, former members of the CJLDS must rise up from the ashes and begin anew. The Lord taught that those that lose their life for His sake, shall find it once again (*King James Bible*, 1769/2017, Matthew 10: 39). Most of the participants described their rebirth or

transformation as a reawakening to new ideas, concepts, and friends, even though the process was long, hard-fought, and mentally taxing (Page, 2021; Wahman, 2020). For Lisa, her transformation was exhausting, but liberating. She said the following, “It is equality, understanding, and love. I am my own person. I will decide on my own. I do not subscribe to any set of rules and I take credit for what I do, instead of giving credit to a higher being. I earned it. I did it.”

The transformation process for all 13 participants ranged from two years to as many as 16 or 17 years. The average transition period was approximately six and a half years. Of the 13 participants, eight self-described as agnostic; three as spiritualist, but non-religious; one as a Deist; and one as an atheist. Even after each participant separated themselves from the CJLDS, some of the participants were still struggling to find a new identity. John captured the sentiments of some of his participants by saying the following, “It has been four years since I made the decision to leave the Church. I am still in the process of reconstructing who I want to be. I went from a believing Christian to a Universalist to an agnostic and then to an atheist. I am still exploring what I believe in.”

A vast majority of the 13 participants were skeptical of religions as being designed by men to control, manipulate, and develop religious dogmas and rituals as a means to foster dependence on those in authority. Not a single participant is now a member of a religious denomination, and with the exception of maybe one participant, all other participants do not plan to seek out another religion for solace, comfort or for spiritual guidance. For example, Lisa said the following, “The structure of the Church and the idea of God - it is all a one-way direction, and it is very unhealthy. I know I won’t go back to the Church or to any Church. I know that is not in my cards.” Furthermore, most of the participants wanted to free themselves from the

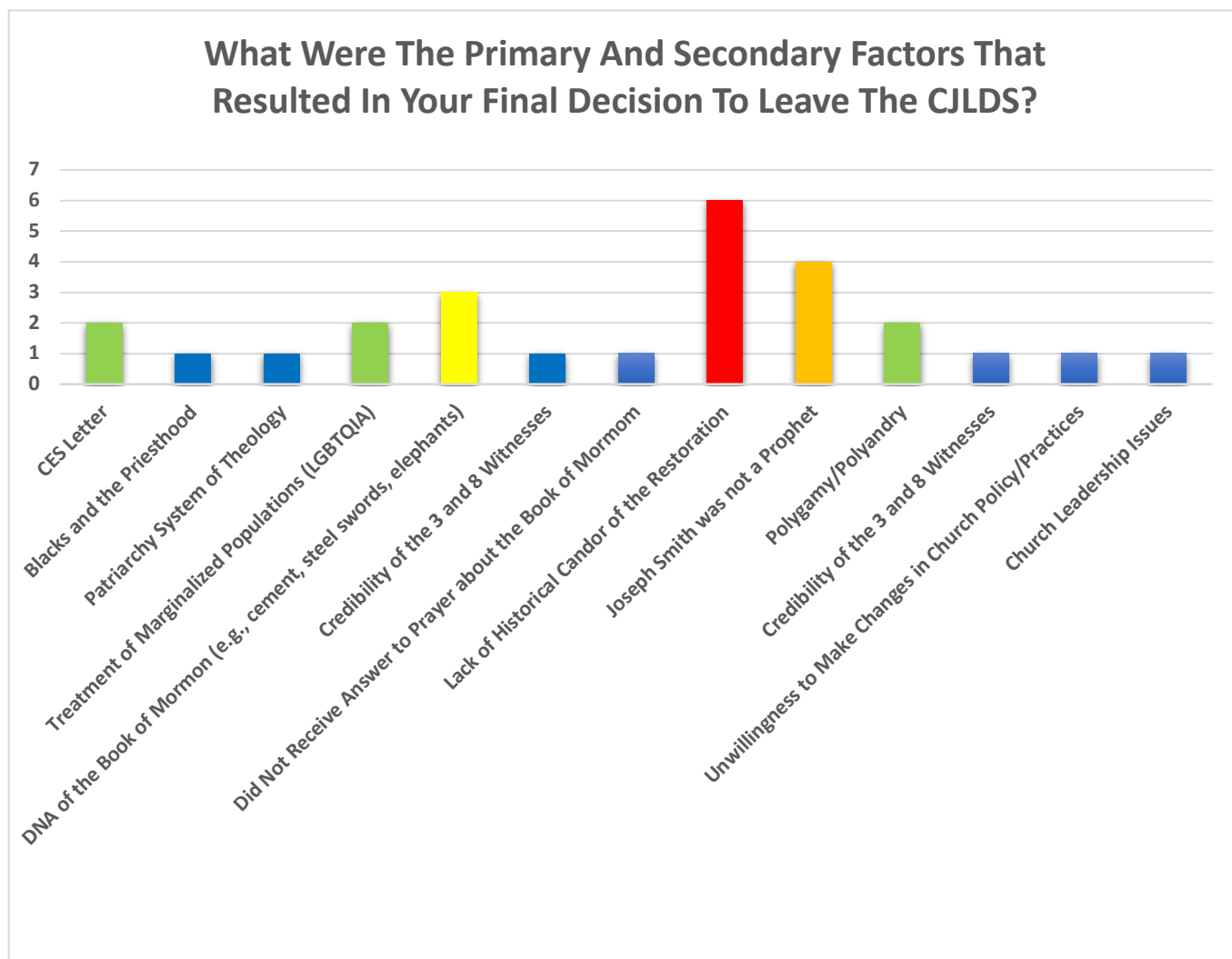
dogmas and rituals of a highly organized religion by becoming less restricted or bound to policies that do not fit their current lifestyle or perception of social issues. Mike said the following regarding his desire to unshackle himself from a religious denomination, “I do not want to be tethered down by a rule book, so I can take out the pages that I do not like and I can add new pages that I do like. It is ok to be gay and to be different.”

In addition, spirituality has been replaced by internal feelings of self-awareness for most of the participants. Faith was considered a taboo word and has been exchanged with trust, conviction, commitment or loyalty; religious dogmas, doctrine and policies have been exchanged with personal views, observations, facts, statistics, understandings, realities, family practices, and proof; and prayer was superseded with mediation, thoughtfulness, and internal understanding, since seeking assistance or guidance from an external higher-source was no longer needed given that 77% of the participants no longer believed in a Supreme Being.

The below figure represents the crucial factors that ultimately resulted in the abandonment or in the transition away from being a member of the CJLDS.

Figure 3

What Were Your Final Primary and Secondary Factors That Resulted In Your Final Decision To Leave The CJLDS



Note. There were 13 primary and secondary reasons that finally resulted in a participant's ultimate decision to leave the CJLDS.

Theme Four – Self-Determination and Autonomy

For most, if not for all of the participants, the transition from being an ex-Mormon started by creating a new identity for the purpose of self-determination and autonomy. The participants sought freedom from being shackled to former religious dogmas and rituals that they no longer

believed in. All of the participants left a highly structured church for the ability to act for themselves instead of being acted upon by others in authority, especially from God or by a set of religious beliefs and principles that they no longer accepted as truth. This new self-determination included developing a new moral framework with a new social community, and for the most part, the participants felt life became less complicated, less structured, less judgmental, and freer to choose what to do, when to do it, why they should make their own decisions, who to be without rules and restrictions developed by others, and how to do something on their own terms and conditions.

The act of deconstruction and then reconstructing a new set of ideals evolved around a person's ability to question and define their life-understanding and whether they believe they are on the true path of redemption (Fisher, 2017; Millwee-Welch, 2021). Developing religious questions and doubts are very common and are considered normal, especially for adolescents, but this process also occurs in adults as well (Fisher, 2017; Millwee-Welch, 2021; Roehlkepartain et al., 2006). The most common source of questioning comes from issues related from religion and science as they collide with one another from a theoretical perspective (Fisher, 2017; Millwee-Welch, 2021; Roehlkepartain et al., 2006). When questioning turns to doubt, people switch their belief systems by either switching within the same broad religion (e.g., from one Hindu or Buddhist tradition to another) or by switching from one broad religious tradition to another (e.g., Christian to Muslim) or from switching to being an atheist or to a Christian and vice-versa (Fisher, 2017; Millwee-Welch, 2021). Most of the participants experienced a dynamic process in their secular maturity, and as a result, they will likely continue to advance along their own path of discovery for truth, enlightenment, and mortality until they feel a sense of autonomy and sovereignty over their decisions.

To achieve self-determination and autonomy, research has demonstrated that people must achieve wisdom through experiential learning and understanding of a collective base of knowledge about the purpose of life (Baker, 2012; Weststrate & Gluck, 2017). Self-determination and wisdom are realized through an acquisition of mental, behavioral, and transcendent characteristics that are manifested by a moral and spiritual character of a person (Weststrate & Gluck, 2017; Wilkinson, 2018). For all the participants, they let themselves be open to new life experiences, to become reflective of their faults and deficiencies, to achieve higher learning, and to learn how to solve complex problems by fostering greater self-development (Weststrate & Gluck, 2017; Wilkinson, 2018).

Understanding who they can become is a prerequisite prior to achieving self-determination and autonomy. For John, he said the following, “Realizing it was ok to genuinely seek truth. Rather than forcing myself to accept certain prophetic revelations that seemed contrary to my values. I allowed myself the space to be objective and remove emotions from my decision-making process.” Margo finally realized that she wanted to be her own person and that she felt superficial and hollow by following doctrines and policies that no longer resonated with her inner convictions. She said the following, “I gave myself permission to be me and to find out for myself what that meant. Attending church each week began to highlight how different I thought than those around me. This process has been confusing, exciting, challenging, and ultimately very rewarding.” Lynn expressed her thoughts about her new identity as follows, “My former beliefs colored my world . . . and I felt betrayed. It is not my fault that I have come to learn what was hidden from me. Right now, I hope to articulate the command of not judging other - with sufficient eloquence, passion, and persuasion to override the conflicting and harmful counsel from my past.” Lastly, Aaron believes that religion does not have a monopoly on

virtuous principles and that humanity through secular love and kindness are universal principles that can bring peace and harmony to all mankind. He said the following, “I don't feel a need to have certainty about the afterlife. My current approach to life is as a Deist, Ietsist, Humanist, Agnostic Non-Theist, Secular Buddhist, Pantheist, etc. I would like to consider myself an independent thinker and with the ability love to all mankind.”

Research Question Responses

The main aspect of the research study was to compare and contrast participants' phenomena to specific research questions by forming meaning, understanding, and awareness to their shared experiences (Boden & Eatough, 2014; Creswell & Poth, 2018; Curthbertson et al., 2020). As a result, research questions were formulated using three general categories of hypotheses: (a) descriptive questions; (b) questions exploring differences; and (c) questions that show relationships (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Heppner et al., 2016). In addition, each research question was developed to express relationships between constructs that can be measured, explained, and validated to confirm creditability and viability of the research design (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Curthbertson et al., 2020; Heppner et al., 2016). For this research study, descriptive data points, exploring differences, and relationship questions were designed to depict the common meanings, themes, and interrelatedness that appeared cohesive as to why, when, what, and how former members of the CJLDS experienced a crisis of faith by either leaving their religious affiliation or by questioning their belief in God.

The below four research questions were derived from the problem and purpose statements and were designed to provide philosophical and pragmatic paradigms to describe the shared meaning, process, perceptions, and behaviors as to why former members of the CJLDS changed their religious belief system or how they lost their faith in God.

Research Question One

How would former members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints describe their crisis of religious faith and were there distinguishable similarities or differences to each experience (difference question)?

There were a plethora of antecedents to the primary and secondary factors that eventually manifested a crisis of religious faith that in the end, resulted in 13 participants leaving their generational and childhood religious denomination. Some of the similarities were as follows: (a) Joseph Smith was not a true prophet of God; (b) the misunderstood practice of polygamy and polyandry; (c) the various accounts of the first vision; (d) how the Book of Mormon was translated to include its mention of steel, elephants, silk, and horses that were allegedly not in the America's at the time; (e) the authenticity of the Book of Abraham; (f) religious prophets are fallible; (g) adaption of cognitive dissonance to justify prevailing sophisticated worldly views; (h) the validity of the three and eight witnesses to the Book of Mormon; (i) the marginalization of minorities, such the LGBTQAI community; and (j) moral indifferences were just a few of the examples how and why some members of the CJLDS first started to question and then doubt their prior religious belief systems.

For many of the participants, their crisis of religious faith was personal and was wrought with inner turmoil and confusion. For Sarah, her eyes were open once she started to listen to podcasts and by searching the Internet to find resolution to her questions. She said the following, "All it took for me to question everything I believed in, was one silly podcast that poked fun at things that Mormons believe in. And that was the beginning of my search for other things that I had been taught, but weren't true and it led me to so much more than I ever imagined." For Lisa, she felt she needed to be perfect and that she had to seek answers to her questions from male

priesthood holders or from a male God for answers. Her thoughts were as follows, “There was always a man, whether it be my dad, priesthood leaders, or a male God. I never thought of myself as good enough to get personal answers on my own. The constant need to be perfect was unhealthy and created a terrible mental environment for me. I needed to find a new path by myself.” Mike had a different perspective. He said the following, “I feel that people leave due to a crisis of faith based on how much it was forced onto you as a child. Most of the people I know that have left the church have had problems coming from bad parents or a rotten situation at home. I would still say that I believe in a God, but I do not believe in the one that I grew up with. I had a poor relationship with my father.”

Research Question Two

What type of experiences and factors will the participants describe as having primarily, secondarily, and tertiarily contributed to their crisis of religious faith (descriptive question)?

There were several experiences and factors that lead each participant to experience a crisis of religious faith. For most of the participants, they felt betrayed and lied to about how Joseph Smith translated the Book of Mormon; when, why, and how was polygamy and polyandry practiced by specific church leaders; what was the real purpose and reason behind why Blacks’ could not receive the priesthood and go to the temple to receive their endowments; ambivalence about the infallibility of prophets to be seers and revelators of truth; and why the CJLDS will not accept practicing homosexuals to hold temple recommends and be married in the church, as well as other similar reasons regarding the history and restoration of the CJLDS.

There were 20 reasons why all 13 participants started to question and then doubt their belief in the CJLDS, which was a catalyst to develop the underpinnings of a crisis of religious faith. For Carry, she felt betrayed, duped and manipulated when she started to investigate the

contrary viewpoints regarding Joseph Smith, polygamy, and the translation of the Book of Mormon. She said the following, “One of the hardest parts of going through a faith transition is the feeling of betrayal. It’s not an easy feeling to get past. Realizing that every single major life decision has been based on a faith that I no longer believe to be true, such as the purpose behind polygamy and whether Joseph Smith was a true prophet of God.” Axel also felt betrayed and questioned whether the CJLDS intentionally tried to manipulate its history by covering up specific details regarding the first vision of Joseph Smith and how the Book of Mormon was translated. He said the following, “My faith crisis was because of the constant coverups the Church demonstrated from the beginning. Every time the church has found itself in a bad light, it has maliciously made extensive measures to cover it up. In addition, Joseph Smith lied to his wife about polygamy and to the Church membership as a whole. A prophet should never lie.” For Aaron, his research and questions stemmed from the Bible and the history of religion in general. He relayed his thoughts as follows, “I realized that when I apply the same reasoning I applied to my LDS-specific beliefs to ALL my Theistic beliefs, many other things started to fall apart. I went from believing that my church’s doctrine was superior to science in every way, to understanding that although science isn’t perfect or complete, it is still the best tool we have to explain the universe. My current philosophy is, I don't know what I don't know.”

Research Question Three

What constructs or events will be related for each participant that played a key factor in how the crisis of religious faith was either resolved or is ongoing (relationship question)?

There were several constructs or significant events that can play a decisive factor when a person leaves one religious denomination for another; when a former religious person decides to become a spiritualist, but is nonreligious; when a former religious person decides to abandon

their former beliefs about the existence of God; and how a crisis of faith was ultimately resolved. Generally, a crisis of religious faith is not necessarily an act of moving away from God, as much as it is an act of becoming closer to the God of their choice or by questioning the actuality of God (Hout & Fischer, 2003; Hwang et al., 2022; Tervo-Niemelä, 2021).

All 13 participants changed their perception of God in comparison to the God they once believed in, when they were a member of the CJLDS; however, their belief or disbelief in God was not the primary catalyst that ultimately persuaded them to leave the CJLDS. Nevertheless, their final belief or disbelief in God did make them feel more comfortable and content with their eventual decision to leave the church without the cloak of guilt or remorse. In spite of this, eight participants self-described themselves as agnostic; three participants self-described themselves as spiritualist, but nonreligious; one participant self-described himself as atheist; and one participant self-described himself as a deist, but open to whether there is a God.

The following excerpts were from three of the participants, which captured the essence of research question three. According to Margo, she felt restricted by the plethora of perceived restrictions placed on her regarding what to believe in, how to conform, and when and where and to whom to seek for guidance. She explained her prior experiences as follows, “Everything that I once believe in as a former member of the church was put in a small box, and I felt restricted. Now I feel that I woke up and now I am in the box of the world. I can now know the beauty of so many different things. Instead of only living in a small box as a way of living.” John felt constrained by simply following the voice of a living prophet. He wanted the ability to think freely without feeling guilty of whether he was following a prescribed set of doctrine. He spoke about his feelings as follows, “Realizing it was ok to genuinely seek truth away from the Church. I felt guilty that it had taken 40 years to learn and renounce doctrines that I find unacceptable.

Time, energy and resources were dedicated to find the truth and then knowing that pertinent information was intentionally hidden.” Lynn spoke passionately about how she had to shed her former beliefs by developing a new pattern of living. She now feels empowered to make her own choices without the burden of feeling guilty by not strictly following each commandment of a religious denomination. She expressed herself as follows, “I can now be curious without feeling guilty. Life feels less threatening from outside the cage of conformity. I do not have to worry about who is right and who is wrong. I can now be me, the true me.”

Research Question Four

What specific factors or events will the participants identify as having predominately contributed to how it made them feel about themselves and how will it affect their interfamily and intrafamily relationships (descriptive and relationship question)?

Social media, and religious and spiritual websites through the Internet provide a forum for adolescents and adults to explore a wide variety of divergent religious, spiritual, and secular philosophies; and all of which can impact how and why a person feels about themselves, their families, and towards their close friends and associates (Avance, 2013; Buddenbaum, 2014; Roehlkepartain et al., 2006). Disillusioned and doubting members of a religious sect to include former members of the CJLDS, now face a crossroad when trying to maintain a close relationship with their parents and extended family members who are still members of the CJLDS (Fisher, 2017; Fisk, 2016; Worwood et al., 2020). Family and close friends play an integral role when an individual goes through a crisis of religious faith, and how they interact and show either support or disapproval with a person’s decision regarding their crisis of religious faith will largely determine the future relationship with them.

The immediate and extended family relationships of the 13 participants were significantly affected once they decided to leave the church. In 85% of the cases, 11 of the 13 participants did not inform their parents or even their spouse (if they were married) and children (if they had children) until a final decision was made or when they actually left the church, which caused reciprocal distress and anxiety for each person to take on in a variety of ways and manifestations. On the other hand, social media platforms, support groups, podcasts, and search engines on the Internet played a significant role in uncovering information that was previously unknown to each of the participants in a way that acted as a catalyst and means to fully explore and understand their various doubts and concerns about the validity of their respective testimonies regarding the divinity of the CJLDS, without explaining why to those closest to them.

Each participant had a unique family dynamic; however, for the most part, each participant felt reluctant to speak with their parents, spouse, Church leadership or even with their close Church friends for fear of raising a concern and being misjudged before they were able to resolve their crisis of religious faith on their own. Aiden spoke passionately about his ten-year struggle to find answers to his questions and how his decision to leave the Church created a ripple effect through his family and Church friends. He said the following, “This crisis created addiction and some mental health issues and insecurity problems with my family, children, and with my parents. I’m the one that broke the pattern by leaving. This process has been a journey, and it is not over.” Jacob would not have left the Church if it was not for the Internet and how social media platforms in general, opened his understanding as a newly embraced humanist. He outlined his feelings as follows, “The Internet played a big role. I started to understand that there are a lot of people whose beliefs in their religions are just as fervent as mine, which is ok. Regarding my family, when you leave the church, it makes for a very strange and complex

dynamic in your relationship – it puts everything at risk.” For Jody, transitioning away from the Church was a very difficult decision, especially since she was a sixth generation member of the Church. She said the following, “Transitioning away from the Church was very difficult. The main reasons why I left the church was due to my twin son being gay and being denied to hold the priesthood because he was a practicing homosexual. My Church friends still love me and I still remain in contact with them.”

Each participant went through a Six-Stage Religious Transition that went from questioning the rituals and doctrines of a church to how their questions turned to doubt to how their doubts were magnified by cognitive dissonance to when and why each participant decided to leave the Church to how each participant shed their former beliefs by developing a new identity to how each participant was trying to reach a final stage of self-determination and autonomy.

The Six-Stages of Religious Transition expanded upon Figure 1, Visual Representation of the Process Involved in Transitions Toward Irreligion, as depicted on p. 87. The Six-Stages of Religious Transition was developed by me, after analyzing the four central themes, the various code words, and after a thorough review of each participant’s interview and narrative reflection. Each participant went through the Six-Stages of Religious Transition, some at a more expedited pace, while others took years to transition from Stage One through Stage Six. The average length of time was approximately 6.5 years. The key factor that either accelerated or prolonged the various transitions from Stage One through Stage Six was the religious and spiritual commitment level that each participant demonstrated and believed that the Church was divinely restored by the Prophet Joseph Smith. The below table illustrates this Six-Stage Religious Transition process.

Table Three*Six-Stages of Religious Transition*

| Stages of religious transition | Key Identifiers | Overview of each stage of transition |
|---------------------------------------|--|--|
| Stage one | Questioning the dogma, rituals, policies, and leadership of a religious denomination | For most members of the CJCJLDS, they view their Church leaders as oracles of God with the authority to denomination receive modern day Revelation for the Church. Therefore, questioning Church dogma and policies are not inherent to their internal belief system (Scott, & Petersen, 2018) |
| Stage Two | Questioning turns to doubt | Once a person starts to question the authenticity of religious denomination and the authority of Church leaders, they place themselves on the road to apostasy (Fisher, 2017; Hinderaker, 2017) |
| Stage Three | Doubt is Magnified by Cognitive Dissonance | Dissent and vocal opposition to established Church doctrine are viewpoints contrary to most traditional Christian churches, and if members choose to express their differing perspectives and opinions in public, they place themselves in jeopardy of losing their ecclesiastical membership (Fisher, 2017; Hinderaker, 2017; Scott, & Petersen, 2018). |
| Stage Four | Apex or Breaking Point of a Religious Belief System | For many individuals, it was an accumulation of policy and doctrinal issues overtime that led to disbelief and eventually an official separation from a religious denomination (Bentley, 2019; Brooks, 2020; Fisher, 2017; Page, 2021). |
| Stage Five | Formulation of a New Identity | Ex-Mormons or former members of religious faiths normally change their personality, self-definition and identification, and meaningfulness of life following a transitional period (Bentley, 2019; Brooks, 2020; Fisher, 2017; Page, 2021). |
| Stage Six | Self-Determination and Autonomy | To achieve self-determination and autonomy, research has demonstrated that people must achieve wisdom through experiential learning and understanding of a collective base of knowledge about the purpose of life (Baker, 2012; Weststrate & Gluck, 2017). |

Notes. The Second, Third, and Fourth Stages of Religious Transition, generally resulted in each participant going through the five stages of grief, e.g., denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and then acceptance. Denial was normally associated with stage one and two (confronting the critics of the Church), while feelings of anger, being manipulated and being duped were associated with stages three and four. Feelings of acceptance, peace, and contentment were typically reached at stages four and five. For some participants, depression and anxiety were still an ongoing phenomenon.

Summary

Throughout the United States, Christians are experiencing a crisis of religious faith at an alarming rate, especially by millennials, which has been exasperated by the Internet and social media platforms (Scharp & Beck, 2017; Wahman, 2020). The problem is a lack of empirical qualitative research data on Christians in general, but specifically on former members of the CJLDS that grew up in the United States as members. The primary purpose for this hermeneutic phenomenological approach to qualitative research study was to provide a holistic approach to research in order to capture the mental, emotional, psychological, and symbolic events in a person's life that likely caused members of the CJLDS within the United States to change their childhood religious affiliation and belief systems by either abandoning their religious faith and/or by questioning their certainty in God.

This research study captured the shared crisis of religious faith experiences of 13 participants from six states through a survey questionnaire, a one-hour personal interview, a narrative reflection about their crisis of religious faith (nine participants out of 13 provided a narrative reflection summary of their crisis of religious faith), and through direct observation of the participants' nonverbal mannerisms. Through this process, four distinct central themes

surfaced that captured, summarized, and portrayed their questioning and doubting of religious principles, doctrines, and historical religious events that ultimately reached an apex, which in the end, propelled and compelled each participant to reveal their loss of former religious beliefs in the CJLDS and to decisively reject their membership in the church. In addition, each participant's crisis of religious faith experience was encapsulated in six progressive transition stages of development, and during at least three of these stages of transition, the five stages of grief were generally felt by the participants. The transition period from stage one to stage six, went as quickly from nearly two years to as long as over 17 years, with an average timespan of six and a half years.

As a final point, most of the participants went through their crisis of religious faith in silence without revealing their questions and doubts to their spouse, close family members, church friends or others for fear of being ostracized and misunderstood. Eleven of the participants initially researched their questions and doubts about the church for the central purpose of proofing ex-Mormons or church critics wrong about their claims of Joseph Smith, polygamy and polyandry, how the Book of Mormon and Book of Abraham were translated, and the fallibility of prophets, seers, and revelators to include on other significant church phenomenon. In the end, each participant had to discarded their old religious identity with a new self-determination and autonomy to become agents unto themselves.

Chapter Five: Conclusions

The primary purpose for this hermeneutic phenomenological approach to qualitative research study was to provide a holistic approach to research in order to capture the mental, emotional, psychological, and symbolic events in a person's life that likely caused members of the CJLDS within the United States to change their childhood religious affiliation and belief systems by either abandoning their religious faith and/or by questioning their certainty of God. Furthermore, the contents of this chapter will consist of five sections, which will give meaning and analysis to the purpose statement: (a) a summary of the findings, (b) a discussion of the findings and the implications in light of the relevant literature and theory, (c) an implications section that will address the theoretical, empirical, and practical aspects of the study, (d) an outline of the study delimitations and limitations, and (e) recommendations for future research.

Summary of Findings

As the primary researcher, I methodically and systematically followed five-main data analysis tools to describe and give meaning to each participant's crisis of religious faith experience: (a) create and organize all data files and collection points; (b) read and understand text comments and take margin notes and form initial coding of data; (c) describe participants' experiences through epoche and then describe the essence of the phenomenon; (d) formulate developing and significant statements and then group statements into meaningful categories; and (e) describe what happened, how the phenomenon was experienced, and then use a composite description of all relevant data, i.e., constant comparison of all collected data (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994). The research data was collected, analyzed, and comprehended after a thorough assessment and understanding of each participant's responses to the survey questionnaire, a personal interview that last between 40 minutes to 90 minutes, a narrative

reflection declaration, and after a thorough examination of their non-verbal body mannerisms. The summary of findings developed four central themes with a Six-Stage Religious Transition process that resulted in each participant transitioning away from their religious denomination by either becoming agnostic, an atheist, a deist or as a spiritualist, but not religious.

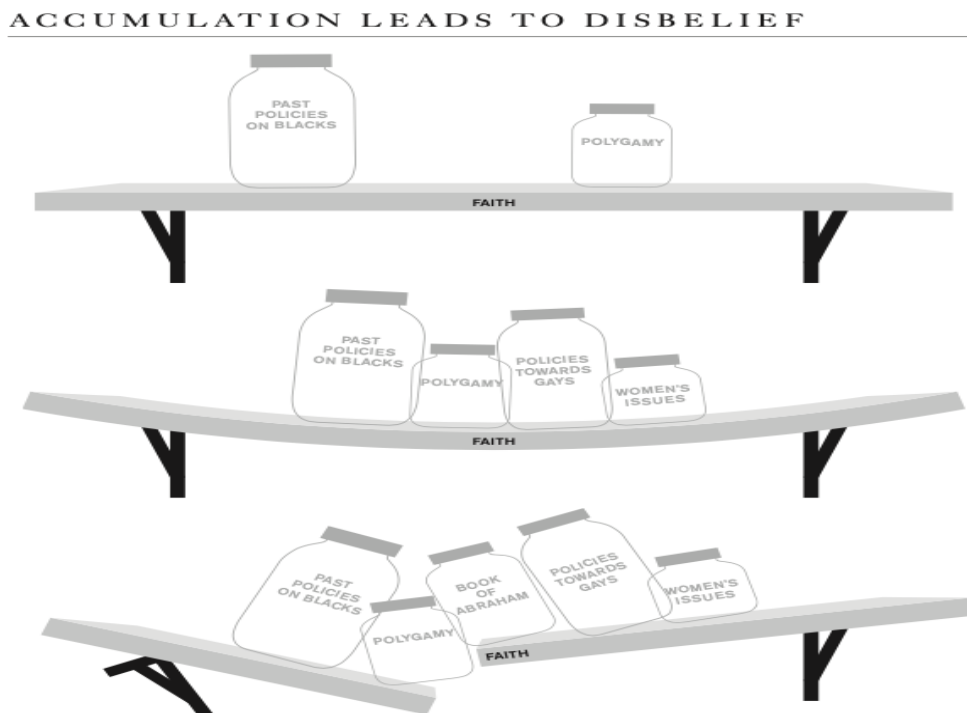
Each participant shared a unique crisis of religious faith story that highlighted an intense emotional phenomenon and transitional period that lasted almost two-years to over 17 years, which resulted in the detection and identification of differing viewpoints about the restoration of the CJLDS in comparison to espoused historical accounts as proffered by the Church. This intense mental and emotional experience, which on average lasted 6.5 years, resulted in all 13 participants to abandon their former religious beliefs system. Furthermore, a majority of the participants cultivated a strong disdain and distrust for organized religions with no future plans to seek out truth or comradery from a religious denomination.

A key finding of the research study was an accumulation of several prominent and significant Church historical events, coupled with the Church's viewpoint on social issues, which were strongly correlated to each participants' eventual loss-of-faith in the divinity and authenticity of the CJLDS. This accumulation of doubts about Church historical events, infallibility of prophets, lack of transparency about how the Book of Mormon was translated, the practice of plural marriage, Joseph Smith was not a true prophet of God, women suffrage issues, and the Church's unwillingness to give practicing gay members full membership in the Church, created a pronounced and immense burden that eventually created a destabilization to a participant's prior testimony that the Church was true (11 of the 13 participants had a prior testimony of the divinity of the CJLDS). From a metaphor perspective, nine of the 13 participants described their doubts as being symbolic of a book that was placed on their

bookshelf, which eventually the accumulation of the many metaphoric books caused their bookshelf to break or their testimony of the Church to succumb to their doubts about the truthfulness and legitimacy of the CJLDS.

Figure 4

Shelf Accumulation Leads to Disbelief



Notes. There were 20 primary and secondary reasons that first started each participant to question their faith and belief system in the CJLDS. From those 20 primary and secondary reasons, 13 reasons emerged as the final catalyst that prompted each participant to abandon their association with the CJLDS. As a result of the various factors and reasons that first started a participant to question and doubt their belief in the CJLDS, and for the 13 principle reasons why each participant decided to leave the Church – it was an accumulation of the various reasons that

eventually caused each participant to lose their faith and eventually their membership in the CJLDS.

Key Phrase to Research Question and to each Central Theme

There were several key phrases that were spoken by each participant that related to the four Central Themes and to each of the four Research Questions. Even though each participant did not precisely say each phrase, the meaning and context of each phrase was discussed by each participant, either during the interview or through their narrative reflection. Each phrase represented significant key findings about the development of a crisis of religious faith phenomenon as it unfolded in the lives of each participant. In addition, verification of information by each participant helped improve the veracity and reliability of all assessed data, e.g., reviewing interview transcripts.

Research Question One

How would former members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints describe their crisis of religious faith and were there distinguishable similarities or differences to each experience (difference question)?

This research question correlated with Theme One – Questioning Turns to Doubt, and the key phrases that were associated with Research Question One and Theme One were as follows: It made me more curious; I was consumed by finding understanding to my questions; this cannot be right or true; I will prove it wrong; are not prophets infallible when teaching doctrine or polices; and this cannot be the only true Church.

Research Question Two

What type of experiences and factors will the participants describe as having primarily, secondarily, and tertiarly contributed to their crisis of religious faith (descriptive question)?

This research question drew a parallel with Theme Two – Insatiable Appetite for Answers and Exploration of Meaning to Doubts. The key phrases associated with Research Question Two and Theme Two were as follows: Social media opened my eyes to things I do not know existed; I would spend hours searching and reading for months; the Internet answered my doubts; I became aware of other conflicting ideas; I felt lonely and betrayed; I spent months, all day, every day, just searching; and I found online anti-Church support groups to help me with my crisis of religious faith.

Research Question Three

What constructs or events will be related for each participant that played a key factor in how the crisis of religious faith was either resolved or is ongoing (relationship question)?

Theme Three – Separation of Religious Beliefs and the Formation of a New Identity linked closely with Research Question Three, and the key phrases that connected Theme Three and Research Question Three were as follows: My shelf broke; I felt manipulated and betrayed; my spirituality was replaced with self-awareness; I shed my former beliefs and identity; I was transformed to a new person; I will not go back to another religion; I can now be my own person; and I need to reconstruct my old belief systems with new ones.

Research Question Four

What specific factors or events will the participants identify as having predominately contributed to how it made them feel about themselves and how will it affect their interfamily and intrafamily relationships (descriptive and relationship question)?

Theme Four – Self-Determination and Autonomy related to Research Question Four and the key phrases associated with Theme Four and Research Question Four were as follows: I want to now act for myself; I became less emotional and more logical; no one organization has claim

on truth – truth is dynamic; I am now at peace with myself; I am free of labels – no judgments; science and logic trump faith and religious terminology; to be a humanist and not a religionist; and family relationships were stressed and in some cases, they became broken.

Key Findings

Even though the crisis of religious faith was unique to each participant, there were many commonalities that defined their phenomenon into four central themes, which resulted in a progressive transition until a point of saturation was felt that led to disaffection and disaffiliation of their former religious belief systems. This conversion process was a gradual development that resulted in *Six-Stages of Religious Transition*, which on average lasted 6.5 years. The First Stage was simply questioning the dogmas, rituals, and policies of the CJLDS. When a participant's religious question was researched and inconsistencies were found to traditional religious tenets and policies, then Stage Two of their transition was developed, which transformed a person's question to doubt about the authenticity of the CJLDS. Stage Three of a religious transition occurred when doubt was magnified through cognitive dissonance, which was normally felt by joining anti-Mormon support groups or by discussing their feelings with others who have left the CJLDS. Stage Four was highlighted by an accumulation of doubts, which created a breaking point for each participant to formally announce their intention to break ties with the CJLDS. Throughout Stages Two through Four, and in some cases, even through Stage Six, the Five Stages of grief were felt by each participant. Stage Five was the formulation of a new identity by purging former beliefs systems with new secular morals and ethics. The final stage or Stage Six was becoming self-determined and sovereign by charting their own course by becoming agents unto themselves.

The following key findings were identified:

Science Versus Faith

A key finding was the shedding of spiritual feelings for scientific and logical meaning in the discovery of new ideas and concepts, and for the reformulation of prior spiritual experiences as just emotional feelings without fact, reason, or significance. Even though 11 out of 13 participants had one or more spiritual experiences about the divinity of the CJLDS, all 13 participants eventually succumbed to reason, rationality, and logic over spiritual feelings of the heart. According to John, “I allowed myself to be objective and to remove emotions and spirituality from my decision making process.” Jacob said the following, “Religious faith leads people astray.” Finally, Margo said the following, “faith is no longer in my vocabulary. I do not see any evidence of a God. I am very analytical and logical. I am no longer a spiritual or an emotional person.”

A Transition and Discovery in Isolation

All 13 participants spoke about keeping their crisis of religious faith to themselves for fear of being wrong about their ambivalence regarding their religious doubts. For most of the participants, this meant keeping their doubts from their spouse, family members, friends, and especially from Church members and leaders. During this time of searching for answers to their doubts, most of the participants felt lonely and isolated, and unsure how to move forward without raising concerns to their family and Church leaders. During this time of uncertainty, all of the participants used the Internet and social media platforms as a place of refuge and safety to express their feelings and to search for answers to their doubts with strangers on anti-Church online support groups. For approximately 70% of the participants, they did not express their doubts with their spouse or with close friends until they reached a final decision point to leave the Church. For Carry, her search for answers was done in private for a long time – “for a long

time, I felt alone in my thoughts and with my questions and doubts. I felt isolated and it made me feel crazy, until I joined a community of people who were also questioning their doubts about the Church.” For Aaron, his experience was as follow, “I would have all these doubts, and I would keep my feelings to myself and this process was for over 10 years.” For Axel, he struggled with depression and anxiety about his feelings about the Church. His struggles were as follows, “I fell into serious depression with no one to talk to since I didn’t want to raise concerns until I figured this out by myself.”

Joseph Smith and the Book of Mormon

There were 20 primary and secondary factors that initially caused each participant to doubt their testimony about the divinity of the Church and there were 13 primary and secondary reasons that eventually catapulted each participant to leave the CJLDS. Of those factors, all but four influences were associated with Joseph Smith and the Book of Mormon (Blacks and Priesthood, treatment of marginalized populations, unwillingness to make changes to Church policies/practices, and current Church leadership issues). According to Joseph Fielding Smith (1954), the tenth President of the CJLDS, “Joseph Smith was either a prophet of God, divinely called, properly appointed and commissioned, or he was one of the biggest frauds this world has ever seen. There is no middle ground.” Regarding this assertion, Aiden said the following, “My number one concern was about Joseph Smith and Mormon history.” Sarah said the following, “Definitely Joseph Smith and his background was my primary concern. He was a treasure seeker.” Alice mentioned her doubts as follows, “The way Joseph Smith translated the Book of Mormon, proves that the Book of Mormon was false. If Joseph Smith is not a prophet, then everything else just falls apart.” The keystone belief for nearly all of the 13 participants centered around the Prophet Joseph Smith and whether he was a prophet of God or whether he was one of

the biggest frauds this world has ever seen. Once their doubts about the Prophet Joseph Smith were confirmed that he was not a prophet of God, it was easy for them to disbelieve the tenets and doctrines of the Church, and their decision to leave the Church quickly followed.

Split Faith Marriages

Of the 13 participants interviewed, 10 participants were married. Of those ten married participants, seven participants and their spouses eventually left the Church. For many couples, when one of the partners decides to transition to a new religious faith or to reject the existence of God, they apply pressure by proselytizing to their partner about the fallacies of their former faith (Mehta, 2018; Page, 2021; Riley, 2013). In some cases, the pressure to remain faithful to their religious beliefs becomes secondary to the daily bombardment of why their decision to remain active in their Church practices; and over time, they acquiesced to their partner's demand to follow them, not out of belief, but out of fear of rejection and possible abandonment (Mehta, 2018; Page, 2021; Riley, 2013). Dual religion households are growing within the United States; however, if a marriage starts with both partners belonging to the same religion, and if the male member decides to change their religious beliefs, the likelihood is greater that the male spouse that changed their religious views will apply pressure for their spouse to follow them. Of the seven participants that left the Church, it was the female member that left after her husband decided to abandon his religious beliefs. According to Sarah, "My husband left the Church first and it devastated me. If he had doubts, then maybe I should too. I eventually left for similar reasons." As stated by Margo, "My husband had similar doubts and he left first. It was just a natural thing that occurred by me following him." As told my Josh, "I was afraid to talk to my wife about my concerns until I knew that the Church was not true. I knew where my wife would land, and when I told her about my concerns, my wife left as well."

Education and Secular Learning can Influence Religious Faith

Of the 13 participants interviewed, six participants had an under graduate degree, four participants had a master's degree, two participants had some college, and one participant had a doctorate degree. Overall, eight-five percent of the participants had an under graduate degree or higher. The quality of human conditions (QHC) such as social status, intelligence quotient (IQ), income level, and education level - demonstrates a positive relationship that higher social status, IQ level, and more education prominence a person achieves, the less religious they become (Mercier et al., 2018; Scharp & Beck, 2017; Webster & Duffy, 2016). Losing religious faith is amplified as a person increases their cognitive ability to analyze and progress at a higher cognitive level (Rackley & Kwok, 2016; Scharp & Beck, 2017; Webster & Duffy, 2016). People with high QHCs become more self-reliant and less prone to rely upon God or a higher being for temporal or moral assistance (Rackley & Kwok, 2016; Scharp & Beck, 2017).

Research Question Four and Theme Four, the endeavor for self-determination and autonomy, drove most, if not all of the participants to state the following key phrases: I want to now act for myself; I became less emotional and more logical; no one organization has claim on truth; I am now at peace with myself; I am free of labels – no judgments; science and logic trump faith; and to be a humanist and not a religionist.

Social Media and the Internet – A Catalyst for Transition

All 13 participants used the Internet and social media platforms as a technological mechanism to resolve their crisis of religious faith. Internet forums create a safe sanctuary for people to feel justified for either leaving or joining a new religious belief system (Avance, 2013; Buckley et al., 2021; Smith et al., 2021). Access to contrary religious information and to other anti-religious forums can contribute to a crisis of faith (Avance, 2013). For members of the

CJLDS, Internet forums help support and threaten their hegemonic status quo (Avance, 2013; Roso et al., 2020). Those facing life-changing events can find solace in the Internet as the forerunner or catalyst of a crisis of faith (Avance, 2013; Buckley et al., 2021; Smith et al., 2021). For John, his crisis started as follows, “The whole process for me was looking them up (doubts about the Church) on social media and on Facebook. That is what started my journey.” For Lisa, her journey started as follows, “This is something you cannot be wrong about. I listened to podcasts, I read articles and books online, I met people on social media platforms. This is what started me figuring everything out.” All of the 13 participants used the Internet as their primary sanctuary and as their crucial and defining source to explain their new identity and belief systems, not only to themselves, but with others as well.

Discussion

This research study confirmed, amplified, diverged from and discovered new factors as to the primary, secondary, and tertiary reasons why members of the CJLDS developed a crisis of religious faith by transitioning away from their childhood religious denomination by becoming agnostic, an atheist, a deist or as a spiritualist, but not religious. This transitional period for each participant was highlighted by Six-Stages of Religious Transition that went from first questioning Church dogma to eventually forming a new identity by becoming self-determined to reach a state of sovereignty as agents unto themselves. The key findings of this study were associated with four central themes as revealed from four research questions and 16 interview questions that spanned the arch of questioning to doubt to deconstruction of prior beliefs systems to withdrawing membership in a religious denomination to restructuring of a new identity to self-determination and autonomy.

Empirical Literature

According to the related empirical literature on this topic, there were several variables and factors that caused a crisis of religious faith with adolescents and adults - such as intellectual apostasy, doubt, spirituality over religiosity, and cognitive dissonance that eventually caused a crisis of religious faith that resulted in abandoning a person's former belief system by adopting a new religious creed or by becoming agnostic (Chifeche & Dreyer, 2019; Scharp & Beck, 2017). The associated literature highlighted that when a person starts to challenge Church doctrine, it was viewed as a primary dispute to the dogma of religious hierarchy and will eventually place nonconformists in jeopardy of losing their Church membership (Hinderaker, 2017; Toscano, 2008). Furthermore, to stand-up and challenge long-standing religious or Church doctrine was viewed by many as challenging the word of God and was viewed as an act of apostasy (Hinderaker, 2017; Toscano, 2008). Dissent was considered by some Christian traditionalists, and for many members of the CJLDS as being in opposition to the norms of acceptable religious behavior, and was viewed as a primary step towards developing a crisis of religious faith.

In comparison to related empirical literature, the current research study revealed specific variables and factors as to why former members of the CJLDS developed a crisis of religious faith, which resulted in 20 primary and secondary factors as to why participants started to question and doubt their religious belief system and in 13 distinctive primary and secondary reasons as to why each participant eventually abandoned their religious denomination. For the most part, the factors and variables associated with former members of the CJLDS in leaving their religious denomination would not be transferable or concomitant with people who developed a crisis of religious faith from other Christian or non-Christian sects, since most factors were associated with Joseph Smith and the Book of Mormon. In addition, dissent by ex-

Mormons was relatively kept in secret, until a final decision was made to leave the Church, primarily since it would be viewed by Church leadership as an act of apostasy.

Use of the Internet and Social Media

The use of the Internet creates a link with others that share similar beliefs, and it provides the forum for people to feel justified for either leaving or staying in their belief system (Avance, 2013; Buckley et al., 2021; Smith et al., 2021). For members of the CJLDS, Internet forums help support and threaten their hegemonic status quo (Avance, 2013; Roso et al., 2020). This research study confirmed and amplified the unique nature that the Internet and social media platforms had in accelerating a crisis of religious faith in former members of the CJLDS. All 13 participants that took part in this research study used the Internet as their primary sanctuary and as their crucial source of information to explore and find answers to their 20 primary and secondary factors that were associated with their emerging crisis of religious faith.

Changing Religious Denominations or Disbelieving in God

For departing members of the CJLDS, many former members start looking outward for religious support by joining faith-based communities that offer activities on Sunday, and by feeling less guilty for their new life-style choices (Preda, 2019; Schultz, 2019). From a cognitive and behavioral perspective, people develop a crisis of faith regarding their religious and spiritual beliefs in at least four fundamental pathways (Le Poidevin, 2021; Scharp & Beck, 2017; Wahman, 2020). First, people develop a faith crisis that moves their external and internal belief systems from faith to agnosticism (Hinderaker & O'Connor, 2015; Le Poidevin, 2021; Wahman, 2020). Second, people experience a life-altering incident that fundamentally transforms their former agnosticism to a spiritual and religious awakening (Le Poidevin, 2021; Scharp & Beck, 2017). Third, religious beliefs are challenged by modifying or altering former religious beliefs to

a new religious ideology (Le Poidevin, 2021; Scharp & Beck, 2017; Wahman, 2020). Fourth, people emerge from humanism to a mystery of enigmatic exploration (Le Poidevin, 2021; Wahman, 2020). Furthermore, individuals who develop a crisis of religious can also leave their religious denomination for other reasons, such as becoming a spiritualist or humanist or to be an atheist (Fisher, 2017).

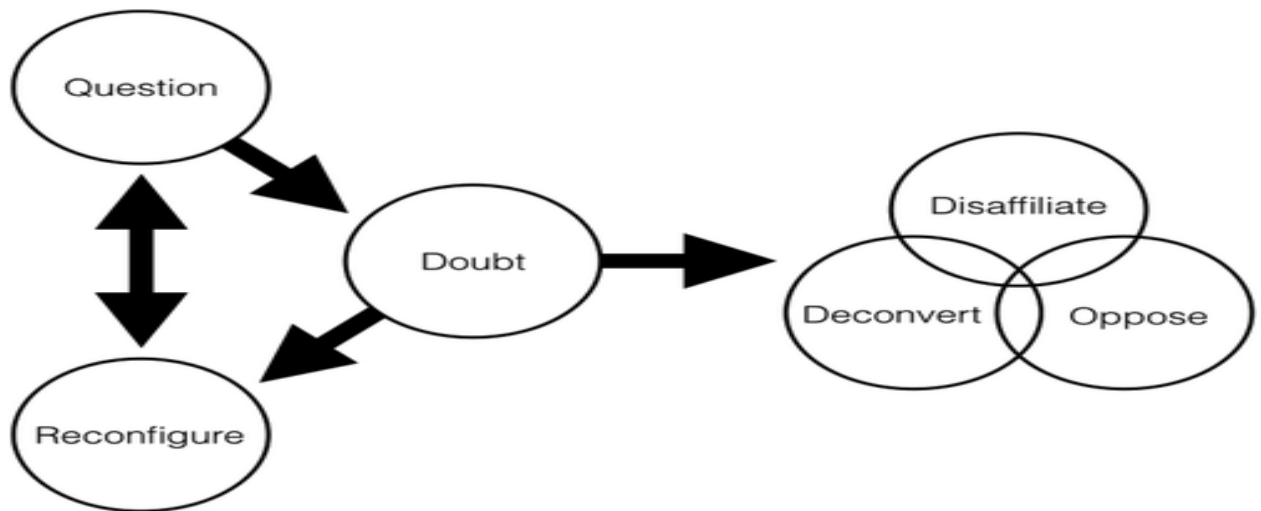
All 13 participants in this study went from a highly structured religious denomination to not wanting to join another religious sect. Of the 13 participants, eight were self-described as agnostic; three were self-described as spiritualists, but non-religious; one was self-described as a deist; and one was self-described as an atheist. With the exception of not having any of the participants join another religious sect, the information from this research study fundamentally supports the data from previous empirical literature.

A Crisis of Faith Causes a Transition

Most of the empirical literature in chapter two described a crisis of religious faith as a transition of deconversion and conversion, which would lead a person to becoming an agnostic or atheist or being reconverted to another religious faith system (Fisher, 2017). This process was best illustrated in Figure 1 (Fisher, 2017; Copyright was issued in 2017 by the American Psychological Association; and Figure 1 was used with permission, see Appendix B for details).

Figure 1

Visual Representation of the Processes Involved in Transitions Toward Irreligion



Note. This research study expanded upon Figure 1 and from other empirical literature on this topic (this figure was also illustrated in chapter 2). Furthermore, a participant going through a crisis of religious faith, as revealed in the research study was manifested by each participant going through transitional phase, as outlined in the Six-Stages of Religious Transition as demonstrated in Table Three. In addition, the below table was depicted in chapter 4.

The Six-Stage Religious Transitional period included a re-examination of their prior theology and dogma beliefs, and a re-examination of their cultural beliefs, which eventually resulted in the termination of their religious membership in an organized religious denomination.

Table Three*Six-Stages of Religious Transition*

| Stages of religious transition | Key Identifiers | Overview of each stage of transition |
|---------------------------------------|--|--|
| Stage one | Questioning the dogma, rituals, policies, and leadership of a religious denomination | For most members of the CJCJLDS, they view their Church leaders as oracles of God with the authority to denomination receive modern day Revelation for the Church. Therefore, questioning Church dogma and policies are not inherent to their internal belief system (Scott, & Petersen, 2018) |
| Stage Two | Questioning turns to doubt | Once a person starts to question the authenticity of religious denomination and the authority of Church leaders, they place themselves on the road to apostasy (Fisher, 2017; Hinderaker, 2017) |
| Stage Three | Doubt is Magnified by Cognitive Dissonance | Dissent and vocal opposition to established Church doctrine are viewpoints contrary to most traditional Christian churches, and if members choose to express their differing perspectives and opinions in public, they place themselves in jeopardy of losing their ecclesiastical membership (Fisher, 2017; Hinderaker, 2017; Scott, & Petersen, 2018). |
| Stage Four | Apex or Breaking Point of a Religious Belief System | For many individuals, it was an accumulation of policy and doctrinal issues overtime that led to disbelief and eventually an official separation from a religious denomination (Bentley, 2019; Brooks, 2020; Fisher, 2017; Page, 2021). |
| Stage Five | Formulation of a New Identity | Ex-Mormons or former members of religious faiths normally change their personality, self-definition and identification, and meaningfulness of life following a transitional period (Bentley, 2019; Brooks, 2020; Fisher, 2017; Page, 2021). |
| Stage Six | Self-Determination and Autonomy | To achieve self-determination and autonomy, research has demonstrated that people must achieve wisdom through experiential learning and understanding of a collective base of knowledge about the purpose of life (Baker, 2012; Weststrate & Gluck, 2017). |

Notes. The Second, Third, and Fourth Stages of Religious Transition, generally resulted in each participant going through the five stages of grief, e.g., denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and then acceptance. Denial was normally associated with stage two (confronting the critics of the Church), while feelings of anger, being manipulated and being duped were associated with stages three and four. Feelings of acceptance, peace, and contentment were typically reached at stage four. For some participants, depression and anxiety were still an ongoing phenomenon.

Furthermore, ex-members of the CJLDS experienced a religious disintegrated loss and a sense of self-loss “lack of identity” once they lost their faith in the CJLDS, and they subsequently struggled to find a new identity to satisfy their new lifestyle and belief systems, which in many cases, took years to form (Bentley, 2019; Brooks, 2020; Scroggs et al., 2018). Eventually, all 13 participants were trying to achieve a homeostasis of self-determination and autonomy as a means to chart their own moral and ethical standards by making, controlling, and enforcing their own decisions on how to live their life. This figure was also depicted in Chapter Four.

Relationships Suffer or Blossom

For many former members of the Mormon faith, they believe their family, former friends, and associates who still belong to the CJLDS will likely treat them differently since their deconversion, and as a result of their perceived misplaced feelings, they feel victimized and resentful for how family and friends treat them since their self-proclaimed reawakening (Fisher, 2017; Fisk, 2016; Taylor, 2021; Worwood et al., 2020). For months and sometimes years after a transition, a sense of belonging becomes all-encompassing as many former members of the CJLDS seek for other support groups and religious denominations to feel the void of loss and

sense of community they once esteemed (Fisher, 2017; Fisk, 2016; Taylor, 2021; Worwood et al., 2020).

For each participant of this study, they faced a crossroad when they tried to maintain a close relationship with their spouse, parents, and extended family members who were still members of the CJLDS. This research study bolstered previous empirical research on how family and close friends play an integral role when a member of their family was going through a crisis of religious faith, and how family members, spouses, and close friends either provided support or discouragement with each participant's final decision to leave the Church.

Overall, the immediate and extended family relationships of all 13 participants were significantly affected once they decided to leave the Church. In 85% of the cases, 11 participants did not inform their parents or even their spouse (if they were married) and children (if they had children) until a final decision was made or when they actually left the Church, which caused reciprocal distress and anxiety for each person to take on in a variety of ways and manifestations.

Theoretical Literature

For this research study, the theoretical framework was to describe the scheme of young adults, middle aged adults, and senior adults, who at one time self-identified as members of the CJLDS and subsequently had self-described experiences that led to a religious crisis of faith, which resulted in the abandonment or rejection of that faith. From a theoretical perspective, three theories were used to help illustrate the theory and development of a crisis of religious faith. They were as follows: The theory of cognitive dissonance; the theory of faith development, and the theory of spiritual intelligence.

Theory of Cognitive Dissonance

The theory of cognitive dissonance is best rationalized when a member of a religious faith starts to disagree with senior leaders in a religious denomination or with specific dogmas or tenets of a religious faith or when a person starts to question the religious history and policies in a specific religious denomination (Tice, 2001; Toscano, 2008). Furthermore, when religious leaders modernize gospel principles and historical events to fit a particular generation or worldview perspective, it may cause people to question the foundation of their faith and question the notion and validity of truth (Felt, 2017; Tice, 2001; Toscano, 2008). Moreover, doubt, dissention, and conflict emerge in some religious members when former doctrine is cast in a new light due to the availability of social media platforms that may or may not use empirical research to fully explain the dissonance in how revelation and truth emerged to form updated or prevailing religious principles and doctrine (Albinus, 2018; Felt, 2017; Tice, 2001). Furthermore, the concept of truth drives the theory of cognitive dissonance, since truth is viewed as either being static or dynamic and whether the hypothesis of religious truth validates a person's religious belief system (Albinus, 2018; Felt, 2017).

The theory of cognitive dissonance was felt by each of the 13 participants, as they first started to question and then doubt the divinity of the CJLDS. During the first three stages of the Six-Stages of Religious Transition, each participant started to question and then doubt the dogmas, rituals, policies, and leadership of the CJLDS. During stage three, each participant's doubts were magnified by cognitive dissonance until they reached a point of saturation, which eventually was demonstrated by each participant leaving the CJLDS.

Theory of Faith Development

The theory of faith development as elaborated by Fowler and Ton (1995 & 1993) is critical to understanding why a person makes sense of the purpose of life and whether there is life after death. Faith is the primary description that defines how people make sense out of life through a secular, spiritual, and religious lens (Fowler, 1995; Haney & Rollock, 2020; Ton, 1993). Faith is a dynamic occurrence and it is comprised of values, morals, life images, spiritual and religious experiences, secular values and belief systems, and it becomes amalgamized in a person's motivation and commitment to act as a guide to the direction they will take or diverge from as they advance and morph through their various life stages (Ferguson et al., 2018; Fowler, 1995). From a worldview perspective, faith is a universal phenomenon as people make choices from the various external voices on how they will live as perceived by their faith belief practice (Ferguson et al., 2018; Fowler, 1995; Haney & Rollock, 2020).

Eleven of the 13 participants had faith that the CJLDS was true, while the other two participants questioned whether their testimony of the divinity of the CJLDS as being manufactured by their parents or whether they were programmed as children to believe and have faith in the CJLDS. Furthermore, all 13 participants no longer believe in religious faith, and they would prefer to use other terms to describe faith - such as trust, reliance, conviction, loyalty or assurance. Nine of the 13 participants did not know if there was life after death, and they were comfortable in their perceived mystery of the purpose of life, while the other four participants believed in life after death, but they were also comfortable not knowing the nature or purpose of post-mortality. Overall, the theory of faith development for all 13 participants was perceived and viewed from a secular and spiritual lens, and not from a religious viewpoint.

Theory of Spiritual Intelligence

Empirical research has demonstrated that SI can likely be categorized as a sixth dimension of personality, in comparison to the context of the main Five Dimensions of Personality (e.g., openness, extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, and neuroticism), (Emmons, 2000; Skrzypińska, 2021). Additionally, SI is a form of intelligence and self-awareness that is likely innate and it helps facilitate a person's ability to perform and solve complex tasks, set and obtain goals, and to achieve self-mastery and wellbeing (Emmons, 2000; Skrzypińska, 2021). King (2008) interprets SI as an inner cognitive functioning with the ability to assist and motivate people to become more self-aware, how to better integrate in society, how to become more adaptive to transcendent characteristics of a person's existence, which will lead to a richer existential meaning and a mastery of spiritual perfection.

If SI can be categorized as a sixth dimension of personality, then all 13 participants used SI to resolve their crisis of religious faith by coming to an appropriate decision to become more self-aware on how to better reach an appropriate decision to further their essence and meaning of life. For four of the 13 participants, who were self-described as a spiritualist or deist they are more likely to use their sense of spirituality as a sixth dimension of personality to enhance their personal growth, which possibly enabled them to reach a final conclusion that they did not need to be part of a religious organization to be spiritual. Regarding the other nine participants, who were self-described as being agnostic or as an atheist, they would likely be more comfortable with the term "Logical or Mental Intelligence" as a mechanism of personality to reach a heightened state of consciousness and to help them solve complex problems, like how to resolve their crisis of religious faith. Furthermore, these same ten participants have rejected the use of religious or spiritual terminology by forming a new lexicon that favors scientific or secular

expressions. As a result, they would likely dismiss SI as a sixth dimension of personality by relying more on their innate personality traits of openness and conscientiousness to decipher their complex problems.

Implications

This phenomenological research study postulated four central themes and Six-Stages of Religious Transition that were unique and specific to members of the CJLDS; however, a general awareness of the factors that first start a person to develop a crisis of religious faith to when they decide to leave a religious denomination, can be beneficial for all religious leaders and to their congregants. Therefore, the primary purpose of this section will be to outline and portray the theoretical, empirical, and practical implications of a crisis of religious phenomenon.

Furthermore, all three implications can further support the research and understanding for the following stakeholders: (a) religious leaders, (b) family counselors and licensed clinical professional, (c) parents and family members, (d) and for those experiencing a crisis of religious faith.

Theoretical Implications

Christians are experiencing a crisis of religious faith throughout the United States at an alarming rate, especially among millennials (Wahman, 2020). Adolescence and young adulthoods are likely the key demographic that are more susceptible to a crisis of religious faith as prior religious principles start to collide with secular teachings that eventually start a chain-reaction of questioning, doubting, reconfirming, or amending their prior religious and spiritual beliefs (Fisher, 2017; Roehlkepartain et al., 2006; Wahman, 2020). From a theoretical perspective, the central essence of experiencing a crisis of religious faith was defined as the process and motivational factors associated with changing a person's religious affiliation or by

abandoning their faith or belief in God. Therefore, the implications from a theoretical standpoint was to describe the pattern and methodology of young adults, middle aged adults, and senior adults, who at one time self-identified as members of the CJLDS, and then subsequently experienced a religious crisis of faith, which resulted in the abandonment or rejection of that faith, and how key stake holders can better understand this phenomenon from a counseling, educational, religious, and family lifecycle perspective.

How to Handle Dissent and Opposition – Stake Holder’s Guide

Religious disaffiliation has been proven to cause poor mental health and physical wellbeing, and those going through disaffiliation are less prone to engage in meaningful social activities (Felt, 2017). Religious leaders and Christian counselors recommend that when individuals go through a transition process, the following criteria should be considered: (a) do not take your congregant’s apparent religious involvement as a sign that everything is ok, be proactive; (b) encourage parents to help their children explore, question and seek out answers in a safe, secure, and in an uplifting environment; (c) and parents, religious leaders, and educators should work together to create safe learning environments for children that is free from judgment and ridicule (Felt, 2017).

Research has also found that when highly organized religions discourage dissent, disaffiliation will foster as a silent killer to faith promoting experiences (Felt, 2017; Hinderaker, 2015). All stake holders should be more transparent, open, and have continuous communication with those that they serve by not discouraging questions. In addition, stake holders should encourage children and adolescents to ask meaningful questions to their parents and religious leaders about their religious and secular preferences without feeling guilty or judged for doing so. The key ingredient is to show Christ like love, which should be free of judgment or derision.

Reversal of Religious Faith Transitions

Doubt, dissention, and conflict emerge in some religious members when former doctrine is cast in a new light due to the availability of social media platforms (Albinus, 2018; Felt, 2017; Tice, 2001). The concept of truth drives the theory of cognitive dissonance, since truth is viewed as either being static or dynamic and whether the hypothesis of religious truth validates a person's religious belief system, if it does not, then apostasy soon follows (Albinus, 2018; Felt, 2017). For most of the 13 participants that took part in this study, truth was viewed as being dynamic, and truth should be adaptive and malleable to modern changes of moral values. As a result, a crisis of religious faith can be directly and indirectly connected to cognitive dissonance, since new concepts and ideas may challenge traditional rituals and practices, and in all of the circumstance with the 13 participants, the process of cognitive dissonance challenged their Church doctrine and current Church leadership practices to the point of apostasy. Today, nearly one third of religious people in the United States will switch to another religion at some point in their life, while others will dwindle in unbelief by deconverting their faith in God, and this process will continue to escalate unless preventative measures are implemented (Fisher, 2017).

This process or transition might not be stopped, but it can slowed down or even reversed in some people, by understanding the precursors of a crisis of religious faith by all stake holders, and then by taking active counter prevention measures to better understand the trials and obstacles that their congregants face by seeking them out before a crisis reaches a breaking point. Such precursors as drug misuse, depression and anxiety, lack of meaningful prayer, questioning of Church doctrine (usually done in private or with close friends), adopting new friends with persuasive secular moral values, negative or fatalistic belief systems, high social and intellectual standing, and adoption of cognitive dissonance to justify prevailing sophisticated worldly views

are just a few examples of how former members of the CJLDS first started to question and then doubt their prior religious beliefs. Stakeholders need to stay connected and let their congregants take an active part in serving others, which will allow a safe environment for those undergoing a crisis to reveal their questions before they ferment to doubts and then to cognitive dissonance, followed by apostacy.

Empirical Implications

The current study has several empirical implications, especially for researchers, educators, and religious scholars and theologians of religious conversion and deconversion phenomena associated with individual's going through a crisis of religious faith. The current study revealed Six-Stages of Religious Transition that were consistent for each of the 13 participants that took part in this study, a framework that expanded upon previous research studies. More importantly, the research study revealed the primary and secondary factors that first started a person to question and doubt their religious convictions to the main factors that ultimately led each participant to dissolve their membership in the CJLDS, a process and progression not previously documented in empirical literature, at least not on former members of the CJLDS as revealed in the research study. Additionally, the current study contributes contemporary empirical data on why each participant left a highly structured religious denomination by becoming a deist, agnostic or disbelieving in the existence of God or by becoming a spiritualist, but not religious. In all cases, each participant felt suspicious and resentful of religions in general, and they had no desire to seek out a differing religious denomination for solace or for a community of support in the future. From a researcher's perspective, not having a single participant deconvert and then reconvert to another religious denomination was an outlier to previous empirical research, a phenomenon not previously documented.

For family counselors, clinical researchers and pastors, the research study can provide additional resources and methods not previously provided to help those going through a religious transition. In the past, many former members of the CJLDS would seek out mental health practitioners for solace and guidance during their transition; however, in many cases, therapy failed to alleviate their anxieties and stress, mainly due to a lack of religious transitional training by the counselor (Brooks, 2020). Paradoxically, some former members of the CJLDS felt re-traumatized when secular therapists provided misinformed or unsolicited guidance to meet with former members and estranged family to discuss their crisis of faith in a group counseling session (Bentley, 2019; Brooks, 2020; Scroggs et al., 2018). Hopefully, the research data provided in this phenomenological study can shed additional illumination and insight on why and how a person develops a crisis of religious faith, but more importantly, how, when, and what counselors and religious leaders can do to provide guidance and assistance to those in need before a crisis reaches a breaking point.

Another implication for empirical research was why 70% of the participants in this study kept their initial questioning and doubting about the factors that first started their crisis of religious faith to themselves without wanting to reveal and discuss their feelings with those they should trust the most – their spouse, close friends, parents, siblings, children, and potentially with religious leaders who should keep their discussions confidential. Stakeholders should want to know why people within their congregations, service groups, counseling sessions or in other associations are reluctant to share their inner most feelings about their questions and doubts about the organization they belong to, before their feelings are solidified. For example, if a person's secular views on abortion, gay and lesbian rights, same-sex marriage, women holding the priesthood, the principles of Sabbath day worship, equality of marriage, and their belief in

God are in conflict with their religious views. How should they be taught to resolve those conflicts without abandoning their religious beliefs over their secular viewpoints, assuming a positive outcome to satisfy both can be reached. In general, as revealed in most empirical research studies, dissent and opposition to established doctrines are viewpoints contrary to the mainstream of most traditional Christian Churches, which might explain the reticence by some to keep their opposition to themselves (Bahr & Albrecht, 1989; Fisher, 2017; Scott, & Petersen, 2018). A paradigm shift needs to be implemented by each stakeholder, that would encourage their members to express their questions and even doubts, in a safe and nonjudgmental environment; however, more data points are needed before an implementation policy could be developed and implemented to address each stakeholder's concerns, especially with senior leaders within the CJLDS.

Practical Implications

This research study yielded practical implications for religious stakeholders (pastors, bishops, Christian counselors, licensed clinical professionals) on the various factors and transitional stages people go through as they transition away from a structured religious denomination. Practical implication and suggested recommendations are provided in the following paragraphs.

Contemporary Sources of Influence

In prior generations, such factors as intellectual apostacy, doubt in the existence of God, hurt feelings, and cognitive dissonance were several of the fundamental root-causes that created the underpinning of people in the United States to lose their faith and give rise to abandoning their former belief system by adopting a new religious creed or by becoming agnostic (Barry & Nelson, 2005; Brooks, 2020; Hinderaker & O'Connor, 2015). This process of questioning and

eventually doubting a person's religious convictions is even greater today, principally for the younger generation, millennials, and young adults in comparison to past generations, mainly as a result of the proliferation of social media platforms, podcasts, online support groups, and search engines by virtue of the Internet (Fisher, 2017).

The factors of the past that caused former members of the CJLDS to abandon their faith share little in common with the reasons and dynamics that influence current members of the CJLDS to abandon their faith today. For practical reasons, leaders of the CJLDS should endeavor to understand these new influences and causes, and implement practical corrective courses of action to lessen or curb the tide of cognitive dissonance that is currently being manifested by some of its membership.

As a result of the Internet and in its ability to provide instantaneous access to information that was inaccessible to prior generations, many deconverts of the CJLDS now feel angry, duped, and betrayed as they transitioned away from the Church due to an alleged lack of access to unfavorable information about the Church (Bahr & Albrecht, 1989; Fisher, 2017; Lee et al., 2017).). Switching or transitioning away from a childhood religion might be a common occurrence for some people in other religious sects; however, for members of the CJLDS, regardless of the generation they grew up in, experiencing a deconversion process of a family member is a significant traumatic event that has eternal consequences.

In addition, all 13 participants used the Internet to find solutions and answers to their questions, initially from approved Church websites. Overtime, each participant also viewed anti-Church social media sites or other similar platforms to gain a different perspective, which eventually overpowered and nullified their religious convictions. From a theological, rational, and practical perspective, regarding the differing viewpoints of religious dissonance, specifically

about Joseph Smith and the Book of Mormon, Church religious scholars should analyze and address the different viewpoints from approved Church websites and contrary Church websites, and teach Church leadership down to the unit level how to address each argument in a nonjudgmental manner. If this process does not take place in the near term, a continuation of the current process of transition away from the Church will likely proliferate to greater dimensions.

Science and Logic Compared to Spirituality and Feelings

The more secular education a person acquires, the higher the likelihood of people to interpret scientific discoveries and religious theories to be in conflict with one another, and they will tend to give more weight and influence to science over religion, and logic over feelings of the heart (Barry & Nelson, 2005; Popescu et al., 2009). Today's generation is typically more influenced by logic and reason, and not by emotional feelings of the spirit; and since many religious experiences are built upon feelings and emotions, some men and women are more prone to lose their religious faith over logic, if they are in conflict with one another (Barry & Nelson, 2005; Jung & Park, 2020; Popescu et al., 2009).

Even though 11 out of 13 participants had at least one or more spiritual experiences of the divinity of the CJLDS; logic, reasoning, and rationality eventually prevailed over prior religious and spiritual feelings. In fact, a majority of the participants have completely abandoned feelings of the heart or spiritual emotions as irrational manifestation that cannot be proven by fact and logic. Therefore, from a practical standpoint, how can religious leaders use logic and reason to promote the principles of hope, belief, and faith without weakening the foundation of spirituality from a religious experience? The answer to this question is to have religious leaders embrace science and logic as mutually inclusive with spiritual feelings as a source of enlightenment by not dismissing one for the other. If the academic community, clinical researchers, and the

scientific institutions can validate SI as a sixth dimension of personality, as a practical innate characteristic of humankind, then greater emphasis would be placed on spirituality as an equal, if not a greater source of guidance in comparison to reason and logic. To sum up, the level of religious and spiritual faith was a significant barometer that determined whether a person experiencing a crisis of religious faith could weather the challenges of conflicting information, and whether their faith was tied to a sense of commitment and agreeableness to existing religious principles.

Delimitations and Limitations

From a scholarly perspective, a researcher is obligated to report on the delimitations and limitations of their research study. The purpose of this section is to inform the consumer of this material of its validity, accuracy, strengths and weaknesses, and trustworthiness in the research data, analysis, common themes, and outcomes. Furthermore, the delimitations and limitations in the preceding paragraphs can also help direct and apprise forthcoming research studies on this topic.

Delimitations

As the primary researcher, I used the process of delimitation as a means to set specific parameters for this research study. This research design was formulated around a hermeneutic phenomenological approach to qualitative research for the purpose of achieving greater awareness and enlightenment to a specific problem statement (Curthbertson et al., 2020; Jackson & Naidoo, 2007). In addition, I chose the hermeneutic phenomenological framework since it would capture the life experiences of each participant by unveiling the participant's unique understanding and meaning of their crisis of religious faith experience by responding to a survey questionnaire, answering 16 semi-structured questions, writing a one or two page narrative

reflection, and by monitoring their non-verbal responses during a one-hour interview. This qualitative approach to research would also provide a deeper and richer meaning to each phenomenon as described by each participant.

From a qualitative research perspective, it normally takes a minimum of 10 to 12 participants to reach data saturation, and in some qualitative research studies, it was recommended to use less than 20 participants for ideal data collection and analysis from a targeted audience (Braun & Clarke, 2021; Creswell & Poth, 2018; Crouch & McKenzie, 2006; Fugard & Pott, 2015). Furthermore, the ideal participant should be an honest person without any preconceived notions or biases with a strong desire to be truthful and helpful without strict geographic, gender, and diversity criteria (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Heppner et al., 2016). Therefore, I set a minimum number of participants at 10 with a maximum number of 15 participants in order to reach data saturation. In addition, I set an age limit of 18 years or older, since this study needed young adults or adults as participants.

For this research study, I established a purposive sample size of 13 participants, which enabled me to reach data saturation. I did not establish a delimitation for race, income or education level, or geographic location. Each participant was purposively selected from a survey questionnaire to determine whether they were former members of the CJLDS and if they experienced a crisis of faith by either changing their religious affiliation or by losing their faith in the existence of God.

From a researcher perspective, I also integrated all textural comments from each participant by developing an epistemological account that reflected the essence and validity of each phenomenological experience without personal bias (Moustakas, 1994). Furthermore, each phenomenological experience was captured and was weighted to give importance to the varying

experiences from each participant without interjecting my personal perception of their feelings or behaviors (Yuksel & Yidirum, 2015). From a data analysis perspective, I endeavored to hide my prejudices and preconceptions by giving empirical meaning to the participant's salient sentiments to wholly provide the synthesized importance of each axiological and phenomenological experience (Moustakas, 1994; Yuksel & Yidirum, 2015). Finally, this particular qualitative research design specifically observed the world in which former members of the CJLDS experienced a crisis of religious faith, which used a set of interpretive data concepts that gave meaning to their shared experiences.

Limitations

Limitations stem directly and indirectly from the delimitations, and are those factors and variables that naturally arose during the study; which may or may not affect the outcome of the study (Rockinson-Szapkiw; Spaulding, 2014). The limitations of this study included age, gender, social-status, income and educational level, and demographics of each participant. While age, gender, educational level, and demographics were generally displaced across each of the 13 participants, 12 out of the 13 participants were Caucasian and one participant was Asian, which resulted in a disparity of race and ethnicity as a sample size.

The researcher did not intentionally try to engineer an equitable balance of the beforementioned limitations. As such, the results of this research study could be biased due to the imbalance of other races and ethnicities. Another limitation was the variable of only including participants that were citizens of the United States. If the research study included other nationalities, the results of the study could have reflected different key findings and outcomes. Additionally, the researcher purposefully selected ex-Mormons that grew up as members of the CJLDS as participants, which might have distorted the findings if I included former Catholics,

Muslims, Protestants, Jews or members of other religious denominations that converted to Mormonism and then reconverted to another faith or stopped believing in the existence of God. In summary, this study was limited in the transferability of a wider set of data outcomes because it was intentionally confined to former members of the CJLDS that grew as members and who were born in the United States. A more diverse sample size of participants would likely increase the applicability, trustworthiness, and transferability of the results of this hermeneutic phenomenological approach to qualitative research.

Recommendations for Future Research

Due to the limitations, delimitations, and key findings of this research study, there are at least five recommendations and directions for future research.

Universal Scope

More members of the CJLDS reside outside of the United States, and geographic regions like South America and Africa have the fastest rate of growth in comparison to other locations. As such, a more universal approach to research could be accomplished, which would include an equitable sample size from each major geographic region. In addition, if a researcher could determine which geographic regions throughout the world are losing more members – a researcher could directly target a sample size from each demographic area as it reflects its overall membership in the Church. A quantitative study would likely be the best source of collecting and analyzing numerical data as a means to find patterns and averages, make predictions, test causal relationships, and generalize results to a wider population regarding why certain geographic regions might be experiencing a crisis of religious faith in greater numbers in comparison to other regions of the world.

Conversion and Reconversion of Ex-Mormons and Others

For this research study, the researcher purposefully selected ex-Mormons that grew up as members of the CJLDS as participants. A more diverse population group could include former Catholics, Muslims, Buddhists, Protestants, Jews or former members of other religious denominations who converted to Mormonism and then reconverted to another faith or stopped believing in the existence of God. In essence, a more diverse sample size of participants would include people who have deconverted once as a former member of the CJLDS in comparison to others who have converted and reconverted religious denominations on multiple occasions, but who have also been a member of the CJLDS at least once in their life-time. This research design would likely increase the applicability, trustworthiness, and transferability of the results for a future research study. A qualitative research design would invite participants to give meaning to their experiences in greater detail, and it would provide the researcher the ability to gather precise information on why people change religious beliefs on more than one occasion and what motivated them to change their religious belief systems. This process is dependent upon the researcher gathering precise data by asking the right questions in a nonjudgmental fashion.

Reconversion of Ex-Mormons

This future qualitative research design would target ex-Mormons who grew up as members and left the Church after developing a crisis of religious faith, but who have subsequently reconverted to the CJLDS. The results of this proposed research study would be to compare the factors and variables that caused a person to develop a crisis of religious faith by leaving the CJLDS to the variables and factors associated with why they decided to rejoin or reconvert back to the CJLDS.

Ex-Mormons and Current Mormons

This proposed qualitative research study would compare the primary and secondary reasons why ex-Mormons left the CJLDS after developing a crisis of religious faith and why current members of the CJLDS who were exposed to the same primary and secondary factors of ex-Mormons, decided to remain active and committed to the tenets and doctrines of the CJLDS. This research study would highlight the key variables that can either draw people away from the Church or draw them closer to their current religious belief system.

No Reconversion to a Religious Denomination

This projected quantitative research study would analyze the factors and variables regarding why all 13 participants deconverted from a highly structured religious denomination and unquestionably decided to not reconvert to another religious denomination, a situation not previously documented in prior empirical literature. This study would analyze the religious, spiritual, humanistic, and secular reasons why people are more prone to change their belief to disbelief in a Supreme Being, coupled with why they did not rejoin another religious denomination.

Christian Worldview on Conversion and Deconversion

There is a need for additional research on why Christians throughout the world are experiencing a crisis of religious faith in greater numbers in comparison to previous generations. More research on this phenomenon is needed in order to fully understand the shared experiences as to why people develop a crisis of religious faith and how awareness of their experiences can benefit others, especially from a cultural, ethnic, gender, socioeconomic, and worldview perspective.

In comparison to prior generations, the use and exploitation of the Internet has created social platforms for people to feel justified for either leaving or joining a new religious belief system (Avance, 2013; Buckley et al., 2021; Smith et al., 2021). Access to contrary information about a religious denomination can significantly contribute to a crisis of faith by reconstructing a new religious identity or by driving person away from their belief of God through an awareness of emerging ideas and belief systems that were not present in former years (Avance, 2013).

From a social, family, and community perspective, more research is needed from a worldview perspective to determine why people are experiencing a crisis of religious faith from a cultural perspective. In addition, more worldview research is needed on the following concepts: (a) why are people hesitant to discuss their crisis of religious faith when it first develops; (b) why does science and logic trump prior religious and spiritual experiences; (c) why do family members show shock, hurt or emotional distress when a person decides to share their feelings about their crisis; and (d) why do former members of a highly structured religion abandon their belief in God in comparison to joining another religious sect.

Summary

The primary purpose of this hermeneutic phenomenological approach to qualitative research depicted the common meanings, themes, and interrelatedness that appeared cohesive as to why, what, when, and how former members of the CJLDS experienced a crisis of faith by either leaving their religious affiliation or by questioning their belief in God. This research study confirmed, amplified, diverged from and discovered new factors as to the primary and secondary reasons why members of the CJLDS developed a crisis of religious faith by transitioning away from their childhood religious denomination by becoming agnostic, an atheist, a deist or as a spiritualist, but not religious.

When a participant of this study experienced a crisis of religious faith, each individual went through a transitional phase that was highlighted by Six-Stages of Religious Transition that went from first questioning and then doubting Church dogma to eventually forming a new identity by becoming self-determined to reach a state of sovereignty as agents unto themselves. The key findings of this study were associated with four central themes as revealed from four research questions and 16 interview questions that spanned the arch of questioning to doubt to deconstruction of prior beliefs systems to withdrawing membership in a religious denomination to restructuring of a new identity to self-determination and autonomy.

From an implication perspective, this study contributed contemporary empirical data on why each participant left a highly structured religious denomination by becoming a deist, agnostic or disbelieving in the existence of God or by becoming a spiritualist, but not religious. In all cases, each participant felt suspicious and resentful of religions in general, and they had no desire to seek out a differing religious denomination for solace or for a community of support in the future. From a researcher's perspective, not having a single participant deconvert and then reconvert to another religious denomination was an outlier to previous empirical research, a phenomenon not previously documented. Secondly, this research study highlighted the process of questioning and eventually doubting a person's religious convictions and how social media platforms, podcasts, online support groups, and search engines by virtue of the Internet played a significant role in expediting a person's crisis of religious faith. In addition, all 13 participants used the Internet to find solutions and answers to their questions, initially from approved Church websites, but overtime, they migrated their searches to anti-Church social media sites or other similar platforms to gain an alternative perspectives, which eventually

overpowered and nullified their religious convictions, specifically about the feasibility of Joseph Smith and the authenticity of the Book of Mormon.

The third key implication was that a majority of the participants tended to give more weight and influence to science over religion, and logic over feelings of the heart. Even though 11 out of 13 participants had at least one or more spiritual experiences of the divinity of the CJLDS; logic, reasoning, and rationality eventually prevailed over prior religious and spiritual feelings. In fact, a majority of the participants have completely abandoned feelings of the heart or spiritual emotions as irrational manifestation that cannot be proven by fact and logic.

From an anecdotal assessment, in the late 1980's, a senior leader of the CJLDS did a sample poll during a regional Church conference in Germany, in which I attended, and found that 80% of ex-Mormons left the Church as a result of having their feelings hurt by a close friend or Church leader, while a minority left the Church for moral indiscretions and Church historical reasons. Today, according to this empirical research study, over 90% of ex-Mormons leave the Church for direct and indirect reasons associated with their belief in Joseph Smith as a prophet of God and whether the Book of Mormon was another testament of Jesus Christ as translated from golden plates.

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Appendices
Appendix A: IRB Approval Letter

LIBERTY UNIVERSITY
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

June 28, 2022

Kent Critchlow
Richard Green

Re: IRB Exemption - IRB-FY21-22-994 Should I Stay or Should I Go? Exploring the Crisis of Faith Process of Former Members of the CJLDS within the United States

Dear Kent Critchlow, Richard Green,

The Liberty University Institutional Review Board (IRB) has reviewed your application in accordance with the Office for Human Research Protections (OHRP) and Food and Drug Administration (FDA) regulations and finds your study to be exempt from further IRB review. This means you may begin your research with the data safeguarding methods mentioned in your approved application, and no further IRB oversight is required.

Your study falls under the following exemption category, which identifies specific situations in which human participants research is exempt from the policy set forth in 45 CFR 46:104(d):

Category 2.(iii). Research that only includes interactions involving educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures, or observation of public behavior (including visual or auditory recording) if at least one of the following criteria is met:

The information obtained is recorded by the investigator in such a manner that the identity of the human subjects can readily be ascertained, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects, and an IRB conducts a limited IRB review to make the determination required by §46.111(a)(7).

Your stamped consent form(s) and final versions of your study documents can be found under the Attachments tab within the Submission Details section of your study on Cayuse IRB. Your stamped consent form(s) should be copied and used to gain the consent of your research participants. If you plan to provide your consent information electronically, the contents of the attached consent document(s) should be made available without alteration.

Please note that this exemption only applies to your current research application, and any modifications to your protocol must be reported to the Liberty University IRB for verification of continued exemption status. You may report these changes by completing a modification submission through your Cayuse IRB account.

If you have any questions about this exemption or need assistance in determining whether possible modifications to your protocol would change your exemption status, please email us at irb@liberty.edu.

Sincerely,

██████████, MA, CIP

Administrative Chair of Institutional Research
Research Ethics Office

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Permission is granted to use "Figure 1. Visual representation of the processes involved in transitions toward irreligion" from the article "A review and conceptual model of the research on doubt, disaffiliation, and related religious changes" in a dissertation for Liberty University. Additional permission will be required if you ultimately decide to publish.

v1.2

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Appendix C: Screening Survey

Please fill-out the below screening questionnaire to determine your eligibility to take part in this qualitative research study.

1. Age: ___ under 18; ___ 18-39; ___ 40-59; or ___ 60-99.
2. Did you self-describe as a member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints during childhood? ___ Yes or ___ No.
3. Did you grow up in the US as a citizen? ___ Yes or ___ No.
4. Did you abandon your religious belief as a member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints? ___ Yes or ___ No.
5. At what age did you abandon your religious belief as a member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints? ___ Age.
6. What was your primary reason for leaving the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints? _____.
7. When you abandoned your belief as a member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, what was the primary reason for doing so? ___ Voluntary Reasons; ___ Involuntary Reasons; or ___ Other Reasons.
8. What is your current religious standing: ___ Not Religious; ___ Spiritualist; ___ Active Member in a Religious Denomination; ___ Inactive Member in a Religious Denomination; ___ Still Searching for a Religious Denomination; ___ Agnostic; or ___ Other.
9. Did you ever have a testimony or have a spiritual experience that cultivated a truthfulness of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints? ___ Yes or ___ No.
10. Name: _____

11. Email: _____
12. Telephone Number: _____
13. Gender: Male; Female; or Other
14. Race and Ethnic Categories: White; Hispanic or Latino; Black or African American; Asian; American Indian or Alaska Native; Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander; or Other.
15. What is your highest educational level? High School; Some College; Undergraduate Degree; Technical Training; Master's Degree; or Doctorate Degree.
16. What state do you currently live in? _____
17. What is your current relationship status? Married; Separated; Divorced; Widowed; Single, but Never Married; or Domestic Partnership.
18. Do you know of any friends or associates who grew up as members of the CJLDS, subsequently experienced a crisis of religious faith, and eventually abandoned their childhood religious affiliation? Yes or No.
19. If yes, would you be willing to share their names and contact information so I can contact them to determine their willingness to participate in the research study?
 Yes or No.

Appendix D: Consent Form

Title of the Project: Should I Stay or Should I Go? Exploring the Crisis of Faith Process of Former Members of the CJLDS within the United States

Principal Investigator: Kent T. Critchlow, Doctoral Student, Liberty University

Invitation to be Part of a Research Study

You are invited to participate in a research study. To participate, you must be 18 years of age or older, and self-identified during childhood as a member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (CJLDS) within the United States, and then subsequently experienced a crisis of religious faith, which resulted in the abandonment of that religious faith or belief in God.

Taking part in this research project is voluntary.

Please take time to read this entire form and ask questions, if needed, before deciding whether to take part in this research.

What is the study about and why is it being done?

The purpose of this study is to provide a holistic research approach and to describe the significant factors that likely caused members of the CJLDS within the United States to change their childhood religious affiliation and belief systems by either abandoning their religious faith or by questioning their certainty or belief in God. The significance of this study is that Church leaders of all religious denominations will better know and understand the central themes and rationale as to why their parishioners lost faith in the tenets of their religious beliefs by either seeking shelter from other dissimilar or similar denominations for spiritual guidance or by becoming agnostic.

What will happen if you take part in this study?

If you agree to be in this study, I will ask you to do the following things:

1. Take part in a one-hour, personal interview to be conducted in person in your home or remotely through Microsoft Teams. In-person interviews will be audio recorded, and remote interviews will be video recorded. You will be given the opportunity to review your interview transcript and make any corrections or additions.
2. Write a comprehensive reflective narration of your crisis of religious faith and whether your experience resulted in a transcendence of self (one or two pages long, double spaced). The results of your narrative reflection will be uploaded to my secure Drop Box account, which uses a 256-bit AES encryption model to ensure security. If you elect not to use my Drop Box account to upload your narrative reflection, I will provide you a preaddressed stamped envelope to mail your narrative response to me. Estimated time to complete the reflective narration is approximately one hour.

How could you or others benefit from this study?

You should not expect to receive a direct benefit from taking part in this study.

For others who might go through a similar crisis of religious experience, it might give deeper substance and more meaning as to why current or former members of the CJLDS experienced a crisis of religious faith by using a naturalistic approach to how participants view religion and spirituality, how they interpret and give meaning to spiritual and religious events, how they gain meaning from conversations with other people who have gone through similar religious and spiritual experiences, and what a crisis of religious experience means to them. In addition, information might be garnered to help develop new and innovative Christian interventions that might help resolve a crisis of faith at the family and parish level.

What risks might you experience from being in this study?

The risks involved in this study are assessed to be minimal, which means they are equal to the risks you should encounter in everyday life. In addition, as the primary researcher, I will avoid the very appearance of deception, and I will not create outcomes from potential conscious or subconscious biases.

How will personal information be protected?

The records of this study will be kept private. Published reports will not include any information that will make it possible to identify a subject or their home of record. Research records will be stored securely, and only the researcher will have access to the records.

- Participant responses will be kept confidential through the use of pseudonyms. Interviews will be conducted at the participant's home and others will not have the ability to overhear the conversation.
- Data will be stored on a password-locked computer and hard-copy documents will be stored in my personal cypher lock safe. Data will be retained for three years and will then be destroyed.
- Interviews will be recorded and transcribed. Recordings will be stored on a password locked computer for three years and then erased. Only the researcher will have access to these recordings.

How will you be compensated for being part of the study?

Participants will not be compensated for participating in this study.

Is study participation voluntary?

Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with Liberty University. If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time.

What should you do if you decide to withdraw from the study?

If you choose to withdraw from the study, please contact the researcher at the email address/phone number included in the next paragraph. Should you choose to withdraw, data collected from you will be destroyed immediately and will not be included in this study.

Whom do you contact if you have questions or concerns about the study?

The researcher conducting this study is Kent T. Critchlow. You may ask any questions now or at any time during the research study. If you have questions now or later, **you are encouraged** to

contact him at (720) 525-9633 or through his email at kcritchlow@liberty.edu. You may also contact the researcher's faculty sponsor, Dr. Richard Green, at rlgreen@liberty.edu.

Whom do you contact if you have questions about your rights as a research participant?

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher or his faculty sponsor, **you are encouraged** to contact the Institutional Review Board, 1971 University Blvd., Green Hall Ste. 2845, Lynchburg, VA 24515 or by email at irb@liberty.edu.

Disclaimer: The Institutional Review Board (IRB) is tasked with ensuring that human subjects research will be conducted in an ethical manner as defined and required by federal regulations. The topics covered and viewpoints expressed or alluded to by student and faculty researchers are those of the researchers and do not necessarily reflect the official policies or positions of Liberty University.

Your Consent

By signing this document, you are agreeing to be in this study. Make sure you understand what the study is about before you sign. You will be given a copy of this document for your records. The researcher will keep a copy with the study records. If you have any questions about the study after you sign this document, you can contact the study team using the information provided above.

I have read and understood the above information. I have asked questions and have received answers. I consent to participate in the study.

The researcher has my permission to audio-record/video-record me as part of my participation in this study.

Printed Subject Name

Signature & Date

Appendix E: Recruitment Template - Verbal Script (Phone or in Person)

Hello [Potential Participant],

As a graduate student in the School of Behavioral Sciences at Liberty University, I am conducting research as part of the requirements for a doctoral degree in Community Care and Counseling. The purpose of this study is to provide a holistic gestalt and to describe the significant factors that likely caused members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (CJLDS) within the United States to change their childhood religious affiliation and belief systems by either abandoning their religious faith or by questioning their certainty in God, and if you meet my participant criteria and are interested, I would like to invite you to join my study.

To participate, you must be 18 years of age or older, self-identified during childhood as a member of the CJLDS within the United States, and then subsequently experienced a crisis of religious faith, which resulted in the abandonment of that religious faith or belief in God. If you agree to be in this study, I will ask you to do the following things:

1. Take a screening survey to determine if you meet the minimum qualifications to become a participant. The screening survey should take about 10 minutes to complete.
2. Take part in a one-hour, personal interview to be conducted in person in your home or remotely through Microsoft Teams. In-person interviews will be audio recorded, and remote interviews will be video recorded. You will be given the opportunity to review your interview transcript and make any corrections or additions.
3. Write a comprehensive reflective narration of your crisis of religious faith and whether your experience resulted in a transcendence of self (one or two pages long, double spaced). The results of your narrative reflection will be uploaded to my secure Drop Box account, which uses a 256-bit AES encryption model to ensure security. If you elect not to use my Drop Box account to upload your narrative reflection, I will provide you a preaddressed stamped envelope to mail your narrative response to me. Estimated time to complete the reflective narration is approximately one hour.

Names and other identifying information will be requested as part of this study, but participant identities will not be disclosed.

Would you like to participate? If Yes - Great, could I get your email address so I can send you the link to the screening survey? Thank you for your assistance.

A consent document will be emailed to you if you meet the study criteria. The consent document contains additional information about my research. If you choose to participate, you will need to sign the consent document and return it to me before or at the time of the interview, which will

be conducted at your home or remotely via Microsoft Teams. If the interview cannot be accomplished at your home, I will provide a preaddressed stamped envelope so can you mail your signed consent document back to me, or you can upload it to my secure Drop Box account.

Thank you for your time. Do you have any questions?

Appendix F: Narrative Reflection Guidance

At the conclusion of the personal interview meeting, I will ask each participant to write a comprehensive reflective narration of their crisis of religious faith and whether their individual experience resulted in a transcendence of self. The results of the narrative reflection will be uploaded by each participant to my secure drop box account, which uses a 256-bit AES encryption model to ensure security, and the results of each narrative will be analyzed and correlated to show linkage of themes (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Heppner et al., 2016). If participants elect not to use the drop box account to upload their narrative reflection, then they will be given a preaddressed stamped envelope to mail their narrative responses to me.

Narrative Reflective Guidance: Thank you for your participation during this one hour interview session regarding your crisis of religious faith. In the coming minutes, hours and perhaps days, additional thoughts might surface that were not discussed or additional amplifying thoughts might surface that could shed supplementary meaning and insight to your crisis of religious faith. Starting today and within the next three to four days, can you capture your thoughts by writing a one to two page narrative reflection regarding your crisis of religious faith and whether your individual experience resulted in a transcendence of self by either growing closer to God or by doubting in the existence of a biblical God.

If a participant's answer is Yes: Once you have completed your narrative reflection, please upload your narrative reflective within three to four days from now by using my secure drop box account. If you would prefer to simply mail your responses to me, here is a preaddressed stamped envelope to mail you narrative responses to me.

If a participant's answer is No: Once again, thank you for your time and for your thoughts on why and how you experienced a crisis of religious faith. Have a blessed day.

Appendix G: Standardized Open-Ended Semi-Structured Interview Questions

Before the interview begins with each participant, I will start the conversation by explaining my professional and personal background, and by engaging in icebreaker questions as a means to build rapport and trust with each participant (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Heppner et al., 2016). The following semi-structured interview questions will be used to guide the conversation. In addition to the below rapport and interview questions, extemporaneous and clarifying questions will be solicited as warranted.

1. Now that you know a little about me, can you tell me about your personal background and your likes and dislikes?
2. What was your favorite vacation and why?
3. Describe one or two of your personal strengths?
4. What matters most in your life and why?
5. Describe whether you developed a testimony and had a spiritual experience of the divinity of the CJLDS?
6. Describe the primary factors and variables that first started your crisis of religious faith (knowledge and belief)?
7. Describe an event or how a situation primarily, secondarily, and tertiarily influenced your crisis of religious faith (knowledge and belief)?
8. Describe how a person or persons influenced your crisis of religious faith (feeling and belief)?
9. Describe your prior and current definition of faith, and how it has evolved since your crisis of religious faith (knowledge and belief)?
10. What type of experiences contributed to your final decision to change your faith and belief system (background and belief)?
11. How did changing your faith and belief system resolve your crisis of religious faith (experiential and belief)?
12. What were the relevant factors that contributed to the resolution of your crisis of religious faith (experiential and belief)?
13. How has the experience of your crisis of religious faith affected your family and close personal relationships (sensory and feeling)?
14. How has the overall experience of your crisis of religious faith affected you (sensory and behavioral)?
15. How are you using your crisis of religious faith experience to help others who are or who might have a similar experience (experiential and belief)?
16. How has your crisis of religious faith reformulated your understanding of God (belief, feeling and sensory)?
17. How has your crisis of religious faith changed your belief in a religious denomination (knowledge and belief)?
18. How has your crisis of religious faith changed your perception of religion and spirituality, and their role in your life (behavioral and belief)?
19. How did changing your religious affiliation resolve your crisis of faith (feeling and knowledge)?
20. How did changing your belief or understanding of God resolve your crisis of religious faith (sensory, feeling and belief)?

Semi-structured interview questions offer a balance between structured and unstructured interview questions since they allow the participant to provide a richer and more personalized response to each question (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Heppner et al., 2016). In addition, semi-structured interview questions can allow the researcher to set response protocols with each participant as a means to adapt or modify inquiries by asking extemporaneous and clarifying questions to each participant as new insights emerge (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Heppner et al., 2016). In addition, I devised each question to gain a meaningful saturation level on the background, behaviors, opinions, feelings, knowledge, sensory understanding, and how each participant experienced a crisis of religious faith in their life that eventually caused them to either change their religious denomination or alter their belief in God. Each standardized open-ended semi-structured interview question was conceived from the problem and purpose statement.

Lastly, each participant will be given an opportunity to review their interview transcripts and they will be given one day to make any corrections or additions to their interview transcript. I will contact each participant after one day to see if they have any corrections or additions to make to their interview and transcript and I will make any changes as needed.

Appendix H: Transcript of John's Interview

1 "Kent Critchlow"

Now let's start with the interview questions. Once again, if there is question that you feel uncomfortable answering – just let me know, and we will move to the next question.

2 "John "

All right. Sounds good. Sounds great. Yeah.

3 "Kent Critchlow"

Perfect, first of all. Uh, can you describe whether you developed a testimony and had a spiritual experience of the divinity of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, while in your youth and adulthood?

4-6 "John "

Um, I can. I was a literal believer, but also, I would say a spiritual believer and I, I always felt like my 1st, kind of recognizable powerful spiritual experience came pretty early. But, but, yes, I was, I was definitely a member that had a, I used to call it kind of a spiritual, big bang experience. You know, either you have 1 of those moments you could, you could lean back on.

7 "Kent Critchlow"

Uh, but, yes, was that during your adolescence or childhood or adulthood?

8 "John "

I was 14. 14 Yep. Was my first experience and then I had several during my adulthood.

9-10 "Kent Critchlow"

Thank you. Can you go into and describe the primary factors or variables that first started you to have questions, and then those questions started to turn to doubt, you know, about the divinity of the church - the beginning stages. What were some of those primary factors and variables that 1st started that process of your crisis?

11-27 "John "

I would say there were 2 or 3 topics that I'll say I discovered almost on accident. Mm, hmm. My initial reaction was, there's no way that's not real. And then, you know, it kind of festered a little bit and ultimately, I thought, well. Yeah, I know the church is true. I know it's real and therefore there has to be legitimate good answers. And actually, I, I remember the day feeling really good and really confident when I, when I said. If I'm not willing to look and get my questions answered, I'm always going to have 1 foot kind of out. Now.

I am confident that the church was true and so I said, okay, I'm going to dive in and look for answers because I got nothing to be afraid of but it. And as far as the topics, uh, and I don't know if that's what you were asking about as well or just kinda the mindset.

What were the 2 top? Uh, the book of Abraham. The translation of the book of Abraham, the book and kind of the facts behind it. And then also polygamy and, and kind of the research and at

1st, I wouldn't say I understood polyandry and, kind of some of the other, the other elements in the circumstances behind it. But those were the 2 big ones at 1st which I came 1st is out of curiosity. I mean, I knew there was polygamy in the history, and I figured while all these people I know and love are okay with it. So, I'm sure it's explainable.

Um, so I would say, initially, it was probably a book of Abraham, because in my mind that was identifiable as testable you know, as being real or not real and that there could be a concrete answer to that.

Polygamy was more of a curiosity of why it would happen and I would say, I, I really didn't dig into further questions until I started learning about, maybe the circumstances, or the nature of polygamy when it was going on.

28-30 "Kent Critchlow"

Sure, um, sometimes in a person's life, there's a traumatic event that starts them to go in one direction or another, or to start the thought process to act in a certain way. Was there any specific situation or events that occurred that happened in your life that started you to question the divinity of the church.

31-39 "John "

Um, life was good growing up as a member. Life was normal.

There wasn't really anything or singular event that caused me to doubt or disbelieve. However, I mean, I do remember what started the whole process for me and it was actually a member of a former award had passed away unexpectedly, and I heard about it. And, you know, I was looking up to them when I was growing up, so I found his social media page, and this person mentioned the CES letter on their Facebook page. And I didn't know if the CES letter was a good thing or a bad thing. However, I could deduce by the comments that it was not a good thing about the church. And as a faithful member of the church, I said, okay, well, I'm never going to read that, but within that thread of comments of his Facebook page, where, you know, there was a question about the book Abraham. And I thought, well, that's a legitimate and fair question. So, anyway, that is what started my journey of discovery. And over time, I was just encountering information that I didn't know was out there.

40 "Kent Critchlow"

Thank you. Um. The next question, specifically centers around a person or persons that might have nudged you to continue you search for answers. I don't need their names. But was there a person or persons that helped influence you or help guide you along in this process?

41-42 "John "

Uh, no, um. And I don't know if I regret that or not at the time I was serving as the Quorum president. And it was one of those where I was worried about talking to church leaders about my questions and doubts. And then being able to resolve those questions. I did not want others, especially church leaders to feel that I was struggling, and then have them relegate me to nursery for the rest of my church career or something.

In addition, I was really afraid to talk to my wife and we talk about everything, but I was so, you know, I got to this point of uncovering information that I found uncomfortable with. And I did not want to worry her, even though I share everything with my wife. And she has a real big problem with it, and then decides to leave the church, but then I can reconcile my doubts. And so, I was afraid to kind of share my feelings with anybody. So, I just kept everything to myself, right up to the point until I made a final decision to leave the church.

43 "Kent Critchlow"

Um, now. When you grow up as a member of the church, you probably had a very, very confident definition of faith. How would you describe the difference between then, and now and what is your current definition of faith.

44-50 "John "

Um, as a boy and as an adult, I can't believe I'm going to say this out loud. I used to look at faith as more of a virtue than I do today. Okay, um, to me, faith, you know, is the amount of faith you have to keep going and to believe in something not seen. It was a badge of honor, like, my willingness to believe something that was either unbelievable, or had contradictory evidence and that I did not completely understand when I was younger. Faith and knowledge, are close, um.

But then again, they are not the same, you know. I, I believe that I had faith in everything about the church, but I did not have a knowledge that it was true. And as soon as I had knowledge of something that was true, my faith would be replaced.

Um, but oftentimes I would say that I know the church is true as a statement of solidarity with other church members. I didn't understand fully what I was saying. Faith is not being in the middle of the road. You need to get on your knees and pray to God to stop the truck that's coming at you, which was my crisis of religious faith.

Faith is running as fast as you can to get out of the way and asking for God to make up the difference. That I would be able to run a little bit faster to get up and beat my crisis.

I would say that through my journey and through my process, I feel, I started to doubt my faith.

My faith and my beliefs at the time did not really impact what was really or actuality real or true at the time.

And that was a hard thing for me to separate. What I wanted to be real and what I wanted to be true.

51-54 "Kent Critchlow"

Okay. Um, sometimes people look at faith and they see it as a more secular meaning. Such as, I have faith in humanity. I have faith in my spouse. I have faith in someone or something.

And then there's a spiritual faith, whereas a belief in a higher or to pray for guidance and to hope for guidance. So, do you see your faith as gravitating more towards secular faith or towards religious faith?

55 "John "

Are you asking about faith from a religious standpoint?

56 "Kent Critchlow"

It can be either religious or spiritual or both.

57-62 "John "

I would likely use the word spiritual instead of faith. Yeah. Um. I would say at first, my faith in Mormonism. Mm. Hmm. And that was a long and painful process. That I had faith in something and that for many years in my younger life, my life was stolen from me due to religious faith. In processing all of that. There was a kind of a pause button on deconstruction.

But it's really, really hard I would say, you know, to stop asking questions. And that led to ultimately, I would, I would say a breakdown of religious faith, not because I wanted it to break down.

But ultimately, I would say my faith now is more, I would say, you know, faith in humanity, faith that the world will get better. By becoming more loving, more accepting, you know, not so much, um, you know. This type of faith replaced my former faith in a higher being or higher beings.

63-66 "Kent Critchlow"

Okay, excellent, thank you. Can you put into context what you said earlier, about your primary factors that first started your crisis of religious faith? What primarily started you down this road of discovery? Initially, you mentioned two things, polygamy and The book of Abraham in the way it was translated.

In addition, can you describe your experiences that contributed to your final decision to leave the church? You know, this is the final straw that broke the camel's back. I am now crossing the Rubicon that type of thing.

67-81 "John "

So, let me be specific, without being too long winded here. But, I will say that initially, I set out to just answer my questions about those two topics and in an unexpected turn, I uncovered more things that I wasn't familiar with. And the more things that I was uncomfortable with, became bigger and more troubling to me. And that led, you know, why didn't I know these things before? And where was this information before.

And ultimately every single pillar of the restoration, as I was taught, it was broken down.

Um, the truth claims, I, would say, you know, the first vision, how the book of Mormon was translated, and the origins of book of Mormon, the doctrines in the book of Mormon that were altered from the first edition to the second edition.

I mean, I'm going through everything like, it was literally everything about the church I had issues with. And I was not aware of any of these issues before.

Boy, early on, I really expected to encounter a fast talker that was going to manipulate me into, you know, breaking my faith. I did not expect to find first-hand accounts and original source information on so many topics, but ultimately, I would say there were two things that that broke the camel's back. That was the final straw. When I learned about Helen Kimble and specifically the circumstances around, Uh, her marriage to Joseph Smith. That absolutely broke me. I laid, in the fetal position crying on my bathroom floor. It just devastated me. Um. And that opened up learning about a whole bunch of other things that were very similar. But, uh, it was Helen Kimball marriage to Joseph Smith when she was 14 that did it for me, and the circumstances of her relationship to Joseph Smith. It was just devastating and I didn't know how to reconcile that in my head and it really took me saying this out loud. Remove the name, Joseph Smith, because I revered and admired him, you know, he wasn't God, but he was as close to him as anything or anyone that had walked on the earth besides Jesus. I just could not believe that Joseph Smith did this.

I had to replace his name and I had to say if Tom Jones, and I'm making up this name. If Tom Jones would have said or did this to a person, how would I react? And I said, it is absolutely positively, completely countered to everything I've ever been told to believe in. So that was the exercise I went through.

I had to internalize that information. So, to summarize, it was Joseph teenage relationships with young girls, and then it was polyandry. That was very difficult for me. And I would say, I spent more time trying to disprove all of this information.

Um, the other I would say was ultimately prophets, and I believe that a lot of people who end up leaving the church do so for similar reason. They do so for the same reasons. For some people, it might be a catalyst of church history or its doctrine or on social issues or whatever it is but ultimately, for me, it was prophets. And do these men speak for God and how often can they be wrong?

For me, and I still hesitate to talk about this with people sometimes because I don't want to sound like I'm attacking it or being overly angry.

82 "Kent Critchlow"

No judgments here whatsoever.

83-85 "John"

If Joseph Smith was able to fabricate just one revelation. For example, saying, God wants you to do this. If that wasn't really a revelation, and if there were any of those out there, then it would called into question all revelations. And to me, there were several revelations by Brigham Young and Joseph Smith that were just a little too far off the mark for me as far as do these men speak for God and it led to a breakdown of really I would say about any prophet in their ability to speak for God, um.

That that was very hard. That was a very hard process for me to go through.

86-88 "Kent Critchlow"

Thank you very much for putting in perspective your feelings. By going through this process, did it eventually change your faith and belief system and did it resolve your crisis of faith? And do you feel at peace with your decision.

89-97 "John "

I never ever, ever imagined I'd be sitting on this side of a conversation. You know about my faith. Mm. Hmm. Um. And, like I said, I, I can't believe I'm saying this, but I, no longer view faith as a virtue. Or, you know, a willingness to believe some really grand things, but without evidence.

I used to think that if I, if I look for evidence, that was a bad thing. And that meant that I lacked faith. I, I don't believe that anymore but where I've landed is, um. You know, I would say, we try to teach our children in this manner. There is no religious institution. But, basically, we teach our children two rules, and I hate to call them rules. But number one is, do no harm to other people. Do not add to anybody's suffering. And once you can manage that, like, if I can manage that, then rule number two becomes – Help people or reduce their suffering. And I would say, accidentally, I didn't do it on purpose but it's kind of like in the old testament and in the New Testament, okay, don't hurt anybody and once you can manage that, then you try to help them.

But my willingness to do that, and this is definitely not the case with all people that have gone through a crisis of faith transition. It is not based on a fear of punishment or trying to earn a reward you know. You do not have to believe in God to do good to others. And if you do not believe in God, you are not going to fall off a cliff or make other terrible choices because you do not believe.

And what I found out, is there some really good people and I'm trying to be one of them.

You know, make good choices and do good for others. I do this without fear of punishment or seeking of a reward and so that's kind of where I would say my faith has landed now. That they go from believing members to Christian, and then from Christian to universal lists, and from Universalist to agnostic and from agnostic to atheist and the really, really, really deep questioners, they eventually go back to agnostic. I would say that's probably the progression that I've gone through.

98 "Kent Critchlow"

Very good. You know, sometimes when a person goes through an experience, what you went through, they start deconstructing who they once were, because their belief systems have changed, and then they have to reconstruct who they want to be. So, what were the various factors as far as this reconstruction process that has brought about a new identity and belief system in your life that help you move forward after your crisis of faith.

99-107 "John "

Boy. Um, I'm still in that process. It's been 4 years now and I'm definitely still in that process. Um. Early on, you know, probably, the two most dramatic moments I've had in my life had to do with telling people about leaving the faith, you know, going to our bishop, Uh, and asking to be released, you know, I was the Elder's Quorum president. My wife was the first counselor in the young women's presidency and so going in and that took time to pick up the pieces from that conversation with my bishop and I would say, telling some family members, not all of them. Some were easy conversations and some were very difficult and with some, I have not talked with them about my crisis of faith.

You know, four years later, they're still difficult, but dealing with the, Oh, for lack of a better word, social excommunication, and just trying to rebuild my life with new friends and trying to rebuild my family relationships.

I would say that was the first part of the reconstruction process.

Every day, you know, you put fuel in every morning and that guides how you think, and you act and all of that. And scripture study obviously changed for me. Um, for better or worse I do not believe in studying the scriptures.

Secular learnings has replaced spiritual learning. I want now to be a better member of the community. Be a good citizen. A good dad, a good husband.

All of that, um, the resources are just different than they were before, but it's still a process today.

108-111 "Kent Critchlow"

Thank you. How has the experience of your crisis religious, if you were going to break it down into four parts – how has it impacted your wife. I assume, by the way you have talked that she has followed your footsteps, but how has your decision affected your wife and your kids. Assuming you have children. And how has it impacted your relationship with your parents and your siblings.

And the fourth is your friends and associates that you had as a former member. Can you describe how your relationship with all four entities has evolved or devolved since your crisis.

112-139 "John "

Some of them much better. Some of them much worse. There's not a lot in between. Now, Uh, huh. Um, I, I witnessed a lot of people both before and after I left the church, I've witnessed people that left, and I feel like some leave the wrong way. I now understand why so many people are angry when they leave. And I definitely felt that after 4 years later, you know, I have all these emotions just built up.

And I've, I've, I've told a couple of people that have, you know, rough conversations with family members who have left, um, in particular a former stake president. You know, we went to dinner. And he said, well, you know, my, my brother laughed and he was super angry about it.

And, and I still remember telling him like, we're all angry. Some of us just bottle it better than others. I'm, like, have mercy on them.

As far as my wife, I still remember when I had hit the point of no return where, uh, in fact, I could even tell you the date. It was May 30th, 2018, when I finally said the day will come when I will no longer be attending the Mormon church. I had reached the point where, um, if it, the church was point 001% true, then I was going to stay.

Two weeks before I told my wife, I went to the temple and I prayed, and I fasted and, you know, I did everything possible to convenience myself that the church was true. But once I hit that point, where I knew with certainty, I brought it up with my wife and I was so afraid of that conversation.

So, I brought it up with her and I simply said, I have found some things that I cannot reconcile. Um, and I brought up polygamy and the book of Abraham, and I said, I'm not asking you to believe me. I was really worried that my wife would just take my word and believe me and 6 months later, she would have regrets. And say, what have you done to our family? And I still remember telling her, I'm asking you to look into it for yourself. Do not believe me.

But don't believe anybody else either. Just be objective and do your own homework.

And I will talk to you as much as you want.

But it's going to be me having to put a cork in it and not like, I didn't want to influence her decision.

As much as I, I knew where I was at, and where I wanted her to go, I wanted her to know to figure it out and I knew I know my wife well enough, I knew that if she was willing to do it. I knew where she would land and a short amount of time later she did. Um, so my wife has left the church. In fact, she came across some stuff beyond all the other stuff where she said we're going now to the bishop to ask to be released, we're done. We are done and I was a little bit surprised at how definitive and upset, she was when she had learned some of this stuff. So anyway, um. We decided to leave. Um, it was in January of 2020, so my wife first started to doubt back in July of 2018 and then she left in January 2020. And it was my wife who said it's time to remove our names from the church.

So, you know. I would say I had a really good friendship with the local bishop and with the stake president. Um, those were difficult conversations to have with them. They asked that my kids, including my 7 year old, who was not baptized to sign their names saying that they didn't want to be members of the church anymore as well. Um.

I felt like that was, oh, not good. I don't know how to express that, but I felt like that was having my 7 year old sign their name was maybe not appropriate, but ultimately, I formulated 10 questions that I asked my kids. Number 10 was would you like to remain a member of the church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints. And all four of them said, no, and so I forwarded those

questions and the answers onto my bishop and stake president. Um. And they our family was removed from being members of the church.

You know, my oldest, I think was 10 at the time and the number one question at that time was can we go to birthday parties on Sunday now? And we said, well, my wife and I will have to think about that.

Overall, the kids have handled it well.

Uh, my parents, I knew exactly, Uh, I hate to say it, but I knew exactly how my parents and in-laws would respond. Mm. Hmm. Uh, we talked to my in-laws when we were in Utah. And that did not go well, and there's still hardship there. Um. Primarily, according to them, I have broken up an eternal family, and I was the blame for it in their eyes. I feel bad. I don't want anybody to live their life thinking that, you know, eternity is now destroyed for my family - whether it is or not is not the problem. They believe it to be true.

Concerning my parents, Um, you know, we again, we told them in person. My parents came to my home a couple weeks after we left, and we told them in person. And again, I would say the reaction was spot on what I, what I anticipated. My mom said, We love you. And she said, I want to know why. She knew me growing up.

I still remember telling her, um, my parents had recently retired, you know, all their friends were in their ward. And I was afraid that they would leave the church and lose all of their friends. And I told my mom, I'm not going to tell you. I know I don't want you to worry and to stress over my decision to leave the church.

But I still remember telling my mom, if you want to know why I left the church. I want you to think about it for at least a week, because it's hard to learn some of these things and not be impacted. Eventually, my parents have since left the church, um.

My mom has to be about the sweetest person on the face of the planet and it is hard, because my parents have lost all of their friends now. Um. My mom's a good person and, uh, so anyway. My relationship is very good with my parents. I did not want them to leave the church, but at the same time, I'm not super upset over it. I didn't want them to pay tithing anymore. Um.

But I didn't, I didn't want them to lose their social network.

I've got 3 sisters. One sister left about 5 years before I did for all of the same reasons that I was told people leave the church. Um.

My youngest sister, I knew, she would ask and she did, and just like my mom and dad, I was afraid to tell her why and she has since left.

I knew that her husband would not and she's now on a split faith marriage and I feel really bad about that. So, I have a good relationship with my sister and with my brother in law, he's a good guy.

But they are in a slump. My third sister, I knew she wouldn't look into the reason to leave the church. She actually just got married. We flew out to where they live and hung outside when they got married in the temple. She's the only remaining active member in my family.

Okay, uh, friends. I had a couple of friends that asked me about leaving and why I left.

I would say with every single one of them, I told them the same thing as I did to my mom. Like, if you want to know, you got to make sure you really want to know and what it could change about your life. Um. I had two friends that said, I don't care. I want to know.

All of the rest of my church friends, we have just lost contact with them.

Sometimes I feel like, I'm a dangerous person to some of those friends. I feel like, if I reach out to them, that they might think, hear he goes, he is trying to pull someone else away from the church.

I understand what it's like, being in the church and now I understand the other side, but anyway, that's been difficult.

140-141 "Kent Critchlow"

Well, I can see how that can be very gut wrenching.

Well, it's a process. It must have been very emotional. Similar to going through the five stages of grief.

142 "John"

You are right – I did go through the five stages of grief and sometimes I regress back to anger, denial, and to disbelief.

143-146 "Kent Critchlow"

Anger has a tendency to resurface more than once.

I think you have explained this before; however, how has this overall experience of your crisis of faith affected you and who you today. are if you had to say.

Did it make you a stronger person. How has it shaped or molded you as a person.

Oh, wow.

147-149 "John "

Oh, wow, in so many ways. In some direct way and them in some indirect ways. It has definitely changed me as a husband and a father.

And again, in two Million years, I never ever thought I would say this, but I feel like I'm such a better husband and father now.

150 "Kent Critchlow"

Um, can you break that down for me by being more specific? Yeah. Yeah. So, um, 5 years ago.

151-166 "John "

Yeah, Yeah. Being a husband and a father was really easy when I was a member. It's more difficult now. Because I knew what I had to do when I was a member – it was spelled out for you. I knew what I had to teach. I knew what I had to say, and I knew what I had to do, and I knew what authority I could use as a father and husband.

I would say that the patriarchal order of our household is destroyed and is gone. Um, I am not the final voice. I am not the ultimate decision maker anymore. I am no longer worried about coercing the correct outcome and I don't mean that to sound bad, but as a member of the church, I was both a child, and a parent, it kind of felt like as long as I can answer these questions and you know, regardless of how my kids felt regardless of what they thought, or believed, as long as they didn't do this and this, we were going to be an eternal family and now I look at being a father as I will be the safest person in the world for my kids to talk to. Things like alcohol, sex, modesty. All of that, like, those were all very taboo topics and it could have been just my household growing up. It definitely felt taboo to a degree in church other than don't drink don't smoke, you know, and remain pure and clean until you get married.

I use some of those principles differently now, you know, things like modesty have a very different view and I can't believe I'm saying that, but what I was teaching my daughters before, versus what I was accidentally teaching them before has changed.

So, anyway, as a husband and a father, I'm no longer worried about coercing the correct outcome. I'm more worried about doing and saying the best I possibly can.

And that includes telling my four kids. I am here no matter what. I am the safest person in the world. And I do not want fear of punishment to be a guiding principle, you know, for me as a husband or father anymore.

And I feel like my relationships have flourished with them.

So, it's changed me as a husband and as a father and as an individual. You know, I mentioned before I used to view faith as a virtue. I now kind of, you know, if there's evidence that the earth is flat, I'm willing to believe it, but if there's evidence that the earth is round, I no longer view believing the earth is flat anyway as a virtue.

I have no problem being wrong. I would rather talk to somebody about any topic. In fact, it is rarely about religion, but I'd rather talk to somebody whether it's finances or current events or politics. It doesn't matter. I'd rather talk to somebody that has a differing point of view than I do. I like those conversations, if it can be without emotions. And I will either change my opinion or my views. I am open to new ideas.

Which actually feels kind of good now. In many ways, it has reinforced my beliefs. And I find myself looking to engage in those conversations and it is almost kind of exciting when my beliefs and views are updated. Because I encounter better information.

So, I feel more, for lack of a better word, more well-rounded.

As a human being, I am now a better member of society.

Trying to do good things. I now have a different set of parameters that allow me to do that now.

167 "Kent Critchlow"

Sounds like the words open and transparency are definitely the hallmarks of your new identify.

168-174 "John "

Yeah, and I will say in my own defense, and I'll say in the defense of my friends and family that are that are still part of the church.

I was trying to view myself as that way before I left the church. I felt like I should show love to everybody and I should not judge anybody.

But in other ways, it has changed. And I still remember the moment. Um, boy, not wearing my was garments was really a hard thing.

And I remember sitting at a restaurant with my wife and watching people come and go and for the first time saying, I'm no better or worse. You know, I'm not secretly in and you are not. You know, I have my temple recommended and that is a good sign that I'm in and you are not.

And all of these people around me, I love them and I don't judge them, but they're not in. And now. I'm just like them. I am no better. I am no worse.

Like, we are all just humans of the same worthiness as I am.

175-177 "Kent Critchlow"

Very good. You know, there are a lot of religions in the word. Um, and even religions can be broken down into sub-categories. For example. There are many types of Christian churches in the world, and we other types of religions or philosophies such as Buddhism, Taoism, Hinduism, and Judaism, and Islamism.

Has your crisis of faith affected your understanding of religion in general? Or do you no longer have a need or desire to seek out a different type of religion for you and your family for truth and understanding?

178-184 "John "

You know, initially it was only the elements of Mormonism that broke my faith in religion.

As you know, it was the first vision. It was priesthood authority. It was Joseph Smith and temples that broke my faith.

Mm, hmm but further deconstruction of my old identity, um, has led me to view religion as untrustworthy.

I shouldn't lump all religions together. But, you know, I have not been a practicing member of the church for over four years. Now there's not a day that goes by where my wife and I don't talk about it. Not a single day. I haven't forgotten anything about, you know Mormonism and religions in general and how it broke me down.

But my trust of religion is just not there. I could say John, I command you to do this and you may, or may not do it. And if you do not, you will be damned. Or I can pull a spiritual trump card, and I say, God wants you to do this. Um, people or people are more likely to listen to that and I'm at a place now where it doesn't matter who you are or if God say it to a person.

There's not a single person that walks on the planet that has a direct tie to God for me or for my family or for anyone.

You know, there's nobody that has a special channel with God or that has better information that can help me live the next 50 years better than if I didn't have them.

185 "Kent Critchlow"

Thank you for your candid response. Now that you've gone through this crisis and you feel very, very comfortable with your decision. There might be a need to become an advocate or to reach out and to assist other people that might be on a similar journey as you. Do you find yourself in that category? Or do you find yourself as a guide when people come to you for help.

186-194 "John "

Um, initially, I was on the receiving end of all of that help. Um. A lot of people that go through that experience need help, and I will help if asked, but I will not create opportunities to pull people away from the church.

That said, the Mormon church not being true was never a possibility for me. And so, the impossible happened and I was on the receiving end.

And then, once I was able to kind of stand on my own two feet and start picking up the pieces of life and realizing like, you will be okay, and don't get me wrong, it's four years later. And sometimes I still have these moments of doubt. Um. But for a while, I became the person that was on support groups, was on Facebook, I posted things on Instagram. You know, there's a whole bunch more resources than I knew of initially but, for those people that are laying in the fetal position, wondering how their life is going to work tomorrow. You know, I became that voice of saying, you're going to be okay, it does get better. It's a difficult situation, but the result is not bad. It is worth it. Um, now I find myself saying, I don't want to be Mormon and I don't want to be ex-Mormon either.

I just want to move on with life and not get riled up. Every time I hear about something about the church. I will say the moments that draw me back in are when I hear about a general conference talk, about, you know, people who leave the church are lazy learners. And that is not the case.

Anyway, I find myself wanting to move on, not from not only Mormonism, but being an ex-Mormon as well. I just don't want to have to relive it every time.

But at any moment, like, I know what it feels like, and I know it feels worse than anything. You can imagine when you get to the point, and you say Joseph Smith was not a prophet and then four years later, it still makes me cry almost to say those words. So, I know what people are going through. And I want to be the person to help people through that, like, your life will go on. It will be. Okay.

195-197 "Kent Critchlow"

Okay, perfect. Um. Now, as you've gone through this crisis, you used to have a very biblical understanding of God and the Godhead. What is current belief in God, in Jesus Christ and in the Holy Spirit? Has your crisis of faith reformulated your understanding of who God is?

198-218 "John "

It has, it was a progression, you know, I believed in the Godhead being three separate beings.

Boy, in my research, I uncovered, you know, the initial doctrines of the church, which I would say for a short amount of time, I thought, well, maybe those are right. The 1830 version of the book of Mormon spoke of the Godhead as one person. It wasn't until the 1837 version when that changed.

Lectures on faith talked about the Godhead as being one person. Um, I think it was the first and the third accounts of the first vision, which states that God was just one person. And so, the Godhead evolved with each account. And so, as I did my research, I thought, well, maybe God, Jesus and the Holy Spirit are maybe just one being.

Um, when I left Mormonism, Jesus became a lot more powerful, you know, as I talked to other friends that I'll say, researched Christianity, even non-denominational Christians, and Christianity spoke about Jesus saving anybody and everybody, you know, even if you were unworthy, so Jesus became a lot more powerful.

When I left the Mormon church, but ultimately, I would say, Um, God is an individual person, or is a combination of three people; however, today, this does not exist in my world anymore. Maybe there is a God. Maybe there is a higher energy. Maybe there isn't.

All I can say with certainty is, I don't know, you know, it's comforting to believe that there might be.

But at the same time, I have found it comforting to believe there isn't a God. I can't believe I'm saying, but mm. Hmm. For me, if God could help my little sister find her car keys, then he could help avoid somebody being sold into sex trafficking too. Um, and if there's a God choosing to answer prayers, then there's also God choosing not to answer prayers. And if there is a God that allows bad stuff to happen and good things to happen – then maybe there just is not a God at all. Now, I used to believe in, you know, all of those talks on agency and freewill.

At the end of the day, I find more comfort in their not being a God.

Um, I don't live my life worrying if I am good enough. Um. I didn't realize this until after I left the church. This is not the reason nor is it the catalyst why I left. I would say it's something I've learned along the way, but, for 40 years I was told, you're not good enough and you have got to go every single week to church and repent. And participate in this, you know, in the sacrament, or you will not be good enough. You are coming up short.

And the message that I teach my kids now is you aren't good enough, you are going to come up short, but that's all right.

You don't have to hit your head and talk about adversity and overcoming trials every day. Life is good. Look up and be happy.

You know in Mormonism, I knew where I came from and I knew where I was going.

And I don't now anymore. And that is ok. My beliefs evolve and I'm willing to change with it. And I'm at peace with that, and I don't know where I'll be for the next 1 Billion years, but if it's like, I was, you know, before I was born, that's okay too. And maybe I won't exist anymore, but I'm at peace with that. What I don't stress about is living forever in misery anymore.

So, anyway, there was an evolution there where I had to change my belief or disbelief in God, and I would say you know, doing good and loving other people and loving other people is different now than what it meant for me as a member of the church. But that is now my God and that is now my religion.

219-222 "Kent Critchlow"

Very good. You might have answered this question already as well. But let's explore this topic in more detail. Sometimes people who belong to a religious denomination in order to be religious you must be spiritual or if you are spiritual, you must belong to a religion. Do you know have a different opinion on what it means to be religious and spiritual and do you think they are mutually inclusive with one another? In addition, if a person who is agnostic, can they be spiritual? How has your crisis of religious faith shaped your opinion on being religious and being spiritual? Or is being spiritual another way to describe being an emotional person who is aware of their inner feelings?

223-238 "John "

Great question. I used to look at spirituality as religion. I now look at it as not necessarily the same, um, you know, I had to evolve my position on this.

And I will say, and maybe this is worth mentioning like, I went through a mini crisis, maybe 10 years ago. And it forced me to evolve my beliefs in God specifically.

When I got there. Um, I'm sorry, I'm going to go on a 2 minute rant here. I hope that's okay. Maybe this is worthwhile or not, but it's probably about 10 years ago. I went through the, uh, uh, what was it, the body world's exhibit. Anyway, it was absolutely fascinating and it really got my

mind spinning on evolution and, you know, the 6,000 years of the earth. And I got to a place where I said evolution is real. It is undeniable and it is real and it caused me not to question Mormonism, but it caused me to question my belief in God.

Mm, hmm. And I got to a place where I said, well, if evolution is real, then God isn't. And I was able to reconcile that and it took me probably a month where I was like, panicking.

But I got to a place where I said, no, God does not do magic tricks. God doesn't snap his fingers. God works through the laws of nature and the laws of science.

And everything is a miracle until you can explain it, then it's no longer a miracle.

And I said, God created man, he just created man through evolution. It caused me to evolve in my belief in God, but I still used to believe in God, Jesus and the Holy Ghost as literal.

I would say I'm now at the point where if somebody says you have to believe this with no evidence, I'm probably not willing to believe it.

And now, you know, with hindsight of not only 40 years in the church, but the last four years out, um, You never stop asking questions and that's okay.

I would say from a religious standpoint, I don't believe in religion, but from a spirituality standpoint, I think it would be arrogant for me to say there's definitely nothing or there's definitely something.

239-244 "Kent Critchlow"

Very good. Two more questions to go. Unless you say something that spurs a different thought process.

You have probably noticed that some of these questions are somewhat similar and they are, because they were designed to be. Each question acts as a stepping stone to the next question, with some overlap.

You I mentioned that there was an initial thought process that first started you to question and then to doubt and that there was a process that you followed to resolve your crisis of religious faith, and that over time, there was a final straw that broke the camel's back. And then how you made your final decision to leave the church and how you felt comfortable with your decision. And then you had to reconstruct a new identity. Such as, where am I going? Who am I? So, did changing your religious belief and association with religions in general resolve your crisis or do you see that this process ongoing and will be a continuous process in your life?

245-252 "John "

Um, I think it will always be a continuous process. I would say even as a former faithful member of the church, it was a continuous process. You know, I believed blindly even in the things I didn't understand, but faith was a virtue. Um. I would say there was a point, and I don't know if I mentioned this already, but there was a point where I set out on my journey, and I said

there are answers to these questions. And I will find them and I'm not afraid of it anymore. I said if the church is real and if the church is true, then I do not need to worry by searching for answers. I've got nothing to be afraid of. If I'm afraid to look then that's actually doubt about not wanting to learn.

And so, I justified my journey, and as I uncovered information. I hit this point where I have to either bury my head in the sand and say, I'm not going to look. Or what I ultimately ended up doing was, I shifted gears from I'm going to prove the church is true, to I just want to find the truth.

And I became objective and open and willing to learn.

But I also told myself, I'm still not reading the CS letter. I had a bias against that in my head, for sure. And I still haven't read it. Um. But then I also told myself, you're allowed to throw out anything you don't like, even if it's true.

And that was the compromise or the bargain I gave myself when I said, you could venture into some dangerous waters here. You know, there's a reason why they discourage you from reading this information and why it is forbidden. But I said, I really felt like I was stronger than the average member. And I said, I'm willing to go down that road because nothing's going to shake me. And when I hit so much information that struck me, there was definitely a tipping point where I transitioned from moving away from the church. I just want to find truth. And now, I believe more in humanity.

253 "Kent Critchlow"

A different question has now come up. I still have two more questions to ask, if that is Ok.

254 "John"

Sure. Fire away.

255 "Kent Critchlow"

Do you think that truth is static or dynamic?

256-259 "John "

Um, well, I have had a couple of conversations about what is truth and what is knowledge.

Um, is truth static by saying that $2+2=4$ or is there a possibility that $2+2=22$. Mm, hmm or is it possibly that it is 5. And in my mind, there are certain abstract things of truth. So, for example, what were the circumstances of Joseph Smith and polygamy? Why did he say and what did he do? Some of the women that he had relationships with may or may not have happened as reported. So how can you find the truth? What is truth? I might be missing the intent of the question. But anyway, did Joseph Smith take advantage of some women and was he truthful in doing so?

260-264 "Kent Critchlow"

Let me explain in a clearer fashion. Does truth change from generation to generation and from culture to culture or does it remain static by not changing? For example. If I made a statement that there is a God, as revealed in the Bible. This can be a static definition of truth about God. But is polygamy a true and an eternal doctrine of God? This can be viewed as being dynamic and can change from one religion to another and from one culture to another culture. Like you said, $2+2$ is 4, and you can prove that from a scientific perspective. And so, in that regard, it's static to a certain degree. But if you think that for is just a relative term, that you can get $2+2$ and get 5 and show how that can get done, then it can be dynamic process on how math can progress and evolve. and it's a growing process,

265-268 "John

I would, I tend to look at truth as static. Now, I might believe it's dynamic in some areas or truth might be dynamic and I believe it's static, but that doesn't change the ultimate definition of what truth is. And I'm now at the point of saying, whatever it is, I'm willing to be on board with it. I have in my head that Truth is static.

269-273 "Kent Critchlow"

Very good. All right, that's fair enough. And this is my last question for you.

You mentioned several things about Joseph Smith, polygamy and about the book of Abraham as being the primary reasons why you left the church and that you now feel very comfortable with your final decision to leave the church. You also talked about how your definition of God has evolved and that you now consider yourself an agnostic.

So, did resolving your belief in God help resolve your crisis? And did your crisis of faith create a distrust of religions in general?

274-283 "John " (3944967680)

I don't think so. I definitely went through a phase where I wondered if there was a God and whether religions in general could be trusted.

I want to know, you know, if there is a Supreme being, I would want to know um.

But it's not that important or impactful to me on a daily basis.

As far as affecting me on a daily basis. It doesn't. Obviously, it did when I was a member. But not anymore.

Um, I do not fear being punished by God. Religions are meant to be controlling by men and be for men.

I do not do things to get a reward from a higher being. I'm now in a place where if there is something outside of this life, if I exist beyond planet Earth, I'm sure it will be good for everyone.

And if there is no life after this life, I am ok too.

284 "Kent Critchlow"

If it is ok. I do have another question. Is that is ok?

285 "John"

No problem. I am glad to help.

286 "Kent Critchlow"

So, because of your new beliefs, has prayer, fasting, or other similar principles of the Gospel of Jesus Christ still resonate with you?

287-297 "John "

They are, but not in the sense that they were before. I would say if anything, you know, sometimes people meditate and call it prayer. Right, I look at prayer as being anything of internal reflection of what am I grateful for. What do I want to work on and do better in.

You know, can you pray and make it rain or request other miracles like that? I don't look at prayer in that regard anymore, but in hindsight, I looked at prayer when I was a faithful member and there were benefits to it, you know, when you take time each day to reflect on what you're grateful for. You become a happier person.

You know, the grass is greener and life is good when you are grateful. So, I think that having a grateful attitude is important and obviously that plays into prayer as I was taught it.

You know prayer is more of how do I spend and take time to improve myself as a person, that's a part of it. That's not all of it. But I would say prayer has definitely evolved.

But prayer is never invoking a Supreme Being to help.

I have changed my lexicon. I no longer use religious terms to describe my behaviors or my actions.

My day to day routine of invoking a Supreme being has changed. It's not a lack of humility per se. It's more of, I just no longer believe there is a Supreme being. There is not a God that moves chess pieces around in people's lives.

If there is a higher power, I think it is probably far beyond anything that I could ever imagine.

298-301 "Kent Critchlow"

Well, John, you are a remarkable individual. You have a powerful story. Thank you very much for allowing me the opportunity of talking with you and in capturing your story about your faith transition.

Again, I want to emphasize the confidentiality on my part that your name and your association with my dissertation will be kept in confidence.

Um, so anyway, I want to say, thank you again. And I certainly appreciate your time, and I wish you all the best in your future endeavors.

302 "John "

It was my pleasure. If you need to ask follow-up questions. I am willing to help. In addition, I will be glad to write a narrative reflection as previously discussed. It was a pleasure to help, and thank you for being a good listener without being judgmental. I wish you the best.

303 "Kent Critchlow"

Thanks again.