LOSING FAITH IN FUNDAMENTALIST CHRISTIANITY:
AN INTERPRETATIVE PHENOMENOLOGICAL ANALYSIS

by

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A thesis submitted in conformity with the requirements
for the degree of Master of Arts in Counselling Psychology for Psychology Specialists
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Ontario Institute for Studies in Education of the University of Toronto

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ABSTRACT

This study investigated the psychological experience of losing faith in God, within the context of fundamentalist Christianity. Nine former fundamentalist Christians were interviewed about their experience of losing faith. Data analysis was guided by principles of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (Smith, 2004), an inductive qualitative approach that identifies themes to generate a description of an experience’s essence. Themes were classified into three domains (Experience of Christianity, Transition out of Christianity, and Experience of Unbelief). Participants’ transition was characterized by emotional shifts (associated with a loss of trust in, or loyalty to, God) and intellectual shifts (associated with a loss of belief in God’s existence). Two typologies of experience emerged within the Experience of Unbelief, one characterized by a sense of relief and the other by a sense of struggle. The findings are discussed in relation to theories of identity and attachment, and are used to generate recommendations for counselling practice.
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CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

The experience of converting into a religion has long been the subject of inquiry within the field of psychology. Edwin Starbuck published his article “A Study of Conversion” in *American Journal of Psychology* in 1897, and his ensuing in-depth investigation of conversion formed the basis of his 1901 book *The psychology of religion: An empirical study of the growth of religious consciousness*. Starbuck’s teacher William James, a pioneer of American psychology, delivered a lecture on conversion in the year 1902 at the Gifford Lectures on Natural Religion; he introduced the subject of his lecture as “the process, gradual or sudden, by which a self hitherto divided, and consciously wrong inferior and unhappy, becomes unified and consciously right superior and happy, in consequence of its firmer hold upon religious realities” (James, 1902, p. 186).

Although these early works and subsequent psychological scholarship on conversion remain interesting and pertinent in the present day, there is a surprising paucity of research on the parallel experience of leaving one’s religion. James’s description of becoming “unified and consciously right superior and happy” (1902, p. 186) paints a rosy picture of newfound religiosity, but fails to account for the experience of individuals for whom religion becomes unsatisfying. Like conversion, “de-conversion” can be understood as a major psychological transition; it seems likely that a life change of this magnitude could be experienced as stressful and distressing. This study sought to investigate the experience of losing faith in God within the context of fundamentalist or evangelical Christianity.
Rationale and background

The rationale for this study is supplied by the threefold claim that the phenomenon of losing faith is pertinent to the field of counselling psychology, is pertinent in Canada, and is pertinent in 2009. Each of these assertions will be explored in turn.

Loss of faith as a psychological event

Theistic religious faith has been characterized as the ultimate attachment relationship (Kirkpatrick, 1992). Many people experience God as “the quintessential stronger and wiser Other” (Kirkpatrick, p. 21) who perfectly fulfils the hallmark qualities of an attachment figure. Attachment theory, originally introduced by Bowlby (1969), suggests that an infant’s secure attachment to its primary caregiver includes a perception of the attachment figure as a dependable source of security and protection. Both theologians and psychologists have identified similarities between this ideal parent-infant relationship and the relationship of a believer to his or her God. The infallibility and absolute power attributed to the deity allow it to be seen as “a protective and caring parent who is always reliable and always available to its children when they are in need” (Kaufman, 1981, p. 67).

The attachment figure serves as a safe haven in the presence of threat and a secure base from which the infant can explore the world during non-threatening circumstances (Bowlby, 1969). Both of these functions have analogues within the attachment relationship with God. Several studies reviewed by Kirkpatrick (1992) suggest that people seek proximity to God (through prayer) in times of fear or crisis, deriving solace and security from the nearness of their divine attachment figure. Kirkpatrick also cites the work of several authors who argue that religious faith provides a sense of emotional security and trusting calmness as a believer navigates the vagaries of life. Further support for understanding religious faith as an attachment
relationship comes from factor-analytic studies that have examined beliefs about God’s characteristics. Several such studies reviewed by Kirkpatrick indicate that many people describe God as loving, nurturing, protective, and ever-available, qualities that are definitive of a good attachment figure.

If a believer’s bond with God can be understood as an attachment relationship, what happens when this bond is damaged or broken – for instance, because a person loses trust in God or ceases to believe that God exists? Individuals bereaved of a human attachment figure generally suffer acute grief, characterized by feelings of sorrow, yearning for the deceased, and intrusive thoughts or images. A minority fail to integrate the loss and enter into a prolonged state of complicated grief (Shear & Shair, 2005). It seems plausible that grieving a loss of faith or belief in God may be similar in some ways to the experience of losing a parent or partner. However, the experience of losing faith in God has not yet been addressed in the empirical or theoretical literature on divine attachment. If loss of faith were found to share similarities with being bereaved of an attachment figure, practitioners would gain a potentially useful framework for understanding a client’s experience of losing faith.

In addition to providing a stabilizing attachment bond, religious faith is a major constituent of identity and daily life for devout individuals. Leaving a deeply-held faith has been compared to the culture shock of migrating to an utterly unfamiliar country (Thurston, 2000). Individuals who convert into a faith are provided with institutional narratives by which they can understand and describe their new identity: for instance, they “once were lost but now are found,” or they have been “born again” into the family of God. Analogous scripts have historically been scarce for those who leave religion (Davidman & Greil, 2007). As a result, transitions away from religion may be experienced as unanticipated, non-normative
“biographical disruptions” (Davidman & Greil, p. 204) with which former believers must struggle to come to terms. This destabilization of personal identity, in combination with the attachment-theory implications discussed above, makes loss of faith a psychologically important and potentially traumatic event.

Although exiting from any religion could be difficult, emotional maladjustment may be heightened by particular characteristics of the belief system. This study investigates loss of faith within the context of evangelical and fundamentalist Christianity. Pragmatic reasons for this choice included Canadian demographics and the researcher’s personal background, and will be discussed below; however, the literature suggests that evangelical or fundamentalist denominations of Christianity are more difficult to leave than the more liberal mainline denominations, such as United Church or Presbyterian. A detailed description of fundamentalist and evangelical beliefs and practices will be provided in the following chapter. As a preliminary definition, evangelical and fundamentalist Christianity are used in this thesis as umbrella terms encompassing many denominations or sects of conservative Protestant Christianity (Winell, 1993). Hallmark doctrines include reverence of the Bible as the authoritative and literal Word of God and belief in the necessity of salvation through an individual relationship with Jesus Christ (Babinski, 1995).

In many evangelical and fundamentalist churches, social and ideological insularity is normative. As Thurston (2000) writes, “There is no such thing as a nominal Fundamentalist. Their lifestyle requires that their lives almost totally revolve around the Church” (p. 136). Thurston goes on to explain that congregants are often expected to attend church services and other church activities three to five times weekly, all social interactions are church-related, homeschooling may be encouraged, and dating or marrying outside of the church is forbidden.
Fundamentalist Christians frequently have few meaningful connections to the world outside of their church, and leaving the church may therefore be terrifying and highly isolating.

Although evangelical Christians are typically more accepting than fundamentalists of engagement with secular culture (Marsden, 1991), they nevertheless encourage regular participation in the church and single-minded devotion to proselytizing or “sharing the gospel” (Thurston, 2000). Fundamentalist and evangelical churches explicitly teach that a believer’s identity ought to be subsumed within Christianity (Moyers, 1990). While moderate religious denominations accept diversity and recognize moral gray areas, fundamentalism discourages dissent and encourages black-and-white judgments (Hartz & Everett, 1989). Even a cursory examination of fundamentalist and evangelical belief systems suggests that leaving these groups would be particularly difficult because of the insularity they encourage, both in lifestyle and in ideology. An individual wishing to leave such a church may be entirely unaware of alternative social circles or worldviews.

Further support for the choice of former evangelical and fundamentalist Christians as the population of interest for this study comes from Cicirelli (2004), who found that elderly adults belonging to an evangelical or fundamentalist denomination displayed significantly higher levels of attachment to God than participants affiliated with mainline Protestant denominations (e.g. Presbyterian). The author speculated that this stronger attachment could either be due to a) fundamentalist denominations’ emphasis on a personal relationship with God or b) the tendency of individuals with unmet attachment needs to join these denominations. Regardless of the reason, it is pertinent to this study that evangelical and fundamentalist Christians experience God as an attachment figure to a greater extent than do Christians of other denominations.
Evangelical and fundamentalist Christianity: Canadian demographic trends

The most recent Census data available on religions in Canada indicates that membership in mainline Protestant churches is declining. The number of Canadians reporting affiliation with the two largest Protestant denominations, United Church and Anglican, declined by 8.2% and 7.0% respectively between 1991 and 2001 (Statistics Canada, 2003). Presbyterianism sustained a greater loss, declining by 35.6% during that decade. Attendance at Sunday morning services has declined even more precipitously than religious self-identification – 25% of Canadians who report a religious affiliation never attend religious services (Clark & Schellenberg, 2006) – leaving many traditional Protestant churches struggling to remain viable (McLean, 2004).

In contrast, certain evangelical and fundamentalist denominations of Protestant Christianity showed moderate growth between 1991 and 2001. The largest evangelical-fundamentalist denomination in Canada, Baptist, increased by 10% over this time period. Some smaller groups enjoyed more pronounced gains, such as the Evangelical Missionary Church (48.4%), Adventist (20.1%) and the Christian and Missionary Alliance (11.9%). The median age of individuals identifying with these churches was generally below that of the Canadian population as a whole (Statistics Canada, 2003); this indicates the presence of young people within these denominations, a positive omen for their future growth.

A particularly interesting result of the 2001 Census is a 121.1% growth in the number of Canadians falling within a category that Statistics Canada has called “Christian, not included elsewhere.” This category includes individuals who self-identify as “Christian,” “Apostolic,” “Born-again Christian,” and “Evangelical.” Although this category showed the second-largest rate of growth of all religious groups, it is somewhat unclear who is represented within this group. Although “Apostolic,” “Born-again Christian,” and “Evangelical” all clearly fall within
the domain of evangelicalism, “Christian” is more problematic. Many evangelical and
fundamentalist churches are non-denominational; their members may select the label “Christian”
to best describe themselves. However, it is also conceivable that individuals who are relatively
non-religious and do not attend church might nevertheless identify as “Christian” if this label is
more familiar than, for instance, “Protestant.” So although this category likely represents many
evangelical and fundamentalist Christians, it could also include nominal Christians and lapsed
members of mainline denominations. This ambiguity makes it difficult to assess the meaning of
the impressive growth of the category “Christian, not included elsewhere.” However, in
combination with the data presented above on the growth of specific fundamentalist and
evangelical denominations, it is clear that these forms of Christianity are thriving and will likely
continue to grow.

Research that has looked more closely at the growth of Christian fundamentalism in
Canada reveals an important pattern. A study of the religious affiliations of over 5000 parents of
University of Manitoba students compared the number of participants who were raised in a
particular religion with the number who were affiliated with that religion at the time of the study
(Altemeyer, 2004). A small increase was found between the number of participants who were
raised in a fundamentalist Christian denomination (n = 314) and the number who identified with
such a denomination at the time of the study (n = 372). However, finer analysis of the data
revealed that only 56% of the 314 subjects who were raised in a fundamentalist Christian faith
sustained their affiliation with this religion; that is, 44% of those raised as fundamentalists no
longer identified with this form of religion at the time of the study. The net increase seen within
fundamentalist denominations was the result of individuals who were raised in other faiths (or
with no religion) converting into fundamentalism. These results indicate that while
fundamentalist branches of Christianity are indeed growing (due to a robust conversion rate), significant proportions of adherents are choosing to leave their faith behind.

*New influences in the religious landscape*

A majority of Canadians continue to identify with Christianity in one of its forms: 43.2% of Canadians are Roman Catholic, and just over 30% identify with a Protestant denomination (Statistics Canada, 2003). However, growing numbers of Canadians report that they have no religion – 16.2% of the population in 2001, nearly 4.8 million people and a 44% increase since 1991. Within the three years following the 2001 Census, this proportion had already increased by three points to 19% (Clark & Schellenberg, 2006). Prior to 1971, fewer than 1% of Canadians reported no religion; now more than ever before, non-identification with any religion is becoming a socially acceptable possibility. Interestingly, the proportion of Canadians who do not believe in God may be even higher than those who report no religion – of 1000 Canadians surveyed by telephone in 2008, 23% stated that they did not believe in any God. This figure contrasts sharply with a similar poll conducted in the United States, where only 8% of those surveyed reported that they were unbelievers (Canadian Press, 2008). Canadians as a population seem relatively open to irreligiousness and unbelief, suggesting that the experience of leaving fundamentalism in this country is unique. Although Canadians who leave fundamentalist Christianity could choose to join a more moderate Christian denomination or a different religion, our culture’s increasing secularization might influence their trajectory.

A recent development in Western popular culture, with potentially momentous implications for those doubting or leaving their fundamentalist religion, is the rise of the *New Atheism* movement (for an overview of the movement, see Wolf, 2006). Each of the “four horsemen” of New Atheism – authors Richard Dawkins, Christopher Hitchins, Sam Harris, and
Daniel Dennett – has a unique style, tone, and emphasis, but all espouse atheism as a rational alternative to the superstition of religion. Their books have been immensely popular: Hitchins’ *God is not great* (2007) reached the top of the *New York Times* bestseller list, and Dawkins’ *The God delusion* (2006) spent 51 weeks on the same list. Harris’ *The end of faith* (2004) and *Letter to a Christian nation* (2006) were also *New York Times* bestsellers. The success of these books has likely depended upon the zeitgeist of secularism that has grown over the past several decades (as reported above). A synergistic effect is doubtless created as atheism gains clout in public discourse: atheist books that become popular because of our culture’s increasing inclination towards secularism serve to further accelerate the shift away from religion. Dawkins identifies the goal of his book as *consciousness-raising*: making the public aware that non-supernatural arguments can elegantly explain the cosmos and that atheism is a viable and rewarding belief system of which adherents should be proud. The New Atheist authors exhort their readers to become active in challenging religion and promoting atheism; to the extent that this charge is embraced, the movement will continue to gather momentum.

The growth of atheism and philosophies such as secular humanism is supported in Canada by organizations such as the Centre for Inquiry and the Humanist Association of Canada. These societies promote free thought and a “religion-free way of life” (Humanist Association of Canada, 2008, ¶ 1); to this end, they coordinate lectures and discussion groups, disseminate information and resources, and serve as a networking hub for likeminded individuals to connect. Recently, the Canadian Atheist Bus Campaign followed the lead of a similar group in the United Kingdom to produce transit advertisements with the slogan “There’s probably no God. Now stop worrying and enjoy your life” (Canadian Atheist Bus Campaign, 2009, ¶ 2). The increasing profile of atheism and humanism is changing the religious landscape into which a former
fundamentalist Christian emerges upon leaving his or her church. Fewer than five years ago, those who left an insular religion may have had difficulty finding new scripts (prototypes for alternative systems of meaning; Davidman & Greil, 2007); now, individuals who exit from religion may be more likely to discover alternative paradigms that do not include God. Furthermore, the Internet now enables instant access to a wealth of information and resources, thanks to the proliferation of atheist and free thought websites. In light of the above very recent cultural developments, this study of losing faith in fundamentalist Christianity is in a position to assess the influence of the New Atheist movement on some of the very individuals it targets.

**Experience of the researcher**

Like other researchers who have investigated the experience of losing faith (e.g. Brent, 1994; Mosier, 2003; Smull, 2002), my interest in this topic emerged from a personal loss of faith in evangelical Christianity and the difficult transition that followed. My familiarity with fundamentalist Christianity contributed to the decision to study loss of faith in this religion, rather than (for instance) fundamentalist Islam or Orthodox Judaism. It was assumed that my prolonged membership in this subgroup would provide a base of tacit knowledge that would help guide the selection of meaningful research questions and the development of an appropriate interview schedule.

Although some schools of thought discourage the selection of a research topic that has personal emotional relevance (e.g. Cone & Foster, 2006), others encourage researchers to “make contact with and respect their own questions and problems” (Douglass & Moustakas, 1985, p. 40). Throughout the research process, I have attempted to guard against unwarranted assumptions while adopting a “passionate and discerning personal involvement in problem solving” (Douglass & Moustakas, 1985, p. 39). Because I have chosen a research question that
captures my attention like few others could, I am highly motivated to conduct rigorous research that generates an insightful account of the loss-of-faith experience.

In summary, the experience of losing faith and leaving Christianity has received scant attention in the psychological literature, although the experience is clearly psychologically relevant. Losing faith can entail losing an attachment bond, an identity and meaning system, and an all-encompassing social context, particularly for individuals who belong to evangelical and fundamentalist denominations. Substantial numbers of Canadians are leaving fundamentalist Christianity, suggesting that many counselling psychologists and other mental health professionals will encounter former fundamentalist Christians in their practice. Simultaneously, a net increase in the number of Canadians identifying with fundamentalist denominations suggests that the experience of losing faith is far from becoming obsolete. The current state of religious flux in Canadian society provides a particularly interesting context for this research. If the most salient loss for those who leave Christianity is that of a coherent meaning system, then the increasing prominence of non-religious worldviews should ease their transition; if, however, the loss of an attachment figure is primary, alternative philosophies would provide little solace. Having established that the experience of losing faith in fundamentalist Christianity is psychologically, demographically, and currently pertinent, this chapter turns now to the purpose of the present study.

**Purpose of the study**

The purpose of this study was to generate an account of the psychological experience of losing faith in God, within the context of evangelical or fundamentalist Christianity. It sought to describe the general essence of the experience while preserving the uniqueness of individual participants’ stories. It is hoped that the results of this study will provide direction for future
research in this area, ultimately leading to the development of a theoretical framework to enhance our understanding of loss of faith in any religion.

Understanding the experience of losing faith is crucial for mental health professionals who might encounter this issue in practice – for instance, chaplains or pastoral counsellors. Counsellors working with a more general population may also benefit from learning about this transition, particularly if they are unfamiliar with conservative religion or (conversely) if they are evangelical or fundamentalist Christians themselves. The results of this study can provide a point of reference for counsellors who wish to help their clients cope effectively with this transition.

This study was designed to fill several gaps in the extant literature. First, it is Canadian; to date, no qualitative research has looked at religious disaffiliation within a Canadian sample. Results of American research may not fully capture the experiences of Canadian ex-Christians, due to marked differences in religious climate between the two countries (such as the discrepancy, reported above, in the proportion of individuals who report that they do not believe in God; Canadian Press, 2008). Second, this study sought to investigate participants’ help-seeking experiences during their transition out of Christian fundamentalism. No published empirical study focuses on this issue in any detail, and this knowledge could serve as a foundation for the design of services and resources for individuals in transition. Third, and perhaps most subtly, this study focused on the experience of losing faith rather than on the process of leaving one’s religion. Although the two often coincide, this difference is not merely semantic. The events that precede, surround, and follow participants’ departure from fundamentalist Christianity provide essential context and structure to their stories; however, this study was primarily concerned with the emotional and cognitive experience of losing faith.
(during the transition) and having lost faith (after the transition). It was anticipated that focusing on the experience of losing faith, rather than the process, would generate results that are directly applicable to counselling practice: it is generally more important for a counsellor to understand what an experience is like for a client than to be able to predict which step of a process the client might encounter next.

**Guiding questions of the study**

In light of the purpose stated above, guiding questions of this study were established as follows:

1. What is the psychological experience of losing faith in fundamentalist Christianity?
2. What are the consequences of loss of faith for an individual’s life?
3. Where do individuals who lose their faith seek help and support, and what elements of this support are experienced as useful or not useful?

**Organization of the study**

This chapter provided an introduction to the study. It provided background information to support the contention that the study’s topic is psychologically important and understudied. The remaining chapters will review the literature related to losing faith in fundamentalist Christianity, describe the study’s methods and procedures, present the results of the study, and discuss the findings and their implications for counselling practice within the context of attachment and identity theories.
CHAPTER II
LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter provides an overview of the literature related to the experience of losing faith in fundamentalist Christianity. It is organized into three sections: evangelical and fundamentalist Christianity, empirical studies of religious transition, and counselling practice with clients in religious transition.

Evangelical and fundamentalist Christianity

Definitions of evangelicalism and fundamentalism are not widely agreed-upon, which can generate confusion in distinguishing between these two streams of Christianity (if, indeed, such a distinction is warranted). A brief overview of these movements’ origins can offer some clarity.

Historical origins

In nineteenth-century America, revivalist Christian sects gave rise to conservative evangelical Protestantism; this ideology came to dominate the American religious landscape by the 1890s (Thurston, 2000). In the early 1900s, liberal religious scholarship and scientific progress (most notably Darwinism) began to contradict the literalist interpretations of the Bible that characterized evangelicalism. A diverse coalition of evangelical groups rallied against these modernizing influences, pledging their allegiance to traditional Biblical doctrines such as God’s creation of the world in seven days and Jesus’ virgin birth, performance of miracles, and literal resurrection (Powell, Gladson, & Myer, 1991). In 1909, the most definitive of these cornerstone beliefs were published in a series of books entitled The Fundamentals, from which the term fundamentalist was drawn.
Over the subsequent five decades, no clear distinction was made between evangelicalism and fundamentalism; both were united in opposition to liberal theology and secularization (Thurston, 2000). However, the fundamentalist movement’s increasingly extreme separatism prompted a counter-reaction, the 1960s’ “new Evangelicalism” (Harris, 2008). New Evangelicals continued to believe in the Bible’s inerrancy but argued that interaction with secular culture was the most effective way of sharing the gospel (the Christian message) and winning converts to Christianity (Thurston). This ideology gained popularity over fundamentalism, and developed into the interdenominational Christian evangelicalism that is currently prominent in North America (Harris).

Similarities of fundamentalism and evangelicalism

Most accurately, fundamentalist Christianity today is a particularly extreme subset of evangelical Christianity that continues to exhibit separatist tendencies. Thurston (2000) suggests that “it may be useful to conceive of Protestant Evangelicalism as containing a continuum of faith and practice that goes from very conservative to moderately conservative, with Fundamentalist Evangelicals on the very conservative end” (p. 133). However, Barr (1991) posits that over 90% of evangelicals are fundamentalistic in their beliefs, particularly beliefs about the truth and authority of the Bible.

Despite diversity of doctrine between and within evangelical and fundamentalist groups, they are similar in their submission to the authority of Scripture in its entirety (Harris, 2008). Although evangelicals may resist the label of “fundamentalist” due to its negative connotations, critics argue that distinctions between the groups are variations in degree, not differences in kind. As Harris (2008) writes, “Being essentially conservative, evangelicals tend to view excess zeal in the fundamentalist direction as less theologically dangerous than excessive liberalizing. While
they object to fundamentalist extremes in temperament, they are in basic theological agreement with those to the right of them, and share the same criticisms of non-evangelical theology” (p. 9). For the purpose of this study, the term *fundamentalist Christian* will be used as an umbrella term including both fundamentalist and evangelical Christians.

*Fundamentalist beliefs*

The most populous denomination within North American Christian fundamentalism is Baptist, a group historically distinguished by its belief that Christians should only be baptized once they are old enough to accept Jesus independently (typically beginning in late childhood or early adolescence; Thurston, 2000). The centralization of leadership seen in Catholicism and mainline Christian denominations is absent from Baptist churches, and the minister or pastor of a church serves as that congregation’s primary authority (Thurston). Other fundamentalist denominations, as mentioned in the previous chapter, include Evangelical Missionary Church, Adventist, Christian and Missionary Alliance, Apostolic, and Pentecostal. There are also many non-denominational fundamentalist churches, including those that practice charismatic forms of Christianity (which are described below).

Fundamentalist Christians believe not only in the Bible as the authoritative Word of God, but in the importance of individual salvation and a personal relationship with Christ (Harris, 2008). Even if a child’s family is strongly Christian, it is normative to undergo a transition referred to as “becoming a Christian,” “being saved,” or “asking Jesus into one’s heart.” Participation in this tradition (which often occurs in early childhood for those raised in Christian families) typically takes the form of a prayer that declares one’s individual acceptance of Jesus Christ as personal saviour (see Fludd, 2007). The phrase “born again” comes from the belief that converts undergo metaphorical death of their sinful human selves and receive new life through
Jesus (Thurston, 2000). Jesus is believed to live in the hearts of believers, and daily interaction with Jesus through prayer is encouraged. Christians are also exhorted to “walk with God” by following his commands in Scripture and his guidance through the Holy Spirit (see Eldredge, 2008). Other fundamentalist doctrinal tenets include the fallen nature of humanity (that is, our inheritance of “original sin”), the existence of Satan as well as angels and demons, the reality of an eternal afterlife, and the certainty of Christ’s future return to Earth (Winell, 1993). Jesus’ “Great Commission” to preach the gospel is treated with urgency by most evangelical and fundamentalist groups, since it is believed that people who do not accept Jesus as their saviour will be condemned to hell upon death (Thurston, 2000).

Pentecostal and charismatic churches are distinct from other fundamentalist denominations in their emphasis on God’s supernatural intervention in the daily lives of believers (Harris, 2008). As a result of this belief, the charismatic Christian experience is more likely to be marked by dramatic expressions of faith such as speaking in tongues, prophesying, and highly energetic, unstructured worship; these behaviours are treated as evidence of the Holy Spirit’s presence.

Psychological correlates of fundamentalist Christianity

Research on religious fundamentalism and mental health has yielded mixed findings: while certain studies have suggested that religiousness has a positive impact on wellbeing, others have discovered a negligible or negative influence. Pargament (2002) argues that this contradiction hinges upon the discrepant criteria used to measure wellbeing (e.g. the absence of mental illness versus the presence of open-mindedness), as well as individual differences in religious style (e.g. intrinsically motivated versus extrinsically motivated religion). Pargament concludes that the question of whether participation in fundamentalist religion is psychologically
beneficial or harmful depends on the church, the individual, and the researcher’s understanding of mental health.

Positive features that have been associated with fundamentalist religiosity include optimism (Sethi & Seligman, 1993), marital happiness (Hansen, 1992), and spiritual wellbeing (Genia, 1996). Pargament (2002) reasons that individuals who value unambiguous answers to existential questions may be reassured by the behavioural guidelines, clear sense of morality, distinctive identity, and noble life purpose supplied by fundamentalist religion. Fundamentalism also offers a close-knit community of believers; these interpersonal connections are a psychologically powerful incentive.

Correlational studies have also linked fundamentalism to less-desired qualities such as prejudice, rigid thinking, and narrow-mindedness (Altemeyer & Hunsberger, 1992; Kirkpatrick, 1993). High levels of religiosity were found to predict adults’ conformity to parental wishes (Hansen, 1998), suggesting that autonomy may be impaired for members of fundamentalist religions. Hansen also found that religiosity was associated with guilt; this finding is consistent with the strong behavioural pressures and high expectations associated with fundamentalist Christianity (Thurston, 2000).

Although the current study is qualitative and therefore does not seek to discover statistical associations between participants’ former religiosity and wellbeing, an awareness of these positive and negative correlations might enhance interpretation of the results. For instance, do participants in this study display or report psychological characteristics associated with fundamentalism (such as propensity to guilt; Hanson, 1998), even after leaving the church? If fundamentalist religion can both enhance and detract from wellbeing (Pargament, 2002), it will
be interesting to note the relative frequency of positive and negative effects reported by this study’s participants, who have left their religion.

This section’s description of fundamentalist Christianity’s history, beliefs, and psychological correlates lays the necessary groundwork for proceeding to a review of the literature on religious transition, both out of fundamentalist Christianity and out of similarly insular religions such as Mormonism and Orthodox Judaism.

**Religious transition**

A search of the PsycINFO and ERIC databases yielded only one empirical study (Brent, 1994) on the psychological experience of leaving fundamentalist or evangelical Christianity. A handful of empirical articles investigated the experience of leaving other religions such as Orthodox Judaism (Davidman & Greil, 2007; Herzbrun, 1999) and Mormonism (Bahr and Albrecht, 1989), and others explored transitions out of New Religious Movements (NRMs; Buxant & Saroglou, 2008; Jacobs, 1987). The literature also includes correlational studies that investigated the predictors of leaving one’s religion, also referred to as disaffiliation, deconversion, or apostasy (Hunsberger, Pratt, & Pancer, 2002; Loveland, 2003; Te Grotenhuis & Scheppers, 2001). Qualitative studies of leaving one’s religion (Bahr & Albrecht; Brent, 1994; Buxant & Saroglou; Davidman & Greil; Herzbrun; Jacobs) share many similarities with the current research, and will therefore be reviewed in some detail.

**Leaving fundamentalist Christianity**

Brent (1994) conducted a qualitative analysis of leaving Protestant fundamentalism; he interviewed seven American ex-fundamentalists about their experience, and used a phenomenological method developed by von Eckartsberg (1986) to analyse the data. Brent generated a model of the general process of leaving, comprised of seven universal, sequential
phases. The first phase was participation in the fundamentalist context. At this stage, the church was central to participants’ social lives; they were expected to contribute time and money to church activities and to adhere to behavioural norms based on their church leadership’s interpretation of the Bible. These unambiguous behavioural mandates offered an appealing sense of structure, but also resulted in feelings of fear and guilt.

The process of leaving was initiated by an event that Brent (1994) termed “The Initial Disillusionment” (p. 208); this was a specific and significant point at which participants’ faith disappointed or failed them in some way. The initial disillusionment was followed by a period of tolerating the religious tradition, during which participants found themselves drifting from commitment as seeds of doubt grew into increased criticism of the religion (despite, sometimes, their best efforts to squelch these doubts). Eventually, some crisis event substantiated participants’ doubts and constituted a point of no return; Christian beliefs were experienced as undeniably inadequate, and participants broke from their faith tradition. This departure was followed by a period of emotion-laden aftermath, during which initial positive feelings of relief were soon joined by guilt, fear, loneliness, and panic related to freedom and responsibility. In time, participants were able to move on to a time of establishing new horizons; at this point, they felt more able to truly relinquish old beliefs, and to expand their knowledge while adopting a more accepting stance towards others’ ideas and lifestyles. The final stage, living with problematic residue, was ongoing. Participants continued to experience guilt, sadness and resentment, difficulties with decision-making, and other troublesome sequelae of their involvement with the fundamentalist church. However, participants also expressed the sense that leaving was necessary in order to validate important aspects of their life experience that were suppressed within the fundamentalist context (see Brent, 1994, for a more detailed discussion).
Although the seven-phase process was common to all participants, Brent (1994) noted that female participants’ experience of fundamentalism was uniquely characterized by a sense of subordination. He recommends that future research explore the psychological impact on women of patriarchal and authoritarian religious environments. However, Brent only highlights the uniqueness of women’s experiences within Christianity; no gender differences in the experience of leaving the religion are presented.

Brent’s (1994) study provided an important point of reference for design of the current study. It established a precedent for using in-depth interviews with a small number of participants to study the phenomenon of de-conversion. It also demonstrated that a researcher can effectively investigate the nature of a transition which he himself has experienced in the past (Brent was raised as a fundamentalist Christian and left the religion as an adult). However, Brent’s study exhibits some weaknesses that the present study attempted to avoid, the most important of which is a misplaced emphasis on chronological process.

Despite its stated intention of describing the experience of leaving fundamentalist Christianity, Brent’s (1994) article seems to be organized around the process of leaving. Although participants’ psychological experience – their emotions and cognitions – are revealed in the quotations selected to illustrate the seven phases, these phases themselves fail to reflect the psychological richness of the data. For instance, participants’ evocative descriptions of progressing through states of numbness, terror, epiphany, and emancipation are classified within the relatively sterile chronological constructs of “Tolerating the Tradition” and “Leaving the Tradition” (p. 207). Although chronological phases may be the only narrative elements that are clearly universal to all participants, a model based on these phases is not particularly enlightening: it is fairly intuitive that an individual who leaves a religion would progress from
immersion in said religion through a transitional phase and into a time of exiting and processing the aftermath. The identification of true themes of experience – psychological, rather than process-focused – would make the results more interesting and memorable for counsellors who seek to understand their clients’ struggles with this transition. The current study sought to improve upon Brent’s analysis by maintaining a distinctively psychological approach to the data, although chronological domains were also used as a structuring device.

Leaving other religions

Studies of the experience of leaving religions other than fundamentalist Christianity can provide context for the current study, particularly if these religions are also conservative and relatively encapsulated. This section presents a review of three such studies, two conducted with Jewish populations (Davidman & Greil, 2007; Herzbrun, 1999) and one with a Latter Day Saints (Mormon) population (Bahr and Albrecht, 1989).

The first study reviewed, Herzbrun (1999), is a qualitative analysis of the onset and development of nonbelief for nine Jewish adults. Unfortunately, its results shed little light on the experience of transitioning from belief to nonbelief; in fact, several participants reported having never believed. Although the interview schedule did not inquire about spiritual distress during the development of nonbelief, several participants spontaneously shared stories of the distress and confusion they experienced during their transition (such as times of yearning to believe in God, but being unable to). Furthermore, now-unbelieving participants reported feelings of guilt and alienation from the rest of the Jewish community.

The most relevant insight offered by Herzbrun (1999) is his observation of the stability of nonbelief. The author points out that while models of faith development suggest that nonbelief is a “temporary detour along the road of faith” (p. 137), participants in his study were firmly
committed to nonbelief (and had been for many years). He likens his participants to individuals in Orlofsky, Marcia, and Lesser’s (1973) identity development category of alienated achievement, characterized by a strong ideological commitment to making no identity commitment. Although this interpretation may be inaccurate – a commitment to nonbelief seems different than a commitment to non-commitment – his attempt to situate the results within models of identity development is promising. The current study will similarly draw upon identity models to locate its findings within a well-supported psychological context.

Another study with a Jewish population was conducted by Davidman and Greil (2007), who analysed 22 individuals’ stories of departure from ultra-Orthodox Judaism. The results are highly relevant to the current study because they are discussed in terms of the social factors that facilitate or inhibit identity change. Of the 22 participants interviewed, Davidman and Greil (2007) chose to present the narrative of one woman, “Leah,” whose story included all of the themes mentioned by other participants. As a child, Leah felt different from others in her highly encapsulated religious community; she began to ask questions of her religious elders at a young age, and her doubts were met with condescending dismissal. As she entered adolescence, Leah became increasingly aware of alternative worldviews (such as feminism), and identifying with these philosophies increased her sense of alienation from the ultra-Orthodox world in which she lived. As an older adolescent and young adult, Leah began to participate surreptitiously in secular activities, while continuing to feel frustrated with aspects of her religious system. She broke from her community after attending college and marrying a man who was also in the process of leaving ultra-Orthodox Judaism. As she began to live a secular life, she felt uncertain about how to spend her time and lacked confidence in social interactions.
Davidman and Greil (2007) argue that exit narratives such as Leah’s are characterized by scriptlessness. Scripts, as understood by these authors, are social narratives that supply a model story and language by which one can make sense of one’s experience. Individuals who convert into a religious group are presented with ways of articulating their identity transformation (e.g. “I once was lost but now I’m found”); these scripts are sometimes taught via religious texts, but more commonly are modelled by other community members (Davidman & Greil). Scripts are also available for individuals who leave a cult under the guidance of an anti-cult organization. These individuals’ stories are characterized by metaphors of captivity and hostage rescue, adopted from the organization’s narratives (Davidman & Greil). Contrarily, those who leave cults without assistance from the anti-cult movement, or people who leave ultra-Orthodox Judaism, have neither institutional nor publicly available scripts with which to understand their identity change. As a result, their stories tend to reflect an unsettled, circuitous journey and themes of loss and confusion (Davidman & Greil).

Davidman and Greil (2007) suggest that the availability of scripts facilitates and expedites the formation of a new identity. The extent to which “exit scripts” are available to participants in the current study is debatable. Until recently, scripts for ex-Christianity have been largely absent from the public sphere; however, the New Atheist movement and the proliferation of internet forums dedicated to humanism and free inquiry may be changing this reality. The extent to which participants find and embrace scripts for their departure from Christianity may affect the speed and confidence with which they adopt new identities. Participants’ identity change may also be affected by their awareness of negative religious scripts and labels for people who leave the faith: for instance, the idea that those who leave Christianity are “backsliders” whom Satan has lured away from the truth.
Davidman and Greil (2007) provide a valuable commentary on the process of identity change after religious transition. However, it should be noted that their study focuses on the experience of leaving one’s religion rather than losing one’s faith; for their participants, loss of relationship with God seemed to be far less troubling than the loss of their sense of cultural role and identity. It will be informative to note which loss – that of relationship with God or of cultural identity – is emphasized by participants in the current study.

Although the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (commonly referred to as the Mormon Church) aligns itself with Christianity, it is clearly distinct from fundamentalist Christianity in beliefs, organization, and practice (the most essential difference being the addition of the Book of Mormon and other scriptures to its canon of spiritual texts). However, commonalities in doctrine and experience (such as a high degree of encapsulation within the church community) suggest that research on the experience of leaving Mormonism may be particularly germane to this study.

Bahr and Albrecht (1989) interviewed 30 former Mormons about their journey out of Mormonism and their present beliefs. Bahr and Albrecht’s findings are structured according to two useful typologies of disaffiliation. The first typology (based on the work of Hoge, 1981, and Roozen, 1980, as cited in Bahr & Albrecht) presents four broad motivations for leaving the church: maturation (and increasing freedom from familial expectations), perceived irrelevance of the church, conflict (either intrapersonal conflict over doctrine or interpersonal conflict with other church members), and unmet needs (the church proving inadequate in the midst of a problem situation). Bahr and Albrecht found that disaffiliation was multiply determined: the initial trigger or primary motivation for leaving was nearly always accompanied by factors from other categories.
The second typology developed by Bahr and Albrecht (1989) was based on the work of Brinkerhoff and Burke (1980, as cited in Bahr & Albrecht). This typology categorizes participants into nine types, derived from the intersection of three levels of religiosity (high belief, low belief, and unbelief) and three levels of participation or belonging within the Mormon community (high identification, low identification, and rejection). Most participants within their sample had never experienced high levels of belief, and reported long periods of marginality before leaving the church. Some participants continued at low levels of both belief and participation, never reaching true apostasy (which is characterized by unbelief and rejection of community). However, an important subset of their participants had previously experienced high levels of belief and participation. Within these former “fervent followers” (p. 192), the authors identify two types: “seekers,” who relinquished belief after a prolonged intellectual struggle with Mormon doctrine, and “displaced persons,” whom the church ignored, alienated, or rejected during a personal crisis (commonly marital dissolution or its aftermath).

The current study primarily sought to interview participants who, as Christians, would have been classified as “fervent followers” (Bahr & Albrecht, 1989) – those who sincerely believed and strongly identified with the fundamentalist Christian community. It was assumed that these individuals would experience the most intense consequences after losing faith, since religion was a particularly valued component of their identities. However, interpretation of this study’s results can be enriched by awareness of the other eight categories identified by Bahr and Albrecht – such as the “outsider,” who believes strongly but does remains on the margins of the church community, the “ritualist,” who continues to participate in the church despite low levels of belief, and the “splinter saint,” who rejects organized religion altogether but maintains high levels of belief (p. 192). Individuals who experienced religion differently are also likely to
experience loss of faith differently, and counselling implications would need to be tailored accordingly.

*Leaving New Religious Movements*

Also included in this review are two articles (Buxant & Saroglou, 2008; Jacobs, 1987) that present qualitative findings on the experience of leaving New Religious Movements (NRM), often known among the general public as cults (Buxant & Saroglou, 2008). Interestingly, both studies included participants whose previous religious affiliation had been with a charismatic or evangelical Christian sect. However, it is difficult to determine the extent to which these studies’ results are applicable to the current study, since the interview data of individuals who had left Christian sects was pooled with that of former members of the Unification Church, Divine Light Mission, Opus Dei, and other diverse groups that differ from Christian fundamentalism in important ways. The studies’ key findings can nevertheless contribute to a frame of reference for the current study.

Both studies interviewed former NRM members about their conversion, membership, and de-conversion; Jacobs (1987) conducted her research in Colorado, while Buxant and Saroglou’s (2008) study was based in Belgium. Jacobs (1987) found that the process of de-conversion was characterized by two distinct phases. Individuals first became disillusioned with their religious group, generally due to conflicts over the regulation of their social lives (for instance, they may have objected to the NRM’s prescriptions for their intimate relationships, gender roles, and other lifestyle choices). This disillusionment led to disengagement from the community, but a strong emotional commitment to the NRM’s leader continued. Participants’ connection with this leader remained “paramount in their consciousness” (p. 299) long after they had abandoned the NRM’s practices and had stopped participating in group meetings or activities.
The second stage of de-conversion was breaking emotional ties with the NRM’s leader, described as a “painful process of separation from an object of love and adoration” (Jacobs, 1987, p. 299). Disaffection with the leader accumulated as the participants witnessed incidents of physical and psychological abuse, felt betrayed by the leader’s hypocritical lifestyle, and felt deeply hurt by unmet promises of a love relationship with the leader. As participants struggled to accept the possibility that their leader was not divine, they often experienced anger and depression that Jacobs relates to Freud’s (1947/1994) account of mourning the loss of a loved one. Jacobs also discusses her findings in terms of power dependency theory (Emerson, 1969): power relationships are sustained while rewards are highly valued and alternative sources of reward are unavailable. The power of the devotee-leader relationship shifts as the leader’s behaviour interferes with the perceived rewards of devotion, and as the participant becomes aware of alternative reward systems within other spiritual affiliations. All respondents in Jacobs’ study maintained a strong belief in God, and many had affiliated with a new religious group at the time of the study.

Like Jacobs (1987), Buxant and Saroglou (2008) found that witnessing hypocrisy and feeling unhappy with behavioural obligations, constraints, and pressures were commonly-reported reasons for leaving a NRM. Participants in Buxant and Saroglou’s study also recalled the emergence of personal objections to the movement’s doctrine, and the observation of incompatibilities between doctrine and scientific fact. Disaffiliation was typically accompanied by social losses, such as separation from a partner who wished to remain within the religious movement. However, ex-members’ self-predicted levels of future wellbeing were significantly higher than their levels of wellbeing at the time of the study (which were similar to those of a
comparison group). The authors suggest that ex-members had not only adapted effectively to their new lives, but were optimistic about their futures outside of the NRM.

Although Buxant and Saroglou’s (2008) findings indicate that leaving a NRM has no long-term negative effects, the data suggest that exiting might trigger a depressive episode in individuals with pre-existing depressive tendencies. The authors also note that leaving was associated with difficulty in re-establishing community relationships, and that having left the NRM became a fixture of identity because of its previously all-encompassing influence over the ex-member’s life. Similar to Jacobs’ (1987) ex-NRM members, participants in Buxant and Saroglou’s study continued to place a high level of importance on God; however, unlike Jacobs’ participants, most resisted the idea of joining a different religious group. Instead, they embraced an individualization of faith, and continued their spiritual journey outside the boundaries of religious institutions.

The findings of Jacobs (1987) and Buxant and Saroglou (2008) may exhibit several commonalities with the results of this study. The experience of disillusionment upon witnessing religious leaders’ hypocrisy, for instance, was described by participants in Brent’s (1994) study of leaving fundamentalist Christianity. Furthermore, it stands to reason that Jacobs’ analysis of severing attachment bonds with a charismatic group leader may be analogous to the process of severing attachment to God, a particular concern of the current study.

_Predictors of disaffiliation_

In addition to the qualitative studies reviewed above, which generated descriptions of the experience of leaving one’s religion, the literature includes several correlational studies that sought to identify predictors of apostasy. The current study was not designed to generate generalizable claims about the factors associated with loss of faith, and quantitative studies are
therefore less crucial to this literature review. Regardless, an awareness of the factors that predict apostasy may be relevant to the task of identifying themes in the current study’s data; for this reason, selected correlational findings are presented below.

Hunsberger, Pratt, and Pancer (2002), in a study of Canadian adolescents, found that the use of belief-confirming consultation (attempts to resolve doubt by consulting religious authorities and resources) predicted higher future levels of religiousness than the use of belief-threatening consultation (turning to distinctively non-Christian sources and friends in search of answers to religious questions). Hunsberger et al. also found that higher levels of doubt predicted a future drop in religiousness. These results are unsurprising, and lead to the question of which factors predict doubt. Studies on correlates of doubt have yielded mixed findings: Hunsberger et al. found no correlation between family variables and levels of doubt, but other studies (e.g. Kooistra & Pargament, 1999) have suggested that doubt is linked to conflictual family patterns. Regardless of whether or not family discord predicts doubt, clearer evidence indicates that parental divorce predicts both religious switching and apostasy (Lawton & Bures, 2001).

Loveland (2003) found that belonging to a “distinctive” denomination – such as Mormonism or Christian Science – was associated with a lower likelihood of switching religions; the author argues that members of these denominations develop niche religious preferences that cannot be satisfied outside of their own religious group. In a similar vein, a study of disaffiliation in The Netherlands (Te Grotenhuis & Scheepers, 2001) found that members of “Re-reformed” churches (analogous to Christian fundamentalists) were less likely to leave their churches than Catholics or Dutch Reformed Protestants. The same study found that exposure to rationalization (the core force of modernization, whereby efficiency begins to trump
custom as the guide for social action) was the most important predictor of disaffiliation. Choosing a non-religious marital partner was also a strong predictor of leaving one’s church.

Macro-level predictors of religious disaffiliation are of interest to sociologists, but provide little guidance for mental health practitioners. Qualitative descriptions of religious transition offer more insight into clients’ experiences, and the preceding section has outlined several such accounts. In addition to empirical research, the psychological literature contains recommendations for counselling practice with individuals who have lost their faith and left their religion, and these sources will be reviewed next.

**Psychotherapy with former fundamentalist Christians**

Several authors (Brent, 1991a; Hartz & Everett, 1989; Moyers, 1990, 1994) have drawn upon their clinical observations and personal experiences to describe some of the mental health issues commonly observed in former fundamentalist Christians. Above and beyond the symptoms of depression and anxiety that often accompany a major life transition, individuals who leave fundamentalist Christianity may exhibit a recognizable pattern of maladjustment that has been called *Shattered Faith Syndrome* (Yao, 1987, as cited by Moyers, 1990). This syndrome is characterized by existential, emotional, and social difficulties.

**Existential symptoms**

Struggles with identity, values, and life meaning are often central to an ex-Christian’s transition. Smull (2002) posits that those who leave Christianity are forced to re-define their personal mythologies (the individualized narrative statements that supply answers for basic human concerns; Feinstein, Krippner, & Granger, 1988). This claim echoes Davidman and Greil’s (2007) contention that the scriptless nature of the transition out of religion makes it difficult to construct a new identity. Having lost their primary source of meaning, former
fundamentalists may feel lost and adrift, unsure what to believe and longing for the certainty they once felt (Moyers, 1990). Moyers (1994) compares this profound confusion to the disorientation described by Kuhn (1970) that results from the failure of a once-definitive scientific paradigm. Feelings of meaninglessness may be especially pronounced because fundamentalist doctrine emphasizes the futility of searching for meaning in anything other than God (see, for instance, Ecclesiastes 12:8 and 12:13).

Fundamentalist Christianity offers its adherents a clear and noble purpose: to love God and to recruit others to the faith, saving them from eternal suffering in hell. Individual identity is subsumed within the greater calling of God’s will; lyrics to popular Christian worship songs poignantly reflect this imperative. One song declares: “Jesus, all for Jesus – all I am, and have, and ever hope to be … all of my ambitions, hopes, and plans – I surrender these into your hands” (Mark, 1990, track 8). Other songs include lines such as “I’m desperate for you; I’m lost without you” (Barnett, 1995, track 3) and “You are why I live; everything of me, I’ll place at your feet …everything of me belongs to you” (Spence, 1998, track 6). With the loss of this single-minded devotion and submission to God, a former Christian may experience deep purposelessness and depression (Moyers, 1990).

As former fundamentalists struggle to find a new, meaningful identity, they may also exhibit low self-esteem and a negative self-image. Because they have been taught that humans are inherently depraved and that goodness can only be achieved through God (e.g. Hartz & Everett, 1989), ex-believers may have great difficulty accepting themselves as valuable. Furthermore, fundamentalists are generally encouraged to rely upon God for direction and to quash any impulse of self-reliance (e.g. Falwell, 1982), and are taught that their human sense of judgment is fallen and untrustworthy (see Proverbs 14:12). Those who leave may therefore
experience difficulty making decisions (Sloat, 1990) and may worry that without divine
guidance, their choices will lead to disaster (Brent, 1991a). This may generalize to a chronic
dissatisfaction with life and difficulty finding direction for their lives (Moyers, 1990).

*Emotional symptoms*

Although a person who leaves fundamentalism may no longer cognitively believe in
divine judgment and eternal damnation, they may continue to experience a lingering fear of what
will happen to them after death (Hartz & Everett, 1989). They may ruminate obsessively on the
question of whether or not God exists (Moyers, 1990), and may experience overwhelming doubt
regarding their decision to leave the church. Another frequent emotional consequence is
profound loneliness: because they once experienced God as a constant companion and supportive
attachment figure, former fundamentalist Christians may now be struck by the unfamiliar feeling
of being completely alone in the universe (Winell, 1993).

The perfectionistic standards of conduct that are idealized within the fundamentalist
world may continue to generate guilt for those who leave (Hartz & Everett, 1989). Sexual guilt
is particularly common (related to the condemning stance toward sexual expression held by
many fundamentalist churches), and may manifest itself in sexual inhibitions (Moyers, 1994).
Former fundamentalists may feel excessive guilt over negative emotions, due to the teaching that
an “evil” feeling (e.g. anger) is equally reprehensible to committing an evil act (e.g. murder), and
may be unable to accept and healthily express these emotions.

*Social consequences*

Spiritual loneliness may be accompanied by a more concrete social isolation. The
fundamentalist lifestyle tends to be all-encompassing (Ammerman, 1987): many believers’ social
lives are limited to church-centric events such as Bible study groups, prayer meetings, and
church dinners. Upon leaving the church, estrangement from this community results in social isolation. Furthermore, many congregations ostracize former believers who have “left the fold,” interacting with them only in the form of clear attempts to win them back (Moyers, 1994).

Ex-believers may also experience painful disconnection from their families. If a person’s fundamentalist parents or spouse believe that turning away from “the truth” is a tragic and abhorrent sin that jeopardizes a person’s eternal salvation, the choice to leave may result in intense family strife and deep rifts.

Recommendations for counselling

Working with former fundamentalists often relies upon general therapeutic strategies such as identifying and processing suppressed emotions, helping the client develop coping skills and build a new social network, and engaging in grief work for the client’s multiple losses (e.g. Moyers, 1994; Rothbaum, 1988). It is important for counsellors to acquire basic familiarity with the language and central doctrines of the client’s religious subculture, in order to facilitate communication and empathy (Harty, 1996). Therapists are reminded to maintain an open, nonjudgmental stance: although certain beliefs and practices described by the client may seem bizarre, these were once some of the most important elements of the client’s life (Moyers, 1994).

Clients may begin therapy in a state of overwhelmed confusion. Counsellors can provide support and encourage questioning as clients search for an alternative worldview. This support can include bibliotherapy, or referral to liberal clergy or humanist organizations (Moyers, 1994). A working knowledge of other religions and non-religious meaning systems will enrich therapy and allow the counsellor to offer appropriate referrals (Harty, 1996). One specific approach recommended for ex-fundamentalists is existential group therapy (Brent, 1991a). Suggested goals of such group therapy are to help clients accept their own good sense and ability to choose
meaning for their lives, to accept anxiety as a natural part of existence, to view crisis as an opportunity to wrestle with life’s ambiguities, and to move from a stance of “trust and obey” to one of decision-making as a free moral agent (Brent, 1991a).

Although the articles described above can provide useful guidance for counsellors working with individuals who have left fundamentalist Christianity, their recommendations are primarily based on the authors’ experience rather than on empirical research. Furthermore, the above articles are outdated (all are more than a decade old). This study sought to generate recommendations for counselling practice that are based on current, Canadian, empirical data.

*Popular press resources*

Although they will not be reviewed here, several popular press books (e.g. Babinski, 1995; Loftus, 2008; Templeton, 1996; Winell, 1993) contribute to the discourse surrounding departure from fundamentalism, and are useful resources for bibliotherapy. Autobiographical accounts such as *Why I became an atheist: A former preacher rejects Christianity* (Loftus, 2008) and *Farewell to God: My reasons for rejecting the Christian faith* (Templeton, 1996) are joined by anthologies such as *Leaving the fold: Testimonies of former fundamentalists* (Babinski, 1995), which include the stories of a number of individuals who became disillusioned with and left Christian fundamentalism, and self-help books such as *Leaving the fold* (Winell, 1993). *Leaving the fold* (Winell), whose author is an ex-fundamentalist and a licensed psychologist, strives to demonstrate to readers the universal human needs that their religion previously satisfied, as well as the ways in which its doctrines may have been inherently manipulative. These books’ firsthand accounts of leaving fundamentalism are generally consistent with the scholarly findings presented in this review: for most individuals, struggles with lost identity and loneliness upon
losing faith were gradually replaced by exploration of alternative philosophies and adoption of a new worldview.

**Summary: Literature review**

This review provided an overview of the history, beliefs, and psychological correlates of fundamentalist Christianity, then discussed the psychological literature on leaving or losing faith in several different religions (fundamentalist Christianity, Judaism, Mormonism, and New Religious Movements). It briefly presented some correlates of apostasy before discussing the possible negative consequences of losing faith in fundamentalist Christianity and summarizing extant recommendations for counselling with this population. Despite the insightful findings yielded by several of the above studies, the contention stands that more psychological research on the experience of losing faith is needed. Only one study (Brent, 1994) dealt with the experience of leaving fundamentalist Christianity, and it prioritized the identification of a chronological model of leaving over an account of the psychological experience of losing faith. As a result, its findings are not maximally oriented for direct application to counselling practice. The current investigation was designed to avoid this shortcoming, and has generated a coherent account of the psychological experience of losing faith in fundamentalist Christianity.
CHAPTER III

METHODS

This chapter describes the current study’s research approach, participants, and methods of data collection and analysis. It concludes with a presentation of certain biases and limitations engendered by the study’s methodology.

Research approach

The literature on the topic of losing religious faith remains underdeveloped; for this reason, it would be difficult to generate specific and meaningful hypotheses about losing faith that could be tested by quantitative methods. Even if a quantitative approach were feasible, qualitative methods may be better-suited to the proposed research questions. Qualitative research is frequently used to investigate the meanings individuals ascribe to events and the quality and texture of psychological experiences (Willig, 2001). Although qualitative research may generate generalized descriptions or models of a phenomenon, it also permits the participants’ diversity to emerge. For an experience as personal as losing faith, commentary on the idiosyncrasies of particular accounts might be a crucial adjunct to any description of the general experience (if such a thing exists). Research which does not give voice to the nuances reported by individual participants risks presenting an averaged experience that fails to resonate with any one participant; such research may be of limited usefulness for application to counselling practice. In light of these considerations, the qualitative approach of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA; Smith, 1996) was chosen to structure this study.

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

IPA is a research approach concerned with describing the essence or nature of lived experience (Smith & Osborn, 2003) and how participants make sense of that experience (Smith,
IPA is particularly well-suited to any investigation concerned with “complexity, process or novelty” (Smith & Osborn, 2003, p. 53). Smith (2004) observes that IPA studies frequently deal with life-altering events, decisions, or conditions that relate to major existential questions; more broadly, the concept of identity “in all its guises, manifestations and complexities” (p. 49) has been a common thread through a significant proportion of IPA work. IPA has been used to investigate the role of spiritual beliefs in coping with loss of a spouse (Golsworthy & Coyle, 1999), the effects of spirituality on treatment for eating disorders (Marsden, Karagianni, & Morgan, 2007), and the ways in which practitioners integrate religious and spiritual issues into bereavement therapy (Golsworthy & Coyle, 2001). IPA’s proven value for tackling questions of faith, transition (e.g. Todorova & Kotzeva, 2006), loss (e.g. Osborne & Coyle, 2002), and identity (e.g. Smith & Osborn, 2007) makes it an ideal method for research on loss of faith.

**Epistemological position of IPA**

As its name suggests, the heart of IPA is phenomenology. Phenomenology, while by no means a unified philosophical or psychological construct, is generally concerned with studying a particular subject “in such a way that it is allowed maximal opportunity to show itself ‘as itself’” (Larkin, Watts, & Clifton, 2006, p. 108). Phenomenology seeks to reveal something of individuals’ life-worlds (Husserl, 1954/1970); in psychological research, this goal manifests as an aspiration to understand and “give voice” (Larkin et al., p. 102) to participants’ concerns and experiential claims pertaining to a particular realm of their lives (such as faith). This “insider perspective” (Larkin et al., p. 103) on individuals’ perceptions of objects or events can be attained through careful study of their verbal accounts. Phenomenology’s assumption that verbal
accounts *do* reveal meaningful information about participants’ private feelings and thoughts, which in turn have a relation to lived experiences, is absolutely necessary to addressing the proposed research questions. To ask about the psychological *experience* of losing faith in Christianity would be impossible using a method such as discursive psychology, which treats participants’ talk as non-representational of their cognitive and emotional experience (Potter & Wetherell, 1987).

While IPA accepts the phenomenological goal of seeking access to individuals’ subjective experiences, it also acknowledges that researchers never have direct conduits to these experiences. To begin with, participants’ verbal accounts do not map precisely onto their inner cognitions, which themselves do not necessarily mirror the experience in question. Memory distortions, rhetorical goals and stakes, and current context all play a role in the construction of a participant’s account (Potter & Wetherell, 1987). After a participant has provided a verbal account, the listening researcher must make sense of this account through the lens of his or her culture, prior experience, and conceptions (his or her “biographical presence”; Smith, 2004, p. 45). IPA does not suggest that researchers can “bracket” these biases (as does Grounded Theory; Willig, 2001); although our interpretive frameworks complicate the research process, we as situated human beings could not hope to understand the world without them. Smith (2004) writes that “human research involves a double hermeneutic. The participant is trying to make sense of their personal and social world; the researcher is trying to make sense of the participant trying to make sense of their personal and social world” (p. 40).

Although acknowledging the researcher’s co-constructive role in analysis is one component of the “interpretative” nature of IPA, it should not be the only one. Novice researchers have often treated IPA as a descriptive methodology, concerned with publicizing the
stories of participants whose voices have not been widely heard (Larkin et al., 2006). While this is a noble goal, it is over-cautious and has given IPA a reputation as one of the most undemanding qualitative methodologies (Larkin et al.). Good IPA should venture beyond a summary of participants’ concerns to an explicitly interpretative analysis. This analysis should be speculative but critical, situating the descriptions in social, cultural, and theoretical contexts (Smith, 2004). Interpretations of participants’ accounts can be drawn from a range of psychological perspectives, as long as they make coherent sense in light of the research question(s) (Smith, 1996). A participant’s talk could be parsed for its social comparisons, links to comments elsewhere in the interview, metaphorical content, and discursive achievements, to name a few (Smith, 2004). This “epistemological eclecticism” (Michael, 1999, as cited in Larkin et al., 2006, p. 116) allows the researcher great flexibility in constructing the results, although interpretations must always be grounded in the data and preceded by close textual analysis.

IPA is built upon an inherent tension between phenomenology (which seeks to describe an experience as it is) and interpretation (which requires an account to be revealed as something else; Dreyfus, 1995, as cited in Larkin et al., 2006). Smith (2004) describes IPA as employing both a hermeneutics “centred in empathy and meaning recollection” and “a hermeneutics of questioning, of critical engagement” (p. 46). Although giving voice to participants’ experience is the first goal, IPA may press further to “posit readings which the participants would be unlikely, unable or unwilling to see or acknowledge themselves” (Smith, 2004, p. 46). Both elements are crucial to a sophisticated use of the method.

In its particular analytic processes (which will be described shortly), IPA resembles Grounded Theory (e.g. Strauss & Corbin, 1990), a more prevalent qualitative method in psychology. However, at least three distinctions should be made between the approaches. First,
because the traditional form of Grounded Theory seeks to allow novel categories to emerge from the data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), the relevance and role of extant literature has often been debated (Willig, 2001). This uneasy relationship with existing theoretical constructs can be confusing for beginning researchers who are struggling with the seemingly-impossible task of bracketing. Although IPA similarly requires that analysis be firmly grounded in the data, it allows the researcher to freely engage with prior research, personal experience and knowledge, and psychological theory (Larkin et al., 2006). Second, IPA was developed as a specifically psychological approach, whereas Grounded Theory’s focus on process lends itself to the study of sociological research questions (Willig, 2001). For the study of private psychological experiences (such as loss of faith), Grounded Theory must be stretched and adapted; IPA is already perfectly equipped. Finally, in the course of Grounded Theory’s long history, it has become embroiled in numerous debates and controversies regarding its proper use; as a result, several completely different versions (and many more sub-variations) of Grounded Theory now exist (Willig, 2001). IPA, a young approach whose author has explicitly invited dialogue and collaboration around its future development (e.g. Smith, 2004), allows a beginning researcher to circumvent the stuffy debates of Grounded Theory and creatively explore the ways in which IPA can best answer his or her research questions. The worldwide IPA community is currently small but dedicated to expansion; support and guidance for IPA research projects are readily available via the IPA listserv and website (http://www.psyc.bbk.ac.uk/ipa).

**Guidelines for Conducting IPA Research**

IPA is idiographic, committed to the in-depth study of small groups of participants (most typically between five and ten participants; Smith, 2004). Unlike Grounded Theory, which uses theoretical sampling to move towards data saturation (and ideally only stops recruiting new
participants once saturation is achieved; Brocki & Wearden, 2006), IPA sampling is purposive, relatively homogeneous, and unconcerned with saturation (an unrealistic goal, according to Smith et al., 1999). Brocki and Wearden (2006) relate the following guidelines for deeming an IPA analysis satisfactory:

According to Elliott, Fischer and Rennie (1999), qualitative research should strive to achieve “understanding represented in a way that achieves coherence and integration while preserving nuances” (pp. 222-223) and perhaps it is when the researcher feels that their analysis has achieved these goals whilst telling a suitably persuasive story that the analysis may be considered sufficiently complete (p. 95).

Larkin et al. (2006) argue that IPA is less a true methodology than a perspective or stance. Examination of IPA papers shows that researchers take different routes through the IPA process, and the techniques used are generally unremarkable and shared with other qualitative approaches. For the stated benefit of new researchers, Smith (e.g. 1999) has offered accessible and practical suggestions for carrying out IPA research; however, like other qualitative theorists, he warns against a “cookbook” approach to research (Smith, 2004). Certain commitments of IPA are clear, however: for instance, the process must be inductive, based upon research questions that are flexible enough to allow unexpected directions or themes to surface during data collection and analysis (Smith, 2004). As mentioned above, IPA is idiographic: detailed examination of a single participant’s data continues until the researcher has reached “some degree of closure or gestalt” (Smith, 2004, p. 41), and only after this process has been repeated for each participant is any cross-case analysis (e.g. search for convergence and divergence among the accounts) attempted.
A general IPA approach to the analysis of a single interview is presented by Willig (2001), and consists of four stages: initial encounter with the text, identification of themes, clustering of themes, and production of a summary table. The first stage requires the researcher to immerse him- or herself in the verbatim transcript, reading and re-reading while making notes of the thoughts and observations that come to mind. These notes are unfocused and wide-ranging; they are not necessarily codes, but documentation of the researcher’s initial open engagement with the text (Willig, 2001). In the second stage, the researcher identifies conceptual themes that capture various facets of the essence of particular passages of the transcript. These themes are then clustered or linked to other themes; superordinate labels are developed to reflect the essence of each grouping of themes. Finally, the researcher creates a summary table of superordinate and constituent themes, including quotations to demonstrate their grounding in the data. At this stage, themes which do not pertain directly to the question of interest are dropped from the analysis.

Once the above procedure has been repeated for each participant, the summary tables are combined into an inclusive list of master themes (Willig, 2001). The researcher integrates and collapses these themes, continually checking the data to ensure that new theme titles are still reflected within the transcripts. The newly integrated themes, as a whole, should now capture something of the essence of the experience shared by all participants. In the write-up, a balance should be struck between discussing generalized essences and revealing elements of specific participants’ life-worlds (Smith, 2004).
Procedure

Participants

Participants were nine adult men and women who self-identified as having experienced a loss of personal religious faith in fundamentalist Christianity. In the information letter used to explain the study to prospective participants (see Appendix A), fundamentalist Christianity was defined as “a branch of conservative Protestant Christianity which emphasizes obedience to the Bible and salvation through an individual relationship with Jesus.” The principle of intensity sampling (Patton, 1990) was applied to ensure that each subject could provide a rich account of the target experience. Inclusion criteria were chosen for their potential to selectively admit participants whose loss of faith experience was likely to have been particularly impactful. Participants were required to have been “heavily involved” in fundamentalist Christianity, defined as regular attendance at a minimum of one weekly church service plus one other weekly religious activity (such as a second service, prayer meeting or Bible study, or church social group; see Mosier, 2003). Participants were also required to be able to identify their loss of faith as an experience separate from that of leaving their family home (see Brent, 1991b). The purpose of this criterion was to exclude individuals who had participated in fundamentalism only at the behest of their parents, and had not internalized the faith as part of their personal identities.

Recruitment

An e-mail summarizing the study and inviting potential participants to contact the researcher was sent to a network of atheist and humanist listservs associated with the Centre for Inquiry Canada, as well as to members of the Centre for Inquiry Ontario group on the social networking site Facebook. The e-mail included a link to the information letter in Appendix A. A verbal announcement was also made by the researcher at a Centre for Inquiry presentation in
Toronto, Ontario entitled “Nothing: Something to Believe In,” and copies of the information letter were distributed to individuals who expressed interest in participating. The e-mail and verbal announcement also included a request that individuals consider referring friends who might be interested in participating (a strategy known as snowball sampling; Patton, 1990). One participant contacted the researcher after hearing about the study by word of mouth, through the researcher’s personal connections rather than via the Centre for Inquiry.

When potential participants contacted the researcher by telephone or e-mail and expressed interest in the study, they were forwarded an electronic copy of the information letter and were asked to review the inclusion criteria and details of participation. They were asked to take at least 24 hours after receiving the information letter to reflect upon the study and discuss their potential involvement with significant others, if desired. They were asked to re-contact the researcher by telephone after a minimum of 24 hours to discuss any questions or concerns; at the end of this conversation, they indicated whether or not they wished to participate. During this telephone conversation, the researcher asked a brief series of questions to ensure the individual met the inclusion criteria. All potential participants were given the option of meeting with the researcher to discuss the study in person before committing to participation; however, none chose to schedule such a meeting. If the individual met inclusion criteria and indicated he or she wished to participate, arrangements were made for an interview. The sample size (nine) is consistent with the typical sample size reported in the IPA literature (Smith, 2004).

Ethical considerations

The process of obtaining informed consent consisted of three sequential elements: the information letter, the telephone conversation during which the study was explained and the potential participant was given an opportunity to ask questions and seek clarification, and a
review of the information letter and consent form (Appendix B) immediately prior to the interview. At each stage of the consent process, the researcher emphasized the voluntary nature of participation. Participants were reminded before the interview of their right to decline to answer any question, to change topics, to request a break, or to withdraw from the interview at any point. This offered the participants a level of control over the interview process, in order to mitigate any emotional distress they might experience. When participants became visibly upset or tearful during the interview, the researcher conveyed nonverbal empathy. If a sensitive topic arose that was tangential to the loss of faith (such as the loss of a loved one), the researcher acknowledged the topic but did not probe for further information.

Confidentiality was ensured in a number of ways. Participants were given the option of choosing their own pseudonym; this gesture was intended to offer participants an added sense of control over their story as it crossed from the realm of personal experience to that of public data. However, only one participant exercised this option; others were assigned pseudonyms by the researcher. Details within the transcript, such as names of small towns or specific churches, were altered in order to disguise the participant’s identity. Participants were later given the opportunity to review the disguised transcript to ensure that it adequately protected their anonymity. The undisguised transcripts, consent forms, demographic forms, and interview recordings were kept in a locked filing box at the researcher’s home office; after transcription had been completed, only disguised transcripts were kept as data on the researcher’s computer.

At the conclusion of the interview, each participant was given a thank-you card and a $25 gift card (for Chapters bookstores) as a token of appreciation. Because participants were not informed about this gift card beforehand, it did not constitute an incentive to participate or to
complete the interview. Approval of the University of Toronto Office of Research Ethics was gained prior to data collection.

Demographics

Because this study was designed to generate a rich description of a relatively rare phenomenon, demographic diversity within the sample was treated as less important than each participant’s ability to provide a detailed account of losing faith. Few demographic details were collected from the participants before the interview: because the study focused on narratives rather than predictor variables, demographic factors that did not emerge in the course of the participant’s story were judged to be relatively unimportant. However, participants were asked to complete a demographic form that included gender, occupation, and age. Four women and five men were interviewed, ranging in age from 23 to 57. Four participants were unmarried, three were married (first marriage), and two were divorced (and not married at the time of the interview). Further details of the participants’ demographics will be provided in the participant summaries at the beginning of Chapter IV.

Interview procedure

Individual semi-structured interviews lasting between 1½ and 2 hours were conducted by the researcher in a private room at a university counselling clinic in Toronto. The interviews were audio-recorded. Interviews followed an interview guide (Appendix C), which provides “a list of questions or issues that are to be explored in the course of the interview” (Patton, 1990, p. 293). Using an interview guide (rather than a standardized open-ended interview) allows for a more conversational tone, helps participants feel at ease, and permits the emergence and exploration of unexpected themes. Development of the interview guide was informed by previous qualitative research with ex-religious fundamentalists (Brent, 1991b; Harty, 1996;
Mosier, 2003; Smull, 2002), as well as by Smith’s (1995) recommendations for constructing semi-structured interview schedules.

The researcher began each interview by asking a participant to tell his or her story of faith and loss of faith, including not only external events or milestones but emotional and mental experience – what it was like to lose faith. The participant was then prompted, if necessary, to start “at the beginning” – how did his or her faith in fundamentalist Christianity begin? After this initial question, some participants proceeded to tell their stories with minimal prompting from the researcher (who would interject if clarification, elaboration, or re-focusing was necessary). Other participants tended to pause and wait for further questions, which were drawn from the interview guide. Throughout the interview, the researcher remained aware of topics that had or had not been discussed, and ensured that all topics in the interview guide were addressed by the end of the interview. Topics to be covered included the participant’s experience of Christianity (including church, family involvement, and relationship with God or Jesus), the circumstances and emotional and cognitive experience of losing faith, the consequences of losing faith or leaving the church, the nature of any support sought during the loss of faith, and his or her current spiritual beliefs and practices. The researcher was alert to themes of attachment (such as love and security) and identity (such as personhood and purpose) throughout the interview.

Each interview was followed by a short debriefing session, which served as an opportunity for participants to express how they felt about the interview process. If a participant had become distressed during the interview, the researcher made efforts to ensure that he or she returned to a calm and positive psychological state before departing (e.g. by answering any
outstanding questions, expressing appreciation for their story, validating their strengths and coping skills, and giving the thank-you card).

Participants frequently asked the researcher about her own experience of losing faith in fundamentalist Christianity; in the spirit of reciprocity in the research process, the researcher offered a brief (five-minute) account of her own faith transition during the debriefing session (if the participant had expressed curiosity about her story). Importantly, the researcher did not reveal any elements of her own story until after the interview had concluded, so as not to influence the participants’ accounts in any way. However, she did disclose (if asked at any point in the recruitment or interview process) that she had experienced a loss of faith in fundamentalist Christianity. This disclosure was deemed reasonable in service of rapport-building.

After each interview, the researcher made a brief entry in her reflexive journal. This entry documented her general impressions of the participant and interview circumstances, any transference or personal bias that arose during the interview, and other factors that could be relevant to future interpretation of the data.

Data analysis

The researcher transcribed the recorded interviews verbatim with the aid of Transana software, and subsequently disguised identifying details. Transcription and analysis occurred concurrently with ongoing data collection – that is, the researcher did not wait until all interviews had been collected to begin analysis. This is permitted by the IPA norm of generating themes from each individual case before beginning cross-case analysis (Smith & Osborn, 2003). Analysis proceeded according to the guidelines described by Willig (2001): as a transcript was read and re-read, wide-ranging notes were made in the left margin to document the researcher’s initial engagement with the text. After several readings, emergent themes were identified and
recorded in the transcript’s right margin. Themes were entered into a word-processing document to facilitate clustering and categorization, and superordinate themes were developed. These themes were chosen carefully, in an effort to best capture the essential nature of that participant’s experience of losing faith.

Because the experience of losing faith is situated within a chronological process, the researcher chose to organize each participant’s themes into three sequential domains: before, during, and after the faith transition. The first domain focused on themes concerning the participants’ experience of Christianity, beginning from their conversion or earliest memories of faith. The second domain contained themes pertaining to the transitional experience of losing faith: the period between reasonably firm belief and reasonably firm unbelief. The third domain began when participants had relinquished belief in God, and continued until the present. Participants’ stories, and the themes contained therein, mapped naturally onto these three domains. The domains provided structure to the results, without necessitating the development of chronology- or process-focused themes which could distract from the essential themes of psychological experience.

Rather than create summary tables of themes and domains (as suggested by Willig, 2001), the researcher found it useful to create lists of themes which allowed space for explanatory notes and multiple illustrative quotations. Once a summary list of themes was completed for a given participant, this list was sent to the participant for review, along with a copy of the disguised and original transcripts. This practice of checking emergent analysis with the participants themselves is a way of enhancing the trustworthiness of a qualitative researcher’s interpretations (Harty, 1996). The participants had been made aware (in the information letter and consent process) that these themes would be sent to them, and had the option of declining to
receive this material (none declined). In a letter that accompanied the list of themes, participants were invited to offer feedback, clarification, or corrections. Specifically, they were encouraged to inform the researcher if they felt the themes failed to represent an important element of their story. They were given a minimum of two weeks to provide feedback. Few changes were recommended; most participants responded with general, positive feedback (e.g. “impressed with what you put together,” “quite accurate; I don't have anything to add”). Some offered further elaboration on themes; this new content was treated as a supplement to their interview data, and used to deepen and enrich the themes where applicable.

Cross-case analysis was conducted by collating all themes within each of the three domains (Experience of Christianity, Transition out of Christianity, and Experience of Unbelief). Similar themes were first integrated with one another. Abstraction was then used to identify superordinate themes that were common to all participants, but specific enough to be interesting and meaningful. Collectively, these superordinate themes constitute the researcher’s attempt to capture the essence of participants’ common experience within that domain.

If a superordinate theme was comprised of several distinct constituent themes, these constituent themes were included as subthemes. Superordinate themes were experienced by all, or nearly all, participants (although they were not necessarily of equal importance to all participants). Subthemes represent the experience of a smaller subset of participants; their purpose is to exemplify and enrich the superordinate themes. Certain superordinate themes (e.g. “guilt”) have no subordinate themes; these themes are relatively homogeneous constructs that were found in all, or nearly all, participants’ accounts.

Within the Experience of Unbelief domain, the process of identifying superordinate themes for all nine participants was found to be problematic. For one cluster of participants, the
experience of unbelief seemed to be primarily characterized by themes of relief and excitement. In contrast, another cluster of participants emphasized themes of loss, depression, and wistfulness. Although most participants expressed some elements of both loss and relief, it seemed inappropriate to generalize across the two distinct and disparate typologies that seemed to be emerging. To preserve the richness of the data, the researcher created two provisional typologies within the Experience of Unbelief: one characterized by a sense of relief and one by a sense of struggle.

Consistent with the iterative nature of qualitative analysis, the researcher carefully parsed interview data from all three domains to assess whether the provisional typologies were, in fact, consistent with the data. She also investigated whether the typologies could be extended into the other two domains: that is, did the same participants cluster together in their experience of Christianity and transition out of Christianity? Although an affirmative answer to this question would have enhanced the parsimony and elegance of the results, the data did not reveal such a pattern. Various clusters could be identified within all three domains – for instance, participants could be clustered according to the emotional or unemotional nature of their relationship with God – but no clusters mapped onto the relief-versus-struggle typologies that had been identified within Experience of Unbelief. Since the distinction between loss and relief seemed particularly pertinent to counselling practice, these typologies were retained within the third domain.

**Methodological biases and limitations**

Two points regarding this study’s methods should be noted before proceeding to a discussion of its results. First, although the sample size was small (nine participants), IPA guidelines recommend a sample size of three to six participants for a doctoral IPA study (Smith, 2004). The larger-than-recommended sample size and additional time constraints of a Master’s
degree limited the researcher’s ability to fully apply the IPA principles of rich idiography and sophisticated interpretation. Future publications using this data will likely focus on a subset of participants, permitting a more faithful expression of IPA.

More fundamentally, bias in the recruitment techniques resulted in a shift in the study’s focus. Originally, the researcher had intended to recruit participants through the Toronto Coping without Religion support group and the Toronto Spirituality Beyond Religion meetup. However, both groups were cancelled before recruitment could begin. Contacting the Centre for Inquiry Ontario, which organizes the Coping without Religion support group, led to recruitment as described above (i.e. via humanist, atheist, and free thought listservs). As a result, the majority of participants were atheists or secular humanists; the sample contained no individuals who had lost their faith in fundamentalist Christianity but not in God.

This unintended bias of the sample allowed for reinterpretation of the study’s goal. The study was originally intended to generate a description of the experience of losing faith in fundamentalist Christianity. Instead, it now provides a description of the experience of losing faith in God (within the context of fundamentalist Christianity). Although the practical difference between the two may be negligible, the new phrasing offers a more precise statement of the phenomenon of interest.
CHAPTER IV
RESULTS, PART 1

The domains and superordinate themes that constitute the results of this study are presented in Table 1. This chapter, after introducing the participants, presents the results that constitute Domain 1. The two subsequent chapters present Domains 2 and 3.

Table 1
Superordinate themes representing the essence of losing faith, classified by domain

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Domain 1: Experience of Christianity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Immersion in Christianity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Relationship with God</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Christian identity and worldview</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Guilt</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Fulfillment of psychological needs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Deviations from the Christian norm</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Dealing with cognitive dissonance</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Domain 2: Transition out of Christianity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Increasing tension</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Crisis or catalyst</td>
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<tr>
<td>3. Emotional shifts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Intellectual shifts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Acknowledging unbelief</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Domain 3: Experience of Unbelief</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Resolution of tension</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Embracing new possibilities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Negative views of religion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Strengthening the identity of unbelief</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| B                               |
| 1. Loss                         |
| 2. Emotional ties to belief     |
| 3. The letdown of unbelief      |

A and B

1. Social consequences
2. Counselling experiences

Participant summaries

Although this study’s central findings are the themes generated from cross-case analysis, IPA requires that individual participants’ voices be audible within the results. The quotations included in the following chapters have been selected not only for their ability to substantiate a
theme, but also for their richness as samples of the participants’ unique stories and expressive styles. To provide context for the themes and quotations, this chapter begins with a brief introduction to the participants – known by the pseudonyms of Jim, Brad, Ted, Chris, Stan, Marianne, Lea, Natasha, and Amber – and an overview of each of their stories of losing faith.

Some introductory comments will prevent repetitiveness in the participant summaries. Because self-identification as a former fundamentalist Christian was an inclusion criterion for participation, the general description of fundamentalist and evangelical Christianity in the literature review is at least partially representative of all participants’ experience of Christianity. All participants came from Christian homes; their parents’ levels of religious commitment ranged from “culturally Christian” (meaning they attended church but were not particularly serious about it) to highly devoted to, and enmeshed within, the church and its doctrine. Participants came from different branches of fundamentalist and evangelical Christianity, ranging from fairly traditional (e.g. Christian Reformed, Salvation Army) to charismatic (Pentecostal and non-denominational “Spirit-filled” churches).

To enhance clarity, summaries are written in the present tense; they describe each participant as he or she presented at the time of the interview.

Participant 1: “Jim”

Jim is 51 years old and works as a management consultant; he is divorced, and currently unmarried. He attended university, earning undergraduate and Master of Divinity degrees. Jim’s family has a long history in the Baptist church, and he “accepted Jesus” as a child. He took his faith increasingly seriously through his adolescent years, and upon entering university he joined a campus evangelical organization. He was first involved with this group as a student, and
became a full-time staff member after his convocation. He later attended seminary and became a minister at a local church.

After an unexpected experience of speaking in tongues (a phenomenon that was not accepted within his church), Jim switched denominations and became more involved with charismatic Christianity. He found a position as a minister for a different church. Jim had begun therapy with a Christian counsellor to deal with problems that he now labels as undiagnosed depression, and he began to wonder whether he might be under demonic influence. He began participating in a “deliverance ministry” to cast out any demons that were holding sway over him. During one such session, the deliverance team suggested that he might have multiple personality disorder; he then began seeing a different counsellor for issues of dissociation. Jim now believes that his “demons” and his multiple personalities were intrapsychically generated phenomena, resulting from his suggestible personality, undiagnosed depression, and inner compartmentalization.

By his mid-thirties, Jim’s depression had become agonizing. He searched desperately for a felt sense of God’s love, which he believed would provide meaning and comfort. As his efforts to experience this love proved fruitless over the course of many years, Jim began to doubt the promises of the Bible and the truth of Christianity. He oscillated between belief and doubt for about a year and a half. This was a tumultuous and confusing time: severe doubt was intermingled with fear of going to hell, continued suspicions of demonic influence, and treatment for a dissociative disorder. When he could no longer preach with integrity, Jim resigned from his ministerial position. Jim finally concluded that he did not believe in Christianity, a realisation that was accompanied by a profound sense of relief. Since he no longer considered divorce a sin,
he was able to end his unhappy marriage. His beliefs progressed over the course of several years through monotheism, deism, and agnosticism before he arrived at his current position of atheism.

*Participant 2: “Brad”*

Brad is 35 years old and works as a freelance musician. He earned multiple undergraduate and graduate degrees in music, philosophy, and religious studies; his highest degree is a PhD in Philosophy. He is divorced and currently unmarried. Brad accepted Jesus as a teenager, a transition heavily influenced by his music teacher and his girlfriend (who later became his wife). Within his circle of friends, Brad was known as “the smart Christian”: being intellectual was an important part of Brad’s identity, and he was fascinated by apologetics (a branch of theology concerned with using rational arguments to support and defend the Christian faith). After an injury during his first undergraduate degree derailed his music career, Brad began training to enter the ministry. He eventually became a youth pastor, and simultaneously taught philosophy at a secular university.

In his late twenties, Brad suffered a major depressive episode (possibly related to burnout). During this intensely painful time, he continually asked God to provide him with a sense of meaning, peace, or hope – to meet his emotional needs in a way that he could experience as “real.” He sensed no response from God, and his depression worsened. Disillusioned, Brad began experimenting with a secular humanist or atheist perspective. Much of this experimentation was done in the context of an important new friendship with Tony, a philosophically-inclined non-Christian who did not know that Brad was a pastor.

After experiencing the atheist perspective as more intellectually parsimonious and more consistent with his personal experience than the Christian perspective, Brad realised that he no longer believed in God. As a result, his marriage soon crumbled. This pained him deeply, but he
felt a profound conviction that he was making the right choice: embracing atheism represented true intellectual integrity. He resigned from his pastorate, but did not disclose his loss of faith to anyone at church. He went back to university to pursue a science degree, and resumed his career as a musician.

Brad is now making efforts to become more vocal about his atheism, inspired by Richard Dawkins’ *The God Delusion*. He seldom reveals that he used to be a pastor, due to feelings of embarrassment and shame.

*Participant 3: “Ted”*

Ted is 57 years old and retired. He is married (his first and only marriage), and his wife remains a fundamentalist Christian. Ted was raised in a fundamentalist Christian home and accepted the faith for himself; however, he was always inclined to scepticism, and entertained growing doubts from late childhood through mid-adolescence. He renewed his commitment to Christianity during his high school years, following the example of a respected friend.

Ted went to Bible school for a year, then worked for a missionary organization for three years. While working overseas, he began to feel vaguely uneasy with the organization’s approach and decided not to make a career of missionary work. Instead, he enrolled at a Canadian university and earned an undergraduate degree in agriculture.

Ted attended a series of churches with his wife and three children, and enjoyed good friends and a sense of community at each. However, even as he was involved in church leadership as a church elder and Bible study leader, problematic questions were accumulating. One issue with which he struggled was theodicy – the question of why an all-loving and all-powerful God allows pain and suffering. While discussing some of his questions with a close friend, Ted admitted that if he were to look at Christianity objectively (rather than within the
context of his commitment to the faith), his doubts would significantly outweigh his belief. At that point, he decided to resign from his position as an elder and allow himself to explore alternative perspectives, trusting that the truth would reveal itself.

After considering various arguments and evidence, Ted concluded that belief in a Christian God was less parsimonious than unbelief. At that point, he began to consider himself an unbeliever. This was difficult for his family, particularly his wife. Ted is now taking initiative to organize support and discussion groups for other ex-Christians. Although he misses belonging to a church community, he values critical thought and considers himself “less deluded” than when he was a Christian.

Participant 4: “Chris”

Chris is 38 years old and works at a call centre. He is unmarried and did not obtain postsecondary education. Chris’s family was not particularly religious until Chris was about ten years old, when his aunt “found Jesus” and convinced his parents of the importance of taking Christianity seriously. Chris sincerely believed in Christian doctrine, but did not feel as though he received any particular blessings from God. He had no interest in being “on fire for God” (passionately and publicly dedicated to Christian practice). Instead, he experienced God as a distant authority figure to be feared and obeyed. During high school, Chris concluded that he would never be able to follow God’s commandments (particularly concerning sex) and resigned himself to the fact that he would not go to heaven. He stopped attending church in high school, but continued to believe in a fundamentalist version of God.

In his twenties, Chris was exposed to viewpoints he had never encountered before. For instance, he met an agnostic for the first time, and was stunned by the idea that unbelief could be an option. At a natural history museum, Chris encountered an exhibit that explained the theory
of evolution. This new information resonated deeply, and the experience “opened his eyes” to seek more knowledge about Christianity and the evidence against it. He eventually became convinced enough by what he had learned to consider himself an atheist. He feels very alone in his atheism, since family members are all Christians. He is keen to share his newfound knowledge with them in the hope that they will relinquish Christianity, but they dismiss and avoid the subject of religious beliefs when he tries to bring it up.

*Participant 5: “Stan”*

Stan is 25 years old and describes his occupation as “student and business owner.” He is unmarried and is currently attending university. Stan, unlike other participants, never really believed in a God who answers prayer and is available for a personal relationship. Instead, he believed in a deistic God (that is, a supreme being who created the universe but does not intervene in humans’ daily lives), and was strongly committed to the political and ideological positions of fundamentalist Christianity.

As a university student, Stan joined the leadership of an organization that promotes the intelligent design movement on university campuses and to students about to begin university. After a period of involvement with this group, Stan started to be plagued by several troubling observations. First, he noticed that his organization’s educational materials were being used to promote unscientific ideas (such as the claim that the earth is only several thousand years old) to young children. Second, the group was violating the scientific principle of naturalism by categorically refusing to consider any theory of origins that did not assume God’s existence. Stan began to sense a hidden agenda at work within the organization: although they claimed to be concerned with pointing out legitimate problems with Darwinism, their true goal was to prevent university students from leaving fundamentalist Christianity.
While wrestling with these issues, Stan began to read about the philosophy of science. As he learned more, belief in God seemed increasingly incompatible with a scientific understanding of the world. Coming to this realization plunged him into an existential crisis and related depression, during which he felt as though life had no purpose. He gradually recovered from this depression as he realised that morality and meaning could exist apart from God. In the meantime, he read Christopher Hitchins’ book *God is not great* and strongly agreed with its arguments, leading him to conclude that he must be an atheist (a notion he had resisted until reading that book).

Stan’s opinion of religion became progressively more negative, and he currently condemns it vehemently as nothing but a cult in respectable clothing. Stan has told very few people about his atheism, because the costs to his social life would be too great. He continues to attend church and work for the intelligent design organization. He is unsure what the future will hold for him; he is currently not prepared to face the losses that would accompany leaving the church, but he also senses that he will be unable to keep his atheism hidden forever.

*Participant 6: “Marianne”*

Marianne is 45 years old and is currently a student, having returned to university to train for a career change. She is married, and has children. Marianne was born to European immigrant parents for whom faith was of paramount importance. Christianity saturated every part of Marianne’s personal and familial identity, and as she grew up, she engaged in efforts to “make faith hers” by reflecting on how she would serve God in the future. She experienced faith in an emotional way: she was deeply moved by worship music, theological imagery, and Christian doctrine (for instance, she felt a profound sense of gratitude for her redemption).
In her late teenage years, Marianne began dating a young man from her mother’s church. She felt increasingly unsettled about the relationship, and went to her pastor hoping to find support for her misgivings; instead, the pastor encouraged her to remain in the relationship. She felt uneasy with this response, and began to doubt her pastor’s authority. She then discovered a terribly painful secret about abuses committed by her boyfriend. She felt betrayed and furious, and immediately “shoved” Christianity out of her life. She embraced a new identity that was deliberately incompatible with Christianity (she became a feminist, adopted liberal sexual values, and chose a non-Christian partner).

Years later, in the context of difficult life events such as her father’s death and a problematic childbirth, Marianne began to feel a deep yearning to reconnect with God. She longed for the beauty, purity, fulfilment, and emotional release that she previously found in worship and faith. To satisfy these longings while remaining true to the liberal identity she had adopted, she sought out church communities that de-emphasized doctrine and focused on worship. She later met other “different” Christians with whom she could be open about her struggles with faith (“radical” pastors who acknowledged the precarious nature of belief). However, when members of her church undertook a process to oust these pastors, Marianne felt increasingly angry and exhausted with the church. An incident of her children being judged at church served as the final straw. Marianne concluded, to her sadness, that she ultimately could not fit within the Christian church.

After she left the church, Marianne’s belief in God began to erode. Secular explanations for phenomena such as the multiplicity of human religions began to seem more parsimonious than Christian explanations. Marianne experienced depression, despondency, and agonizing disappointment to no longer be able to believe in Christian ideas. To her, the world without God
seems a much bleaker place. A tendency to believe remains ingrained within her psyche, and she occasionally allows herself to “pretend” that Christianity is true.

*Participant 7: “Lea”*

Lea is 36 years old and works as an employment counsellor. She is unmarried and holds undergraduate and graduate degrees. Lea’s parents were both chaplains, and Lea was heavily involved in church activities and leadership throughout her childhood, adolescence, and young adulthood. Her Christianity was central to both her public identity and private self, and she felt called to eventually become a minister. Although Lea was devoted to the faith, she was also plagued by a sense that she was different from others in her church. She disagreed with the church’s position on social issues such as homosexuality, and harboured a vague sense that the doctrine of hell could not be true. She longed to believe as wholeheartedly as her peers, but simply could not. When she began attending university, she was presented with radical new knowledge (for instance, about the Bible’s origins), and tried to discuss this information with others at church. They were resistant to such discussions, which frustrated her. She felt as though a rift was growing between her and others in the church.

During Lea’s undergraduate degree, a cluster of traumatic interpersonal events led her to leave her church. After leaving, she became depressed; although she attributes this depression primarily to the interpersonal events, she believes it was compounded by the loss of identity she suffered upon leaving the church. Lea began attending a liberal United Church, and initially experienced relief to be able to worship God outside of the exclusivist theology of her former church. However, she eventually began to experience the United Church’s theology as problematic, and she left the church altogether.
Lea’s understanding of God continued to shift, from the God of fundamentalist Christianity, to a less clearly defined monotheistic God, to an impersonal force. Currently, her beliefs are approaching atheism. She used to consider herself a spiritual person, and hoped to open a spiritual retreat centre; she is now beginning to realise that she will need to re-define this dream if she no longer believes in the spiritual realm.

Lea returned to a highly unorthodox United Church, whose doctrine and services include no reference to God and focus instead on humanistic principles. She still sometimes wishes she could believe in Christianity for the comfort and hope it offers. She describes herself as being in the process of aligning her heart (which still wants to believe) with her mind (which is continually shifting further away from Christianity).

Participant 8: “Natasha”

Natasha is a 23-year-old married university student. She was raised by her mother, who is a conservative Pentecostal Christian. Natasha participated enthusiastically in her church and attended a Christian high school; in her words, her “whole life was centred around the church.” During high school, she found herself inclined to liberal socio-political beliefs, and concluded that she might prefer a more liberal mainline church environment. She still wholeheartedly identified as Christian and retained many fundamentalist beliefs such as the necessity and exclusivity of salvation through Jesus.

Natasha grew intellectually as she went through university, but kept her faith compartmentalized until she began experiencing severe depression. Within the context of being treated for depression, she began examining her thoughts more rationally than she had in the past. As she did this, she began to evaluate her religious beliefs in a new, more objective way.
At the same time, she had become frustrated with God, who continued to seem distant and inaccessible despite her sincere efforts to connect with him.

Natasha began reading about Christian history, and was astonished by facts about the Bible that she had never learned. Although she searched for arguments that would reinforce her faith, she instead found more and more evidence that Christianity was human-made (like other religions). She experienced a turning point when she discovered that early Christian art depicted Jesus as a magician with a wand. Natasha was struck by the ridiculousness of this image, and it suddenly seemed ludicrous to believe that the Christian myth was literally true. She began reading about science and atheism and connecting with other unbelievers on a free thought internet forum. She eventually concluded that she no longer believed in God’s existence.

Natasha’s friends and non-Christian husband validated her shift in beliefs, claiming that Christianity had seemed a strange “fit” for her liberal opinions. Natasha herself felt relieved to no longer feel guilty for the ways in which she did not fit the Christian mould, and acquired an enhanced drive to make the most of life.

**Participant 9: “Amber”**

Amber is a 28-year old unmarried university student. As a child, she was immersed in increasingly charismatic forms of Christianity after her father left the family and her mother searched for more “real” manifestations of faith. As a late adolescent and young adult, Amber became very involved with a charismatic church that encouraged a passionate, demonstrative experience of faith and emphasized the importance of protecting oneself from demons.

Attending the funeral of a man from her church led Amber to an intuitive “turning point”; she sensed that her church had been too focused on the wrong things (they were overly concerned with the best or “right” ways to be spiritual). She became disillusioned with the
church altogether, and began searching for “a better way” (although she continued to attend church for some time). She was still devoutly Christian, but no longer associated God with the church.

Soon after this turning point, Amber began to date a non-Christian. Despite warnings from her church about the dire consequences of such a relationship, Amber was drawn to this young man and felt compelled to find out what their relationship could be like. They fell in love, and she experienced this love as intensely “real”; in comparison, her relationship with God via the church began to seem complicated and difficult. Doubts about Christianity’s veracity grew as discussions with her boyfriend led to various realizations about her faith (for instance, she began to see the Bible’s dictates as arbitrary rules rather than loving guidelines). As she began to apply logic to her beliefs about the spiritual realm, the afterlife, and God and Satan, she stopped believing in these concepts one by one.

Relinquishing belief in God resulted in traumatic emotional reactions and prolonged, intense symptoms of depression. Amber now understands these reactions as symptoms of her brain’s efforts to adopt an entirely new worldview and to cope with the loss of her best friend (Jesus). Amber experienced judgment, cruelty, and guilt trips from members of her family and church, but believes the benefits of “finding her own way” are worth the painful journey. Pursuing a university degree in philosophy was a key healing factor for Amber, and her passion for science, philosophy, and inquiry now supplies her with “spiritual” meaning.

**Domain 1: Experience of Christianity**

To make sense of the experience of losing faith, it is crucial to have an understanding of the nature and meaning of the faith that was lost. The findings in this domain provide this important context. They support contentions that have been made in previous chapters about the nature of fundamentalist Christianity, and demonstrate that participants’ faith was important to
them in diverse ways. They also reveal that faith was accompanied by certain problematic by-products (primarily guilt and its variations), and that participants were aware (sometimes acutely aware) of ways in which they were not like other Christians. The seven themes in this domain – Immersion in Christianity, Relationship with God, Christian identity and worldview, Guilt, Fulfilment of psychological needs, Deviations from the Christian norm, and Dealing with cognitive dissonance – will be described in turn. Numbered section headings represent superordinate themes (shared by all or nearly all participants); italicized in-text headings represent subthemes. An overview of themes in this domain is provided by Table 2.

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Superordinate themes and subthemes within the Experience of Christianity

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1. Immersion in Christianity

All participants but one had fundamentalist Christian parents, grew up in the church, and “accepted Jesus” in childhood. As children and adolescents, most participants had little reason or opportunity to question Christian doctrine. In Natasha’s words: “I didn't really think too much about it. I mean, why would you, right? You’re just used to it.” Christianity provided structure for participants’ family dynamics, social and intellectual pursuits, and lifestyles; it left few (if any) spheres of life untouched.

Interaction of family and religion. Some participants experienced dramatic and impactful shifts in family religious dynamics over the course of their childhoods. For instance, Amber’s mother began searching for a more “real” (demonstrative and emotional) form of faith after Amber’s father left the family; as a young teen, Amber was brought into a much more charismatic denomination than the Mennonite tradition in which she had been raised until that point. Despite feeling somewhat frightened by this new style of worship, Amber was compelled by her mother to participate within the new church:

My mom was just like, well, you've gotta go up [to be healed by a visiting evangelist]. And it wasn't even a choice, especially when my mom said something, because she's very controlling, manipulative. And especially now that this was part of the church, if they were gonna offer something to you, you took it.

Chris’s family had been non-religious until he was ten years old, at which point his aunt (who herself had undergone a dramatic conversion to Christianity) convinced his parents of the truth and importance of the Christian message. Later, Chris’s family experienced a drop in their standard of living when his father quit his steady job at a liquor store, under pressure from his aunt and the church to distance himself from the sinfulness of liquor. Chris described feeling resentful of his father for making that choice and bringing financial hardship upon the family.
As a child and adolescent, Marianne witnessed a dramatic interaction of family dynamics and religious beliefs as her mother adopted a charismatic form of faith that was viewed “intensely negatively” by the more traditional denomination held dear by her father. This led to bitter fights between Marianne’s parents and required Marianne to “navigate between [her] parents’ religion”:

I started to go along with [my mother], although my father was really upset about that. And there was an awful fight about that; in fact, my father wrote me this dreadful letter that I’d chosen the wrong faith – I think that's probably around when I was 14. And he actually signed it “Robert Smith” instead of “Dad.” ... It was this feeling that I'd abandoned my dad's faith and taken my mom's faith.

Even if their families were strongly Christian, many participants mentioned a point of transition, described as “becoming a Christian,” “being saved,” or “asking Jesus into my heart.” This gesture of choosing the Christian faith for themselves was treated as a key rite of passage for several participants (for instance, Brad referenced the exact date of his conversion – May 5, 1990 – demonstrating to the interviewer that this is an important milestone in the story of his faith).

Social and intellectual insularity. Consistent with accounts in the literature, many participants experienced fundamentalist Christianity as an encapsulated world. Amber found a positive social niche within her church and progressively increased her involvement until she was going to church three or four times a week. She self-segregated from her school peers, who in turn kept their distance:

Even though I went to a Christian high school, they weren't Christian enough; they didn't understand me enough. And because I was going to what was considered a very demonstrative church, and the other people I knew from my Christian school were all pretty traditional, it was a little ‘out there’ for them.
Although some participants were intellectually keen and self-described voracious readers, they often limited themselves to reading and thinking within the realm of Christianity. Jim reflected:

It's interesting how little secular reading I had ever, ever done. I mean, other than some fiction books and occasionally a business book, because it was about leadership that I could apply in the church somehow, all I read was theology, really. Or Christian stuff.

Stan, who worked for an organization whose purpose was to discredit Darwinism and promote intelligent design, reported:

Believe it or not, ... you don't actually do a lot of reading of opposition materials, except for just reading them in order to write a response, to argue against them. But you don't actually think through what they're saying a lot of the time.

Several participants echoed this theme in the context of personal conversations: the expected stance when talking to non-Christians was to remain relatively closed to their opinions, and to look for opportunities to offer a Christian perspective. Chris, Stan, Amber, and Lea were also warned about the dangers of going to university, and particularly of certain areas of study (religious studies and philosophy). Lea recalled:

People in the [church] warned me not to go to university. Because, y’know, the devil is alive there. And people go to university and they lose their faith, especially if you take religious studies kinds of courses. ’Cause they’ll teach you ... what the devil wants you to know, and you’ll lose your faith.

Behavioural expectations. Another common theme in participants’ accounts of their Christian experience was the presence of standards, expectations, and responsibilities. These norms were communicated via sermons, church or organization policies, and conversations with church leaders and other respected Christian elders. Standards ranged from implied to very explicit, and covered a wide range of behaviours – even those that are not commonly considered spiritual. As Jim remembered about the organization for which he worked:
They had very strict weight requirements back then, and if you were to be a good Christian witness, you needed to be in good physical health as well. ... I mean, they didn't kick you off staff for that, but there was a lot of pressure constantly - you're overweight; you need to lose that weight; you're not being a good witness for Jesus.

Several participants mentioned sex as an activity about which expectations were particularly clear (and difficult to follow). For Amber, who went to a church that emphasized the literal presence and day-to-day influence of demons, the consequences of having premarital sex with a non-Christian were extreme and devastating:

The absolute worst, worst thing that could possibly happen is if I decided to have sex with this guy. Because then all of his demons, all of his generational demons that his parents had, anything that he had was then automatically going to be mine. ... And you're done, that's it, you only get one chance to make that choice.

Although each participant’s experience of Christianity was unique in ways that will emerge throughout this chapter, participants all indicated that their Christianity was not limited to church on Sunday morning – it was a deeply ingrained belief system that had wide-ranging implications for the emotional, intellectual, spiritual, social, occupational, and physical spheres of their lives. The all-importance of faith was underscored by Marianne:

I kind of always had a feeling like it was one plus one plus one equals the Holy Trinity. Not three. It was just so much part of who I was, who we [as a family] were. ... It was more important for me to understand church dogma than it was for me to understand math.

2. Relationship with God

A central fundamentalist teaching is the importance of a personal relationship with God or with Jesus. The participants varied in the extent to which they saw themselves as having had such a relationship. A spectrum emerges in the participants’ characterizations of God, ranging from God as distant and impersonal to God as an intimate confidant. On the latter end of the spectrum is Amber, who experienced Jesus as her ever-present best friend and described herself as “hardcore in love with him”: 
I told him everything. I talked to him every day. All day, every day. ... I just saw him as, God is everything. God is all-encompassing, he can be anything that you need him to be. Because he made you. And he made you to need him.

On the opposite end of the spectrum are Stan and Chris, who both experienced God as distant. Stan was a deist – he believed that a supreme God created the universe and “keeps everything going,” but does not intervene in the daily lives of individual humans. Unlike those he labelled “true believers,” Stan and his scientifically-minded colleagues (at an intelligent design organization) did not “buy into” the idea of a personal relationship with God. This is an atypical stance for a fundamentalist Christian, but Stan’s strong commitment to the ideology and political beliefs of fundamentalism meant that he did not question his Christian self-identification.

Chris’s experience of God was also distant, but for different reasons. Although he was aware of the script within his church that said he should experience blessings through his relationship with God, Chris experienced God primarily as a disciplinarian who would hold him responsible for sinful behaviours:

Chris: Jesus was not my friend; he was just the way to get to God. We sang the songs about Jesus walking with me and talking with me, and then there’s that whole “Footprints” poem. But I never felt that way.

Interviewer: And did you feel there was anything wrong with not feeling that way? Or not?

Chris: No, no. 'Cause it was all about, y’know, God will punish you. God was there to give you blessings, but at the same time, punish you. So he's like a father, y’know, a heavenly father. And me and my dad, we didn’t have that great a relationship anyway; he provided me with food and whatnot, and also with spankings. That’s how I viewed God. Um ... naw, there wasn’t any warm fuzzy feelings about God. He was someone to be feared.

The experiences of the other six participants fall between these two ends of the spectrum. Many participants described a simple understanding of a friendly Jesus during their childhood, and a period in their youth during which they were keen to find evidence of God’s presence and

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1 A poem whose message is that the Lord walks beside us through life, carrying us through particularly dark and difficult times.
intervention – for instance, by praying to find lost items or praying for calm nerves before a musical performance. As adults, their relationships with God were sometimes mediated by a specific activity. For instance, Brad connected with God primarily through studying theology and philosophy, and Marianne experienced God most vividly during the emotional experience of worship.

Importantly, participants who did not have intimate and emotional relationships with God articulated an awareness of this concept, and discursively positioned themselves in relation to it (e.g. Stan contrasted himself with “true believers,” and Chris with people who can sense Jesus walking and talking with them). This rhetorical positioning attests to the priority placed upon a relationship with God in fundamentalist communities, and simultaneously demonstrates to the listener that these participants’ experience did not align with the fundamentalist ideal (see the theme of Deviations from the Christian norm, described below).

3. Christian identity and worldview

For all participants, being a Christian shaped and interacted with the way they saw the world, themselves, and what was most important in life.

Resisting “The World.” Ted, Stan, and Chris commented on the message, communicated from the pulpit, that Christians ought to live separately from “The World.” This us-versus-them mentality interacted with their personalities, enhancing their sense of being loners or outsiders. Their isolation was made meaningful by the church’s teachings: being alienated was a normal part of being a good Christian. Chris recalled:

I was always taught that I'm a child of the King. Like, I'm a prince, almost. So I just hung onto that. I just imagined myself as better than [others in my high school], even though I was just this shy boy who didn't get involved in very much.
Several participants refrained from going to movies or school dances, abstained from alcohol, and listened only to Christian music, in order to distance themselves from worldly concerns and focus more fully on God.

The idea that Christians were a righteous minority pitted against an evil world continued to suffuse participants’ worldviews during young adulthood. Attending university for the first time filled Stan with turmoil, because he had been taught that the university was rife with homosexuals, atheists, and other enemies of God. Seeing the triangular rainbow stickers that denoted gay-positive spaces around the campus, Stan felt disconcerted to be “surrounded” by sinful influences.

The importance of protecting oneself from worldly influences was made particularly explicit for Amber by her church’s emphasis on demonic activity. Becoming even peripherally involved in activities that could be considered witchcraft or rebellion, or talking to someone who had participated in these activities, created cracks in a Christian’s “armour” and made him or her vulnerable to the devil’s attacks. When praying for one another, people in her church would accentuate their prayers by stomping on the ground (squishing the demons) or brushing their hands over the person being prayed for (scraping off the demons from the person’s body). Amber’s prayers often focused on requesting protection from demons (e.g. demons of lust or envy) and recruiting the aid of angels, petitioning for extra courage, love, or mercy.

Demonstrating devotion. Some participants recalled the perceived importance of “seeking God”: of learning more about God through studying and meditating on the Bible, and aligning oneself with God’s will through prayer. Similarly, several were driven by a desire to “purify” themselves, or to follow the Bible’s commandments and Jesus’ example more closely.
Ted, who presented in the interview as a reasonable, level-headed, and fairly quiet man, seemed similarly phlegmatic in the practice of his faith:

I tried to do all the things that you're encouraged to do, have daily devotions and all that, which I sometimes didn't succeed at, sometimes probably did. But I did pray a lot, internally at least, and was very, very concerned over issues like God's will for my life and for various decisions that I was facing.

Marianne, whose faith was far more emotional, talked about subsuming herself within God and his will:

If I lay prostrate before the crown of Christ, if I just lay in front of him, and I gave him everything that I was, everything that I am, every part of who I was, that would be this sense of giving my life to something. That was such a powerful thing. Those little hymns – “Take my life and let it be / Consecrated, God, to thee” ... every part of you being a part of God.

By relinquishing her own identity and giving herself fully to God, Marianne became part of the highest and most beautiful purpose imaginable. She later struggled to communicate what this felt like, and stated that “all the explaining in the world just doesn’t do it.” Similarly, when asked how her faith used to arise in her thought life, Amber had difficulty articulating her experience:

I don't know how to describe this, you just basically ask God to take you over. ... You just make yourself, like, an open vessel so that God can, if he sees a need, that he could just kinda slip in you and make you do just the right thing. Like, I always, always, always wanted to be useful to God.

*Internalized Christian priorities.* Participants described striving to devote themselves to pursuits that were most worthy of their time and energy, as dictated by messages received from their Christian context. The activity of witnessing (telling others about one’s faith in hopes of converting them to Christianity) was presented as an important duty for Christians – a duty that several participants experienced as onerous. As Ted explained, if a Christian sincerely believes that non-Christians are destined for hell after death, it becomes his or her moral duty to devote
time and energy to proselytizing. In part because he could not “escape” this logical contingency, Ted joined a missionary organization to spread the gospel in France, India, and Nepal. Other participants simply tried to insert Jesus into conversations with those they encountered in their social lives—however, several experienced guilt over not doing enough witnessing, as will be discussed in the next section.

Several participants mentioned the teaching that their focus ought not to be on temporal, earthly matters, but on their future in heaven. The basis for this doctrine is found in Biblical passages such as Matthew 6:19-21: “Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth ... but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moth and rust do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also” (New International Version). Life was seen as a relatively meaningless “practice round,” postsecondary education was seen as “worldly knowledge” that was less valuable than study of the Bible, and one’s physical body was seen as a sinful vessel to be tolerated until one’s reunion with God in the spiritual realm. In Chris’s words:

When you’re Christian, time here on Earth is like a mist. It’s here, and it’s gone, and you forget about it. Your time is gonna be spent in eternity with God. And that’s where you should be focusing your energies, building up treasures in heaven.

Levels of Christian identity. Christianity was a major component of each participant’s core identity. For Brad and Jim, who worked as ministers, Christianity was their vocation and occupation; it was what they read about, thought about, and talked about for a significant proportion of their time. Similarly, Stan devoted much of his time to raising funds, planning events, and giving lectures for an Intelligent Design organization—an essentially Christian cause. Natasha described Christianity as “everything that I had invested my life in,” and Marianne talked about the pre-eminence of her “Christian” identity:
At that point in time I completely defined myself as Christian. I wouldn't define myself as anything else. I was actively seeking God; I'd pray and I read Scriptures, and I thought of myself doing things for God. Like, I was open to the idea of being a missionary, I was open to the idea of, however it was gonna come, it would come.

For Brad and Ted, Christianity was an integral part of their marriages (identity-within-relationship). Ted and his wife had discussed serving together as missionaries, and Brad remarked that Christianity suffused every aspect of how he and his wife understood each other and spent their time.

Marianne emphasized the centrality of Christianity to her family’s identity. Her parents were extremely devout, and she observed how religion was central to her parents’ moments of deep joy (her father’s open weeping in response to beautiful hymns sung at church) as well as heartbreak (her mother’s faith-based coping after a devastating car accident). As mentioned above, religion also became the root of bitter family strife (over her mother’s “betrayal” by turning to a more charismatic form of faith).

Chris, too, saw Christianity as part of who his family was; however, unlike Marianne, Chris did not identify with the faith as strongly as other family members. This resulted in a sense of separation and alienation from his family. To Chris, being Christian meant ensuring that his family saw him praying and behaving in “godly” ways. He compared himself with his brother, who was more “on fire for God” than he was; he imagined that when they arrived in heaven, his brother would live in a mansion on a hillside while Chris would be relegated to a shack. When Chris eventually resigned himself to his inability to follow God’s rules, he did not consider rejecting his Christian identity; instead, he adopted the identity of an inferior Christian who would not make it to heaven.
Christianity supplied participants with answers to the questions of who they were, why they were here, and how they should spend their time. Regardless of whether participants experienced these answers as beautiful or onerous, they perceived them as largely conclusive.

4. Guilt

Most participants’ retrospective assessment of Christianity’s impact on their lives was mixed – they identified some ways in which Christianity filled a need or enhanced their development, and other ways in which Christianity hampered their potential or caused them to suffer. However, the overall valences of participants’ accounts varied from extremely negative to primarily positive. The next two sections present elements of Christianity that participants experienced as particularly harmful and valuable, successively.

Many participants reported a strong sense of guilt over their various inadequacies as Christians. Jim, in particular, posited that his emotionally sensitive, highly ethical personality led him to take the teachings of Scripture very seriously, to try harder than the average Christian to attain its ideals, and to be plagued by guilt when he fell short of these ideals:

Guilt over habits and behaviours that I couldn’t seem to shift and change, a lot of them related to depression. Outbursts of anger and stuff like this, that I would think, “Oh gosh, it’s so clear – you’re not filled with the Spirit.”

The intensity of Jim’s guilt, and his constant sense that he could never be good enough for God, resulted in inner tension and compartmentalization. This psychological pressure and “emotional trauma” led to the development of a dissociative disorder for which Jim was treated for many years. His personalities represented parts of himself that he could neither accept nor acknowledge because they were incompatible with his Christian identity: for instance, some of his personalities were Satanists, while others were sexual or merely cynical. Dealing with this
dissociative disorder threw Jim’s life into turmoil, particularly since he was concurrently participating in a “deliverance ministry” to exorcise demonic influences from his life.

Jim also talked about experiencing persistent guilt over not witnessing enough, a message that was frequently reinforced by his church and pastor. After he joined the staff of an evangelical organization, he was further inundated with messages that inflamed his guilt:

[When] you're on an airplane, you're never just chatting with somebody beside you in the seat. You're looking for the window to turn it into a conversation about Jesus. And if you don’t, you feel guilty. ‘Cause you should've. ‘Cause that person might step off the plane and die. I remember once ... we had gotten this film from [a missionary organization]. And as part of this film they had this picture of humans walking towards this cliff and just falling, falling, falling into fire. And there's thousands of them, falling off. And then the idea is, you're the one that's to be standing there, warning them. If you don't, their deaths are on your hands. Their eternal deaths. Like the guilt stuff, unbelievable!

Chris also experienced overpowering guilt; however, his guilt centred on the issue of sex. As a teenager, Chris was torn between his growing (sexual) interest in girls and his fear of punishment for his actions (going to hell when he died). He continued to engage in a cycle of forbidden sexual activity, intense guilt, and asking forgiveness until he decided that it was impossible for him to live by God’s standards (and began to reflect seriously upon how he might be able to cope with the conditions in hell).

Although Jim and Chris represent fairly extreme examples, several other participants reported uncertainty about whether they were good enough Christians. Ted used to doubt his fitness for church leadership because of his inconsistent Bible study and prayer habits; Natasha wondered why she did not experience God’s intervention as dramatically as others did; and Amber struggled to decipher God’s expectations:

God was also kind of a strict father figure too, because he had these things that we were and were not supposed to do. So on the one hand, I wanted to please him very much; on the other hand, I was just run ragged trying to figure out what that right thing was.
5. Fulfilment of psychological needs

Christianity and the church filled several important needs for this study’s participants, including needs for support and community, beauty and hope, and achievement and self-esteem.

Support and community. For Natasha, whose single mother suffered from mental illness, Christianity provided her only reliable support system. During frightening times in her childhood, when her mother’s behaviour became erratic and threatening, Natasha coped by asking Jesus for help and by telling herself that God would keep her safe. Amber, whose father was also absent for much of her life, saw her relationship with God supplying emotional needs that were inadequately met by weak parental figures. Jesus became “everything” to her: best friend, father, mother, and older sister.

The church and associated groups provided participants with an important context for social connection. Ted, particularly, emphasized the positive experiences he had within the “vibrant” churches he attended. He described the church as supplying a “smorgasbord of friends” – “all the friends you could ever have.” Within the church context, Ted could meet people with whom he identified and who were at a similar life stage as he and his wife (e.g. when they first started having children). Ted’s friendships were close and enduring, and he has fond memories of his time within specific churches. Ted’s consistent involvement in church leadership – as an elder, or leading Bible study groups – may have reflected a desire to give back to the church community he so enjoyed and appreciated. He also saw the church as a positive influence in his children’s lives – his daughter, for instance, was a high-profile leader within the youth group and the first female to ever conduct a baptism service at that church. Of the church he was attending until he lost his faith, he said: “If there was an example of a church that worked the way one would think churches should, this was it.” The theme of a church functioning “as it
should” was echoed by Marianne, who observed the church’s outpouring of care for her father as he was dying of cancer:

There was always somebody reading the Bible to him, there was always somebody praying with him, somebody who would come and sing for him when he was bedridden. People always brought food to the house, like, there was a huge amount of caring. And I actually was really impressed as an adult, like, wow. That is a church in action. Like, okay, you can't argue against what that looks like.

Beauty and hope. Marianne was unique among the participants in that she was the only one to return to Christianity after rejecting it for the first time. Her longing to return is understandable in light of the poetic, poignant terms in which she describes her experience of Christianity. To Marianne, faith was pure, beautiful, clean, restful, ultimate, certain, perfect, and comforting. Christ provided a “hope of something whole” that she could become, and the experience of worship through music was emotionally impactful:

It was just such a clean and beautiful expression of something so powerfully good, that you were giving praise to God. And you kind of felt tied to ancestors because a lot of, y'know, ‘God of our fathers, holy faith’ – I remember loving singing those songs and feeling very much a part of something.

Upon returning to Christianity, Marianne found a church community that emphasized worship rather than dogma. She described the spirit of these services:

Huge bands playing with incredible music, and people would dance and use those gorgeous ribbons, and there would be poets speaking out. It was really as beautiful as it could be. ... The worship was euphoric, and fed a part of me that I had been longing for, for a long, long time.

Marianne stressed the fact that her relationship with Christ was indescribable and unlike any human relationship. It was predicated on feelings of shame being followed by a “twisty spiritual orgasm” that resulted in a sense of purity before God. She felt overwhelmingly grateful to be a recipient of the undeserved grace offered through Christ, and to be able to enter into communion (spiritual union) with Jesus:
There were moments where it was just relief. The relief of a pure, pure love. I could just imagine my head against Christ's chest and these long dreadlocks [laugh] and his kind, kind eyes and just enormous love for me. Just a sense of belonging, of ... of being one, of merging. With something so sweet and pure and all.

**Achievement and self-esteem.** For Brad, who always experienced a drive to feel intelligent and well-educated, Christianity provided a route by which he could feel intellectually fulfilled. Within a year of his conversion (at age 16), Brad had achieved a much deeper understanding of Christian theology and history than any of his Christian peers. He was fascinated by sophisticated Christian apologetics, and integrated Christian philosophy into his graduate research at secular universities. By becoming an expert in the valued (but circumscribed) domain of Christian theology and philosophy, Brad was able to satisfy his intellectual streak and mitigate the self-esteem threat of being associated with “dumb” Christians.

6. **Deviations from the Christian norm**

Each participant described at least one important way in which he or she was not a “typical” fundamentalist Christian. Although none of the participants present these aberrations as directly causative in their loss of faith, a sense of being “different” from their Christian peers has been integrated into the narrative of their former Christian identity and loss of faith.

**Deliberate distancing.** For Brad, it was of paramount importance to distinguish himself from “dumb Christians,” whom he perceived as ignorant and infantile:

You end up ministering to so many dumb people who are just dumb examples of Christianity ... They have a 5-year-old’s understanding of Christianity, but they’d get in a fistfight with someone who said there's no God. And they just say the most outrageous stereotypical things about, y'know, atheism leads to genocide – just ridiculous, right?

The idea that others might assume he was dumb or uneducated because he was a minister troubled Brad, since he admitted that “a lot of my self-identity was wrapped up in whether or not
I was an intelligent, learned person.” He became known as “the smart Christian guy,” and was dedicated to finding ways of proving that belief in Christianity was rational and well-supported by evidence. His unusually high level of educational achievement (undergraduate degrees in music and religious education, master’s degrees in philosophy and theology, and a doctoral degree in philosophy) provided concrete proof of his intellectual prowess (by secular standards as well as Christian ones). However, he speculated that perhaps his disdain for “stupid” Christians may have masked a deep-down sense that he had more in common with them than he cared to admit, as will be discussed in the section below on cognitive dissonance.

Brad was also keen on “breaking through people’s ideas” and “rejecting stereotypes” of how a minister ought to behave. For instance, he played in pubs with his band, smoked cigarettes and drank alcohol, and raced cars for a hobby. At the same time, he worried about getting caught engaging in these behaviours by church members who might not accept his revisionist ideas. He seemed to relish his image as the “cool” pastor, serving as a hero figure to the teenagers in his youth group. In short, Brad’s stereotypes of Christians as dumb and uncool set the stage for tension within his identity as a Christian; various cognitive and practical strategies for managing that tension contributed to his daily experience of Christianity.

Liberal perspectives. Like Brad, Natasha was an avid reader and had a natural affinity for inquiry and learning. She had a strong sense of how different she was from other Christians:

I've always been really, really curious, and just interested in reading anything I could get my hands on. My friends in high school – I had a lot of really good Christian friends – I'd try to talk to them about things and they're just, 'well, um, that's interesting, but I have no idea what you're on about!' [laugh] Y'know, like their parents were all voting Christian Alliance\(^2\) back when it still existed. And I'm thinking, shouldn't you be voting NDP\(^3\)?

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\(^2\) Likely the Canadian Alliance, a right-wing conservative Canadian political party that existed from 2000-2003.

\(^3\) The New Democratic Party, a left-wing social democratic Canadian political party.
Because, y’know, social justice, and Jesus helping the poor. And they're just looking at me like I'm crazy!

The proclivity for activism that Natasha developed as she began learning about environmental and political issues, and her discomfort with her church’s conservative stance on issues such as abortion and gay rights, contributed to a growing sense that she was out-of-place.

Although Lea’s parents were chaplains, they were known within their denomination for being accepting and nonjudgmental of gay individuals (in contrast with the prevailing attitude within the church). Lea developed similarly unorthodox perspectives on gay rights, and was unafraid to share her opinions with others in the church. As she went through adolescence, her personality was increasingly characterized by an inclination to independent thought, nonconformity, and activism. This sometimes created tension with her faith, as she was part of a particularly structured denomination (members wear a uniform and sign declarations of commitment to the faith). Lea walked a fine line, trying to remain true to her sense of integrity while satisfying the requirements of her church:

The senior soldier declaration thing you have to sign – it would be hilarious to look at it now, because all the way through I was, like, crossing out words, and ‘I don't know about that’ and re-writing things [laugh]. I mean, even just gender bias and stuff like that. But I still was trying to stay within that because, to step outside that was to lose everything right ... so you try and find a way to stay in. If they’ll accept me with my things crossed out and stuff, then okay.

Ted recalls being inclined to scepticism since childhood, and throughout the interview he presented himself as a logical, pragmatic individual who was willing to reject the dominant Christian view if it was inconsistent with his own best interpretation of the available evidence. His openness to seeing shades of gray is demonstrated in his stance towards evolution. Although he was aware that fundamentalist Christians were expected to discount evolution, and he diligently attended Christian debates and lectures on the topic, Ted eventually concluded that:
First of all, there was no evil conspiracy to preclude God and teach evolution ... evolution was based on science, and for the most part, people that taught evolution, there was really no connection with their faith or with their lack of faith or with any conspiracy. It was just how it was. They were just people that believed in science.

Ted recalled another incident that demonstrates his prioritization of integrity over the politics of religious allegiance. He once attended a debate between Dwayne Gish, a creation science heavyweight, and one of Ted’s biology professors, a liberal Christian who agreed to argue the side of evolution. The professor was “torn to shreds,” since the debate was less about facts than about scoring rhetorical points by whatever means possible. Ted’s opinion contrasted sharply with that of other audience members, creating a moment of non-identification with other Christians:

I remember being very, very ashamed of my fellow Christians. And being thoroughly disgusted with Dwayne Gish. ... It was a set-up from the beginning. This guy that agreed to debate him had no idea of what he was getting into; it was a very one-sided, very unfair setup. But anyway, it pleased a lot of the people in the crowd, I guess, me not included.

Amber was guardedly open to the possibility of having discussions with non-Christians and listening for the truth within their perspectives. This attitude was “outrageous” within her church, which taught that listening to others’ viewpoints could defile or weaken a Christian’s faith:

Even back then I was fairly philosophical, so I tried to understand that God was gonna show himself to me in many, many ways ... if you were Buddhist or something like that, I believed you were definitely going to hell, but ... it wasn't too far of a stretch for me to think that if I talked to somebody who was going to hell that God could still show me something through what they had to say.

Struggling to connect with God. Even before her liberal views began to emerge, Natasha struggled with an inability to “hear God’s voice,” a normative experience within her church. Despite her earnest efforts to learn the secrets of connecting with God, Natasha never felt confident that she was following the proper steps:
I really beat myself up over it, because, y’know, clearly I wasn’t a good enough Christian, or God didn’t like me, or whatever. I think it did affect me, especially when everyone else in your entire life is like, “But it’s normal, and it should happen to you, and if you just pray a little harder,” or “Maybe there’s sin in your life, and that’s why God’s not talking to you.”

Brad also sensed that he did not fit in with other Christians because prayer did not fill him with “incredible joy”; his faith tended to be manifest through study rather than prayer. Despite the sincerity of his belief, Brad speculated that his connection with God was less personal-feeling than that of other evangelical Christians.

Ongoing, painful frustration with her inability to believe as strongly as her peers was a major element of Lea’s experience of Christianity. She recalled:

One of the overwhelming feelings that I remember is just ‘what’s wrong with me’ ... We’d go on youth retreats for a weekend, and on Sunday morning they’d have the call to front and I’d be in tears, but not for the reason everybody else – I don’t know why they were in tears, but I was in tears because I wasn’t feeling what they were feeling.

Lea described feeling as though she were “on the outside looking in,” wishing desperately that she could experience a deep conviction of Christianity’s truth. She felt as though the more she searched for that experience, the more elusive it became.

*Deism or non-commitment.* As already discussed, Stan and Chris did not have close relationships with God; such a relationship is central to the ideals of fundamentalist Christianity. Stan, who was highly sceptical, experienced his scientific-mindedness as incompatible with faith in a God who answers prayers and performs miracles. Although he did interact with people who thought that prayer can influence daily life (e.g. his mother), Stan was never “one of those people that believed in a personal God.” He strongly endorsed the political ideals of Christianity and sincerely believed in a deist God, and was surrounded by likeminded scientists at the Intelligent Design organization for which he worked. Chris was aware of the Christian ideals for which he was supposed to be striving, but they did not resonate for him:
I wasn't really on fire for God, but I believed it all. You have these other people in the church that, all they do is church stuff – singing and street corner preaching – and we're all taught to aim for that kind of spirituality. But I never wanted that.

Despite identifying ways in which they were different from other Christians, participants discursively rejected the interpretation that their faith was not deep or sincere. They achieved this by emphasizing their efforts to retain their faith in spite of their atypical inclinations. Brad provided the most explicit example of this rhetorical accomplishment as he anticipated – and rejected – the possible interpretation that he was never fully committed to Christianity:

I always felt a little bit like I didn't totally fit in with Christians. And I don't know if someone would say, ‘oh, I can see from that a precursor that you’d lose your faith someday – you never totally clicked in.’ Because I think I really, I believed to the extent that any Christian believes. I think I really, really believed.

The participants achieve a delicate balance in their accounts. Portraying themselves as sincere and dutiful Christians is important in order to demonstrate the magnitude of change entailed by their loss of faith. However, pointing to ways in which they were not typical Christians provides evidence of consistency throughout their narrative, and supports their continuity of identity (i.e., they are the same people now as they were within Christianity).

7. Dealing with cognitive dissonance

Even before participants began dealing with the issues that would eventually lead them to reject Christianity, several experienced ongoing struggles with particular elements of their faith. Many participants engaged in fairly sophisticated mental gymnastics, creating unconscious safeguards that allowed them to preserve their beliefs in the face of contradictory scientific, philosophical, or “gut-sense” evidence. For instance, there were certain parts of the Bible that Jim avoided in his preaching – the story of Abraham being asked to kill his son Isaac as a test of faith, or the story of God giving Satan permission to destroy Job’s life. Jim said of these stories, “I look back now and see why I didn’t touch them – ‘cause I couldn’t. I couldn’t make sense of
them; they seemed to portray a vindictive, petty, almost evil God. So I just avoided them.”

Similarly, Jim “never really thought about evolution,” since a part of him knew that looking at the evidence would yield the “wrong answer.” Since that would be disastrous for his faith, he simply ignored or avoided the issue altogether.

Because of his conviction that Christian theology would always be borne out by scientific evidence, provided the right logic was applied, Brad devoted significant energy to grasping the scientific ideas that are used to support creationism. Although he became adept at reinterpreting evidence to support his own beliefs, this exercise eventually smacked of intellectual dishonesty:

Even as a Christian I realised, I’m really sticking my head in the sand about this. ... I might win a debate about it, even, but, back of my mind? ... I think I kinda know that evolution is true.

Another unwelcome realization that eventually crept into the back of Brad’s mind was a sense that the “cutting edge of intellectual life” was not located within Christianity. For Brad, a Christian whose self-worth was tied up in intellectual accomplishment, this was a particularly threatening notion; rather than face it, he delved deeper into Christian philosophy and turned to new Christian intellectual heroes.

Most participants were highly educated individuals, having at least one university degree. Several mentioned keeping their faith compartmentalized, not subjecting it to the same standards of critical thought that they applied to the rest of their thought life. Natasha recalled:

I was taking different classes, and you learn about logic and all those pesky things that get in the way of beliefs that are based on blind faith [laugh]. But I still just kind of kept it compartmentalised, right – I had my faith and then I had logic. And the two shall never meet.

Similarly, Stan used the metaphor of “keeping two sets of books,” and Jim talked about keeping the different realms of one’s life (e.g. one’s business dealings and one’s Christianity) distinct
from one another. He used the metaphor of a switch: upon moving from one realm to another,
“all that stuff clicks off” and one’s thinking becomes radically different.

Many participants’ experiences of Christianity included an ever-present tension, stemming from deep gut-sense hunches that, if acknowledged, would have jeopardized their faith. Jim described experiencing an internal fear that warned him, “don’t penetrate the system; don’t think too deeply.” He recalled reading a book that provided justifications for every apparent contradiction in the Bible (in retrospect, he commented that the author’s logic was “extremely convoluted”). At the time, he was happy to simply trust that someone had found viable explanations for troublesome passages of Scripture.

For other participants, discomfort with parts of their Christian faith emerged in the context of witnessing. After serving with a missionary organization in India and Nepal for two years, Ted returned to Canada with a vague unease about proselytizing. He recalled visiting a rural area in Nepal and being struck by the vast differences between his own lifestyle and worldview and the villagers’. These differences were so extreme that he found it difficult to comprehend “what made them tick,” even as human beings. Although Ted could not clearly articulate why this bothered him, he described it as a “dissonance”; one might speculate that he could no longer believe it was moral to impose his own truth upon people with whom he was utterly unable to relate.

Lea recalled going on a “missions trip” to witness among First Nations children; when the children asked her if they would go to hell if they rejected the Christian message, Lea’s response was noncommittal. Although she was aware that her church’s interpretation of the Bible was clear on the matter – yes, without accepting Jesus, the children would be destined for hell – she could not bring herself to truly believe it (or to convey it to the children). Brad, too,
eventually realized that he “never totally believed in hell” (although he certainly thought he did). While he was preaching on certain topics, he would experience a slight twinge of integrity. “You kinda know,” this small voice said, “deep in the back of your head, that this is stupid.”

**Summary: Experience of Christianity**

This chapter has presented and explicated the themes of participants’ experience of Christianity. Christianity provided the taken-for-granted context of participants’ early lives, structuring their assumptions about themselves, others, and the world. Participants described both positive and negative elements of their faith, as well as ways in which they were aware of being different than other Christians and ways in which they had to compartmentalize and avoid thoughts that might threaten their belief. The latter two elements provide a rhetorical or narrative foundation for the transition out of faith, which is the focus of the next chapter.
CHAPTER V
RESULTS, PART 2

Domain 2: Transition out of Christianity

Although each participant’s story of losing faith and leaving Christianity is unique, all stories had five themes in common; these themes are listed with their subthemes in Table 3.
Themes in this domain are necessarily more process-oriented than those in other domains because of the sequential nature of a transition.

Table 3
Superordinate themes and subthemes within the Transition out of Christianity

<table>
<thead>
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<th>Domain 2: Transition out of Christianity</th>
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<tr>
<td>1. Increasing tension</td>
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<td>2. Crisis or catalyst</td>
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<td>3. Emotional shifts</td>
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<td>i. Frustration and betrayal</td>
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<td>ii. Weakening identification with the church</td>
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<td>iii. Intuitive problems with theology</td>
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<td>iv. Lessening dependence on God</td>
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<td>v. Troubled integrity</td>
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<tr>
<td>i. New realizations about Christianity</td>
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<tr>
<td>ii. New realizations about science</td>
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<td>iii. Logical and philosophical problems with the faith</td>
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<tr>
<td>5. Acknowledging unbelief</td>
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Some participants’ paths from belief to unbelief were long and convoluted; for others, the change was relatively abrupt and unidirectional. Some had been profoundly dissatisfied with the faith for years, while others were relatively content within Christianity until a crisis event disturbed their worldview. For Chris, losing faith in his late twenties was the final step in a long transitional process: he stopped attending church in high school, and had not lived by fundamentalist behavioural standards for years (for instance, he had moved in with his girlfriend, which was viewed intensely negatively by his Christian family members). Nevertheless, he continued to believe in God until a catalyst event finally allowed him to explore the possibility of
atheism. Natasha’s process was a similarly gradual progression away from her fundamentalist roots. She first turned to more liberal churches in an attempt to reconcile her faith and her socio-political beliefs, then stopped attending church altogether (in the midst of a depressive episode). These participants’ journey could be visually represented by a relatively gradual and steady slope, upon which key catalyzing moments can be plotted (see Figure 1).

In contrast, some participants’ transition was relatively sudden, and surprised many people in their lives (including themselves). Brad was outwardly and inwardly committed to Christianity until God failed to meet his emotional needs during a debilitating depressive episode. After this disillusionment, Brad’s loss of faith and departure from Christianity took place over the course of months (rather than years, as was the case for many other participants; see Figure 2).

Certain participants’ journeys were especially complex, characterized by efforts to return to the faith in a modified form, discrepancies between personal beliefs and religious activities, and oscillation between belief and unbelief. To give a sense of one such journey, a visual representation of Marianne’s transition is provided in Figure 3. These visual representations are not based on numerical data; they are heuristics designed to demonstrate the variation in participants’ trajectories from belief to unbelief. The remainder of this chapter is devoted to the essence of the experience of losing faith, as represented by the five themes of Increasing tension, Crisis or catalyst, Emotional shifts, Intellectual shifts, and Acknowledging unbelief.
Figure 1. Visual representation of Natasha’s trajectory from belief to unbelief. This figure is not based on numerical data, but illustrates the gradual path, marked by a series of milestones, taken by Natasha’s loss of faith.
Figure 2. Visual representation of Brad’s trajectory from belief to unbelief. This figure is not based on numerical data, but illustrates Brad’s relatively sudden loss of faith following a long period of steady belief. After the onset of his depression (point D), Brad’s faith eroded rapidly.
Figure 3. Visual representation of Marianne’s trajectory from belief to unbelief. This figure is not based on numerical data, but illustrates Marianne’s erratic path through faith and loss of faith. The shaded areas represent times when Marianne was not participating in organized Christianity. Point B represents her father’s death, and the two discrepant dotted lines that emerge following that point represent her faith (or longing for faith) and intellectual belief.
1. Increasing tension

The theme of being different from other Christians, or of struggling with parts of faith, was an important element of participants’ experience of Christianity (see the Domain 1 theme of Deviations from the Christian norm). This theme continues in Domain 2 as Increasing tension. The boundaries between the themes of Deviations from the Christian norm and Increasing tension are indistinct, since the domains grade into one another. However, while the former is characterized by deviations that participants treated as challenges to be managed within Christianity, the latter carries a sense of impending change. Problems with the faith were accumulating, and participants knew their solutions were tenuous.

For some participants, this mounting tension took the form of inadequate answers to theological questions. A particularly salient problem, mentioned by several participants, was theodicy – the question of why an all-loving and all-powerful God allows human suffering. In Jim’s words:

I read voraciously on that issue, and never found a book or an answer that intellectually satisfied me. And very consciously basically got to the point of saying, “I don’t know how to reconcile this. It doesn’t make sense to me. We just have to trust that somehow God will make it all worthwhile.”

Other participants similarly found themselves with no choice but to accept “platitudes or excuses” (Ted’s words) as imperfect explanations for weighty problems. These trite explanations – “it’s a mystery, and we don’t understand all this, and God’s greater than us” – were unsatisfying, but no superior alternatives were available. When his mother died suddenly, Ted found it difficult to accept the Christian claim that this tragedy was part of God’s plan:

It’s a real stretch to get your head around how this is gonna be good. Y’know, what good is there in this, an untimely death? I mean, it happens all the time, and it’s part of life, so that’s understandable from just a human point of view. But to have to get your head around this other whole part of, y’know, God is all-powerful and he’s all-loving – those two things just don't work.
As he coped with his mother’s death, Ted experienced a sense of detachment from his faith. Although he was aware of the Christian ideas that were supposed to supply him with meaning and comfort, he observed that they were not particularly salient in the midst of his grief:

> I remember thinking, this belief in God just doesn’t do anything for me in this. So what if she’s in heaven or whatever; there’s really no great comfort to that, to *me*. ... And I kinda was looking at it almost in a detached way, saying, it sure isn’t helping *me*; I don’t know about anybody else.

Although Ted did not lose his faith until many years later, this experience added to the building tension that came to characterize his faith. To use Ted’s analogy, it represented one of the straws that eventually and collectively “broke the camel’s back.”

For other participants, acquiring new knowledge about the world contributed to the accumulation of tension. Although intellectual shifts that were directly involved in losing faith will be discussed as a separate theme, some participants, such as Lea, made efforts to integrate their newfound discoveries with their faith. Upon learning at university about the human processes involved in the Bible’s compilation, Lea was anxious to discuss these ideas with her peers and leaders at church. However, she found them unwilling to engage in dialogue, and felt increasingly marginalized. In her words, she experienced a sense of “frustration around having this information that I was gathering, and nobody else really wanted to hear it. And so the rift begins in the community, and you start to be on the outs.”

Whether theological, intellectual, or personality-related, tensions eventually accumulated to uncomfortable levels. Most participants seemed aware that a crisis might be imminent, and some engaged in efforts to “shore up” their faith (Natasha’s phrase). For instance, Amber tried joining a fringe Christian group that rejected the doctrines of sin and hell, and Natasha scoured the Internet for examples of more sophisticated and convincing apologetics. The tensions
persisted despite these efforts, and created a “dividing wedge” (Natasha’s phrase) that began to estrange the participants from their faith and church.

2. Crisis or catalyst

Although cognitive dissonance, doubts, and other tensions often accumulated over the course of many years, most participants identified a particular incident with which their loss of faith “began.” For some, this watershed incident took the form of a dramatic crisis. Marianne’s initial departure from Christianity was triggered by an intensely painful betrayal by her boyfriend and other individuals associated with the church. At that point, Marianne experienced God as being “in cahoots” with the people who had violated her trust so deeply. She immediately and categorically rejected Christianity and everything associated with it:

It was like something twisted in me, and I couldn’t look at anything in the same way. ... I was a youngster, I was 19 or 20, and it actually was like a twist where I just went - I can’t, I don’t want, I just don’t wanna think about this stuff any more. I’m pushing it and shoving it away from my mind.

Other participants’ transition out of Christianity began innocuously. Ted had long been struggling with theological contradictions, but not until a casual conversation with a friend cast his doubts as alarming did he realize their implications for his integrity as a Christian:

He asked me, ... what percentage would you say you are, of belief versus doubt, or faith versus doubt, or whatever. And I said, well, I think I’m about 70 percent or 80 percent doubt. And he seemed kinda shocked at that. And to me, I didn’t think that would be shocking. ... I kinda thought about that after, and [thought], that’s kinda strange for me to be an elder in the church and be at that position. So I thought, well, I probably should step down from that.

As he resigned from his eldership and committed to investigating his doubts more carefully, Ted’s journey to unbelief had begun.

Some participants did not identify a specific event that marked the beginning of their transition to unbelief. Stan began to notice inconsistencies, one by one, that eventually troubled
him enough to initiate a transition process. The account of his transition therefore has no clear beginning, but is characterized by miniature milestones (such as a particularly memorable point made by the opposing side during a creation versus evolution debate).

For two participants (Jim and Amber), loss of faith was preceded by a major shift within Christianity. Jim described the incident as a paradox: “My real start of moving away from God began with a genuine miracle from God.” As he was preparing to lead a Bible study arguing against the legitimacy of speaking in tongues, Jim (to his amazement) spontaneously began to speak in tongues. This experience prompted him to carefully study the theological evidence for charismatic phenomena, and he concluded that they were supported by Scripture. Since his church was strongly opposed to charismatic expressions of faith, Jim resigned from his pastorate and began serving at a different church. Although he remained a strong Christian, he came to associate this experience with the beginning of the end.

Amber’s departure from Christianity began with a disconcerting experience at the funeral of a man from her congregation. A series of realizations about this man’s life led to an upheaval of her assumptions about her church; she felt ashamed of her church’s misguided pride and exclusivity, and sensed that she had been focusing on the wrong things, obsessing over the minutiae of holiness rather than simply loving others. Amber began to experience her church as “a big joke,” and began searching for “a better way.” She felt less and less confident that following church doctrine was the best way to become the person God intended her to be:

I started saying, no, there’s something more inside. Like, your conscience will tell you when you’re doing something right or wrong. You don’t need to find a Bible verse to tell you if what you’re doing is the right or wrong thing.
Although she still emphatically identified as Christian, Amber began distancing herself from the established church and embracing an individualized faith. This break from religion may have paved the way for her eventual loss of faith in God.

For three participants, loss of faith began with a period of severe depression. Jim and Brad both became disillusioned when God failed to intervene during the pain of their depression (this experience will be described in association with the next theme, Emotional shifts). Depression played a different role in Natasha’s journey: as part of receiving psychological help for her depression, Natasha was taught how to appraise her moods and negative thinking patterns in a rational and balanced way. As the depression lifted, Natasha spontaneously began to apply her newfound clarity of thought to her religious beliefs – something she had never done before. Once she began submitting her longstanding beliefs to objective appraisal, intellectual shifts eventually led to her loss of faith.

**Interaction of emotional and intellectual factors**

Before moving to a discussion of Emotional and Intellectual shifts, the central themes of Domain 2, a comment on the temporal interaction of these two themes is warranted. A common pattern that emerges from participants’ narratives is that of an emotional, intuitive, or developmental shift paving the way for an intellectual reappraisal of beliefs. In other words, something needed to be emotionally or intuitively wrong with a participant’s faith before it became permissible, possible, or conceivable to question Christianity’s facticity.

Most participants had long been aware of the ideas (such as evolution) that eventually contributed to their loss of faith. When their commitment to the faith was strong, they dealt with these ideas using strategies of compartmentalization and avoidance (see the Domain 1 theme of Dealing with cognitive dissonance). However, if an emotional factor had weakened their
devotion – if they were feeling frustrated with God or detached from him – they were more likely to passively consider, or actively seek, faith-threatening information. Brad articulated this contingency as follows, in the context of his depression:

I just constantly begged God to help me, ... give me that feeling that there is meaning. I just wanted to jump off a building all the time. And he totally didn't come through at all. Like, didn't come through at all. And I think the result of that for me was – it gave me the ability to sort of take off that Christian perspective, that way of interpreting everything in my world, and to ... look at it from another perspective.

Further explication of this pattern of emotional shifts paving the way for intellectual shifts can be provided by principles of cost and benefit. If emotional needs are being adequately met within Christianity, an individual would be motivated to ignore or assimilate faith-threatening information (such as the theory of evolution). This motivation is often supplemented by messages from the church that faith-threatening information is the work of Satan, who attempts to deceive Christians into doubting God. If an individual is only mildly discontent within the faith, he or she may continue to resist faith-threatening messages out of fear of being misled by Satan. Furthermore, people are generally reluctant to admit that a belief system they have advocated and defended for years might be false.

With these psychological safeguards in place, it stands to reason that individuals would not become receptive to faith-threatening knowledge until they had reached a significant level of frustration with, or emotional disconnection from, their faith. Natasha’s experience serves as an example. Not only had God remained silent despite her sincere efforts to hear his voice, but he had provided no comfort as she coped with depression. She felt “fed up” and resentful, and began to explore liberal scholarship about the Bible and Christian history. Although she was aware that these heretical viewpoints could be the voice of Satan, she explained: “I was just so frustrated with God that I didn’t care any more if it was Satan talking to me. At least Satan
makes sense! So, y’know, God – if you have any arguments to defend yourself, I’m all ears.”

Once her frustration had reached a critical level (an emotional shift), God lost his privileged status. His existence was now up for debate, and Natasha was ready to consider evidence from both sides. At that point, intellectual shifts became central to the transition; however, these intellectual shifts could not occur until an emotional shift had opened the door to questioning.

3. Emotional and intuitive shifts

Frustration and betrayal. For some participants, loss of faith was strongly associated with God’s unmet promises and failure to meet their needs. The most poignant examples are those of Jim and Brad, former pastors who experienced periods of severe clinical depression.

During Brad’s depression, he was “despondent” and contemplated suicide. Desperate, he beseeched God to provide a tangible sense that life had meaning. He rhetorically demonstrated the “realness” of his prayers, the absence of flourish or religious pretence, by using frank, un-Christian language: “I need you to cut through the bullshit and just meet my emotional needs right now.” He considered it God’s responsibility to provide comfort: after all, the Bible presents God as a perfect father who will always rescue and protect his children. Throughout his account, Brad emphasized his sense of betrayal and letdown when God “didn’t do anything” to help; “he just totally didn’t come through at all.” The fact that “God wasn’t there for me in my time of need” was the fundamental crux of Brad’s loss of faith. Brad used metaphor to powerfully convey his sense of abandonment:

It was like being in a dark cave and calling out and there being no-one there, … and realizing all of a sudden, whoa, I’m all alone. I thought I was with somebody and I’m alone in this cave. I don’t know where I am.
Jim’s depression was undiagnosed, and lasted for about six years. During this period, he felt miserable, angry, hopeless, and utterly alone. He wondered how God could allow him to experience such acute emotional pain, and he desperately yearned to feel loved by God:

It’s hard to express how much I wanted that. Because I believed that was the solution to everything. If I knew God loved me, I could put the problems of pain and suffering away; it would cure my own emptiness in my heart and transform my life. And really believed that was the key to everything. So I’m calling out to God consistently for this, asking to be prayed for for it, etcetera, nothing’s happening, nothing’s happening, nothing’s happening.

Jim continued to search for an experience of God’s love, since he was convinced that the Bible clearly promised this experience to believers. His intense seeking continued for years, to no avail; eventually, he began to doubt the Bible’s promises. His reaction is consistent with basic principles of learning theory: response extinction will occur in the repeated absence of reward.

Brad described a similar experience:

At a point you start getting kind of like, [sigh], I can’t depend on God. Like, okay, well, I’ve been praying now for days. And it’s just gotten worse and worse worse worse worse worse; well, my motivation to pray is going down …

Learning that one cannot depend on God is the very essence of losing faith. If God cannot be trusted to meet one’s needs, he becomes irrelevant. Although loss of belief may or may not follow, irreparable damage may have been done to the faith relationship.

**Weakening identification with the church.** For various reasons, several participants became disillusioned with the church and with other Christians; they were plagued by a growing sense that the institution of Christianity was not consistent with their “true selves.” Marianne’s story provides a particularly rich example of this subtheme. After her initial rejection of Christianity, Marianne eventually experienced a deep longing to believe in God again. However, the identity she had forged during her absence from Christianity seemed to be incompatible with the fundamentalist church:
And that was the struggle of – I’m a feminist, I don’t think I can be a Christian. I’m pro-choice, I don’t think I can be a Christian. I’m really comfortable with homosexuality, and my life is woven with people who are gay now, and the idea that I would ever worship with somebody who didn’t believe that [being gay] was just a celebration of human sexuality was just, like, I could never even contemplate going back to any of those churches.

She managed this tension by finding a church community that was led by pastors who rejected pretence and were open and honest about their own struggles with faith. She forged a deep connection with these two pastors, but her precarious truce with Christianity was threatened when the church attempted to oust these pastors from the ministry. This action disgusted and angered her, and a minor incident (a judgmental message directed at her children) soon “broke the camel’s back,” unleashing “years of anger against Christianity”:

I remember just feeling so furious and thinking, y’know, you’ve no idea how hard it is to be here, how hard it is for me to be a Christian. Like, every fucking bone in my body doesn’t wanna be a Christian, and yet I’m longing and yearning for God. ... I can’t even tell you the hoops I’m going through to find God at the end of this picture, and you people can’t see that. ... In the context of them trying to get rid of Greg and Sonia, I just couldn’t do it any longer. ... I felt like I’d tried so hard to find God, and it was like I couldn’t find God for the church.

Unable to remain within the church, and unable to distance God from the church, Marianne lost her faith soon after.

Several other participants described a weakening identification with the church, although their reactions were less extreme. Natasha, for instance, was searching for arguments to support her shaky faith and discovered online videos of a popular Christian apologist delivering a particularly unsophisticated argument for God’s existence. Natasha was dumbfounded by his ignorance and appalled that he was representing Christianity to the world. She thought: “These are the people that speak for my faith, apparently. Maybe I need to start reconsidering my faith.” Although the videos were designed to bolster Christians’ faith, she felt as though they were “tearing it apart so much further.” Having struggled for years with liberal beliefs that set her
apart from her Christian friends for years, Natasha saw even more clearly how little she had in common with popular representatives of Christian culture. With reluctance, Natasha sensed that it was time to leave Christianity behind.

*Intuitive problems with theology.* Participants described two sorts of objection to Christian theology. The first, logical or philosophical objections, will be discussed elsewhere in the context of intellectual shifts. Objections of the second type related to participants’ sense of emotional logic, intuition, or fairness. These were the ways in which Christian theology failed to add up, to make good sense; although these factors were often described in vague or inarticulate ways, participants also presented them as particularly difficult to dismiss.

One such problem, the issue of pain and suffering, has already been described. Ted recounted an incident involving a church friend whose daughter was severely handicapped (related to oxygen deprivation at birth). During a prayer meeting, this woman had expressed gratitude for a recent blessing: God had provided her with a parking spot right in front of her daughter’s doctor’s office, and there was even money in the parking meter. At the time, Ted experienced this story as a touching example of God’s love. However, as he later reflected on the story, he was struck by the perversity of this interpretation – for the same effort it took to plug a parking meter, Ted wondered, could not the almighty God have intervened at the moment of the child’s birth, preventing her suffering altogether?

Other participants experienced increasing dissonance as they learned about the world and other cultures. As Natasha recounted:

As I started taking more classes about, you know, environmental issues, that kind of thing, at school, it becomes increasingly hard to ignore the fact that, okay yeah, God is very concerned about me, but he sure doesn’t seem to care about other people. It stops being quite so comforting at that point.
Marianne talked about traveling to Nepal and seeing the countless ways in which humans try to connect with the divine. Faced with this multiplicity of faiths, she came to the intuitive conclusion that God does not exist, except in our collective human longing for him.

*Decreasing dependence on God.* God served as a primary source of support and love for several participants. However, as their life circumstances changed, they began to rely less exclusively on God to meet these psychological needs. For Natasha, God provided a sense of stability in the midst of a chaotic home life; this function became less important as she moved away from her family home and got married (to a man who was not Christian). Natasha also observed that as she matured, she relied increasingly on her own capacity for critical thought and independent decision-making, and was no longer content to simply accept what she was taught by authority figures.

For Amber, falling in love for the first time had implications that culminated in losing faith. She was devoted to her faith, but Christianity suddenly paled in comparison to this new experience:

> The love that I felt for [my boyfriend] was the most real thing I had ever encountered. And it made everything that I had ever tried to strive for in the church, like, so convoluted. It just felt like I was making work up for me to do by going to church, whereas I realised that the actual love that you could have for somebody else – it’s just effortless.

Since fundamentalist Christianity purports to hold the only key to true happiness and meaning, finding something more satisfying than Christianity was confusing for Amber. Although she was inundated with messages from her church leadership about the dire consequences of dating a non-Christian, she could not bring herself to end the relationship. Although she still believed in God, his importance in her life was at least partially eclipsed by the genuine, exciting, and beautiful human love that she had discovered.
Troubled integrity. Distinct from concerns about theology, some participants developed a sense that there was something dishonest about Christianity or their church. Stan, who was involved with the leadership of an intelligent design organization, made a series of observations that eventually led him to conclude that the organization was scientifically unsound and had hidden agendas. Its ethically questionable practices included teaching oversimplified versions of complicated debates to young people who were unequipped to comprehend the true scope of the information that was being presented. Stan was deeply troubled by seeing through the organization’s façade to what they were “really doing,” and felt torn between his integrity and his social life, which was enmeshed within the church.

In addition to ethical integrity, participants reported struggling with intellectual integrity. If Christianity was the truth, they wondered, then why were certain questions or subjects taboo? Stan found himself asking:

What’s so wrong with reading a book on science, really? Like, why are you in an organization that’s telling you that you can’t read that kind of stuff? What do they have to hide? If it’s not true, fine. Then it should objectively say things that aren’t true.

Ted similarly concluded that the facts should be allowed to speak for themselves. His mind had either been created or evolved to be logical, and he was no longer willing to suppress this function in order to protect Christianity:

I had to come to the point to say, well, my mind is telling me something here. And if God created me, and created the human mind – and certainly questions like this weren’t unique to me, I didn’t invent them – ... somehow there had to be a way through this. ... The faith can’t be contradictory. ... Even though we don’t know everything, the things we do know have to make some sense.

Each of the shifts described above changed the way participants felt about Christianity. At one point, they had felt loyalty, gratitude, allegiance, and love (or at least the fondness of familiarity); now, they were frustrated, abandoned, repelled, embarrassed, ill at ease, suspicious,
or dissatisfied. This new emotional valence changed the value of their faith, and working to preserve it began to seem less and less worthwhile.

4. Intellectual shifts

Once an initial emotional shift had established doubt or disillusionment, participants began to think in new ways about their religious beliefs. Beliefs that were previously considered untouchable – beyond the purview of evidence or logic – were now up for debate. As Jim explained, the fear of being wrong (and being doomed to hell) was a frightening potential consequence of exploring and accepting faith-threatening information. However, once frustration and doubt sufficiently outweighed this apprehension, a dispassionate examination of the facts quickly led to unbelief:

Once I said, “I don’t think it’s true,” and I actually looked at stuff, stuff was so apparent. All of a sudden it was like, how could I have not seen that before? And that’s where [belief] just fell apart quickly. But not until I was willing to face that fear – okay, I’m gonna look at the truth regardless of the consequences.

The “stuff” of these intellectual shifts fell into three categories: new interpretations of Christianity, novel scientific insights, and evaluation of the philosophical or logical grounds for belief in God.

New realizations about Christianity. Several participants began discovering information – in books, on the Internet, and in university classes – about the compilation of the Bible, the origins of the church, and the historical evolution of Christian dogma. Chris and Natasha both resolved to study the Bible “with new eyes,” as though they had never read it before. Chris was fascinated by the bizarre and violent stories he found therein, such as that of Elijah praying that God would send bears from the forest to dismember a group of children who were teasing him about being bald (a story found in 2 Kings 2; Chris wryly commented, “why didn’t I learn that
story in Sunday school?”). Natasha began to conclude that the Bible was not substantially different from any other ‘holy’ or historical book:

I had a copy of the Koran and other books at the time. And as I’m reading through them, I’m like, there’s really nothing to make the Bible more compelling or life-changing than the Koran. It’s the same. And that was definitely a big part of accepting that I didn’t believe any more – being able to read the Bible and not immediately think, “Oh, I’ve gotta get the deeper meaning.” There’s no deeper meaning; it was just compiled by people who were trying to explain their place in the world and the universe as they knew it.

Natasha was also shocked that she had never been taught certain facts that are widely accepted by most theologians. She learned that, contrary to what she had been told, the Bible contains no eyewitness accounts of Jesus’ life; she learned about the many problems with translations of the Bible. In light of this new information, she realised that she could no longer trust the Biblical authors’ credibility – and without faith in the Bible, her Christian beliefs were stripped of their basis. Ted also experienced a gradual shift in his understanding of the Bible:

Even from a rather conservative type of study of the Bible, there were certain things that seemed obvious. That there’d been a certain evolution in the understanding of God, for example. ... Concepts that we took for granted now didn’t exist at certain times, ... and it began to seem suspiciously like a human process rather than a divine process that was at work here.

Participants also began to see parallels between the Bible and older mythologies – for instance, Chris noticed that the story of Noah’s flood was similar to the story of Utnapishtim in the epic of Gilgamesh. Furthermore, participants discovered that Jesus himself was not unique. Natasha recalls learning about the “prophet” Apollonius, who was also crucified and was said to have been born of a virgin, but “didn’t have Paul to create the cult for him afterwards, so he never picked up and took off and became mainstream. It’s just kind of luck of the draw. That was problematic [laugh] for me.”
Participants also began to see that Christianity was not particularly different from any other religion. Stan realized that he was a Christian because he had been born in Canada to Christian parents; if he had been born in Afghanistan, he would likely be a Muslim. Natasha realized that the objections she claimed to have to other religions applied equally to Christianity. Encountering an absurd image of Jesus served as a key turning point for her:

I was reading about early Christian art, and how some of it depicted Jesus as a magician with a magic wand. And I just kind of went, are you kidding me? [laugh] Like, I think at that point just the ridiculousness of that image of the traditional Christ on the cross with a little magic wand, I just kinda went — “And I believe this to be literally true?”

In summary, participants began to conclude that the Bible was no different from other historical books, Jesus was no different from other historical “prophets,” and Christianity was no different from other religions. In light of these realizations, belief in the dogma of fundamentalist Christianity became untenable.

**New realizations about science.** Participants began reading about science, a realm of knowledge that many had “consciously chosen to ignore” until that point (Jim’s phrase). Theories of evolution and of the universe’s origins suggested that the world did not require a creator, and in fact, the available evidence supported a naturalistic perspective. For Jim, this new knowledge logically led to relinquishing fundamentalist beliefs:

In retrospect, I would say it’s probably more [science] writing than the liberal theological writing that really nailed the coffin shut. Because then it became clear that there is abundant good evidence for this stuff. And if this stuff is true, that Bible is not.

Chris spoke poignantly of the first time he comprehended the theory of evolution. As a Christian, he had always been taught to dismiss evolution as heretical and meritless. While visiting England in his late twenties, he wandered into a museum of natural history and discovered an exhibit that explained Darwinism. As he viewed the exhibit, he recalled:

“Neurons connected in my brain, and I knew that evolution was true. And that moment for me
was very spiritual; it was like I was a new person.” Although Chris’s experience was particularly profound, many participants expressed a sense of epiphany as they began to comprehend scientific theories. They had been taught for years that beauty within the natural world was clear evidence of God’s design; their discovery of viable alternative explanations made belief in God, once a necessity, into a redundancy.

*Logical and philosophical problems with the faith.* Even without an infusion of new information, logically examining their religious beliefs yielded novel conclusions for several participants. Amber’s non-Christian boyfriend, although fascinated by her faith, was willing to challenge those of Amber’s Christian beliefs that made little sense to him. Although Amber was generally able to find a response to his challenge (generally defaulting to trust in God’s loving and omniscient nature), she was often unsatisfied with her own explanation. Within the context of these conversations with her boyfriend, Amber eventually arrived at new interpretations of her faith: for instance, she began to see the Bible’s behavioural norms as arbitrary rules rather than loving guidelines.

Amber then began to apply principles of rational thought to her beliefs. First, Ockham’s razor (the assumption that the simplest explanation is the best one) called into question the existence of angels and demons: if God is omnipotent and omnipresent, why would he need an army of minions to do his bidding? Next, she admitted that the idea of hell did not make logical or intuitive sense – if God perfectly loves and understands humans, how could he send some people to hell for behaving in ways that were perfectly natural to them? Finally, she started to reflect on extant philosophical thought about God. She concluded that if no clear evidence supports God’s existence, then it was more logically sound to assume that he does not exist:
If you look at this world, you can’t tell one way or another if there’s a God. So why would I posit, like, why would I struggle so hard to believe that there is a God, when there’s just no real reason to believe that any more?

Brad, who had earned a doctorate in philosophy, clearly had an advanced capacity for critical thought; however, until he felt abandoned by God in the midst of his depression, he tended to apply this capacity only in faith-confirming ways. After his disillusionment, he began to realize that many of his experiences could be more parsimoniously explained by an atheist perspective than a Christian one. If God existed, it was difficult to understand why he would withhold comfort during Brad’s depression, why Brad’s friend Tony was a good and moral person despite rejecting Christianity, or why troubled youth in Brad’s church were not being helped by guidance from the Bible. If God did not exist, these circumstances became perfectly reasonable:

When I take off my Christian glasses and put on my atheist glasses, it makes more sense. It makes sense to me that some people could be helped by their religion, and other people could not be helped by it, if it’s just a human invention. That makes sense. Sometimes human inventions work, sometimes they don’t. It’s harder to understand it from the Christian perspective, for me.

Over time, an accumulation of these wide-ranging emotional and intellectual shifts served to move participants from belief to unbelief, from Christianity to scepticism or atheism. Interestingly, two separate processes of interest emerge from the data: the loss of faith, and the loss of belief. The first, loss of faith, is primarily associated with emotional shifts. Faith can be understood as trust in and loyalty to God, and is weakened by feelings of frustration, abandonment, disillusionment, and apathy. Belief, on the other hand, is the state of being convinced of the reality of a phenomenon (in this case, God); it is primarily undermined by the evaluation of evidence and subsequent intellectual shifts. These two processes can unfold sequentially or in tandem, and often interact with each other in complex ways. Distinguishing
between loss of faith and loss of belief is not particularly important; both processes are central to the essence of leaving fundamentalist Christianity.

5. Acknowledging unbelief

The final step of participants’ transition was to acknowledge their unbelief and declare (to themselves and others) that they were no longer Christians. Many participants experienced this as a difficult step. Stan explained that Christianity had a powerful hold over his mind, and he was extremely reluctant to admit that he was an atheist and no longer believed in any sort of God. When he read Christopher Hitchins’ (2007) book *God is not great* (a particularly combative exemplar of the New Atheist canon), he recalled not only agreeing but “fist-pumping in the air agreeing” with its arguments. He then had to face the implications for his self-identification:

I thought, “I’m still, I’m a Christian, right? But I just agreed with everything he said. In a book on atheism. How is this possible?” And I was sitting there in a coffee shop and thinking, “I guess I’m an atheist, right? I think that makes me an atheist.”

Natasha expressed a similar sense of uncertainty when she suddenly identified her unbelief (while reading articles on an online free thought forum):

I all of a sudden just kind of went, “I don’t think God exists. Am I allowed to think that God doesn’t – did I just think that? Oh my god!” [laugh]. It was so ... outside my realm of normal experience, that I wasn’t sure what to feel. Should I be afraid? I knew that I should feel guilty for even thinking that, but I didn’t!

Natasha’s tone of voice when describing this moment was upbeat, conveying a sense of astonishment and relief. In stark contrast, Marianne described her experience of recognizing unbelief using language that conveys bereavement and despondency:

The picture I had of God got chipped away, and chipped away, and chipped away. And then I kinda reframed it in my adulthood, like, okay, maybe it’s like this ... and then that got chipped away, and chipped away, and chipped away. And finally it was just like, oh noooo ... I knooooow! Like, it's gonnnnne! I can’t find it any more. I can’t find it any more. It’s just gone.
Natasha and Marianne’s highly discrepant accounts of acknowledging unbelief proceed from the very different meanings (relief versus loss) that this experience held for each of them. These differences will be explored in depth in the next chapter, which presents results from the final domain (Experience of Unbelief).

There seemed to be no critical level of doubt or unbelief at which participants relinquished the label of “Christian.” Some, like Stan, considered themselves Christian until the resonance of a definitively non-Christian viewpoint forced them to reconsider their identification. Others began to “try on” a new identification relatively quickly – Ted began to consider himself a sceptic soon after resigning from his eldership. For some, such as Brad, the admission of unbelief was socially mediated:

It was my wife who pointed [it] out to me in a way that really made me go, “Yeah, take ownership of this idea.” One time in the middle of the night I was just so upset, just so sad and feeling hopeless. And she said, “You don’t even believe in God any more, do you.” And then I was like, “Yeah, I’m gonna kind of hang my hat on that statement. Yeah, I don’t believe in God any more. That’s right.” And that was kind of me just letting myself – because I’ve told my wife, now I can tell myself.

Brad’s explanation demonstrates that admitting he no longer believed in God was a step to be resisted, regardless of how obvious his unbelief was becoming. He went on to suggest that if his wife had not ventured this observation, he would have clung to the remnants of belief for much longer.

**Summary: Transition out of Christianity**

This chapter has presented themes that represent the essence of the complex experience of leaving Christianity: Increasing tension, Crisis or catalyst, Emotional shifts, Intellectual shifts, and Acknowledging unbelief. Participants used various metaphors to describe their transition experiences, including many straws breaking a camel’s back (Ted), being betrayed by a trusted friend (Brad), or finding out that one has been “living a lie” – as if one’s spouse of twenty years
has been unfaithful throughout the marriage (Stan). Although participants often tried to hold onto their faith, the accumulation of frustration, doubts, and disconfirming evidence finally led to a loss of faith and loss of belief. At that point, they acknowledged their unbelief and began to process its implications, which are the subject of the next domain.
CHAPTER VI
RESULTS, PART 3

Domain 3: The Experience of Unbelief

Acknowledging that they no longer believed in God constituted a major shift for participants’ identities and worldviews. Responses to this shift varied widely across participants, and identifying general themes to represent all participants’ experiences was deemed inappropriate. Instead, emergent themes were clustered to create two typologies (Type A and Type B), representing two different essential experiences of unbelief. Type A is characterized by a sense of relief or easy fit; Type B is marked by a sense of struggle. Participants within Type A present unbelief as superior to belief, while the opposite is true of participants within Type B. Figure 4 represents the typologies and lists the participants whose experience they describe.

The typologies were developed from clusters of themes, not from an assessment of participants’ complete stories. Therefore, certain themes from one typology may be experienced by participants falling within the opposite typology: for instance, although Relief is a theme associated with Type A, Lea (a participant in Type B) did experience some relief when she stopped believing in the Christian God. She is nevertheless placed within Type B because her story is most definitively characterized by themes of struggle. Two participants, Stan and Amber, fall in the intersection of Types A and B. Both of these participants experienced a defining element of Type B – depression following the acknowledgment of unbelief – but other aspects of their experience (such as Amber’s sense of unbelief as better than belief and Stan’s anger towards Christianity) align them with Type A. Data was drawn from these participants’ accounts to substantiate and enrich the descriptions of both typologies.
Figure 4. Distribution of participants within Type A and B experiences of unbelief.
Certain experiences that accompanied unbelief – social consequences and counselling experiences – generated themes that did not cluster into typologies. The chapter will conclude with a discussion of these cross-typology themes. Table 4 provides a summary of the typology-specific and cross-typology themes and subthemes that comprise the results in this domain.

Table 4

Superordinate themes and subthemes within the Experience of Unbelief

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<th>Type A</th>
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<td>1. Resolution of tension</td>
<td>1. Loss</td>
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Types A and B

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Type A

The Type A experience of unbelief is characterized by four themes: Resolution of tension, Embracing new possibilities, Negative views of religion, and Strengthening the identity of unbelief. As will be demonstrated by these themes, individuals within Type A tend to present their departure from Christianity as a largely positive development.
1. Resolution of tension

The theme of “fit” – that is, felt resonance with one’s nature or intellectual sensibilities – is definitive of the Type A experience of unbelief. As described in Chapter IV on the Experience of Christianity, most (if not all) participants identified some way in which they had “always” been different from other Christians. For Natasha, for instance, this was an intuitive sense that the church’s judgmental stance on homosexuality, abortion, and other social issues was not truly loving or helpful. Ted had trouble from an early age accepting standard Christian positions on ideas such as evolution, and he struggled throughout his adulthood to come to terms with theological explanations for pain and suffering (never adequately resolving this issue). At the time of relinquishing belief, being Christian represented a struggle or burden for these participants. Letting go of Christianity and accepting unbelief therefore resulted in alleviation of this tension.

Several participants within Type A either explicitly or implicitly referred to the idea of being “true to oneself.” Since Christianity had become problematic, remaining within Christianity amounted to a stressful suppressing of the “true self.” Natasha cited a friend’s comment as evidence that, by the time of her loss of faith, Christianity was plainly inconsistent with who she was:

One of my friends was just like, “I always thought that Christianity was such a strange fit for you. Because it just didn’t match any of your personality, or the kinds of things you care about or believe in. I couldn’t figure it out. So, yeah. Welcome to reality!”

Natasha further substantiated this claim by speculating about what it would have been like for her to remain within Christianity:

I don’t think I would have been very happy. The longer I went, trying to reconcile myself and how I viewed the world and what I thought was important [with] what Christianity told me that I should be thinking was important ... If I still believed that the God of the
Bible is God, and the Bible is true and his Word, then everything I believe and think about the world is wrong.

For Brad, whose intellectuality was a central feature of his identity, being true to himself revolved around intellectual integrity:

This is really being true to myself, not lying to myself. ... I can feel good about myself even though this is painful, and it’s wrecking my marriage. I can look at myself in the mirror, because it’s true that Christianity is not true.

Brad went on to say that he experienced a conviction that he was “doing the right thing” by rejecting Christianity; this phrase further served to present his departure from Christianity as morally necessary and being “true to oneself” as a moral imperative.

Several participants had felt reluctant to pass judgment on others, although dominant Christian opinion pushed them to do so. These participants struggled with tension between their intuitive sense of how people should be treated and the Christian expectation that one should, in Natasha’s words, “beat them over the head with the Bible.” Being able to choose one’s own attitude towards others was treated as another component of integrity. Having adopted a secular perspective, Ted stated: “I feel a lot more true to myself. I feel a vast relief at not having to condemn people that I really had no reason to condemn.”

The opportunity to be “true to oneself” generated a sense of relief for all participants in Type A. However, the extent of this relief depended on the level of tension or struggle that had characterized their mental lives before leaving Christianity. For participants such as Ted, for whom Christianity had been persistently but relatively mildly problematic, the relief is presented as refreshing; for Jim, whose Christian beliefs were generating intense psychological trauma (compartmentalization and dissociation) or Chris, who had lived with unremitting guilt for years, the relief was profound. The intensity of relief was proportional to the burden or unhappiness
that Christianity had come to represent in the participant’s life. For Jim, upon relinquishing belief in Christianity:

It felt like this huge burden had been lifted off of me. No more needless shame. Needless guilt. Restrictions on my behaviour that were totally arbitrary. And a tremendous sense of freedom came with it.

Although Jim continued to cope with the turmoil of depression and a dissociative disorder, he stated that relinquishing his Christian beliefs resulted in a “noticeable emotional shift.” In fact, he asserted that leaving Christianity was the key to resolving his mental health disorders: he had “split off” parts of his mind (such as sexuality, anger, and cynicism) that were unacceptable within the fundamentalist context, but was now able to recognize these urges and emotions as natural to the human condition. As a result, he could accept or “re-own” them in therapy and undergo integration of his multiple personalities.

Brad, another participant for whom depression preceded loss of faith, described the hope he sensed in relinquishing Christianity:

I realised in the long run, I’m going to be a more integrated person. And y’know, that little beam of light where it’s like, the depression’s going to go away if you shed this stuff, because I think a part of the depression was that I kind of knew it wasn’t true.

As he began to experience periods of unbelief, Brad was struck by the sense that “this is better.” He directly compared his newfound unbelief to his conversion into Christianity: both supplied him with the excitement of a “new day” or “Christmas morning” feeling. Similarly, Chris recounted:

I felt freedom to take a different path. I just felt like, I’m looking at the world through different eyes now. And everything’s different. So I can leave the old thoughts behind, and I can start thinking new thoughts. Everything about it was brand new. It was a born-again experience.

Relinquishing Christianity, for these participants, resulted in relief from tension and pressure, and a sense of freedom and fit. They presented unbelief as emphatically better than
belief, and conveyed no sense of wanting to return to Christianity – in fact, several explicitly stated that leaving was worth any cost and that they would never go back. Their accounts are imbued with a sense of excitement and untapped potential, which is the subject of the next theme.

2. Embracing new possibilities

Participants within Type A emphasized the possibilities that opened to them and the benefits they gained upon leaving Christianity. A few of these possibilities were practical: leaving Christianity allowed Jim to end his marriage, which had been unhappy for a long time. Although he still viewed divorce as a tragedy, he was no longer obliged to consider it a sin. Other new possibilities concerned participants’ meaning systems, intellectual pursuits, and relationships; participants’ tone and language when discussing these new opportunities typically conveyed enthusiasm and pleasure.

New understandings of philosophy and morality. The sense of being “true to oneself,” discussed above, was often linked by participants to a newfound open-mindedness that came with unbelief. In contrast to their previous obligation to follow their church’s formulation of Christian morality, which they sometimes experienced as onerous or objectionable, they were free to consider a full range of philosophical and moral ideas and select the path that seemed best to them. Brad, who was inclined to intellectual inquiry and philosophical thought, explained:

I was able to look at any question in life, any philosophical aspect to life, and be able to have an open mind towards any possibility. In terms of, how should I think about this? Or how should people behave in this type of situation?

Many participants commented on the archaic, confusing, and sometimes barbaric nature of the Bible’s moral prescriptions. It was experienced as liberating to discover alternative, more parsimonious philosophies. Ted explained:
It’s a lot simpler, in a way. … You can take a humanist manifesto, or you can take, there’s all kinds of really good statements of ethics and systems for ethical behaviour that are a whole lot easier to live by than the Christian one.

He went on to cite the example of Canada’s Charter of Rights and Freedoms; although he acknowledged that it is not perfect, he expressed admiration for the Canadian Charter and its attempt to create a “progressive, enlightened” system of morality and to reject discrimination on the basis of attributes such as sexual orientation (which many religions retain as a point of discrimination).

New understandings of life and death. Several participants identified an enhanced drive to seize life’s opportunities. In contrast to the Christian doctrine that life on Earth is unimportant except to prepare for eternity in heaven, participants’ new orientation to life was characterized by a desire to take risks, meet new people, contribute to society, and experience as much as possible. In Natasha’s words:

For me, [life] suddenly became more meaningful when it wasn’t this long dress rehearsal where God judges you, and takes marks, and decides whether you get to go to heaven. It’s like, wow, this is it! This is all we have. It’s really important.

Specifically, Natasha identified an increased motivation to travel, to donate to charity, and to participate in politics. In her view, becoming an atheist ought to make a person an activist, since one no longer believes that God will right injustices and reward suffering after death.

Many participants in Type A had arrived at a less threatening view of death than they held as Christians. Some participants expressed a degree of bafflement over this shift, since as Christians they were supposedly assured of eternal bliss in heaven. However, the prospect of death (assumed to be a continuation of consciousness) had been surrounded by anxiety over their eternal fates, the fates of others, and whether God would be pleased with how they spent their earthly lives. Unbelief permitted an acceptance of death as a benign state of non-existence.
Several participants cited a quotation from an author or philosopher that represented their view. For instance, Brad paraphrased a quote that has been attributed to Mark Twain: “I had been dead for billions and billions of years before I was born, and had not suffered the slightest inconvenience from it” (as cited in Dawkins, 2006, p. 396).

Brad talked about a common perspective within Christianity that without the promise of eternal life, our short and insignificant lives would seem pointless. Many participants’ new viewpoints were exactly the opposite: embracing unbelief actually made their lives seem more meaningful, since they realized they only had a finite amount of time in which to experience the world. Although death was seen as unfortunate – the end of one’s exhilarating bout of existence – being dead was nothing to fear.

Embracing inquiry and critical thought. A subtheme that emerged from several participants in this typology was the paramount importance of free inquiry, critical thought, and the scientific method. This new value contrasted with their experience of religious thought, which required holding tightly to one’s final conclusion and seeking post hoc support for that conclusion. Amber, who was particularly passionate about the scientific method and its potential to imbue life with excitement, declared: “We all understand so little about what’s actually happening in this world; let’s not pretend that we do. Let’s just keep being inquirers, let’s keep being investigators.”

During his loss of faith, Ted became aware of his tendency to selectively seek and retain information that was consistent with his Christian worldview. He expressed concern that he might exhibit a similar confirmation bias within his new (un)belief system, but is trying to

... use [the] mind as much as possible, in a rational way. To try to say, well, even if this supports what I believe, is it valid? ... I’ve subscribed, over time, more to a belief in the thought process, in a rational thought process as being more important than almost anything.
For Stan, the primacy of free thought extended beyond his present life and into his vision for his future childrearing values: “For my kids, I’m not going to indoctrinate them in anything. I’ll just say, listen, science is a method of thinking freely, not having answers simply handed to you.”

Although several participants acknowledged that finding one’s own answers to life’s ultimate questions is challenging, they presented free and critical thought as a superior and more mature approach to life. Wrestling with the meaning of life – by applying their faculties of rational thought to the best available evidence – was treated not as an option, but a responsibility.

**New realms of knowledge.** Participants in Type A expressed a sense of freedom to explore fields of knowledge that had previously been viewed as faith-threatening and therefore taboo. After resigning from his job as a minister, Brad enrolled in a science degree at university. Jim, another former minister, felt like “a whole new world opened up” when he allowed himself to embrace evolution and other scientific ideas. He explained, “It’s become such a joy for me to read science stuff now, and just to think of how marvellous and amazing this universe is – just as it is, without anybody creating it.”

In addition to the newfound world of scientific knowledge, participants became able to study religion in new ways. After identifying as an atheist, Chris explained:

I started reading the Bible, and I’ve been doing a Bible study like I never did when I was a Christian. And I love it! I think it’s fascinating. … Because now I’m free to understand what it really is, y’know, an ancient book written by Bronze Age people.

Not only was Chris intrigued by a new perspective on the Christian faith, but he made a hobby of studying other religions: he regularly attended Bahá’í discussion groups and Hare Krishna worship services, had prayed at a Muslim mosque, and attended his parents’ technology-driven

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4 A monotheistic religion, founded in the nineteenth century, that emphasizes the spiritual unity of humankind (Bahá’í International Community, 2009).

5 The popular name for the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON), a religious movement that promotes devotion to Krishna (God) as he is revealed in traditional Hindu scriptures (ISKCON, 2004).
megachurch whenever he visited them. He participated in these religious activities as an open atheist, and made it clear that he was not open to converting but wanted to gain a meaningful understanding of different belief systems. In stark contrast to his previous insularity (he had never even met an agnostic or atheist until his mid-twenties), Chris had become an observer and student of the world’s religions.

*New ways of relating.* Not only were participants relieved of the pressure to judge people who were leading ungodly lifestyles, they no longer felt a responsibility to treat all conversations with non-Christians as opportunities to share the gospel. As a result, their relationships deepened and become more sincere. Jim recalled a casual interaction, shortly after losing his faith, with staff members of a service organization:

I remember thinking afterwards, that’s the first time I’ve ever just really related to them as people, not as potential conversion projects. And it was so freeing, it was so, like - I love this. We’re just all humans together, struggling, trying to make our way in the world.

In summary of this theme, the Type A experience of unbelief is characterized by a sense of progress, of finding a higher, truer, more sincere and highly motivating new purpose for one’s life. These participants conveyed a sense of optimism and positivity: they had attained clarity of purpose for their lives as unbelievers. In Amber’s eloquent words:

I now see myself as a philosopher/scientist. ... I love learning what people are doing, and what people are trying to figure out about this world. So that is almost my spirituality. ... One of the worst things about religion, to me, is that they start with their conclusion, and they make up their world so they can keep their conclusion the way it is. And they construct this whole system of belief and thought and science that adds up to that final conclusion. Science is supposed to be the other way around. You empty your mind as much as you can, and you take in as much as you see, and then you start building together a conclusion. And you could have fifty thousand different conclusions based on the same sets of evidence, but then you just keep looking. You keep searching. And that’s incredible to me. That’s given me new life.
3. Negative views of religion

The Type A experience of unbelief is typified by a sense of negativity towards Christianity and religion in general, ranging from mild patronizing or pity to vehement bitterness. These negative views were expressed in relation to the role Christianity had played in the participant’s personal life and to its broader influence within Western society.

Regret and shame. The subtheme of regret and shame was particularly strong for the two participants who had spent many years working as ministers (Jim and Brad). Both were plagued by guilt and shame – sometimes to the point of feeling physically ill – by remembering the damaging and destructive “nonsense” that they had taught from their positions of authority. Although they were able to acknowledge that they had helped some people and acquired transferable skills, they had “no sense of being able to look back with satisfaction” on their careers in the ministry (Jim’s phrase) and saw being a minister as a “waste” of their lives. However, both were able to channel this regret into a keen drive to do something worthwhile with the remainder of their lives: to make a meaningful difference and to leave a positive legacy. Brad claimed, “I’m so happy that I’m not a minister any more. I couldn’t imagine being at the end of my life, and then de-converting. And thinking you spent your whole life in a fairy tale.”

More mildly, several participants expressed embarrassment and incredulity as they looked back at their previous beliefs and practices. Natasha squirmed to recall her “horribly condescending” attitude toward members of other religious faiths, and Amber framed her former practices – such as stomping on the floor to symbolically crush a person’s demons – as bizarre. Both women indicated that looking back on their lives within Christianity felt surreal, as if they were remembering a different person in another world. Jim recalled his behaviour within “Spirit-filled” charismatic settings with embarrassment, and explained that his suggestible nature
disposed him to dramatic experiences such as bodily shaking, falling on the floor, and uncontrollable fits of laughter.

**Anger and resentment.** Most Type A participants went through a stage of anger and bitterness towards Christianity, and several continued to feel resentful of its impact on their lives and its continued negative influence on society. Upon leaving Christianity, Brad was initially very bitter about the ways in which he perceived it to have damaged him psychologically; this bitterness towards their previously shared faith contributed to the breakdown of his relationship with his wife. Brad attributed the failure of his marriage to Christianity, and (at the time of the interview) had not resolved the resentment he felt about this fact.

Several participants expressed a feeling of having been “duped.” As Jim remembered: “I felt hoodwinked; I felt like I’d wasted so much of my life believing a bunch of lies.” Participants described feeling betrayed, but also being confused by this feeling. Who had betrayed them? They could not blame a God who did not exist, and they knew that their typically well-meaning, sincere elders at the church had not purposefully deceived them. Most directed their anger at the Christian belief system and the ways in which it discouraged critical thought and imposed unrealistic standards.

Of all the participants, Chris and Stan were distinctive in their harshly negative views of Christianity. Chris called Christianity a “disease” that causes suffering and keeps people “shackled,” preventing them from reaching their full potential. He expressed anger that Christian doctrine is presented as the absolute truth to children who do not have the capacity to assess its merits for themselves. The indoctrination of children was also particularly distressing to Stan, who at the time of the interview was still participating in fundamentalist Christianity. He lamented: “So not only am I part of this machine, but this machine is serving to propagate
intolerant, hateful, destructive, paranoid-type beliefs to people en masse, and worse still, is doing it to children.” Stan repeatedly emphasized his belief that Christianity is nothing more than a socially respected cult; not only have its truth claims been utterly debunked, Stan claimed, but its influence is evil and destructive. He acknowledged no meaningful positive contributions of Christianity, and argued that it inevitably leads to unhappiness and dysfunction. For instance, he claimed that Christianity generates hypocrisy and distress around sexual thoughts (since thinking about sex, which he presented as a natural and unstoppable tendency, is treated as equally sinful as the act of committing adultery). He also expressed a belief that his family’s problems – his mother’s unhappiness, the family’s financial struggles – stem from subjugation to the fundamentalist worldview (e.g. because having many children was treated as a priority, and saving money was viewed as less important than faith in God’s provision). He admitted that his strongly negative view may have been influenced by reading Christopher Hitchins’ book God is not great, which presents a “scorched-earth type policy” on religion (the book is subtitled “How Religion Poisons Everything”).

Although most participants attended university despite warnings from their church (as discussed in the chapter on Experience of Christianity), Chris did not. He explained:

I never went to university because I was told, that’s worldly knowledge. You wanna build up spiritual knowledge. Spiritual gifts, spiritual treasures. So educating yourself was frowned upon. So I was pressured out of going to school and, y’know, I’ve been doing “Joe” jobs my entire life. I think I really could’ve been something different, had I had the opportunity.

Chris described feeling angry and resentful that he was deprived of this opportunity and had “lost his youth” to the Christian teaching that one should focus exclusively on the afterlife.

“Post-Christian hangover.” Brad coined the term “post-Christian hangover” to describe the lingering cognitive and emotional habits that carried over into his life as an unbeliever: for
instance, he might “catch himself” praying without thinking about it. His reaction was characteristic of participants in Type A: “I have to go, no, no, no, that didn’t make sense; don’t think about something in those terms. Because those terms are silly.” Other participants similarly revealed that they occasionally slip into habitual prayer, especially in times of worry or uncertainty. Some were tolerant of these impulses, recognizing that they stemmed from thought patterns that had been deeply ingrained for many years; other participants held a stern attitude, chastising themselves for lapsing into superstition. Regardless, participants in Type A communicated a clear sense that they had moved on from their old ways of thinking, and were in unidirectional transition away from Christian patterns.

The discursive construction of unidirectional transition was also achieved in the way these participants discussed the losses they sustained upon leaving Christianity. For instance, several participants remarked that they missed the unique sense of community found within the church. However, their accounts tended to discursively balance positive assessments of the church with negative ones, or to present a way by which they hoped to eventually achieve the same benefits via an alternative route. For example, Brad talked about the explicit sense of family that can be found within the church; he then added the disclaimer that “there are other parts of it that are horrible, too, I think. The way it can isolate people from our society.” Having rhetorically “corrected” his stance, he returned to discussing positive elements of the church community, but concluded his turn with a summative counter-claim: “I still think the cons outweigh the benefits of Christianity by quite a margin.” Participants in Type A tended to display a reluctance to make any positive comment about Christianity without also including a reminder of the downside of belief.

4. Strengthening the identity of unbelief
Participants within Type A firmly and decisively rejected Christianity, and made it clear that they were not going back by actively embracing new “unbeliever” identities. They engaged in various activities to inform and substantiate their new identities, which are represented by the subthemes of connecting with others, choosing a label, and sharing their new perspective.

*Connecting with others.* Several participants sought out communities of likeminded individuals, whether in person or on the internet, with whom they could discuss their new beliefs and their experience of leaving Christianity. These groups included those formed specifically for ex-Christians or former members of fundamentalist religions in general (e.g. [www.ex-Christian.net](http://www.ex-Christian.net)), those devoted to atheism (atheismonline.com), or those dedicated to secular humanism or free thought (Centre for Inquiry, Freethought-Forum.com).

Participants cited a number of reasons for joining these groups. First and foremost, they served as a hub for sharing information. Not only do they provide lists of books and links to online articles covering a range of topics, but Natasha described how moderators of the online free thought forum would respond to individual users by referring them to specific books that would address the questions they had posted.

Another important function of these communities was the availability of models or examples, people who had successfully navigated the same transition. Natasha recalled:

I found myself identifying with how they're feeling and what they were thinking. Like, yeah, that's me. That's what I'm going through. And seeing that they were just normal people, living fulfilled lives. It wasn't like without God there was nothing. It was clear that they were perfectly happy without any religion.

Natasha was surprised by the genuine concern displayed by members of her online community; when she did not visit the site for a few months, she received an e-mail from another member “checking on her” and inquiring about the specific problems with her mother than she had disclosed when she was last active on the forum. This spirit of cohesion motivated
participants to remain active members of these communities even after they had become comfortable in their new identities; the participants now felt a sense of responsibility to help others transition into fulfilled unbelief.

Several participants had not only sought out communities, but had taken steps to initiate new groups. Ted had been attending an atheist “meet-up” in Toronto (meetup.com is a website that facilitates the formation of interest groups, and was mentioned by several participants); he then established a new group for the smaller city in which he lived. Ted explained that he has been more open about his story than he would typically be comfortable with, because he is dedicated to providing support for others going through this experience.

Chris talked about his experience of attending an atheist discussion group and feeling very out-of-place when he asked the group if anyone else had formerly been religious. He found that lifelong atheists could not identify with his experiences, and he was in the process of setting up a discussion group exclusively for former Christians.

Choosing a label. Although all participants in Type A believed that there is no supernatural presence in the world, they had arrived at several different ways of describing their belief identity. Stan, Chris, Natasha, and Brad identified as atheists. Notably, these participants had all read the New Atheist books as part of their transition out of Christianity; it is possible that the New Atheist movement may have influenced their choice of label. Ted referred to himself as an “unbeliever” or a “sceptic” (although he stated that he is “for all intents and purposes an atheist”). His motivation for preferring the former terms may relate to a desire to maintain peaceful relationships within his Christian wife and friends; “atheist” remains an inflammatory term within our culture, and may be more objectionable to Christians than “sceptic.” An alternative explanation, analogous to the hypothesis that participants who read New Atheist
materials tend to identify as atheists, is that Ted adopted the label associated with the sceptic organization to whose magazine he subscribed upon first leaving Christianity.

Jim identified as a naturalist; he explained that he prefers to define himself by what he believes (that the natural world is all that exists) than by what he does not believe (the term “atheist” literally means “without God”). Chris displayed near-opposite reasoning: he identifies as an ex-Christian – a specific reference to the beliefs he has rejected – in order to highlight the magnitude of the transition he experienced. As he explained:

The atheists I’ve met, ... for them it’s not even a big deal to be an atheist. It’s just, “yeah, y’know, I never believed, I was taught not to believe,” and there it is. But going from believing to not believing, ... it can be traumatic and, a lot of emotions involved.

To Chris, the most salient part of his identity was the path he had travelled, not the beliefs at which he arrived.

Sharing the new perspective. Several participants reported an enthusiasm for raising awareness of atheism, evolution, or problems with Christianity. Brad stated that he was trying to become a more “active atheist,” inspired by Richard Dawkins’ idea of consciousness raising – reducing the automatic stigma that the general public associates with atheism. He had begun looking for ways to advance the profile of atheism, while trying to avoid giving atheism the distasteful reputation that comes with pushing an agenda too aggressively (in his words, without “getting into Christian mode about atheism”). Jim had adopted a similarly active stance, and was willing to challenge cultural assumptions about religion and spirituality. For instance, he rejects the popular notion that holding self-transcendent values is synonymous with spirituality:

Somebody will say, “So you’re not spiritual at all?” And I’ll say no. And they’ll say, “So, like, you don’t believe your life has some bigger purpose?” And I’ll say, “Well, yeah, I want to leave a legacy, and I want to feel like I’m making the world a better place when I leave, and I want to have deep meaning,” – “Oh, well, then you're spiritual!” “No, I’m human!” [laugh] That’s what it is to be human.
Among the participants, Chris was particularly anxious to see his family convert to atheism. However, they consistently rejected his efforts to share his newfound knowledge, and tried to avoid discussing religion with him altogether. At first, this caused him significant anxiety and suffering, but at the time of the interview he had reached a level of acceptance: he had tried to tell them, and that was all he could do. He had shifted his focus to disseminating his newfound knowledge among the general public:

That's where I am today, just learning, trying to figure out a way to tell people. I'm always writing down ideas on little tracts that I could make to teach people about evolution or teach people that … well, Christmas, for one. Christians think Christmas is a Christian holiday when really it's pagan, and I think people should know that. … I didn't find that out until I'm in my thirties … I just feel like this kind of knowledge or understanding should be out there.

Several participants hoped to write a book about some aspect of their experience. Jim had already begun writing his memoirs, and Ted also planned to eventually document his story — if only to help his friends and family members understand his transition. Brad intended to write a book about the brokenness of the Bible’s metaphors for God, particularly the metaphor of God as a father (he also mused about writing an argument against presuppositional apologetics, although he admitted that this topic would not attract a particularly wide audience).

In summary, this section has described a typology within the Experience of Unbelief that is characterized by themes of relief (resolution of tension), new possibilities, rejection and negative opinions of Christianity, and embracing a new identity of unbelief. The experience is described in predominately positive terms, and having relinquished Christianity, participants express a sense that they have found something better in unbelief.

Type B

The Type B experience of unbelief is primarily characterized by a sense of struggle and loss. Loss is a particularly relevant theme to the field of counselling psychology, the researcher
refrained from collapsing participants’ experiences into too few subthemes. Several types of loss were identified within the data: losses of relationship, meaning, beauty, identity, hope and comfort, and direction. These losses will each be described briefly, followed by a presentation of the second two themes in Type B: Emotional ties to belief and the Letdown of unbelief.

1. Loss

*Loss of a relationship.* For Amber, who experienced God as an intimate friend and confidant, the early months of her unbelief were extremely lonely; she described them as “the emptiest days of my life.” Although several participants described the loss of a reassuring presence, Amber was the participant who emphasized interpersonal bereavement most strongly:

> I told him everything. I talked to him every day. All day, every day. I was quite socially isolated. So I was losing my best friend; I was losing a father figure. I was losing an older sister. ... I was losing my father, I was losing my mother. Neither of those two people are very strong structures in my life, and so I put all of those needs on God.

Marianne also stressed Jesus’ constant presence in her personal and familial life. Her family prayed to Jesus before every meal and before bed; in her words, “Jesus was a part of everything.” Despite an intellectual rejection of Christian doctrine at the time of the interview, Marianne had been unable to escape the felt sense that Jesus was real and present in her life. She offered the metaphor of watching a favourite television show so many times that the characters begin to seem real, even if one knows they are only actors playing a role. Jesus had been such a central character in her life that her inclination to interact with him persisted. This inclination faded over time as her intellectual unbelief gained primacy, and Marianne eventually had to acknowledge and cope with the relationship’s nonexistence.

*Loss of meaning.* For several participants, unbelief was accompanied by a profound sense of anomie (the “personal unrest, alienation, and uncertainty that comes from a lack of purpose or ideals”; Mirriam-Webster, 2009). Stan became very distressed upon concluding that
if God does not exist, then anything is permissible. As he explained, it seemed logical to him that “I can just go out and steal and kill and rape, and there’s nobody watching.” Although he did not engage in these antisocial acts, he felt as though human choices had no moral significance in the absence of a divine moral code. Without a higher power to anchor his sense of order, norms, or values, Stan became extremely depressed. He explained: “I just thought that the world was coming apart at the seams. Somehow everything I thought was a lie, and there's no meaning or purpose any more in life. And I got progressively worse.”

At the time, Stan had difficulty understanding and articulating the reasons behind his hopelessness. At first, he attributed it to the “depressing” nature of Darwinism: “I'm just a bacteria that got lucky, really. No different than anything else. And that means there's no meaning, and no God, and it's all over without God. ... It's the most depressing thing I've ever heard.” By the time of the interview, Stan had concluded that Darwinism is no more inherently depressing than the belief that cars operate because of internal combustion engines: it is simply an explanation of a scientific mechanism. However, since he had always been taught that ultimate meaning and purpose are found only within God, his transition to unbelief triggered a major existential crisis. Marianne similarly struggled to understand how life could be fulfilling without God:

[I had a] very long depression, probably two years, where I felt like there was no meaning at all. And where I couldn't reconcile meaning without sacred, without God. And ... the emptiness I would feel; I felt so empty without it.

Loss of beauty. Marianne, Amber, and Lea all conveyed a sense of deep sadness over the passing of an incredibly beautiful story and worldview. Without God, the world seemed a much colder, harsher, uglier place. Marianne’s voice was soft and halting as she recalled feeling “so very sad, like I’d been duped. From an early age. Duped into words like redemption and
salvation and redeemer. Saviour. Counsellor. [small laugh]. Everlasting, omnipotent.” The
glorious theological concepts with which Marianne had been raised were now exposed as shams;
although she yearned for them, they did not exist. Even at the time of the interview, eight years
after losing her faith, Marianne sometimes experienced “agonizing disappointment” as she
longed for the beauty, purity, and simplicity of innocent faith.

The loss of beauty seemed to be particularly connected to participants’ emotions. As
described above, Marianne’s voice was replete with emotion as she talked about feeling “duped”
into belief in the divine. Lea became tearful as she described the loss of participating in worship
and music at church. For her, old Christian songs and hymns held an intangible but irreplaceable
beauty. Although Lea could not articulate why the music was so uniquely beautiful, Marianne
attempted an explanation:

[The music] was just such a clean and beautiful expression of something so powerfully
good. You were giving praise to God, and you kind of felt tied to ancestors because a lot of – y’know, like, “God of our fathers, holy faith.” I remember loving singing those
songs and feeling very much a part of something.

This sense of divine and historical connection might be part of what Lea missed so acutely about
church music. The loss of connection with God and others was also a source of grief for Amber.
She became tearful as she described the loss of a particularly uplifting fantasy:

When you pray for something good, like, you've got these heavenly warriors who are -
beautiful to think about, y'know! [starting to cry]. It's beautiful to think about, but it's just
a fairy tale. It's just like Lord of the Rings or something ... it's really nice to think that
when you bless somebody, there's someone who really cares. And he is listening to you.
And he wants to bless people as much as you do.

Amber described herself as someone who cares deeply about her friends and strongly hopes for
good things to happen to them. Therefore, being deprived of a transcendent, sacred, and
effectual way of loving and helping others (through “blessing” or praying for them) was a
painful loss.
**Loss of identity.** Having, until that point, completely defined themselves according to their Christian beliefs, participants struggled to understand who they were without God. Amber recalls asking herself, “What am I in this world for, then?” Stan was overwhelmed by the sense that he had based his whole life on a lie. He cited his high level of personal and intellectual investment in Christianity to account for the extreme debilitation he suffered upon transitioning into unbelief:

> I guess maybe for some people it's not a huge deal, but for me it's a huge deal ... I sort of base my whole life around intellectual type stuff, so to have my worldview come crashing down is really, really disconcerting.

Lea explicitly named a loss of identity as part of her departure from Christianity: “I didn't know who I was, not part of that community. Like, okay, I have to start over, basically. Sort of forging a new sense of self, almost.” As she transitioned to unbelief, Lea also had to relinquish her vision of becoming a minister. She adopted a new dream of opening a non-religious spiritual retreat centre. However, at the time of the interview she had realised that she must abandon or revise this goal, since she had moved towards complete unbelief in the spiritual realm. For Lea, the loss of her long-held vocation – that of helping people connect with their spiritual selves – was gradual, taking place over the course of many years.

**Loss of comfort and hope.** Participants experienced the loss of God’s comforting presence and of the reassuring knowledge that he cared for them deeply and individually. Some described the lost promise of reunion with loved ones after death. For Lea, whose father was ill at the time of the interview, this loss was particularly salient and painful:

> I was walking through the grocery store talking about this stuff with Dave, in terms of the context of my dad. And I started to cry in the grocery store. ... I think that’s the heart catching up with the head stuff. Recognizing the implication is - when people you love go, they go.
Although Lea’s “head” or intellect was supplying a growing sense that there is no afterlife whatsoever, her “heart” was resistant to this new belief in death’s finality.

In addition to losing the specific hope of seeing one’s relatives again, Amber referred to a generalised loss of hope. She stated that although she continues to anticipate good things for her life, she still has not regained her sense of hope. She provided no further explanation of this distinction between hope and optimism, but it can be speculated that Amber continues to associate “hope” with a sense of trusting faith in God’s goodness and providence, a theme to which she refers elsewhere in the interview.

*Loss of direction.* When they believed in God, participants felt that their lives were being divinely guided. Not only could they seek God’s will in prayer, but they also expressed a sense of assurance that he would orchestrate their life circumstances to fit within his overarching plan. As a Christian, Amber trusted that she would always be led in the right direction, and felt a sense of security as a result. As an unbeliever, she felt as though she was “on a chair with rollers on it” – her life was suddenly unpredictable, unstable, and entirely her own responsibility.

Lea described feeling taken aback by the realisation that there was no “right” path, and her choices were of little significance. She had always believed that “figuring out” her life’s purpose was an important task, but this conviction was abruptly negated upon losing faith:

Suddenly, that's not the case, actually. There's no purpose, and you're just here, so. There's nothing to figure out. Like, you're just gonna do whatever you're gonna do with your life, so, good luck. ... It's like, oh! Okay. Well, I guess I better get busy. Doing something.

Lea spoke the phrase “good luck” in a brusque, dismissive tone; her tone then changed to suggest resigned aimlessness, conveying a sense that it now mattered less how she chose to spend her life.
The losses of relationship, meaning, beauty, identity, hope, and direction were intertwined with each other – for instance, it can be assumed that the loss of meaning and direction exacerbated the loss of identity, and vice versa. The theme of loss was revealed as the participants pointed to ways in which the Christian story was beautiful, fulfilling, and valuable, although they had come to see it as untrue. Their personal reactions of grief, depression, or disappointment – whether recalled or demonstrated through tone or tearfulness – revealed that unbelief came at a high cost.

2. Emotional ties to belief

The second theme in the Type B experience of unbelief is the persistence of emotional ties to belief. These ties were expressed in participants’ periodic wishing or yearning to believe, allowing themselves to occasionally “pretend” that God is real, or sensing a disconnection between the mind and the heart – that is, the co-existence of intellectual unbelief and experiential belief. Immediately after losing faith, these experiences were particularly intense. As Amber recalled:

It's amazing what the brain will do to you. I didn't even believe in God any more. But I loved him. And I couldn't break those two apart. I didn't even believe in God any more, but I didn't want to let him down ... I felt so bad for Jesus for such a long time, after I didn't even believe that he was alive any more ... I felt bad that I was turning my back on him. But it wasn't a rational thing any more.

Amber understood the illogical, contradictory aftermath of losing faith in terms of her brain’s struggle to “heal” or “re-wire” itself after a lifetime of belief. For Amber, this experience was traumatic: loving a God in whom she no longer believed resulted in strong feelings of guilt, sorrow, and depression. As she tried to explain later in the interview, she felt a sense of pained empathy for Jesus, who would now be deprived of her friendship:

I felt bad for him because he would be losing a best friend. Because me and Jesus were like this [crossed fingers]; I was so hardcore in love with him. And that's how hardcore I
was, that even after I couldn't really believe in him the same way any more, still my heart felt bad.

Like Amber, Marianne described being unable to fully “move away from” experiencing Jesus as a real and constant presence in her life. Marianne used the metaphor of two “tracks” within her mind. The dominant track is characterized by unbelief, but patiently accepts the smaller track that continues to believe:

It can be just this little track that plays in my world; this gentle place where the story really feels real, where my willing suspension of disbelief is fully activated. ... It comes out in areas of shame sometimes, comes out in areas where I long for comfort. Comes out when I long for validation. Where I want to make meaning, when there's days when I don't feel like there's any.

Rather than rejecting this track altogether, Marianne embraced a psychodynamic “parts of me” approach within which she allowed herself to occasionally pretend that God is real. As the above quotation indicates, these moments of pretending tended to be associated with times or areas of vulnerability and uncertainty. However, Marianne observed that this track of belief has diminished over the years.

Amber and Lea also noted that their moments of “lapsing” into belief became less frequent over time. For instance, in her early stages of unbelief, Lea sometimes engaged in ambivalent, bet-hedging prayer: “That went on for a while, actually - ‘I don’t really believe you’re there, but if you are ...’ and then I would say whatever I was gonna say [laugh].” Lea implied that while she formerly resorted to these prayers during moments of stress or upset, she had not done so recently. Rather than an intermingling of belief and unbelief, her ties to belief began to take the form of wishing she could believe. In the context of anticipating her father’s death, Lea was having difficulty acknowledging her growing sense that she no longer believed in any sort of spiritual realm:
That’s why I still hold onto these spiritual things. Because I don’t want to believe [tearing up] ... that there’s nothing else. Um, my dad’s been unwell. And he still very much believes. And in my brain I think, I don’t really believe there’s anything after we die. In my heart, I really want to believe that.

Lea’s struggle was uncannily echoed within Marianne’s account of her own father’s death. As Marianne sat with her father on the evening of his death, he was visited by a professional opera singer from his church. As this woman sang the hymn “Be Still and Know that I am God,” Marianne was overcome by an intense longing for Christianity to be true. When the researcher asked if she experienced it as true at the time, she explained:

I really did experience it as my father's truth at the time. And I, with all my heart, believed that he was going into heaven. For him. And it seems strange but it's like a disconnect. I completely could believe he was going there, it's just - I wasn't gonna go there.

Of all the participants, Marianne was most comfortable with allowing belief and unbelief to co-exist within her; at the time of the interview, it remained to be seen how Lea would manage the tension between increasing scepticism and emotional ties to belief in an afterlife. Of the three women, Amber was least tolerant of her occasional pining for belief. She firmly dismissed her wishes for divine guidance by adopting a new philosophy of how humans are “supposed to” live:

In this present day, I still wish there was somebody telling me what to do. And I still wish someone was telling me that what I was doing was the right thing. But that just doesn't exist. That's what experience is for; you're supposed to be learning how to make your own life. I've been so used to having this higher power that I go to for assurance that I'm still not perfectly over it.

In various ways and for many reasons, Type B participants continued to believe (or long to believe) in God long after they had acknowledged their intellectual unbelief. This tenacity of belief suggests that Christianity was integral to their psychological makeup, and could not be quickly or simply relinquished.
3. The letdown of unbelief

Although all participants had come to perceive unbelief as intellectually warranted, some in Type B presented it as a less beautiful, less comforting, and less meaningful state than belief. In a particularly moving segment of Marianne’s interview, she expressed how difficult it is to communicate what it was like for her to have God “within her heart.” Even Marianne’s husband of 22 years cannot understand the full extent of what it was like to have belief “woven into her very fibre”; she feels as though “all the explaining in the world just doesn’t do it.” She explained that having God within her was like floating in a lake on a starry night, and experiencing everything – the stars, the clouds, the water in which she floated, and the air in her lungs – as part of God and of herself. It was an experience of perfect unity, of God saturating every fibre of her being and surroundings. She continued this metaphor into her loss of faith:

And so the process of losing that is this progressive acceptance of, that’s just the water. And those are just stars. And that’s just the air. And I’m floating because there’s oxygen in my blood. God isn't holding me up. I'm not being directed. There's no plan. There's no purpose. There's no divine love. ... Pretty much everything comes up lacking, in the face of that kind of comparison. So the lack is so big.

Marianne’s use of the word “just” – “that’s just the water,” “those are just stars,” “that’s just the air” – demonstrates that the new interpretations are lesser than the previous ones. Her previous understanding of floating in the lake – that God was within her and all around her, holding and guiding her – was revealed as an illusion, and she was left with a series of unrelated natural explanations. In Marianne’s final assessment, unbelief consistently “comes up lacking” when compared with the exquisite experience of being enveloped within God’s cohesive love and plan.

A sense of letdown could also be detected in Marianne’s description of her current spiritual beliefs. At the time of the interview, her understanding of God had shifted from that of
God as a person to God as a social phenomenon, the “collective narrative of what we long for as humans.” Again, Marianne’s use of the minimiser “just” subtly presents her new beliefs as lesser than her Christian beliefs:

[My understanding of God] wasn't the Trinity, it wasn't omnipotent any more; it was our spiritual artistic nature painting different pictures of what God was. It was just, God was a product of our imagination. And that was a beautiful thing, but it wasn't a spirit any more. It wasn't someone you prayed to; it was just something you looked at.

Although Marianne recognized the beauty in the new meanings she had adopted, they were less powerful: they could be appreciated, but not petitioned or worshipped. Finally, Marianne expressed the opinion that belief simply feels “prettier” than unbelief (her whispered repetition of this phrase suggests its emotional significance):

Sometimes, I let myself believe that there's angels. Because, like, it just feels prettier. °It just feels prettier, that way. ° But mostly, I think that we have a yearning for something else, and I think that yearning is for connection.

Marianne’s choice of the childish word “prettier” calls attention to the innocence and simplicity she associates with faith. Marianne presents prettiness as adequate motivation to occasionally and deliberately suspend disbelief. Her subsequent presentation of a fairly sophisticated viewpoint on the human yearning for connection creates an interesting juxtaposition, reinforcing her rhetorical self-presentation as an intelligent woman who is nevertheless attracted to naive faith.

Like Marianne, Lea had arrived at intellectual unbelief but continued to feel as though atheism simply could not compare to faith in certain important realms. One such realm was music, as previously described in relation to the loss of beauty. At the secularized church Lea was attending at the time of the interview, the congregation sang new hymns whose lyrics focused on love and justice rather than God. She dismissively described this music with a laugh
as “lovely,” but sadly observed that the Christian hymns held a certain emotional clout that could not be replicated within a secular worldview:

That comfort of, y’know, [voice shaking] he walks with me, and he talks with me, he knows the number of hairs on your head, and all that stuff. There's comfort in that that is not found in what the atheists offer.

For Lea and Marianne, the new state of unbelief was characterized by emotionally significant disappointments. Unbelief is not presented as simply different and unfamiliar, but as inherently lesser (in some key ways) than belief. The letdown of unbelief was therefore cast as a long-term or permanent fact with which these two participants would continually have to cope.

**Depression**

Depression was not selected as a theme of the Type B experience of unbelief because it was understood as a secondary consequence of the three fundamental themes of loss, emotional ties to belief, and the letdown of unbelief. However, it is important to note that Marianne, Lea, Amber, and Stan all experienced severe depression after relinquishing belief. This depression seemed to originate in their sense of emptiness or meaninglessness, and extended into many spheres of their lives. Amber described some of the physical, cognitive, and emotional symptoms she experienced:

I first of all felt like a cap had been lifted off my head, and I was going out throughout my day feeling like my skull was, my brain was exposed. I felt like something had lifted - literally, it was like a physical feeling - and I was walking around with, like, my brain was just about to pop out of my head. I felt like that all the time. That was one physical feeling I remember, after I really internalized the fact that I didn't believe in God any more. The other one is numbness. My body was numb, my brain felt numb. I started to lose my memory. I started to just not feel emotions any more.

Amber went on to recall symptoms such as frequent tearfulness and difficulty sleeping. Stan also described some hallmark symptoms of clinical depression:

It was like every day was the worst day of my life. ... I sort of stopped eating, then I was eating way too much, and I just had no energy. Like, the idea of getting up to go to a
lecture, take notes, and come back would just be like, “I can’t face it; it’s just too much work; it’s too much; I can’t do it.”

Stan developed “weird” phobias; for instance, he became terrified of using the underground subway. Despite his symptoms’ significant impact on his daily life, Stan did not recognize his depression until he was “virtually suicidal.” At that point, he (like Amber) sought psychiatric help. Lea sought the help of a university chaplain who was also a psychotherapist. She was in such profound crisis that she saw him three times weekly and often felt as though she was “hanging on by her fingernails to the next appointment.”

For Lea and Stan in particular, loss of faith was conflated with other life stressors: for Lea, an experience of interpersonal betrayal and trauma, and for Stan, his parents’ divorce. It is impossible to determine what proportion of their depression was attributable to loss of faith versus other stressors. Regardless, participants themselves treated their loss of faith (and its secondary losses) as an important contributing factor. For Amber and Marianne, whose loss of faith was unmistakably the most salient precursor of depression, a logical aetiology can be traced from the sorrow and guilt of losing faith – an experience Marianne characterized as plunging into “an ocean of sadness” – to the behavioural lethargy, cognitive despair, physical dysfunction, and emotional pain of depression.

**Comparison of Types**

To summarize the two typologies of the experience of unbelief: while Type A is marked by a resolution of tension within the self and the embracing of new possibilities, Type B is typified by struggle (loss, disappointment, and difficulty letting go of belief). Many differences between the types emerge from the preceding discussion: for instance, Type A presents new meanings as exciting and superior, while Type B treats them as adequate but disappointing. The
following section highlights differences between the types in the experiences of loss, tension, and identity change.

Although the theme of loss is described in detail within Type B, participants within Type A also acknowledged certain losses associated with departure from Christianity. However, their discursive treatment of these losses was vastly different. This can be illustrated by a comparison of Lea and Brad’s descriptions of the loss of sacred music. Lea (Type B) presented this loss as distressing, persistent, and permanent: “The music was a huge loss. I still miss it. Like, I still miss the sound of the band, I still miss singing, like those old hymns and songs [tearing up] ... they're not replaceable.”

Brad (Type A), a professional musician, presents a similar opinion; however, the discursive qualities of his account construct a very different meaning:

The other thing I struggle with - not struggle with, but it's just because the thought and cultural life of atheism is still in its infancy - but the other thing too, as a musician, it's so hard to imagine what the atheist version of St. Matthew’s Passion would be. Because it would sound so weird to be singing passionately about something that isn't divine, in a way. Y'know, that's an interesting area to kind of think about.

Brad and Lea, in the above quotations, are describing a similar problem: sacred music has a certain intangible quality that is difficult to replicate in secular music. However, Brad’s account contains several rhetorical devices that minimize this problem’s importance. He introduces the issue as something he “struggles with,” but immediately disclaims that phrase and offers an explanation that excuses the problem he is about to present (“it’s just because the thought and cultural life of atheism is still in its infancy”). This excuse casts the problem as temporary: it will resolve itself once the cultural life of atheism has matured. By then stating that an atheist alternative to sacred music is “hard to imagine,” he frames the problem as a limitation of his individual imagination rather than a fundamental impossibility. Finally, by concluding
with the dismissive assessment that this issue is “interesting to think about,” he disclaims any distress over the matter and solidifies his presentation of the problem as ultimately solvable.

Brad’s treatment of the loss of sacred music is typical of the Type A presentation of other losses (e.g. community, guidance, and existential certainty): regrettable but transient. Within Type B, on the other hand, losses are devastating and enduring.

A second important difference to note between the two types is the resolution versus continuation of tension. As described above, unbelief within Type A is accompanied by a release of tension and sense of natural fit. Participants expressed relief to have “escaped” or a thankfulness that they can now “see clearly.” When asked what she had lost upon leaving Christianity, Natasha laughed: “I felt like I was losing everything negative in my life ... I just wish I had de-converted earlier.”

Participants within Type B, in contrast, express a sense of pining for the comfort and relief they experienced within Christianity. Marianne disclosed: “Sometimes there's agonizing disappointment. When I just wish so much I could have that relief ... where it could be purely just, wow, there's God. It's all clean.” Although parts of these participants’ selves, particularly their intellects, were pushing away from Christianity, other parts continued to yearn for God. Lea spoke of having two different selves within her:

[The transition has] been a process of trying to bring the rest of me that still really wishes I could believe it, that me, in line with this me, who sees more and more clearly ... how so not true this shit is [laugh]. And so there are these two ‘me’s trying to bring themselves into alignment.

For Type B participants, inner tension continued during unbelief as they managed simultaneous drives towards and away from Christian belief.

Finally, differences emerged between the two types in the process of identity change after the transition to unbelief. Participants in Type A engaged in behaviours to strengthen their
chosen identification as an atheist, sceptic, or ex-Christian. They conveyed a sense of pride in their new identity and embraced its subculture (for instance, by joining the Centre for Inquiry, posting on ex-Christian internet forums, or reading the New Atheist authors).

In contrast, participants in Type B seemed to enter an identity moratorium of sorts; they did not adopt a new belief identity or label. This could be the result of their lingering emotional attachment to Christianity and a reluctance to reject it entirely by adopting an incompatible label such as “atheist.” Rather than transitioning out of Christianity and into atheism, Type B participants transitioned out of Christianity into a no-man’s-land of vague, “complicated” beliefs characterised by vestiges of spirituality (these vestiges being deliberately indulged rather than sincerely endorsed).

In conclusion, some participants within Type A present their transition into unbelief as so uniformly positive that they are unable to articulate even one loss that they sustained as a result of leaving Christianity. Conversely, the transition was so painful for some participants within Type B that they cannot identify a single benefit of having left, apart from the character growth that resulted from navigating an agonizing transition. Having discussed the important ways in which these experiences of unbelief are fundamentally dissimilar, this chapter now turns to a presentation of themes that are common to both types.

**Social Consequences**

Regardless of how participants felt about their loss of faith, they had little control over their family and friends’ reactions to their transition. Some participants described positive interpersonal experiences after leaving Christianity. As described above, Jim stated that he experienced a “profound sense of deepening of relationships” as an atheist, since he was relieved of the ulterior motive of converting friends and acquaintances to Christianity. Lea, although
initially devastated by the loss of her social network at her fundamentalist church, had come to feel more comfortable within her new, secularized church community:

I’ve gained a community that is based on truth, and justice and love and challenging each other and caring for one another, all that kind of stuff. I mean, what binds [a fundamentalist congregation]? ... It’s that commonality around, “we all believe in Jesus.” And I didn’t. So I’ve gained a more authentic community, a more real community.

Like Lea, most participants had begun to forge new relationships and repair damaged ones by the time of the interview; these new social connections tended to be presented as equal or superior to those sustained within Christianity. However, participants described a preponderance of negative social consequences in the immediate aftermath of leaving Christianity. Although some loved ones were supportive and helpful – for instance, when Lea left her fundamentalist church, her father told her about the progressive, God-optional church she now attends – others were shocked, angry, or grief-stricken. This theme will be described in the context of interpersonal relationships with family of origin (parents and siblings), spouse, children, friends, and the church community.

*Family of origin.* Many participants described verbal clashes and tension with their parents and siblings, who continued to be devout Christians. Amber had been living at home, but her familial relationships deteriorated after her loss of faith and her mother asked her to move out. In Amber’s words, “she didn't want me influencing my family with my wayward ways any more.” Stan’s circumstances were unique in that after his parents’ divorce in his mid-twenties, his mother and siblings moved into *his* home – precisely at the peak of his vehemently anti-religious phase. Stan’s indignation at his mother’s indoctrination of his siblings, particularly under *his* roof, was a source of constant conflict:

I have had non-stop fights with her, because she leaves Bibles and tracts around, and she's teaching my - I'm the oldest, I'm 25, so all my siblings are younger than me – she’s indoctrinating them in exactly the same way that I was brought up, in my own house.
Although Stan was frequently aggravated by his mother’s practices, he tolerated the living arrangements for the sake of offering an alternative, secular perspective to his younger siblings:

If it weren't for the divorce and legal stuff that's going on, I'd probably tell her to get lost. But then I wouldn't be able to give my view. My brothers are all hard-line fundamentalists; I've tried to tell them a bit about science and say, listen, our family's been so messed up by this. They're not interested, don't wanna hear it, think that I've lost my mind.

Like Stan, Chris felt frustrated by his family’s non-receptivity to his newfound viewpoint. He believed he had an obligation to point out the ways in which they were “shackled” by Christianity, but his efforts only generated angry and unproductive arguments. He had learned to bite his tongue when his family praised Jesus for an occurrence that Chris perceived as natural or coincidental, but he suffered from anxiety over how to convince them of atheism’s veracity. At the time of the interview, he had begun to accept the limitations of his influence:

It's better now that I feel like, “Chris, you made an effort. And that's where you should let it lie.” Years down the road when they all wake up, uh, I could say “I told you so.” But I still feel, not an obligation any more, but I still want them to be free. I want them to join me! Y'know, because I'm pretty alone over here [laugh].

Chris talked about feeling isolated and disconnected from his family, and expressed sadness over the current superficiality of his family relationships. He also communicated a complex sense of hurt over their apparent lack of concern with re-converting him:

Chris: I still haven't fully accepted my position. The fact that I'm an atheist in a Christian family. It's just really hard. I just feel relationships are now two-dimensional - y'know, we talk about movies - when I just really want to talk about that. Why doesn't anybody care about my loss of faith? They don't, no-one asks.
Interviewer: Hmm, okay.
Chris: No-one's tried to re-convert me. The only thing that ever happened was my uncle, when he found out, he hugged me. He didn't say anything. He just hugged me and cried... I think they all just assume I'm going to hell.

This element of Chris’s social experience was different from that of other participants. Several participants’ families engaged in efforts to bring them back into the faith: for instance, Natasha’s
mother began mailing her Bible tracts and subscribed her to an evangelical magazine. While some participants were tolerant of these gestures and others found them irritating, all were relatively dismissive: they were simply not interested in returning to the church. Chris was the only one seemed to want his family to try to re-convert him; he inferred from their silence that they did not care that, according to their beliefs, he was destined for hell.

Although Jim’s family largely avoided discussing his loss of faith (consistent with their tendency to avoid any uncomfortable subject), his mother became perturbed about his eternal fate when she was dying. He recalled one dramatic incident when he visited her in the hospital:

She grabbed my hand with this strength that was quite surprising for her condition at that point, and she said, “Why don’t you believe in Jesus any more?” Just this anguish coming out of her. And she would not let go of this theme: “I don’t understand why you don’t believe in Jesus any more. I don’t want to go to heaven without you. I cannot bear to think you’re going to hell.” And all of this horrific emotion coming out of her.

Although he initially tried to dodge the questions, Jim eventually decided that his mother’s comfort was more important than his integrity and he untruthfully assured her that he still did believe. Although his mother was pacified by this assurance, Jim saw something “perverse” about the anguish she was experiencing over the destiny of her two unbelieving sons.

*Spouse.* For participants who were married to a Christian at the time of losing faith, the transition to unbelief caused a significant rift in the relationship. Brad, whose marriage ended as a result of his loss of faith, said that he and his former wife were “soul mates” who understood each other deeply; however, their shared faith was central to their marriage. Brad’s “arrival at the other side” (i.e. reaching unbelief) constituted an irreconcilable difference for the couple: in Brad’s words, “on every single issue, we couldn’t relate at all.” Although it pained him that his loss of faith was hurting his wife and irreparably damaging his marriage, Brad was convinced that leaving Christianity was essential to his integrity and mental wellbeing. Brad still harboured
some resentment over the dissolution of his marriage: “I still hate that our marriage ended because, uh, because of Christianity, is I guess how I would put it. That was terrible.” By attributing his divorce to Christianity (an impersonal entity) rather than using a more personal construction (e.g. “our marriage ended because I lost my faith” or “because I left the church”), Brad adopts a particular rhetorical stance. First, he absolves himself and his wife of blame for the breakup. Second, he positions “Christianity” as an antagonist, constructing a justification for the negativity he exhibits elsewhere in the interview.

Ted’s marriage also suffered after his loss of faith. As he explained:

She certainly considered leaving, and so did I, because she wanted something very different from life than what she was getting. ... She felt hard done by that, y'know, her Christian husband turned out to be non-Christian. ... Now she's faced with a life where in her view, half her family's going to hell.

Ted expressed empathy with his wife’s struggle, but framed staying within the marriage as “ultimately her decision.” This attribution of responsibility presents his newfound unbelief as non-negotiable: his loss of faith was an involuntary and permanent change in his character with which his wife would have to “come to terms” if the relationship was to survive.

Children. Of the participants with children – Jim, Ted, and Marianne – none described ongoing conflict with their children over their loss of faith. Ted’s teenage daughter was heavily involved with the church when he lost his faith; upon first hearing of his unbelief, she was devastated. However, she herself left Christianity in her young adulthood. Ted’s son remained a devout and active Christian, while his youngest daughter “doesn't really have any kind of belief system in her conversation, but she doesn't want to take sides between her dad and her mom; ... she’s never really given either of us any ammunition.” Although Ted’s wife had chosen to stay within the marriage, Ted’s use of the word ammunition attests to the continued tension within the family’s dynamic. The couple’s three children seemed to engage in efforts to maintain balance
and peace. Ted laughed as he described the blessing of the meal before Christmas dinner: “We had a traditional fundamentalist, evangelical Christian prayer as well as an atheist giving of thanks to the various people involved, so [laugh] – and my kids were the ones that insisted on some of that.”

Marianne’s children were young when she lost her faith, and she sometimes wondered whether her own rejection of religion had prevented her children from having a positive experience of faith:

I worry - have I not allowed for that possibility to exist for my children, by just not mentioning it any more? ... The legacy of giving on something – a belief – to your children is nice, in some ways. But I'm very wary of it because of what it ended up being for me.

In particular, Marianne was attracted by the simplicity that faith can offer a child: for instance, reassurance that Jesus is in control of whether a grandparent gets well or passes away. Although she saw the beauty of this simple explanation, she also expressed misgivings about “deluding” a child with these messages. How faith should (or should not) impact her parenting was an ongoing question for Marianne, one with which she continued to wrestle.

Friends. The participants described several ways in which their friends reacted to their loss of faith. Some participants had already begun surrounding themselves with atheist, agnostic, or religiously indifferent friends; these individuals (naturally) tended to be supportive of the participant’s transition out of Christianity. Other participants, such as Ted, talked about good Christian friends who remained accepting and close. However, many participants experienced dissolution of friendships after they left the faith. Amber attested: “I don't have one church friend who still has any interest in talking to me. Out of everybody that I knew for 21 years. Nobody.” Stan, who had not yet widely disclosed his unbelief, cited the anticipated social costs as his primary motivation for keeping his atheism secret:
My best friend, who is from church? Can’t talk to him. He’s like, stonewall; this will come between us. I’m afraid that this is actually, in the long run, going to be an unsustainable rift between us; you can’t really patch it up.

Without the commonality of beliefs and worldviews upon which the relationship had been built, many friendships were simply untenable. In some cases, the participants themselves lost interest in maintaining these friendships; in others, Christian friends actively distanced themselves from the participant.

Church community. In addition to Christian friends, participants described the reaction of the broader church community to their loss of faith. Amber, in particular, experienced harsh judgment and cutting cruelty from members of the congregation she left. She was the victim of guilt trips, vicious name-calling, and threats of God’s punishment:

I am now a slut, and I'm now a whore, and I'm now vain and full of pride. And now I really deserve what's coming to me – “And just you wait, because it's coming. Everything you touch now? You don't have God's blessing any more, so now everything that you do, you're going to fail at. And you're gonna turn to so much to fill this hole in your life - you're gonna turn to drugs, you're gonna turn to crime” ... all these threats about what I was gonna do to myself as a result of this. So who wants to live? Like, who wants to try anything?

Although this barrage of abuse was depressing and painful, Amber stated that it helped her realise that she had “chosen a better way”: she would never speak so hurtfully to anyone.

Amber’s experience was atypical, but several other participants reported a milder sense of judgment from the Christian community. As Brad explained, this judgment is theologically grounded: since faith is regarded as a virtue, the absence of faith is seen as a reflection of poor character. This claim was borne out by Ted’s experience: he asked a close friend from church how his departure was viewed, and the friend replied that it was seen as a “lack of faithfulness.” Ted was ambivalent about this description:
I no longer have that faith, so I have not been faithful, not full of faith. So literally it's true, but there was a moral kind of judgment that I really didn't like. Same as, y'know, being unfaithful in a marriage or whatever: I'd been unfaithful to the faith.

Although he was uncomfortable with the moral implications of the “unfaithful” label, Ted admitted that he may have held a similar view as a Christian. He recalled that people who doubt or lose their faith tend to “disappear off the radar,” and gossip circulates within the church about the secret sin they may have been harbouring.

Naturally, friends’ and family members’ reactions varied according to their individual personalities. Natasha’s mentor, a minister from her hometown, responded to the news of Natasha’s loss of faith in a way that was characteristic of her kind and caring nature:

Being who she is, she's like, “Well, I still love you and it doesn't change our relationship. I'm sad to hear that you feel this way, but I'm sure that if you've come to this decision, you're serious about it.” Which was nice.

Natasha’s mother’s reaction was very different, but consistent with her volatile personality: “From my mom - [sigh] well, she's threatened to never speak to me again so many times in my life that at this point, it was just like, okay!” Managing these varied social implications added another dimension to the challenge of transitioning to unbelief.

**Coming out.** Participants treated their announcement of unbelief as a consequential step; several used the phrase “coming out” to underscore the significance of this disclosure. The researcher solicited further explication of this phrase from one participant, Chris. He explained that upon moving to Toronto, he befriended a gay man and began hearing stories of how gay people came out to their families. He realised that revealing oneself as an atheist to a Christian family was similar in its magnitude and potential consequences (e.g. being shunned by one’s family). Since the gay and lesbian community had already introduced the term “coming out” into the cultural lexicon, Chris adopted it to describe his own disclosure process.
This section presented the theme of social consequences in the context of relationships with family of origin, spouse, children, friends, and church community. The final theme describes the participants’ experiences with mental health professionals.

**Counselling Experiences**

Several participants sought mental health support during and after their transition to unbelief; others offered suggestions regarding what might hypothetically have been helpful or unhelpful, had they sought such support. Four subthemes capture the essence of their comments in this domain: general therapeutic factors, making sense of the transition, counsellors’ unfamiliarity with the experience, and neutrality as an impediment.

*General therapeutic factors.* Clients who found psychotherapy helpful tended to identify the counsellor’s general therapeutic attributes as central to the experience. Lea described her therapist (who was a chaplain for a liberal church) as a “gentle, listening, caring presence.” He offered her empathy and a safe space in which to express her emotions; he engaged in a variety of techniques, such as art therapy (which helped Lea to connect with her anger against the individuals in the church who had betrayed her).

Brad had a very positive experience of psychotherapy; he implied that the experience contributed to his current goal of becoming a psychiatrist. He “related well” to his psychiatrist, who offered a sense of support (for instance, by accepting a compact disc recording of Brad’s band) and empathy. The psychiatrist also served as a “sounding board” for Brad’s exploration of new worldviews. Brad recalled being impressed by the “big bag of tools” at the psychiatrist’s disposal in therapy. He was also reassured by the psychiatrist’s nonjudgmental stance and guarantee of confidentiality:

[I could] tell him everything, tell him about the weird parallel lives and the struggles with my wife, that kind of stuff. Having someone where I can know in the back of my mind –
well, he's heard everything anyone's ever said, and he's not allowed to tell people, so just take the filter out.

Unsurprisingly, characteristics that are important to any counselling relationship – confidentiality, support, unconditional positive regard, curiosity, and respect – were valued by the participants in this study. Participants also commented on ways in which therapy was uniquely shaped by their presenting problem of losing faith, and the next three subthemes present these special considerations.

*Making sense of the transition.* Some participants recalled an inability to understand their emotional reactions during their transition to unbelief. Stan, for instance, did not recognize that his debilitating depression was linked to his loss of faith. He saw several psychiatrists, but found none of them helpful. He admitted that this unhelpfulness was likely due to his own inability to explain what was troubling him:

In fairness to them, I couldn't really tell them what the problem was. I can now, but it's funny - it's almost like once you know what the problem is, that's 90 percent of the way to solving your problem; you've already solved it by that point.

Before he identified his existential crisis, Stan attributed his depression variously to school troubles, his parents’ divorce, and the bad weather. Although he felt frustrated when psychiatrists misunderstood him, he was unable to truly understand himself.

Amber also described feeling confused by her reactions to losing faith; although she did not seek counselling, her boyfriend ventured explanations to help her make sense of and articulate how she was feeling:

He really intuited what I was going through, so even if I couldn't find the words myself, he often did. ... If he could tell I was feeling lost, then he'd be the one to say, “I can understand if you were feeling like you had depended on Jesus for all of your support before, and now you don't think it's there any more.” It's like, “oh yeah, well that's exactly how I'm feeling.” So he would just explain things like that.
Although this strategy of intuiting and suggesting possible interpretations was carried out by Amber’s boyfriend rather than a therapist, it served an important therapeutic function.

Participants needed help not only to understand the meaning of their transition, but to find positive meanings within the experience. Chris’s doctor proposed one such interpretation that resonated for Chris:

She said, there's a silver lining here in the sense that, um, having truly believed, religion was more alive for me. She never believed, so she doesn't understand what it would be like to have this vision of an afterlife and heaven, and angels and demons in the midst of this big spiritual war that I thought was very real. So she said, y’know, accept that. That really helped, actually. It's not a waste that I experienced it. It's actually quite rare; not everyone does experience it.

Chris went on to explain that the experience of true belief in the Christian myth cannot be purchased or casually adopted. He felt a valued sense of having emerged from something, and believed his atheism was richer because of it. Had his doctor not offered her viewpoint, Chris may have taken longer to discover this particular meaning (if he discovered it at all).

Unfamiliarity with the experience. Some participants found that because counsellors were unfamiliar with fundamentalist Christianity, they had difficulty understanding the experience of leaving it. Ted and his wife both tried to explain the magnitude of Ted’s transition to their marital therapists, with limited success:

Very few counsellors could even grasp what it was like to be a fundamentalist Christian and how that would impact your life to leave it. I spent a long time trying to explain this, but it never, they'd just kinda look at you like ... I wasn’t getting through, or they weren't comprehending or something. ... Although as you talked about it, they kinda – ‘oh yeah, that is a big thing!’ [laugh] and they'd accept that, but they didn't seem to have much of a basis for dealing with it.

Although Ted’s counsellors seemed open to learning about his transition, their unfamiliarity with the cultural context of fundamentalism seemed to limit their ability to provide effective therapeutic intervention. In contrast, Marianne found that some counsellors were clearly
uncomfortable focusing on her faith transition within therapy; these counsellors tended to direct
the session away from God and back to family dynamics or behaviours. One gestalt therapist
exhibited this bias when Marianne brought up an issue pertaining to her faith:

She said, “Okay, let's do a role play about your father.” It was about me and my dad,
rather than, like, “Let's feel what this wrestling between you and God feels like.” She
didn't tell me to put God in the chair, she told me to put my father in the chair. So it was
clear: okay, we're doing family work then. All right.

Marianne was fairly accepting of individual therapists’ reluctance to discuss her faith, since she
was content to work on different issues within different courses of therapy. At the time of the
interview, she had begun therapy with a psychologist who disclosed (after about eight sessions)
that he had also been raised in fundamentalist Christianity. In the context of this psychologist’s
ability to understand and honour the magnitude of her loss, Marianne could begin to deeply
process the experience of losing her faith.

Another particularly valuable experience for Marianne was participating in a therapy
group attended by two other students who had left a deeply held faith (Catholicism and Islam).
Although these group members did not share her history within fundamentalist Christianity, they
had an important experience in common: “when the faith becomes a reality, and then the reality
shifts.” Unless individuals (including counsellors) have had such an experience, Marianne
doubted that they would be able to empathize with her loss. She was protective of her story and
hesitant to share it with those who would not understand:

If I knew that someone was that naïve about Christianity, I wouldn't even talk about it.
Why would I try and tell you how part of my fibre this is? I can't tell you that, because
you don't know what it's like when it weaves into your very fibre. All the explaining in
the world just doesn't do it.

In addition to having difficulty understanding the loss of faith experience, counsellors
may be insensitive to the ways in which departure from fundamentalist Christianity can affect
their clients’ perceptions of the world. Stan tried to convey his distress over the fact that children are indoctrinated into Christianity before they can think critically, and our culture’s acceptance of this practice. He felt dismissed and patronized by his psychiatrist’s response:

I went there and the guy, he doesn't understand my background, he doesn't understand what I'm going through. ... He's like, “I need to teach you not to catastrophize.” Right? Come on, man. I'm not crazy. I'm not catastrophizing; this is a catastrophe. They're telling children stuff that's just lies; it's a cult.

From Stan’s perspective, not only did the psychiatrist fail to understand his background, but he formulated a treatment goal with little or no regard for Stan’s point of view. Stan experienced this exchange as frustrating and alienating.

*Neutrality as an impediment.* Although this subtheme was identified by only two participants, it warrants mention because of its relevance to counselling practice. Stan and Natasha, when asked how they thought a counsellor might have been helpful to them in their transition, commented that a therapist’s obligation to remain neutral would limit his or her usefulness. Natasha explained: “I wanted answers; I wanted good, hard facts. I didn't want someone to say, ‘Well, if you believe, then that's good for you; and if you don't believe, that's okay too.’” She deliberately refrained from discussing her struggles of faith with her psychiatrist:

We didn't talk about faith, because I felt like it would be unfair of me to expect her to try and mediate when it's something so personal. I can't expect a counsellor to say, “You're right. You should become an atheist!” [laugh] or “No, you should still be a Christian.” It's not really their place. Kind of an awkward position to put them in.

Natasha also speculated that, had she gone to a Christian counsellor who was *not* neutral, she would likely have been unconvinced by any exhortations to stay within the faith. She needed to go through her own process of evaluating her faith, and to reach her own conclusions.
Because of his belief that religion is a destructive institution that always causes more harm than good, Stan believed that counsellors helping fundamentalist clients would ideally adopt a directive approach that resembles cult de-programming tactics. However, he realised that this might not be realistic within most counselling settings, which tend to assume that religion can be both helpful and harmful. Stan expressed doubt that conventional counselling could help individuals who are in the midst of transitioning out of Christianity:

I don't see any other way to do it, other than to be a hard-line atheist with people. ... I needed to be sat down, and gone through the problems, and basically told I was in a cult. That would have done it. ... Honestly, it’s really hard from a therapist's point of view, if you want to take a neutral stance on an issue that I don't think is neutral.

After further discussion with the researcher, Stan suggested that a counsellor could explore any ways in which Christian doctrine was generating dysfunctional, oppressive, or unhealthy consequences for the client’s life. He also suggested that counsellors try to help clients create distance between themselves and the organization, so that they would be more able to critically evaluate its truth claims and moral code.

This section has described the participants’ recollections of, and reflections on, psychotherapy during their transition out of Christianity. Implications for counselling practice, based on the results in their entirety, will be discussed in the following chapter.

**Summary: Experience of Unbelief**

This chapter described the themes that represent the experience of unbelief. Collectively, this chapter and the two chapters that precede it present the results of the current analysis. Case summaries of participants’ individual experiences were provided, followed by results in the domains of “Experience of Christianity,” “Transition out of Christianity,” and “Experience of Unbelief.” The final domain was organized according to two distinctive typologies that emerged from the results (with the exception of the themes of social consequences and counselling
experiences, which cut across both typologies). In order to emphasize the primacy of participants’ voices, this chapter will conclude with an elegant exhortation from Amber. At this point of the interview, Amber briefly diverted from telling her own story to directly address other individuals who have lost faith in fundamentalist Christianity:

I want to tell people who are going through this – be prepared for bodily responses, but just embrace them. You don't have to hate your body any more. You don't have to hate your desires. You were made; you just weren't made by a single creator who thought about what he was doing at the time. But just the fact that you're alive – you are so lucky. So just be happy about that. Life is a - it's not a blessing ... it's an amazing gift. And if you're coming out of religion, you decided that life could be fuller. And it doesn't feel like it all the time, but if you were able to make that first step, then you deserve to keep going until you've made it to the last step. That's all I know. That's all I can say. It could look like anything, but just embrace it.
CHAPTER VII

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to explore the experience of losing faith in God, within the context of fundamentalist Christianity. As stated in Chapter I, an important part of the rationale for this study is the contention that losing faith is a psychologically meaningful event. In support of this claim, literature was cited that suggests that a believer’s relationship with God can be understood as an attachment bond (see Kirkpatrick, 1992), and that leaving a deeply-held religious faith is highly disruptive to an individual’s sense of identity (see Davidman & Greil, 2007; Thurston, 2000). It was hoped that interpreting the results of this study within psychological frameworks of attachment and identity would bring a potentially foreign experience – that of leaving fundamentalist Christianity – into a context with which researchers and counsellors are more familiar. As predicted, the findings are amenable to interpretation within these frameworks; this chapter discusses the experience of losing faith in relation to literature on identity and identity change (including Marcia, 1966; Feinstein et al., 1988; and Kunnen & Wassink, 2003) and the experience of losing an attachment figure (Sbarra & Hazan, 2008; Shear & Shair, 2005).

To ground its discussion of identity, attachment, and loss of faith, this chapter begins with a summary of the study’s findings. Since the IPA approach is inductive, the themes that constitute this study’s results were structured according to patterns that emerged from the data; as a result, the study’s initial guiding questions were not specifically addressed within the findings. To provide a sense of continuity, and to demonstrate that the study achieved its goals, the following summary is organized in relation to the study’s three guiding questions:

1. What is the psychological experience of losing faith in fundamentalist Christianity?
2. What are the consequences of loss of faith for an individual’s life?

3. Where do individuals who lose their faith seek help and support, and what elements of this support are experienced as useful or not useful?

**Summary of results**

1. *What is the psychological experience of losing faith in fundamentalist Christianity?*

   The first of this study’s three guiding questions is also its most essential; the bulk of the results presented in the preceding three chapters constitute its answer. The phrase *losing faith*, as used in this question, encompasses two sequential experiences: first, the transitional phase of questioning, doubting, and relinquishing Christian belief; and next, the task of coming to terms with and integrating one’s new unbelief. These two phases correspond to the domains of Transition out of Christianity and Experience of Unbelief.

   The essential psychological experience of losing faith – in the transitional sense – begins with an accumulation of intrapsychic tension. This tension can take the form of dissatisfaction with theological explanations for problematic questions, a growing awareness of facts that are incompatible with Christian doctrine, or the increasing sense that one does not fit in within the Christian community (for instance, because of one’s political beliefs). Although this tension may have been present for many years, it becomes increasingly difficult to manage. Eventually, a crisis or catalyst event marks the beginning of the journey from belief to unbelief. This event could be as dramatic as a major depressive episode or an interpersonal betrayal, or as innocuous as stumbling upon an anti-Christian argument that one cannot dismiss.

   This study found that loss of faith entails both having lost trust in, or loyalty to, God (*losing faith*) and no longer being convinced of God’s reality (*losing belief*). Typically, loss of faith follows an emotional disillusionment or frustration with God and Christianity. This
emotional shift may be caused by God’s perceived non-responsiveness during a time of need, being treated badly by individuals within the church, struggling with the injustice of suffering, sensing that the church is acting dishonestly, or finding appealing sources of support and meaning outside of God. An individual’s emotional relationship with God, once characterized by love, devotion, and loyalty, is increasingly marked by distance, frustration, or hurt.

Until this emotional shift occurs, believers are motivated to defend their faith from potentially threatening information and viewpoints: they tend to avoid, ignore, or discredit arguments that contradict Christianity. After the emotional loss of faith has begun, they start to open their minds to formerly taboo perspectives, such as naturalistic theories of origins and secular scholarship on the Bible. They also begin to think critically about their religious beliefs, which previously held a privileged status beyond the purview of logic. As evidence mounts against Christianity’s veracity and God’s existence, individuals shift intellectually from belief to unbelief.

Recognizing and acknowledging unbelief is a psychologically significant step. Having identified as Christians for most (if not all) of their lives, these individuals may be confused, shocked, or distraught by the realization that they no longer believe. The admission of unbelief may be avoided for some time, but the person eventually acknowledges that he or she is no longer a Christian. This acknowledgment may be facilitated or necessitated by identification with overtly atheist viewpoints or by social interactions (for instance, a friend or partner voicing their suspicion that the person no longer believes).

After the transition to unbelief has taken place, two distinctive patterns of experience emerge. The experience denoted in the results as Type A is characterized by a sense of freedom, relief, and fit with the true self. For individuals within Type A, preserving belief in God had
become emotionally and intellectually stressful; relinquishing belief therefore resulted in the resolution of psychological tension. These individuals enthusiastically embrace new values, discover new motivations, and build a new sense of self. Unbelief is experienced as a more enlightened and genuine state than belief, and there is little or no desire to return to Christianity. Any losses that were sustained upon departure from Christianity (such as the breakup of a relationship) are considered unfortunate but outweighed by the rewards associated with unbelief. The “loss” of faith is hardly treated as a loss at all; rather, it is viewed as an emergence into an exciting new world of potential and possibilities.

In contrast, the Type B experience of unbelief is characterized by struggle and depression. The passing of faith and belief are experienced as profound, multifaceted, and distressing losses. The dissolution of a divine relationship, the obliteration of meanings and values, and the demise of a treasured story result in a sense of sorrow and upheaval.

Relinquishing belief is difficult, and individuals may have discrepant emotional and intellectual experiences: as one participant explained, the “heart” continues to believe long after the “head” does not. Although Type B individuals have arrived at intellectual unbelief, they pine for the comfort of various Christian beliefs (such as the promise of an afterlife or the reassurance of God’s guidance). The perceived truth of unbelief is acknowledged, but is experienced as less emotionally fulfilling than the perceived fiction of Christianity. Grieving the passing of this fiction and learning to accept the more disappointing paradigm of unbelief are fundamental parts of the Type B experience.

To summarize, the essential psychological experience of losing faith in fundamentalist Christianity can be understood as the accumulation of tension, the turning point of a crisis or catalyst, and a series of emotional and intellectual shifts that culminate in the loss of faith and
relinquishing of belief. Upon acknowledging their unbelief, individuals experience either a sense of relief, fit, and excitement, or a sense of loss and sadness.

*What are the consequences of losing faith for an individual’s life?*

Losing faith is typically accompanied by leaving the church, which is a primary hub of public identity and social life for fundamentalist Christians. The former Christian’s external sense of self undergoes dramatic changes. Those who were employed by the church must find new occupations; those who held positions of leadership must find new outlets for their talents and energies. All must find new activities to replace the worship services, Bible studies, volunteer opportunities, and recreational activities that were provided by the church.

The observable consequences of having lost faith differ between Type A and Type B. Depression is a hallmark Type B experience; for these individuals, losing faith may be accompanied by a period of reduced productivity, self-isolation, and other behavioural signs of depression. In contrast, individuals in Type A may engage in a flurry of new pursuits, including the promotion of atheism or exploration of scientific knowledge. They may display an enhanced zest for life as they try to make the most of their finite time on earth and compensate for time viewed as wasted within Christianity.

An individual’s relationships with parents and siblings, spouse, children, friends, and the church community may be disrupted by his or her loss of faith. These tensions and rifts can arise for numerous reasons. New unbelievers’ bitterness against religion or frustration with the foolishness of belief sometimes sparks arguments with their Christian family members. Strife may also grow from an unbeliever’s attempts to convince his or her significant others of the facticity of atheism. Former friends and members of the church community may judge and reject the former believer, unilaterally ending the relationship. Finally, disconnection is sometimes the
inevitable consequence of the new discrepancy in beliefs, where previously there was concordance. The results suggest that this outcome is particularly pronounced within marital relationships: although the spouses once understood each other well, the relationship became strained and sometimes untenable due to one partner’s radical change in beliefs.

In summary, individuals who lose their faith and leave the church have to rebuild not only their sense of self and worldview, but the trappings of their lives: their circles of friends, how they spend their time, and sometimes their occupation or marital status.

*Where do individuals who lose their faith seek help and support, and what elements of this support are experienced as useful or not useful?*

Support during and after the loss of faith is sought from a wide range of sources. Websites dedicated to free thought and secular belief systems provide links and referrals to reading material; this information serves to justify and support the new identity of unbelief. These websites often manage online forums, which provide the opportunity to dialogue with other individuals who have left Christianity. The Internet also serves as a tool for establishing and promoting in-person discussion and support groups, or for locating existing groups. Some individuals join organizations such as the Centre for Inquiry or the Humanist Association of Canada; like the websites mentioned above, these societies offer a blend of information, support, and likeminded discussion to the new unbeliever.

Face-to-face support is sought from non-Christian significant others. Individuals who transition out of Christianity gradually may have already begun to build a network of atheist or religiously indifferent friends; these friends can offer not only support but validation and congratulations upon the individual’s arrival at unbelief. Finally, support is sought from medical and mental health professionals: counsellors, psychiatrists, and family physicians. Some
individuals present loss of faith as their primary therapeutic concern. However, the results of this study suggest that it is more common to seek professional assistance for depression, which commonly precedes or follows loss of faith; the loss of faith may then arise as a peripheral treatment issue.

The most commonly cited useful element of the websites, online forums, and reading materials was access to reasoning and evidence that justify unbelief. Interacting with others who had left Christianity proved that happiness could be achieved apart from God, a possibility that can seem remote to someone who has recently lost faith. The forums offered guidance and support with common milestones, such as telling one’s family about the change of beliefs; the online community provided former Christians with reassurance that they were not alone, and supplied them with a language and points of reference with which to make sense of their experience. Getting involved in these organizations offered new fields of knowledge to embrace and explore, and helped substantiate a valued new identity.

From friends and health professionals, participants valued general qualities such as listening, non-judgment, and empathy. Antidepressant medications were of some use to individuals who experienced depression following loss of faith; however, medications were experienced as a temporary aid rather than a true solution. Interventions were experienced as unhelpful when a professional did not understand the fundamentalist context, and as a result did not grasp the implications of losing faith. Even worse were helpers who were dismissive and condescending. Finally, while most support and discussion groups were said to be beneficial, participants sometimes felt out-of-place or alienated when gathering with lifelong atheists rather than with ex-Christians.
This summary has provided an overview of this study’s findings regarding the experience of losing faith, the consequences of leaving Christianity, and the experience of seeking support for one’s transition. To appreciate the deeper implications of these results, it is necessary to situate them within the context of psychological models and theories such as those related to identity.

**Identity**

The results of this study indicate that the experience of transitioning from belief to unbelief is intertwined with themes of identity, including loss of identity, identity confusion, and strengthening a new identity of unbelief. The following discussion draws upon several different psychological models of identity and identity change. It first establishes context by considering participants’ religious identities before their loss of faith in terms of Marcia’s (1966) identity statuses. It then describes two related models (Feinstein et al., 1988; Kunnen & Wassink, 2003) for understanding how Christian doctrine became part of participants’ individual identities. It proceeds to a discussion of identity change, focusing on processes of assimilation and accommodation and identifying ways in which these processes were visible in participants’ transitions to unbelief. Since strong emotions were associated with the experience of losing faith, the role of emotions in identity change is briefly examined. This is followed by an analysis of identity status within unbelief, paralleling the first topic. The section concludes with a commentary on the parallels between atheist and gay or lesbian identity development. Models of coming out are not intended to serve as a framework for interpretation of the findings, but as an interesting heuristic that can aid counsellors’ understanding of the transition to unbelief.
Identity within Christianity

For fundamentalist Christians, faith is integral to all components of identity. It shapes their understanding of self (ego identity), of being different from others (personal identity), and of their roles in the world (social identity; Erikson, 1968). It supplies content for identity commitments, and also directs or constrains the process by which Christians explore other values, meanings, and roles to which they might commit. For many, Christian is the primary identification, more important than other identity markers such as woman, Canadian, or student.

The results of the current study suggest that the religious identity of fundamentalist Christians can fall within at least two or three of Marcia’s (1966) four identity statuses of achievement, foreclosure, diffusion, and moratorium. Several participants, while within Christianity, seemed to exhibit religious identity foreclosure: rather than exploring various options for religious commitment, they accepted the ready-made Christian identity supplied by their parents and church leaders. Rather than reflecting a lack of curiosity, motivation, or confidence, identity foreclosure in the fundamentalist context may have been the only perceived or viable option. Christianity was consistently presented as the exclusive truth, and harsh punishments were believed to await those who rejected this truth; the exploration of alternative religious viewpoints was prohibited or discouraged.

Although foreclosure was common, the results suggest that some Christians may attain religious identity achievement. Some participants showed evidence of exploring different worldviews in adolescence or young adulthood. However, it is difficult to determine whether they truly experienced a religious identity crisis, paving the way for an individually chosen religious identity commitment. Their exploration of alternative meanings and values was typically repatriated to the purview of Christianity; this is seen in Lea’s efforts to create a form
of Christianity that she could accept while still remaining within her church (e.g. she found an interpretation of the Bible that allowed her to accept homosexuality, although this stance was rejected by her church).

One participant, Chris, exhibited religious identity diffusion. Although he passively accepted the label of Christian as bestowed by his family, Chris was not committed to the meanings or values of the religion. He unaware of alternatives to belief in the Christian God, and therefore made no effort to explore any such alternatives. No participants in the current study exhibited religious identity moratorium; this status may be uncommon among Christian fundamentalists because of the community’s intolerance of ambivalence. That is, even if an adolescent (covertly) explores various options for religious identification, he or she will encounter pressure from parents and church community to express a clearly “Christian” identity. In the face of such pressure, it may become necessary to either foreclose or to commit – whether to Christianity or to an incompatible religious identity (in which case, the individual exits the fundamentalist community and the population of interest for this study).

Scripts, personal myths, and identity change

Two valuable constructs for discussing religion’s role in identity and identity change are scripts (Tomkins, 1995) and personal myths (Feinstein et al., 1988). Scripts are “intraindividually stable, idiosyncratic ways of experiencing who one is and how one relates to the world” (Kunnen & Wassink, 2003, p. 348); they provide a set of rules by which an individual can make sense of events and meaningfully link meanings, values, and emotions to each other and to certain contexts. Scripts form the basis for identity commitments, which in turn determine one’s sense of self and place in the world; they also supply the individual with rules and explanations which serve to circumvent the experiencing of painful emotions.
Similarly, personal myths (Feinstein et al., 1988) are inner stories or models that supply answers to key questions of identity: who am I? Why am I here? Where am I going? These myths structure memories, explain the present, and impart goals for the future. They are typically non-conscious, but powerfully influence cognition, emotion, and action.

Regardless of subtle differences between the two constructs (e.g. Feinstein et al., 1988, contend that myths, unlike scripts, encompass the archetypes within human meaning-making), both myths and scripts substantiate the sense of self and impact identity commitments. The results of this study reveal that Christianity provided several such guiding stories for participants. Participants’ recollections of their Christian experiences suggested implicit scripts such as “I can never be good enough for God,” “I have to seem perfect to set a good Christian example,” “I owe God everything, and I am worthless without him,” and “Jesus is the source of all meaning.” Since they are essential to meaning-making and self-esteem, scripts and personal myths are highly resistant to change. As Feinstein et al. (1988) write, “long standing-myths, however dysfunctional, tend to die hard” (p. 32). This is particularly true of scripts that relate to components of life that are associated with high anxiety; the religious or existential sphere typically fits this description.

Of course, the results of this study reveal that the scripts girding identity can and do change. Kunnen and Bosma (2000) generated a model of identity stability and change in adulthood, comprised of three primary mechanisms: assimilation, accommodation, and withdrawal. Conflict or disequilibrium arises when an individual is unable to make sense of an important situation in a stable or satisfactory way. Individuals’ preferred strategy for dealing with such conflict tends to be assimilation. Assimilation is the tactic of interpreting the problematic situation in terms of the pre-existing script; it requires ignoring, distorting, or
denying the facts that are incompatible with the script. Because it does not resolve the
discrepancy that generated the conflict in the first place, prolonged use of this strategy tends to
result in an accumulation of unsatisfactorily resolved problems.

Although an individual can rely on assimilation for some time, the buildup of
discrepancies results in increasing tension. At some point, the extant script either “breaks” or is
abandoned, and new interpretations are adopted. This is known as accommodation: changing
one’s scripts to fit the discrepant information. Loosening one’s grip on central organizing scripts
can be painful and frightening, but accommodation ultimately results in feelings of relaxation,
freedom, empowerment, and joy (Kegan, 1994; Kunnen & Wassink, 2003). The process of
accommodation depends upon becoming aware of one’s automatic, non-conscious script and re-
evaluating its assumptions in light of the circumstances or evidence (Kunnen & Wassink, 2003).
It entails exploring and experimenting with new ways of interpreting the world, and is facilitated
by the presence of environmental or relational support (or inhibited by the absence of such
support).

The results of this study lend clear support to the model of identity change described
above. As Christians, participants engaged in frequent assimilation (captured in the theme of
Dealing with cognitive dissonance). For instance, Ted observed that belief in God supplied no
meaningful comfort in the wake of his mother’s sudden death; this script-threatening cognition
was minimized and sidelined, and he contented himself with script-concordant platitudes that
encouraged trust in the goodness of God’s ultimate plan. Certain information (such as that
pertaining to science and evolution) was ignored or rationalized away, or was re-interpreted to fit
within fundamentalist Christian doctrine. These efforts to assimilate script-conflictual
circumstances were generally non-conscious, but rose to awareness as tension increased: for
instance, Natasha’s search for more sophisticated apologetics on the Internet can be understood as an active attempt to find more effective assimilation strategies when her old ones (based on mainstream Christian teaching and simple apologetics) were no longer functioning. The impact of social context can be seen in Lea’s efforts to recruit help in assimilating the faith-threatening information she was learning at university. Although she approached others in the church, hoping to talk about how these new facts about the Bible’s origins and Christian history could fit within her beliefs, she was rebuffed and ignored. Stymied by this social non-support, her ability to assimilate broke down and she was left with no choice but to accommodate.

The theme of Increasing tension in the second domain (Transition out of Christianity) corresponds to the strain and breakdown of assimilation processes and the beginning of accommodation. Amber displayed this shift as she responded to her boyfriend’s questions about her faith: at first, the core of her answer to any question (e.g. about why God wanted her to give money to the church, why he wanted her to witness, why he did not want her to have sex before marriage) was her central script of “[God] loves me and he’s looking out for me.” However, after repeatedly using this script as the answer to any query, tension began to accumulate; she gradually came to the radical realization that Christian and Biblical behavioural expectations were not loving guidelines, but arbitrary rules. This key accommodation initiated the subsequent drastic transformation of her central guiding script or myth.

Ultimately, all participants underwent accommodation of their religious scripts as they transitioned from belief to unbelief. However, the concept of accommodation may be inadequate to represent the extremeness of their change in scripts. Feinstein et al. (1988) argue that myths have a limited capacity for accommodation: once they have been repeatedly revised and re-revised, they break down and must be re-written entirely. For instance, Amber’s disengagement
from the established church and search for a better way of being Christian was a major accommodation of her Christian script; subsequent accommodations followed (such as beginning to sense that her conscience was a better beacon of morality than was the Bible). However, the realization that she no longer believed in God was considerably more radical than these accommodations: it necessitated a complete overhaul of many core beliefs and scripts. Kunnen and Wassink (2003) do not differentiate between accommodation and the complete breakdown and reformation of scripts. Since this discussion has been primarily structured according to their work on identity change, it will not dwell upon this postulated distinction; however, it should be noted that while the process of accommodation is often discussed as a series of modifications, individuals who leave fundamentalist Christianity frequently must abandon altogether the scripts that had informed their identities until that point and create new scripts from the ground up.

Kunnen and Wassink (2003) proposed that the process of accommodation (moving from an old script to a new one) is comprised of five sub-processes. Examples of each constituent process can be found in the results of this study. The first process, exploration of scenes, entails acknowledging the ways in which one’s scripts are resulting in painful experiences. This can be seen in Ted’s experience: his belief in a loving God generated additional grief and pain as he struggled to understand how such a God could allow his friend’s ill daughter to suffer profoundly. The second process is exploration of the script, or reflecting directly on aspects of one’s meaning making. Marianne engaged in this process when she realized that people in diverse cultures around the world all long to connect with the divine, and invent stories to fulfil that longing; she began to see her own belief in God as an expression of longing rather than of factual truth. The third process is the exploration of conflicting components – recognizing perceptions that were previously denied or repressed. This process occurred as participants
began to explore Darwinism, or finally acknowledged their discomfort with the idea that God would send people to hell for not believing in him. The fourth process, exploring the conflict (how these perceptions fail to fit within the script), is exemplified by Natasha and Chris’s struggle to understand how God could love them (and assist them in mundane ways like helping them find their car keys) but apparently care so little about starving people elsewhere in the world. The final component of accommodation is the experience of the primary emotion: an experience of strength and freedom when the new, accommodated script is applied. Brad expressed these feelings most clearly: once he had begun to “put on his atheist glasses,” that is, to interpret the world according to his new script, he experienced an exhilarating taste of emotional integrity and a sense of promise that his depression would eventually lift as a result of relinquishing his tension-filled Christian script and embracing a fresh theory of reality.

Although both typologies of unbelief (A and B) underwent accommodation of extant scripts and adoption of new personal myths, the strong positive emotions of relief and freedom that allegedly accompany identity change are much more pronounced within Type A. For Marianne and Lea (Type B), accommodation was ongoing at the time of the interview. Both women exhibited deliberate retention of Christian scripts; however, these scripts had become conscious and consequently lost most of their power to direct action and constrain meaning. Instead, these myths lingered as soothing fantasies to which the women could turn for comfort in times of distress or uncertainty. Accommodation continued with the passage of time: although Marianne saw no need to eradicate the Christian script entirely, she and Lea both admitted that the script was fading from their mental life as new meanings were incorporated into the identity. Kunnen and Wassink (2003) do not emphasize the experience of bereavement as a former identity is relinquished; however, other scholarship on adult identity change acknowledges the
losses inherent within such a transition (see Raskin, 2002). The Type B experience of loss will be further discussed below in relation to negative emotions.

In addition to assimilation and accommodation, Kunnen and Bosma’s (2000) model of identity change includes a less-common third response to disequilibrium: withdrawal, or escape from a situation that cannot be organized using the old scripts. For instance, a person might end a romantic relationship or quit a job that is generating conflict for extant scripts; withdrawal is “change without development” (Kunnen & Wassink, 2000, p. 350). This response is not clearly represented in the results of the current study. Participants who could no longer assimilate tended to wrestle with, rather than escape, their script-conflicting perceptions (at least in those situations they chose to describe to the researcher). Some participants described situations in which they were tempted to withdraw, but did not. For instance, when Amber’s experience of love for her non-Christian boyfriend was threatening one of her Christian scripts (which might have been something like “true love can only be found within God”), she “almost broke up with him” several times (but could never bring herself to actually end the relationship). Of course, had they habitually withdrawn from script-threatening situations, participants might have remained Christians and been ineligible for participation in the study. It stands to reason that an ability and willingness to accommodate (rather than withdraw) is necessary for loss of faith and departure from Christianity to occur.

One assumption of the assimilation-accommodation model of identity change is that accommodation is not simply a process of switching scripts, but of developing psychologically superior scripts. “In development,” Kunnen and Wassink (2003) write, “rigid scripts give way to scripts that are more flexible, differentiated, and more conscious. Emerging commitments will be more flexible than previous ones” (p. 349). This assumption was only partially supported by the
results of this study. Some participants explicitly stated that, as unbelievers, they guard against confirmation bias and dogmatism and are always ready to subject their beliefs to critical thought and re-evaluation. Other participants’ accounts suggested that their new underlying scripts might be no less rigid than the scripts upon which they relied as fundamentalist Christians. Some participants who exhibited strong anger and negativity towards the church showed a limited ability to understand the church’s perspective (for instance, Chris stated that he believed pastors should be required to add a disclaimer to the end of each sermon stating that its content was simply the church’s opinion, not absolute truth; when queried by the researcher, he stated that this was “absolutely” a realistic expectation). These participants’ new scripts about religion (e.g. “Christianity is an evil cult that inevitably causes problems for its adherents”) were fairly rigid at the time of the interview. However, this stage of inflexibility may have been temporary – other participants, such as Brad and Jim, talked about having gone through a time of bitterness and anger before progressing to a more balanced stage in which they saw the church as a negative influence but could understand its members’ perspective.

To summarize this section, the process of losing faith or journeying from belief to unbelief can be understood in terms of the accommodation of identity scripts, after prolonged periods of assimilating script-discrepant information has resulted in unsustainable levels of tension. Whether via gradual accommodations or a complete breakdown and re-imagining of personal myths, new scripts are formed to support an identity of unbelief.

*The role of emotions in identity change*

Strayer (2002) argues that identity transitions are emotionally significant in numerous complex ways. Fear works to defend the current identity against threats, and motivates the use of assimilation to circumvent the uncertainty and turmoil of identity crisis. Strayer posits that
such crises, whether prompted by common events such as the birth of a child or a non-normative disruption such as losing faith, are followed first by feelings of loss and grief, then by hostility, and finally by the achievement of a more sophisticated emotional equilibrium.

According to Strayer (2002), negative emotions are particularly salient to the process of identity or personality change. Like Kunnen and Bosma (2000), Strayer assumes that disequilibrium is a necessary antecedent of change; this disequilibrium is nearly always associated with unpleasant emotional states. Emotions are action-oriented: they alert an individual to a situation’s discrepancy from what is desired or valued, and prompt efforts to lessen the discrepancy and alleviate the negative emotion. As Strayer writes, “it is an adage among psychotherapists that people do not change unless they have to. The experience of negative emotions makes us have to” (p. 67). This claim was supported by the results of this study, which found that negative emotions associated with God or Christianity (frustration, abandonment, disillusionment, guilt or unease, annoyance or dissatisfaction) were the first signs of an impending loss of faith. Furthermore, these emotions seemed to be a necessary precondition of identity change: until negative feelings outweighed the fear of abandoning familiar Christian scripts, participants persisted in their efforts to assimilate (or accommodate within Christianity) rather than exploring the possibility of unbelief.

Strayer (2002) makes a special comment on extremely distressing emotions (such as those associated with depression). She proposes that such destructive emotions can serve to “clear the slate,” eradicating previous scripts and permitting novel meaning-making structures to emerge. This seemed to be true for the three participants whose loss of faith was preceded by a period of clinical depression – Jim, Brad, and Natasha. Magai and Nusbaum (1996) suggest that a similar (though less extreme) function is served by affects such as surprise or shock, which can
disrupt or suspend existing scripts long enough for new ones to take root. An example of this from the results is Amber’s astonishment upon discovering that a man from her church had been directing new converts to a different church (the fact that she made this discovery at his funeral heightened its emotional salience). Her assumptions thus jolted, Amber began to see ways in which her church was focused on the wrong priorities.

In addition to initiating identity change, negative emotions may accompany the process of change; this was most obvious for participants in Type B, who suffered debilitating grief and emptiness upon losing faith. Conversely, Strayer (2002) asserts that positive feelings (such as joy and excitement) mark the conclusion of an episode of identity change and serve to maintain the stability of this new identity. Participants in Type A certainly exuded positive emotion when describing their new beliefs, discursively conveying the sense that they were firmly committed to their new identities.

Identity within unbelief

Having transitioned from belief to unbelief and adopted new core scripts, participants can once more be classified in terms of Marcia’s (1966) identity statuses, which emerge from the interaction of exploration and commitment. As stated above, participants in Type A show high levels of commitment to their new identity (as an atheist, sceptic, ex-Christian, or naturalist). This suggests that Type A is characterized by either an achieved or foreclosed identity; it is unclear which of these two statuses is inhabited by each participant. It may be tempting to speculate that individuals who quickly adopt an atheist identity, perhaps after reading the New Atheist books, are foreclosing: falling into a ready-made identity without exploring a full range of options. However, the person may have put considerable thought into various expressions of religious and spiritual belief while he or she still identified as a Christian. If this were the case,
the identity could be considered achieved: characterized by high levels of commitment after ample exploration.

Participants in Type B exhibit less enthusiasm and even a level of reluctance to embrace a new identity. Their identity commitments are less clearly delineated than those of participants in Type A (for instance, when Marianne is asked about her spiritual beliefs, she typically responds: “It’s a very complicated thing for me”). They seem less certain of who they are as spiritual beings, and may fit within an identity moratorium status: they have explored many options for religious identity, but have not fully committed to one (even if they are leaning towards it). These individuals seem to be moving towards identity achievement, but their process cannot be rushed. They convey a sense of needing to process and respect the loss of the former identity, and to define the new identity slowly and gradually. They are more likely to carry parts of their Christian history forward into their current identity: for instance, Marianne’s identity contains an image of herself as someone who manoeuvred the emotional agony of losing faith and emerged on the other side.

*Parallels with gay identity development*

Participants’ use of the phrase *coming out* to describe the process of disclosing their unbelief to their families and social circles prompts consideration of the ways in which transitioning to unbelief might parallel the development of a gay identity. It is beyond the scope of this discussion to fully explore the ways in which these two identity transitions are similar or dissimilar, but highlighting some key commonalities might help counsellors who are familiar with coming out in the context of sexuality to understand the process of building an identity as an unbeliever.
Cooper (2008) presents a tripartite framework for understanding the process of coming out as gay or lesbian. During the first phase, Realization, a child begins to feel different from his or her peers and may become aware of feelings for the same sex (which they frequently reject, dismiss, or repress). Activation occurs when individuals begin to acknowledge their same-sex attractions (to themselves at first, and then to isolated others). During this phase, they test a new sexual identity and permit themselves to experiment sexually. Finally, during Consolidation the private and public identities fuse: the person discloses his or her gay identity to a broader (though still selected) audience. The person often begins pursuing intimate relationships, which may become public, stable, and committed.

The process of transitioning from belief to unbelief has parallels with each of Cooper’s (2008) three stages. Participants within this study began sensing their difference from other Christians from a young age; this experience, similar to Cooper’s stage of Realization, is represented by the theme of Deviations from the Christian norm. They were aware of their heightened scepticism, their inability to hear God’s voice, or their identification with liberal values, and they struggled to understand what this meant for them as Christians. They frequently tried to “fix” the ways in which they were different (e.g. asking people to pray for them), although they also had a nagging sense that their own perspective was valuable. The themes of Dealing with cognitive dissonance and Increasing tension represent their increasingly inadequate efforts to manage the forces that placed them at odds with Christianity.

As Cooper (2008) writes, “the acquisition of gay identity is firstly an intrapsychic process” (p. 433). The first part of the Activation phase is coming out to oneself, whether as gay or as an unbeliever. This step is frequently difficult for former fundamentalists, as described within the theme of Acknowledging unbelief. As Stan explained, “you just never want to say the
word to yourself that you are actually an atheist and you don’t believe in any kind of God.”

Once individuals had stopped resisting the label of unbeliever or atheist, they began selectively disclosing their change of beliefs to others. For a time, some participants were “out” only within certain contexts (a common experience for gay people, who may be out at university but closeted in their hometowns). For instance, Brad met a new friend, Tony, at the time he first began to doubt his faith; he did not tell Tony that he was a Christian or worked as a pastor, and instead interacted with him as a secular humanist. One participant had the experience of being involuntarily brought out of the closet: Ted had disclosed his unbelief to some trusted friends at church, but not to his children. The news leaked, and spread around the congregation until it reached his daughter at youth group; she was devastated to find out that this rumour was true, and hurt that she had not heard the news from her father himself.

The broader coming out of Consolidation is often made difficult for gay and lesbian individuals by homophobia. Although not as virulent, anti-atheist prejudice can also make coming out difficult for unbelievers. Within a former fundamentalist’s social circle, atheism is likely to be seen as totally unacceptable. Even in broader society, atheism is not widely accepted. Although corresponding Canadian data is unavailable, a 2007 Gallup poll found that only 45% of Americans surveyed would vote for a “generally well-qualified” presidential candidate who was atheist – fewer than the percentage (55%) that said they would vote for a candidate who was gay (Jones, 2007). Anti-atheist prejudice may also be internalized, resulting in feelings of guilt and self-condemnation and interfering with the development of a positive atheist identity. Finally, there is a lack of openly atheist role models in popular culture; although some organizations (such as www.celebatheists.com) are dedicated to raising awareness of well-
known atheists and free thinkers, former fundamentalists may know no atheists, either among their own acquaintances or in the public sphere.

In summary, the construct of identity in many of its guises – including identity status, personal myths, scripts, and coming out – is highly relevant to the experience of losing faith and transitioning from belief to unbelief. A second well-known framework that can be used to understand loss of faith is attachment theory; the following discussion will focus specifically on descriptions of losing an attachment figure (Sbarra & Hazan, 2008; Shear & Shair, 2005).

**Attachment and loss**

As previously stated, a believer’s relationship with God has been compared to a human attachment bond with a parent or romantic partner (Beck, 2006; Cicirelli, 2004; Miner, 2007). This study’s results offer partial support for this interpretation, although not as much as might be expected in light of the ample literature on the subject (for a review, see Kirkpatrick, 1992).

Several participants did not seem to experience God as an attachment figure, or at least not as an attachment figure with whom they were emotionally close. Stan and Chris both experienced God as distant and relatively uncaring, Jim struggled with his inability to feel loved by God, Brad connected with God through study rather than through prayer, and Natasha felt frustrated by her failure to hear God’s voice. However, other participants’ accounts – particularly those of their reactions after losing faith – suggest that God did fulfil an attachment role for them. For instance, Ted, Marianne, and Lea all spoke of missing God’s presence in times of worry and uncertainty, suggesting that they relied upon God as a source of solace and reassurance, a comforting haven in times of stress. Amber and Marianne both described feeling empty, adrift, and alone in the aftermath of losing faith. Their accounts are consistent with Shear and Shair’s
conceptualization of being bereaved of an attachment figure, an experience which entails both loss of an assumptive world and loss of a sense of proximity and comfort.

Although several participants’ relationships with God resembled attachment bonds in some ways, one participant – Amber – most clearly experienced God as a close and essential attachment figure. As a Christian, Amber interacted with God frequently and intimately; she loved him dearly and felt strongly that he loved her. She had few other social supports among friends or family, and relied on Jesus as her primary confidant. Amber’s experience will be treated as a miniature case study for the following discussion, in which losing faith is compared to separation (by death or relationship breakup) from an attachment figure.

Sbarra and Hazan (2008) conducted a review of the literature on how adults’ biological and psychological systems are regulated by attachment bonds and disrupted by the loss of these bonds. Attachment bonds provide a sense of felt security; when individuals perceive a threat to this security (for instance, during temporary separation from a partner), they enter a state of physiological dysregulation characterized by vague malaise, bodily agitation, and sleeplessness. If the felt security is severely jeopardized or obliterated (for instance, by divorce or death), an individual’s biobehavioural systems enter a classic stress response, marked by depression, social withdrawal, and mental slowing (Sbarra & Hazan, 2008). Amber’s account of the “hell” she experienced after relinquishing belief in God is consistent with the latter stress response. She described physical sensations (bodily numbness and a hallucinatory feeling that her brain was exposed), memory loss, sleeplessness, tearfulness, and emotional numbness.

While Sbarra and Hazan (2008) provide a detailed account of physiological reactions to loss of an attachment figure, Shear and Shair (2005) focus on the psychological processes underlying the “visceral reaction, dysphoric mood, painful feelings of incompetence, and
unfamiliar identity confusion” (p. 264) that accompany bereavement. First, Shear and Shair (2005) describe the mental representation of one’s attachment figure, the internalized working model that overrides the need for physical proximity to the person. These working models are slow to change, and loss of the attachment figure creates a mismatch between external reality and the bereaved person’s mental reality. Until it adjusts to reflect the fact of the attachment figure’s non-existence, this working model continues to generate a disconcerting sense that the loved one is present. This description matches Amber’s experience: for nearly a year after she no longer believed in God, she continued to sense his presence. For part of this time, she still loved him; later, she felt as though he continued to watch her choices, and felt guilty for turning her back on him. This experience, which she was unable to understand or explain, was alarming and traumatic for Amber.

A second reaction described by Shear and Shair (2005) was the inhibition of one’s competence motivation, or withdrawal from tasks that require performance and mastery. As a result, the bereaved person exhibits little interest in social interaction and reduced motivation to pursue longer-term goals. Shear and Shair (2005) emphasize the importance of a support system to assist and encourage the person during this stage, lest avoidance and fear of failure develop. In Amber’s case, social influences (people within her church) greatly exacerbated any initial damage to her competence motivation with destructive messages that all her efforts would meet with failure without God’s blessing. As a result, Amber’s creativity (for instance, her motivation to draw) was dashed; at the time of the interview, she still had not regained this trait.

Shear and Shair (2005) tentatively propose a third reaction to loss of an attachment figure: the disruption of one’s internalized caregiving model. The internalized caregiving model is the reciprocal of the internalized attachment model; it expresses itself in the provision of
comfort and care to a loved one in distress. Bereavement leads to a discrepancy in this working model as well, generating “persistent feelings of failure to protect the deceased and/or to take good enough care of the person” (p. 264). Although loss of this caregiving role would seem irrelevant to a person’s relationship with God (who, one would assume, is not dependent upon comfort from his human children), Amber’s experience reflects elements of this reaction. She described feeling sorry for Jesus’ loss of her love; although it was difficult for her to explain, she recalled feeling sympathy for Jesus “as though he [were] attending a funeral.” Her sorrow over causing Jesus pain (although she no longer believed he was present) added its turmoil to her experience of bereavement.

Regaining normal functioning after the loss of an attachment figure requires learning to self-regulate, rather than depending upon the attachment relationship for emotional regulation (Sbarra & Hazan, 2008). There are countless ways by which individuals can achieve self-regulation, but all entail reorganizing how they think and feel about the lost attachment figure. Cognitive reappraisal that leads to a less threatening perception of the situation can restore a sense of security. Felt security can be bolstered by reaching out to others; it can be achieved by working through the pain to find new meanings or by avoiding the negative emotion until it abates with time. Amber used an array of strategies to help her integrate the loss. First, she sought support from her boyfriend, who was good at intuiting, understanding, and articulating her reactions to losing faith. She found some benefit in prescribed antidepressants, and used alcohol and marijuana as a temporary fix for her emotional numbness. Healing ultimately resulted from immersion in her university classes and embracing new passions (science, art, and music); these commitments provided her with a new and independent sense of identity, worth, joy, and stability.
Summary of discussion

This chapter has discussed the experience of losing faith in relation to theoretical and empirical literature on identity change and loss of an attachment figure. The compatibility of this study’s findings with these established frameworks is important, since it leads to implications for counselling practice: well-established therapeutic approaches exist for working with issues of identity and loss. The final chapter presents several of these implications.
CHAPTER VIII
CONCLUSIONS

Building upon the preceding discussion, this chapter focuses on the findings’ implications for counselling practice. Implications are drawn directly from participants’ experiences and suggestions, as well as from theoretical inferences: extant frameworks for working with identity and loss are discussed as possible approaches to working with clients who have lost religious faith. This chapter includes recommendations for counselling clients from different typologies of unbelief (A versus B). It also considers ways in which the counsellor’s own life experience and values can affect practice with former fundamentalist clients. The chapter concludes by presenting certain limitations of the study and suggesting possible directions for future research.

Implications for counselling practice

This study’s findings offer several insights for therapy with clients who have lost their faith in fundamentalist Christianity. Unsurprisingly, general therapeutic factors such as empathy and supportiveness, a nonjudgmental stance, and the provision of a safe space in which to explore different values and worldviews were critical to the good counselling experiences described by participants. Building a strong therapeutic relationship and following general principles of effective psychotherapy are the essential basis for working with any client, but counselling with former fundamentalist Christians may be further enriched by use of the following frameworks and strategies.

Identity work

Kunnen and Wassink (2003) claim that counsellors who wish to support their clients’ identity change must support and guide the process of accommodation, whereby old scripts are revised to fit new perceptions more closely (or old scripts are discarded and entirely new scripts
are identified and enacted). Supporting accommodation would be particularly important for clients who are in the process of transitioning out of Christianity, or clients who fall within the Type B (struggle and loss) profile of unbelief; clients who match the Type A (relief and freedom) profile of unbelief have generally already embraced new scripts.

A model proposed by Feinstein et al. (1988) demonstrates how a counsellor might work with a client in transition or in Type B unbelief. Feinstein et al.’s five-step approach is designed to help resolve *mythic conflict*, the dissonance that arises from a discrepancy between a dominant personal myth and a suppressed counter-myth (that is, the accumulation of dissenting perspectives that have been ignored or denied in the process of assimilation). For a former fundamentalist Christian, the problematic dominant myths will likely be those involving God or Christian doctrine, and the counter-myths emerge from the emotional and intellectual factors that have led the person to doubt Christianity’s veracity. Feinstein et al. recommend helping a client first to bring the conflict into awareness (by investigating the underlying messages of dreams, anxieties, confusion, and ambivalence). Next, the assumptions, origins, and consequences of the prevailing myth and counter-myth are examined. The central intervention is negotiating an acceptable integration of the myths. At this stage, it is important for counsellors to validate the meaning and value of both sides of the mythic conflict. Familiarity, comfort, and loyalty may make it difficult for a client to relinquish the prevailing (though outgrown) myth; a counsellor should be sensitive to the client’s preparedness for change, and pace therapy accordingly. After a new mythology has been identified, it is refined until it is robust and worthy of full commitment. Finally, the counsellor and client monitor and practice the client’s integration of the new myth into everyday thoughts and behaviours. Techniques drawn from cognitive behavioural approaches (e.g. Neenan, 2004), such as visualization, monitoring self-statements,
and behavioural rehearsal, may be useful at this stage of therapy. As Basseches (1997) observes, continued support for a new meaning system is essential to its stabilization. Counsellors can help clients connect with environmental supports – people, organizations, and resources – that will encourage and reinforce their new myths.

For former fundamentalist Christians, new myths must supply a vision of a meaningful life without God. Examples of self-statements based on the new personal myth might be “I am a good person with or without God,” or “My life has purpose, even if its purpose is not divinely ordained.” A counsellor may also work with clients to integrate their loss of faith into the new myth or script in a positive way, identifying ways in which their experience of Christianity valuably shaped their current identities. Finding this positive legacy may be equally important for clients who exhibit strong negativity towards Christianity as for those who continue to pine for belief. Participants in this study demonstrated various ways of accepting the legacy of losing faith. Chris, for instance, concluded that coming out of Christianity had enriched his experience of atheism, and made him sceptical of the claims of religious or ideological systems that might seek to recruit him; because of the latter development, Chris was able to make a hobby of investigating different religions, knowing that he was “immunized” against their conversion efforts. Marianne stated that she had grown as a result of her painful loss of faith, and was better able to understand what faith means to people and why they will do nearly anything to retain it.

Another approach to identity work that could prove transferrable to therapy with former fundamentalists is the Realisation, Activation, and Consolidation model of coming out as gay or lesbian (Cooper, 2008), described in the previous chapter. After identifying which stage of the model best corresponds with the client’s current identity position, a counsellor can support and facilitate the client’s transition to the next stage. During the Realisation stage, a counsellor’s role
will be “responding to and empathising with [the client’s] sense of isolation, fear, and being different. Strengthening the client’s capacity to tolerate stress and anxiety will be paramount” (Cooper, 2008, p. 435). Clients who identify as fundamentalist Christians but are struggling with cognitive dissonance and feeling different from other Christians may be unlikely to seek secular counselling, since non-religious mental health intervention is often regarded with suspicion by fundamentalist Christians (Thurston, 2000). However, for counsellors who do see such clients, normalising doubts and encouraging self-compassion rather than self-blame might be important interventions. A counsellor might gently invite clients to consider their religious beliefs from a different point of view, but too early an intervention may provoke a client to become defensive of God, the church, and the sincerity of his or her faith (in a similar way that asking a young person about same-sex feelings too soon may facilitate denial; Cooper, 2008).

For gay and lesbian clients in the Activation stage, a counsellor’s role includes acknowledging and validating their same-sex feelings, offering encouragement, and helping them compile a list of reading materials and organizational contacts for extra support (Cooper, 2008). Similar interventions are appropriate for former fundamentalist Christian clients who have self-identified as unbelievers but are still wrestling with the implications of unbelief. The results of this study suggest that staying in the closet as an unbeliever, like staying in the closet as gay or lesbian, has a detrimental effect on mental health. Counsellors may help clients evaluate who in their lives is most likely to be supportive, and discuss different strategies for revealing the news of their unbelief.

In the Consolidation stage, clients are widely out and are in the process of building a public identity as a gay person (or as an unbeliever). Counsellors can help clients in this stage to build resilience around rejection they encounter, and to explore and affirm their new identity.
Building the new identity may first be an introspective activity, revolving around reading and reflection. Later, it may include getting involved with a cause or organization, such as a scientific society or a group that helps others with the same transition. During the Consolidation stage, counsellors may also help clients process their feelings of loss and grief. Cooper (2008) states that gay clients may need to process the loss of a particular vision of the future (such as raising children in a traditional family structure). Ex-fundamentalist clients may also struggle with the loss of future dreams and plans, such as getting married in a church or passing on a religious legacy to their children.

According to Cooper (2008), it is imperative for counsellors to adopt a thoroughly and uncompromisingly gay-affirmative stance if they plan to work with young people who are coming out. Counsellors who work with former fundamentalists must similarly examine their subtle biases: for instance, their attitude towards spirituality, however they conceive of it. Some people define spirituality as the domain of human life relating to existential and transcendent themes, and therefore assume it is a universal human trait (Chiu, Emblen, Van Hofwegen, Sawatsky, & Meyerhoff, 2004). However, using language of spirituality with atheist clients, persisting in asking them about spiritual beliefs after they have claimed to have none, or suggesting that spirituality is essential to full mental health could make these clients feel misunderstood and alienated. In the opinion of one participant in this study, the imperative to lead a meaningful life is a human drive, not necessarily a spiritual one.

Loss work

The primary presenting issues of former fundamentalist Christians may differ according to whether their current experience of unbelief aligns with Type A (unbelief has brought a sense of relief and freedom) or Type B (unbelief is experienced as primarily as a loss and a struggle).
For clients who fit the Type B profile, counselling can be approached from a bereavement framework. If the loss of faith was recent, or if the client has deliberately avoided processing the loss, a counsellor may wish to limit active intervention in favour of a deeply validating and empathic presence. Counsellors may encourage clients to engage in self-care strategies and to seek practical and emotional support from their social networks. They may also wish to emphasize the varied timelines and pathways of different individuals’ grieving processes. Sbarra and Hazan (2008) assert that psychological and physiological recovery from the loss of an attachment figure depends on the use of coping strategies that provide a sense of felt security (formerly conferred by the attachment bond). There are many such cognitive, emotional, and social strategies by which clients can regain their sense of self-regulation, control, and competence (examples of these strategies can be found in the preceding chapter’s discussion of loss of an attachment bond).

Clients who present their loss of faith as a true loss – who fit the Type B profile – may need help understanding what, specifically, was lost. As the results of this study indicate, losing faith has many components: it can include secondary losses of meaning, beauty, comfort, identity, social connections, and so forth. A counsellor may want to first discern which loss is most distressing for the client, and prioritize therapy accordingly; later, recognizing and processing peripheral losses may enhance the client’s ability to fully integrate the experience. This study found that former fundamentalist Christians often struggle to make sense of their emotional reactions to the transition out of faith. If clients seem unable to understand why they are reacting in a particular way, it may be helpful for a counsellor to venture a tentative interpretation. Of course, if this suggestion does not resonate with the client, the counsellor should show respect for the client’s perspective by abandoning or setting aside the interpretation.
Counselling Type A clients

Clients who fit the Type A profile of unbelief are unlikely to be interested in loss work, since their experience of unbelief is predominately positive. If they seek counselling at all, these clients’ presenting concerns are likely to pertain to social relationships: conflict with their families of origin, marital problems, or social isolation following rejection by former friends. In these situations, few special recommendations are needed; general strategies for helping clients resolve, mitigate, or cope with conflict will apply. Interventions may include assertiveness training and rehearsal, taking the other party’s perspective, practical solution-building for problematic situations (e.g. will your children continue to attend church? If you need to move out, where will you go?), and recognizing the limits of one’s influence (accepting one’s inability to force others to change).

After therapy has begun with a Type A client, the counsellor or client may identify additional therapeutic issues such as anger, resentment, and inflexibility of viewpoints. A counsellor may help clients find ways to constructively channel their anger and negativity – for instance, by becoming involved with a group that promotes atheism within the community. If a client’s viewpoints are extreme and inflexible, a counsellor may suggest working to make these perspectives more balanced. However, this should only be undertaken if these extreme opinions are causing problems for the client, or if the client recognizes their potential to cause problems in the future (for instance, if a future partner wants to get married in a church). A counsellor should remain mindful of his or her own biases: the counsellor’s own benign or positive opinion of religion is not reason enough to encourage clients to soften their strongly negative perceptions.
Life experience and stance of the counsellor

It is impossible for a counsellor to have previously experienced every issue brought to therapy by his or her clients. The ability to feel and express empathy for situations with which one is unfamiliar is a central skill of counselling. Although one participant in this study believed that therapists who have not experienced a loss of deeply-held faith would be unable to comprehend her loss, other participants did feel understood by their counsellors. Counsellors who are unfamiliar with the fundamentalist context should apply principles of effective multicultural counselling, including being aware of their own biases, suspending preconceptions about the client’s experience, and being comfortable with difference (Corey, 2005). They can also educate themselves about fundamentalist Christianity, their client’s specific denomination, and the loss of faith experience; relevant information can be found on the Internet and in popular press books, as well as in the sources cited in this study’s literature review (Chapter II).

Importantly, if a counsellor is not only unfamiliar but uncomfortable dealing with spiritual issues, it may be wise to refer former fundamentalist clients elsewhere.

In order to better understand a client’s point of view, counsellors may wish to ask clients to generate metaphors for their experience of losing faith. Participants in this study used several metaphors: Stan compared his loss of belief to a husband’s discovery that his wife has been unfaithful for the duration of the marriage, and Brad likened it to calling out for his companion in a dark cave, only to realize that he had been alone all along. Taking time to elicit these metaphors can enrich a counsellor’s empathy for how the loss felt to clients (in the above examples, stunned and hurt or bewildered and abandoned).

One participant in this study, Stan, expressed disdain for a psychiatrist who utterly failed to relate to his loss of belief. Stan felt as though the psychiatrist, rather than making an effort to
understand Stan’s perspective, jumped to inaccurate conclusions and began “diagnosing me like I’m some teenager that hates his parents or something.” Counsellors must demonstrate respect for their clients’ reality, and should not minimize the seriousness of their perceptions (such as Stan’s intense distress over the indoctrination of children). If these perceptions are maladaptive, they can be addressed later in therapy; initially, establishing the therapeutic alliance by listening carefully and nonjudgmentally is of paramount importance.

Two participants in this study stated that seeing a counsellor who maintained a neutral stance would be unhelpful for a believer transitioning to unbelief. One participant claimed that directive intervention would have been most helpful, and mused that “deprogramming” techniques designed to break individuals’ allegiance to cults might be useful for extracting people from Christianity. The dearth of current literature on these techniques suggests that coercive deprogramming approaches have fallen out of favour (and indeed, may never have been viewed particularly favourably by mainstream therapists), likely because their respect for client autonomy is questionable. Current counselling opinion holds that a therapist who believes that “religion poisons everything” (Hitchins, 2007, p. 1) is nevertheless obliged to refrain from expressing bias either for or against departure from Christianity (to an undecided client). Instead, the counsellor should advocate full exploration of the consequences of staying or leaving, and help the client weigh these consequences to make an informed choice that will promote long-term mental health. If the counsellor feels unable to adopt a neutral stance, one opinion might be that it is ethically necessary to refer the client to a different therapist.

However, to present an alternative viewpoint, those who believe that religion is inherently destructive might argue that the situation is comparable to working with a person in an abusive relationship or addicted to drugs. Although a therapist stops short of telling the person to change
their behaviour, they are generally willing to admit a preference for working towards ending the unhealthy situation. On the other hand, if the counsellor is Christian him- or herself and sees religion as an inherently salubrious force, he or she may feel justified in harbouring a desire (which may reveal itself subtly in therapy) for the client to return to Christianity. A counsellor’s personal beliefs, in the context of an issue as near to the heart as religious faith, may be difficult to set aside.

Regardless of the counsellor’s viewpoint, therapy can proceed effectively by focusing on the consequences of belief for a client’s mental health: what benefits and costs are associated with belief? Of course, the choice to remain within or leave Christianity is not merely one of examining pros and cons. It is made complicated by the dynamics of belief – whether or not the client thinks Christian doctrines are true. A counsellor can help clients explore information on both sides of the debate. Balancing books such as Why I became an atheist: A former preacher rejects Christianity (Loftus, 2008) with current Christian apologetics in books such as God, actually: Why God probably exists and why Jesus was probably divine (Williams, 2009) may be reassuring for an ambivalent client. If a client is leaning towards relinquishing religion, bibliotherapy can be tailored accordingly; the counsellor can recommend books on, for instance, secular humanism or spiritual naturalism. A counsellor can also encourage clients to seek out groups and individuals who are not bound to neutrality and can offer persuasive arguments on either side of the issue.

Clients who are in the process of transitioning out of Christianity are likely to express high levels of uncertainty, guilt, and emotional and intellectual chaos. Counsellors’ key interventions at this stage include normalizing and validating the clients’ confusion, and serving as a “sounding board” for clients’ exploration of new worldviews and values.
have left Christianity and self-identified as unbelievers, it is important to establish role models and visions of the ideal self within the new worldview. A counsellor can highlight a client’s unique (and exciting) opportunity to deliberately consider and select the new values and beliefs by which he or she wants to live.

As always, a good fit between client and approach is vital. Some clients will be interested in cognitive behavioural therapy to deal with habitual God-centric thinking patterns that are now seen as irrational. Other clients may prefer a more psychodynamic approach that respects the deeply ingrained, conflicting drives within them. With sensitivity and patience, counsellors can facilitate clients’ healing, solution-building, or exploration as they navigate the unique demands of losing faith and leaving fundamentalism.

**Limitations of the study**

No qualitative study can avoid the potential problem of the researcher’s subjective bias; this is particularly true of an investigation of such a personally relevant and emotionally charged topic as losing faith. As a result, some readers may be circumspect in endorsing this study’s findings. Ideally, the author would have preferred to form a consultation group of co-researchers to check her interpretations and guard against personal bias. However, limited time, finances, and personnel prevented the establishment of such a team.

Because this study was descriptive and interpretative rather than correlational or experimental, its results are not necessarily generalizable to all individuals who have lost their faith in fundamentalist Christianity. However, using a qualitative approach allowed for preservation of the rich and complex essence of the experience. It is hoped that counsellors will be equipped by this study to better empathize with their clients’ journey from belief to unbelief, despite being unable to predict with confidence the path this journey will take (in fact, it is
suspected that any fully generalizable description of an experience as idiosyncratic as losing faith might be so broad as to be nearly meaningless to a counsellor).

The participants’ awareness of the researcher-interviewer’s faith history (or any assumptions they may have made about her history, based on her interest in the study’s topic) may have influenced their accounts. It is inevitable in any interaction that the interlocutors influence (and even co-construct) each others’ talk (ten Have, 1999); this fact is not a true limitation, but an influence to be considered. A researcher who was, for instance, an active fundamentalist Christian may have elicited different results (perhaps more cautious descriptions, less disclosure, and less open negativity toward Christianity).

The participants, while representing reasonable diversity in age and a near-even gender distribution, lacked other forms of socio-demographic diversity. Although participants were not asked to report their ethnicity, no visible minorities were represented. Chinese churches, in particular, are among the fastest growing in Canada (Johnstone, n.d.), but the Chinese population was not represented among this study’s participants. Furthermore, a disproportionately high number of participants (eight out of nine) were university educated. The findings of this study might therefore be representative only of the experience of a small (and privileged) subset of individuals who lose their faith. Furthermore, recruitment was strongly biased toward atheists (as mentioned in Chapter III), and toward those who were committed enough to their new, atheistic perspective to join a related group or e-mail listserv. This may have excluded individuals who have lost their faith and continue to struggle in a religious “no-man’s-land” – outside of Christianity, but not yet having made a new identity commitment. Recruiting and interviewing such individuals might have yielded more data to support the characterization of the Type B experience of unbelief.
This study provided a preliminary description and discussion of the experience of losing faith in fundamentalist Christianity; its findings are clinically relevant and offer a current, Canadian perspective on this experience. However, a need remains for qualified empirical research in this area.

**Directions for future research**

In light of the limitations described above, a replication of the current study that ensures a more demographically diverse sample might broaden and strengthen our understanding of this experience. Since a majority of participants in the current study were atheists, future research might seek to interview former fundamentalist Christians who adopted liberal Christianity, a different religion, or a non-institutional form of spirituality. It can be assumed that the experience of individuals who left Christianity but did not lose their faith in God or in a higher power would differ substantially from that of this study’s participants, who relinquished belief entirely.

Another interesting area for future research is the experience of losing faith in other fundamentalist religious denominations, such as fundamentalist forms of Islam. Islam is the fastest-growing religion in Canada (due primarily to immigration; Statistics Canada, 2003); departure from a religious community when one is also a visible minority or immigrant may have different implications than departing from the majority religion.

Finally, future researchers may wish to quantitatively investigate predictors of losing faith, or of falling within the Type A or B experience of unbelief. A longitudinal approach, following fundamentalist Christians through phases of doubt and subsequent restoration or loss of faith, would provide invaluable insight into the dispositional, situational, and idiosyncratic factors that contribute to this momentous change in worldview.
Summary

This chapter presented implications and recommendations for counselling practice, and concluded by acknowledging the study’s limitations and suggesting potential directions for future research. This study has offered an analysis of the experience of losing faith and losing belief in God within the context of fundamentalist Christianity. It is hoped that the results will help counsellors understand their clients’ background, journey, and current struggles and victories. Equipped with this understanding, counsellors may be better able to support clients’ efforts to attain the previously unthinkable – fulfilled, joyful, and peaceful lives without God.
References


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Appendix A

Information Letter

My name is Karen Ross, and I am a student at OISE (the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education) at the University of Toronto. I am supervised by Dr. Roy Moodley, a faculty member at OISE. I would like to invite you to participate in a research study, which I am conducting as part of the requirements for my Master of Arts in Counselling Psychology.

WHAT IS THE STUDY ABOUT?
The topic of this research is the experience of losing faith in fundamentalist Christianity. For fundamentalist Christians, faith is generally central to who they are and how they live – and therefore, losing faith can have very complicated consequences. I am interested in what it is like to go through the experience of losing faith – not just the events that surround it, but the thoughts and feelings that different people experience. I also want to find out what kinds of support people looked for when going through a loss of faith, and what about that support was helpful or unhelpful. I hope my findings will generate ideas for the development of recommendations and resources for counsellors and other mental health practitioners who work with people who are going through a loss of faith.

I am looking for adult men or women who:

- **Are currently experiencing, or have experienced in the past, a loss of personal religious faith** (in fundamentalist Christianity)
  - Specifically, I am looking for people whose loss of faith was a separate experience from moving out of their family home.
- **Were, in the past, involved in fundamentalist Christianity** (a branch of conservative Protestant Christianity which emphasizes obedience to the Bible and salvation through an individual relationship with Jesus)
  - Specifically, I am looking for people who regularly attended at least one weekly church service, plus one other weekly religious activity (e.g. a second service, a prayer meeting or Bible study, or a church social group).
- **Speak English**

Approximately 8-10 people will be interviewed for this study.

WHAT WILL I BE ASKED TO DO?
You will be asked to participate in one audio-taped interview that will last between 1½ and 2 hours. In the interview, you will be asked to talk about the story of your loss of faith, and the feelings and thoughts that you experienced. You can request to see a list of the topics that I will ask about beforehand, if you wish. The interview will be conducted by me, Karen Ross. Some time later, you will be sent a copy of the transcript of your interview, accompanied by some written discussion of the interview’s content (i.e. my interpretations of, and comments about, some of the information you provided). You will have the opportunity to review the transcript and discussion, and to provide suggestions, corrections, and comments. This feedback would be appreciated, but is optional.
If you are interested in participating in this study, please contact me either by phone or e-mail. We can arrange a suitable time and space for me to meet with you to discuss the research and answer any questions you may have. Alternately, we could have this discussion via phone. After this discussion, we would arrange a time for the actual interview, if you wish to participate.

**DO I HAVE TO PARTICIPATE?**

No. Your participation in this research is entirely voluntary. You may refuse to participate at any time, decline to answer any question, or withdraw during the course of the interview, without any negative consequences.

**ARE THERE RISKS AND BENEFITS TO PARTICIPATING?**

During the course of the interview, you may choose to share sensitive information: for instance, memories of a difficult time of your faith. This has the potential to be emotionally upsetting, which is the only foreseeable risk associated with your participation in this research. **If, at any point, you wish to take a break, change topics, or stop the interview, you may do so without any negative consequences.** You will have the opportunity, once the interview is finished, to “debrief” – that is, to discuss the interview process that you have just been through.

Your participation in this research might have the following benefits:
- Sharing your experience of losing faith in fundamentalist Christianity may raise awareness of the fact that this is a complicated and challenging transition (for many people).
- The results of this research could be used to develop materials or recommendations for counsellors, chaplains, and mental health workers who work with clients in religious/spiritual transition.
- People sometimes find that telling aloud the stories of significant events in their lives, such as losing faith, can bring to light personal insights which are interesting and useful for their own learning, growth, and development.

**WHAT WILL HAPPEN TO THE INFORMATION AFTER I HAVE PARTICIPATED?**

The information you provide will remain strictly confidential, and you will be invited to choose a pseudonym so that no-one can identify you. In addition, the information you provide will be carefully edited to remove or disguise personal details which may even remotely identify you. The data collected for this research may be used for publication in journals or books, and/or for public presentations, but your identity will not be revealed. The data (full transcripts and interview recordings) will be retained for a period of three years by me, Karen Ross, and will be kept in a locked filing box at my home office. I am the only person who will have access to this data. After three years, paper documents will be shredded and CDs will be broken.

If you change your mind about participating after the interview is complete, you can still contact me to withdraw from the study. However, once the information from your interview has been fully analysed and combined with other people’s information, you can no longer withdraw. I will inform you of this deadline at least two weeks before it occurs.
If you would like to see the results of this research when they become available, I would be very happy to offer them to you; please check the box next to “I would like to receive a summary of the results” on the Consent Form.

If you have any questions about your rights as a participant, you may contact the Research Ethics Review Office by e-mail (ethics.review@utoronto.ca) or phone (416-946-3273). You may also contact my supervisor, Dr. Roy Moodley, at roymoodley@oise.utoronto.ca.

If you would like to participate in this study, or if you have any questions, please contact me by e-mail or phone. Thank you for considering participation in this research.

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Appendix B

Consent Form

If there is anything you do not understand about the information letter or this consent form, or if you wish to ask any questions, please speak to the researcher.

I understand that if I share any information that suggests I may be at risk of harming myself or others, or if I share any information regarding a child who is currently being abused or potentially abused, then the researcher is legally required to report this information. This is the only instance in which my identity would be revealed (due to legal requirements).

1. Volunteer’s declaration of informed consent

☐ I have been given a written explanation of the study by the investigator (Karen Ross), including full details of any potential psychological risks and what participation entails. I have been given the opportunity to ask questions.

☐ I have had enough time to think about the study, and to decide without pressure if I want to take part.

☐ I therefore agree that I will take part in this study.

Name: ____________________________________

Date: _____________________________________

Signature: _________________________________

2. Contact information

☐ I am willing to receive a copy of the transcript and preliminary analysis for my interview.

☐ I would like to receive a summary of this study’s results.

If you have checked either of the above boxes, please fill out the information below.

Please send me the above items by:

☐ E-mail

☐ Canada Post

Address: ____________________________________________________________

City and Province: ____________________________________________________

Postal Code: _________________________________________________________
E-mail address: __________________________________________________________

3. **Researcher responsible for conducting the informed consent process:**
I confirm that I have explained the nature of the research and supplied the volunteer with an information letter explaining the nature of this study and the volunteer’s participation in terms that, in my judgment, are suited to their understanding.

Name: ________________________ Signature: ______________________ Date: ___________
Appendix C

Interview Guide

As you know, I am interested in the experience of losing spiritual or religious faith. You have identified yourself as someone who has experienced a loss of faith, specifically in fundamentalist Christianity. I would essentially like to hear the story of your faith and loss of faith; in particular, it would be helpful if you could focus on not only the external events or milestones, but on your emotional experience, thought processes, and any mental debates – what it was like for you to lose your faith.

1. Can you tell me the story of your faith, as it has unfolded until this point?
   a. When and how did your faith in fundamentalist Christianity begin?
   b. Where did you go to church? What was it like? What was the atmosphere like, and what doctrines or values were emphasized?
   c. Was the rest of your family involved with the church or religion? How did religion or faith factor into your family life?
   d. How often did you attend church activities? Can you tell me about some of these activities? What was your role or level of involvement?
   e. How did you feel about your faith or religion? How would you characterize what you then saw as your relationship with God/Jesus? What benefits did your faith provide? Were there also downsides?
   f. What is the story of how you came to lose your faith? When would you say your loss of faith “began”?

2. Going back, can you tell me a bit about what was it like for you emotionally, around the time that you began to lose faith?
   a. (Continue line of questioning through stages of loss-of-faith story: e.g. when it became clear that participant no longer believed, etc.)

3. What kinds of thoughts were going through your mind, around the time that you began to lose faith?
   a. (Continue line of questioning through stages of loss-of-faith story: e.g. when participant stopped attending church, etc.)

4. How has losing your faith affected your life?

5. Did you seek any help or support, while you were going through your loss of faith?
   a. Probe: Did you talk to friends, see a counselor or chaplain?
   b. What was most helpful about the support you received?
   c. What was unhelpful? Did any part of their attempts to help actually make matters worse?
   d. Hypothetically, if you were to have seen a counselor, what could he or she have done to be particularly helpful to you?

6. How would you describe your spiritual beliefs and practices now?
   a. Probe: Do you participate in an organized religion? Do you believe in a higher power?