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Summer Anne Myers

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Visualizing the Transition out of High Demand Religions

by

Summer Myers

A research paper presented to the

Faculty of the Department of
Marital and Family Therapy
Loyola Marymount University

In partial fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts in Marital and Family Therapy

May 9, 2017

Signature Page

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Abstract

This research uses a questionnaire and a bridge drawing directive to explore the lived experience of transitioning out of a high-demand religion. Subjects include disaffiliated Mormons, Jehovah's Witnesses, and Fundamentalist Protestants who were recruited through a dedicated website via limited promotion in online communities for disaffiliates. Visual and textual responses are analyzed through qualitative coding, with additional analysis performed on the artwork using Hays and Lyons' (1981) bridge drawing criteria. Results reveal the psychological, social, behavioral, identity, and existential effects of disaffiliation. Results also produce seven emergent themes: ambivalence; embracing uncertainty; social justice; simultaneous transitions; freedom and constraint; growth; and remaining ties. The paper then explores the subjects' lived experiences, latent content in the artwork, and the role and value of artmaking in healing from these difficult transitions. Lastly, this paper discusses treatment considerations, limitations of the study, and suggestions for future research on religious struggles and disaffiliation.

Keywords: Religious struggle, disaffiliation, high-demand religion, art therapy, bridge drawing, life transitions

Disclaimer

This paper does not reflect the views of Loyola Marymount University nor the Department of Marital and Family Therapy. Prior to data collection, an Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval for the research was obtained. Appendices contain IRB approval.

Dedication

This research is dedicated to my oldest sister, who stepped onto the bridge years before I did and showed me that it wasn't so scary after all.

Acknowledgements

Many thanks to the twenty-nine brave individuals who shared their painful disaffiliation stories and their honest, powerful artwork, including two whose responses could not be used here. Thanks to my husband, Andrew Myers, for editing, coaching, discussing ideas, and caring for our children while I locked myself away to work. Thanks as well to my classmates in the trauma research cluster who brainstormed, assisted, and cheered along the way. And special thanks to Dr. Paige Asawa for her patience, encouragement, and mentorship, and especially for pushing me to take the more difficult path.

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Introduction

The Study Topic

This research explores the lived experience of adults who have disaffiliated from high-demand religions. High-demand religions may involve high time and resource commitments; an emphasis on scriptural and leadership inerrancy; a level of separation between the membership and the rest of the world; and strict, enforceable moral and behavioral codes, potentially including rules of diet, dress, education, sex, reproduction, media, technology use, language, social involvement, and marriage (Avance, 2013; Berger, 2015; Brent, 1994; Davidman & Greil, 2007; Hookway, 2015). Leaving such an intensive faith can be a major life transition with a high social and psychological impact. Understanding of the unique challenges of disaffiliates may become increasingly relevant for mental health clinicians as the religiously unaffiliated are the fastest-growing religious demographic in the United States (Pew Research Center, 2015). Art therapy literature lacks significant research regarding faith transitions or disaffiliation, and this research begins to fill that gap. This study explores the following questions: What is the lived experience of transitioning out of high-demand religions? How do disaffiliates conceptualize and visualize their transitions? Does the art reveal any latent content about their transitions? Does making art about their transitions assist disaffiliates in understanding and integrating their experiences?

Significance of the Study

This study held significance for myself, the Primary Investigator, as I am personally a disaffiliate of a high-demand religion. This difficult transition significantly impacted my life, my husband's life, and my relationships with my friends and extended family. My meaningful experiences in comforting and witnessing for dozens of others on their journeys out of the church

was one of my primary reasons for pursuing a career in mental health. I have an interest in becoming an art therapist specializing in religious struggles, and this study was an early step in expanding the knowledge of myself and the field. The general psychology and sociology literature has a variety of studies about religious disaffiliation, and some even focus specifically on high-demand religions. However, I have found no literature directly relevant to the use or efficacy of art therapy for religious struggle or disaffiliation. I believe art therapy can be an effective modality for clinical use in understanding and facilitating difficult religious transitions.

Background of the Study Topic

Psychological studies on religious struggles and disaffiliation are prevalent, with the oldest one here from 1983 (Albrecht & Bahr). Studies concerning disaffiliation specifically from high-demand sects are rarer, but some do address this topic (Adam, 2008; Albrecht & Bahr, 1983; Avance, 2013; Bahr & Albrecht, 1989; Berger, 2015; Brent, 1994; Buxant & Saroglou, 2008; Coates, 2013; Davidman & Greil, 2007; Fenelon & Danielsen, 2016; Hookway & Habibis, 2015; Khalil & Bilici, 2007; Scheitle & Adamczyk, 2010). Prevalence rates are similarly more comprehensive for general disaffiliation than for high-demand disaffiliation (see Deiner, Tay, & Myers, 2011; Fenelon & Danielsen, 2016; Hout, 2002; Pew Research Center, 2012; Pew Research Center, 2015). Pew Research Center (2015) reports that 22.8% of the U.S. population was religiously unaffiliated in 2014 (p. 4), with “nearly one-in-five of all American adults” having disaffiliated from their religion of birth (p. 33). Fenelon and Danielsen (2016) provided the only rates on high-demand disaffiliation that this author could find, estimating that 17% of high-demand members disaffiliate (p. 57).

The literature explores disaffiliation from high-demand religions through a mix of interview, personal narrative, analysis from written and online sources, and large-scale surveys, and most of it focuses on branches of Christianity (Beck, 2006; Ellison, 2010; Fisher, 2016; Freeze & DiTamaso, 2015; Krause et al., 1999). Fisher (2016) writes a comprehensive and up-to-date review of psychological literature on doubt and disaffiliation, then creates a visual model for the disaffiliation process, including precursory struggles, doubt, and the formation of a new religious identity.

The literature largely agrees regarding reasons for leaving and the psychological, familial, social, health, and practical impact of religious disaffiliation, with several authors

noting that depth of involvement predicts depth of impact (Abu-Raiya et al., 2015; Bromley, 1991; Ellison et al., 2013; Dein, 2013; Kézdy et al., 2011; Scheitle & Adamczyk, 2010). Many authors also report the personal growth, identity strengthening, and other positive effects of leaving a high-demand faith (Abu-Raiya et al., 2015; Avance, 2013; Coates, 2013; Fisher, 2016; Krause & Ellison, 2009).

While none of the found art therapy literature directly applies to the subject of this study, the psychological literature provides some connections to art therapy, including metaphors of immigration and acculturation, “coming out,” and crossing a bridge (Avance, 2013; Bahr & Albrecht, 1989; Berger, 2015; Coates, 2013; Fisher, 2016; Khalil & Bilici, 2007; Niens et al., 2013). Rousseau and Heusch (2000) provide justifications for using art therapy for purposes of honoring the past and creating a new community and identity in acculturative situations. Pelton-Sweet and Sherry (2008) discuss using art for making meaning and constructing a new identity in the process of coming out. Van Lith (2014) likewise discusses art therapy’s benefits to spirituality, meaning-making, and identity reconstruction. And finally, Hays and Lyons (1981) create and discuss the Bridge Drawing, an art therapy assessment and intervention for life transitions, which formed one of two primary data-gathering methods of this study.

Literature Review

Transitioning out of a high-demand religion involves psychological, social, and spiritual challenges (Brent, 1994; Davidman & Greil, 2007). Before disaffiliation, these religions are often central to their members' lives (Brent, 1994). Religions may qualify as high-demand when they involve: intense demands of time and resources; emphasis on leadership, orthodox belief, and scriptural inerrancy or literalism; and strict behavioral codes including rules of diet, dress, tithing, education, sexual practices, media and technology use, language, social involvement, and marriage (Avance, 2013; Berger, 2015; Brent, 1994; Bromley, 1991; Coates, 2013; Davidman & Greil, 2007; Hookway & Habibis, 2015; Segady, 2006). Disaffiliates from high-demand religions include, among others, former Mormons (LDS), Jehovah's Witnesses, Ultra-Orthodox Jews, Muslims, and Protestant Fundamentalists (Adam, 2008; Brent, 1994, Davidman & Greil, 2007; Fenelon & Danielson, 2016; Khalil & Bilici, 2007; Segady, 2006), which are the groups primarily discussed here. Understanding of the unique challenges of these religious disaffiliates may become increasingly relevant for mental health clinicians as the unaffiliated are the fastest-growing religious demographic in the United States (Pew Research Center, 2015).

General psychology and sociology literature provides a range of studies regarding religious doubts, spiritual struggles, and disaffiliation, with some even focusing specifically on high-demand religions. This literature review surveys the past and contemporary discussion on leaving high-demand religions, including the struggles and reasons that lead up to disaffiliation. The psychological effects of leaving an intensive faith, including a loss of identity, are then discussed. Exacerbating these psychological effects, disaffiliation likely comes at the sacrifice of some family and community ties. However, on the other side of the transition out of a high-demand religion, new identities, new freedoms, and positive personal development often follow.

Lastly, this literature review attempts to connect the findings of the psychology literature to art therapy concepts and interventions, culminating in the use of Hays and Lyons' (1981) Bridge Drawing to visualize and conceptualize the disaffiliation experience.

Prevalence

The number of religiously unaffiliated is on the rise, reaching 22.8% of the U.S. population in 2014 (Pew Research Center, 2015, p. 4). This number includes the never-affiliated, but the same study reports that “nearly one-in-five American adults (18%) were raised in a religion and are now unaffiliated” (p. 33). In the 1990s, “between 5 and 7 percent of Americans raised in a Christian tradition...left organized religion” (Hout, 2002, p. 188). More recently, Fenelon and Danielsen (2016) analyze several decades of samples from the General Social Survey and find that the rate of disaffiliation in major American denominations is accelerating, with the rate increasing from 6% in the 1970s to 14% in the early 2000s (p. 54). The trend seems to be similar across the world: Deiner, Tay, and Myers (2011) review recent Gallup World Poll information and conclude that “people are rapidly leaving organized religion,” particularly in more economically developed nations (p. 1278).

The above numbers reflect trends in religion in general. While the numbers of disaffiliation specifically from high-demand religions are more difficult to pin down, most authors seem to agree that the rate is increasing. When Fenelon & Danielsen (2016) stratify their general data into denominations, they find that members of high-demand religions disaffiliate at a rate of 17% (p. 57). Pew Research Center (2015) also takes a closer look at specific denominations in terms of shares of the U.S. population. Between 2007 and 2014, Pew (2015) finds negligible growth for Jehovah's Witnesses and Jews, a slight decrease for Mormons, and a small increase for Muslims. Muslim growth, showing the largest increase of any denomination in

America at .5%, is quite small compared to the growth of the unaffiliated at 6.7% (p. 4). The reasons for these trends could include generational patterns, delays in the age of marriage, political shifts, and widespread social disengagement, but increased secularization and disaffiliation also play a role (Pew Research Center, 2012, pp. 30–31). It should be noted that while the Pew Research Center is not peer-reviewed, it is a respected source of religious demographic information and is cited by several authors included in this literature review (Colaner, Soliz, & Nelson, 2014; Dein, 2013; Diener et al., 2011; Fisher, 2016; Hookway & Habibis, 2015; Scheitle & Adamczyk, 2010).

The Leaving Process

“Apostasy is not at first, a leap of faith towards an unknown destination. At first, it is a reluctant stumbling and falling into darkness and uncertainty” (Adam, 2008, p. 215).

Disaffiliation from a high-demand religion involves leaving a comfortable, familiar, and secure community and way of life (Adam, 2008; Davidman & Greil, 2007). Brent (1994) calls the process of leaving a high-demand religion a “major life transition beset with emotional difficulties.” Davidman and Greil’s (2007) subjects describe their transition process as long and “torturous” (p. 204). Disaffiliates from religions with high demands of commitment and devotion may experience some of the greatest struggles, as “the sense of loss a person can experience is directly related to his or her level of investment on it” (Abu-Raiya, Pargament, Krause, & Ironson, 2015, p. 572). Bromley (1991) agrees that highly-involved, long-term members of high-demand religions will face a more difficult transition.

Various authors present many types of disaffiliates, including those who defect from a group joined at birth; those who deconvert from a group joined later in life; those who behave as if they believe for family or the community; those who openly disbelieve but still attend; those

who still believe but reject the community or moral codes; and those who switch to another faith tradition (Avance, 2013; Bahr & Albrecht, 1989; Baker, 2015; Berger, 2015; Bromley, 1991; Davidman & Greil, 2007; Fisher, 2016; Hookway & Habibis, 2015; Wollschleger & Beach, 2013). Several authors conclude that religious disaffiliates are more likely to be young and male (Bromley, 1991; Dein, 2013; Fenelon & Danielson, 2016) while potentially outdated information from Hunsberger and Brown (1984) reports that “apostates tend to be older and male” (p. 248). Pew Research Center (2012) data shows that the religiously unaffiliated (but not necessarily disaffiliated) tend to be younger, male, white, unmarried, and college-educated (p. 21). Pew Research Center (2015) also notes that religious disaffiliates are “getting younger, on average, over time” (p. 5), due to both generational replacement and progressive disaffiliation within generational cohorts (p. 12). Nearly 20% of married Americans are in mixed-faith marriages between one religiously unaffiliated spouse and one Christian spouse, compared to only 5% of those married before 1960 (p. 5).

Many authors examine the lived experiences of religious disaffiliates through interview and personal narrative (Avance, 2013; Bahr & Albrecht, 1989; Berger, 2015; Brent, 1994; Coates, 2013; Davidman & Greil, 2007; Hookway & Habibis, 2015; Khalil & Bilici, 2007). Some researchers also analyzed observations from other sources (online communities, books, or publications) in which former members tell their disaffiliation stories (Avance, 2013; Khalil & Bilici, 2007). Khalil and Bilici (2007) specifically note their difficulty in locating former Muslims for interview despite the likelihood of a large population. They also note that most of their accounts of Muslim defection are published anonymously. Several researchers used surveys, questionnaires, and large sample sizes (Abu-Raiya et al., 2015; Adam, 2008; Colaner et al., 2014; Ellison & Lee, 2010; Exline et al., 2000; Fenelon & Danielsen, 2016; Hunsberger &

Brown, 1984; Kézdy et al., 2011; Krause & Ellison, 2009). Most of the available research samples mainly from Christian traditions, potentially limiting its use, as results may not be generalizable to other faiths (Beck, 2006; Ellison, 2010; Fisher, 2016; Freeze & DiTammasso, 2015; Krause et al., 1999). However, Dein (2013) argues that while much of the literature on disaffiliation and religious struggle is focused on Christianity, the results “can be applied to other faith groups, including Muslims and Jews” (202). Some of the studies included here focus exclusively on Muslims (Khalil & Bilici, 2007) and Jews (Berger, 2015; Davidman & Greil, 2007).

Brent (1994) describes disaffiliation from fundamentalism as a “major life transition” and outlines a general sequence of phases, namely “participation in the fundamentalist tradition, initial disillusionment, tolerating the tradition, leaving the tradition, the emotion-laden aftermath, establishing new horizons, and living with problematic residue.” Fisher (2016) created an alternative phase-based model, specifically “questioning, doubt, crisis of faith, reconfiguration, switching, deconversion, disaffiliation, and opposition” (p. 2). While Brent’s (1994) model is sequential, Fisher’s (2016) model accommodates nonlinear transition experiences, regression, and variable outcomes. Fisher (2016) created the following graphic illustration of his model:

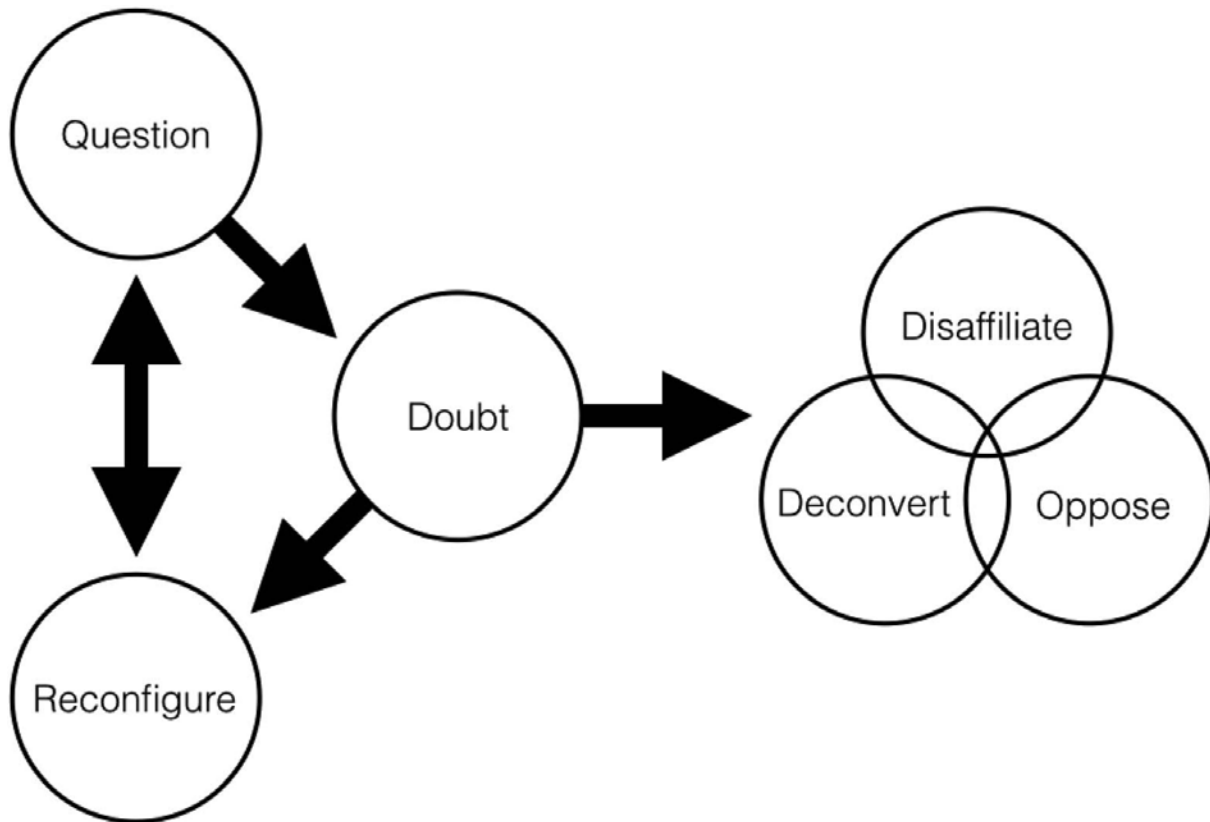


Figure 1 - Fisher's Model of Transition Experiences

Struggles before leaving. The formal or informal act of disaffiliation can be preceded by prolonged periods of doubt, struggle, and searching (Adam, 2008; Avance, 2013; Davidman & Griel, 2007; Fisher, 2016). This can be a troubling time for members of high-demand religions, as “doubting presents a greater problem for the more devoutly religious” (Dein, 2013, p. 212). Fisher (2016) states that deconversion can be either fast or slow, taking months or even years, and is sometimes unconscious. Bromley (1991) agrees that, due to powerful spiritual bonds and social ties, the disaffiliation process from high-demand groups may be particularly prolonged. These long periods of doubt and searching can weigh heavily on believers because, as Beck (2006) puts it, “theological inquiry is a game played with potentially ultimate stakes” (p. 130).

Questioning, struggling, or nonconforming members may feel out of place in their faith community (Hookway & Habibis, 2015). Davidman and Greil (2007) likewise note a sense of

belonging neither in or out. Bahr and Albrecht (1989) consider the alienating experiences of those with “atypical problems,” such as single parenthood, who find their faith tradition insufficient or irrelevant to their needs (p. 197). Some disaffiliates may have never felt that they fully belonged: Davidman and Greil (2007) found that most of their participants experienced disillusionment from their early years, and it was not one identifiable moment of doubt that pushed them away. Bahr and Albrecht’s (1989) findings echo this idea, indicating that most Mormon apostates felt marginalized or did not believe or identify strongly with the faith from a young age. In contrast, Avance (2013) observes that many former Mormons point to one crucial moment of doubt, often learning some cultural, historical, or scientific information that “blindsides” them and “threatens to upend their current worldview” (p. 20).

Avance (2013) cites access to online information and to communities of former members as contributing factors to doubt. Khalil and Bilici (2007) likewise credit the internet for undermining religion’s hold on its adherents. As Davidman and Greil (2007) point out, “no community can be perfectly secluded,” and even the most isolated of groups will eventually be exposed to the outside world through media, non-religious relatives or friends, school, or the internet (p. 212). Discovery of incriminating information is often followed by a period of intense research from Church-prohibited books and online sources, which can be an exhausting and painful process (Avance, 2013). Adam (2008) describes a parallel process of the “reluctant apostate” researching and delving into apologetics for a prolonged period while “pulling the weight of a cart laden with a sense of social and emotional loss” (pp. 214–215). Guilt and shame may prevent doubters from bringing their questions to religious leaders or peers (Ellison et al., 2013). Davidman and Greil (2007) find that those who do bring their questions to religious leaders are dismissed, condescended, redirected, and sometimes distracted with flattery, leaving

doubters to distrust themselves. Bahr and Albrecht (1989) similarly report leaders who dismiss questioners with instructions to pray, read their scriptures, have faith, and stop worrying. This gas-lighting effect left some members feeling “speechless” and “crazed” (Davidman & Greil, 2007, pp. 209, 213).

Disaffiliation can also be preceded by conflicts between one’s religious identity and one’s experiences in the secular world (Friedson, 2015; Hookway & Habibis, 2015; Khalil & Bilici, 2007). Some of Hookway and Habibis’s (2015) respondents reported feelings of embarrassment, self-consciousness, and anger at being “noticeably different” and did not wish to be associated with their faith’s conservative and troublesome doctrines (p. 848). One of Khalil and Bilici’s (2007) subjects described struggles with academic, social, and professional development, reporting that “I skipped classes to pray or to go to Friday prayers. I avoided certain jobs believing them to be un-Islamic” (p. 114).

Krause and Ellison (2009) note that religious doubts are often accompanied by cognitive dissonance, pain, a sense of violation, and psychological distress. Fisher (2016) likewise reports that simmering doubts can be harmful to the doubter, including increased stress and depression, lower wellbeing, and reduced ability to find meaning and a sense of purpose. Doubting may also be suppressed or linked with guilt and shame if it is perceived as sinful (Ellison, 2010; Krause & Ellison, 2009).

Reasons for leaving. Members may discontinue activity in a faith tradition for many reasons, including changing values, a loss of belief, rejection of rules, conflict with leaders or peers, logical and scientific conflicts, and difficulty reconciling God with world suffering (Abu-Raiya et al., 2015; Bahr & Albrecht, 1989; Buxant & Saroglou, 2008; Ellison, 2010; Fisher, 2016; Hookway & Habibis, 2015; Jacobs, 1987). Khalil and Bilici (2007) cite two primary

motivations for leaving Islam, namely intellectual and experiential/social concerns. Bromley (1991) simply asserts that individuals disaffiliate when the payoff of membership is no longer greater than the investment. Many disaffiliates have not one but a cluster of reasons to doubt and to leave (Fisher, 2016; Jacobs, 1987). Bahr and Albrecht (1989) note that specifically for Mormons, disaffiliation for a single reason is rare, with each interviewee naming an average of four types of problems or conflicts. Avance (2013) and Bromley (1991) both point to a single precipitating event, such as the discovery of a particularly damning piece of information, that catalyzes around other unresolved issues and triggers a definitive choice to leave. Jacobs (1987) disagrees, stating that deconversion evolves over time “rather than a single event experience in which faith and commitment are suddenly altered” (p. 297).

Psychological Effects

Religious doubting and spiritual struggles are widely found to be harmful for mental health (Abu-Raia et al., 2015; Ellison et al., 2013; Dein, 2013; Krause et al., 1999). Kézdy et al. (2011) warn that while spiritual struggles are correlated with psychological distress, they may not be causal: mental distress may also lead to spiritual struggles. Symptoms of spiritual struggles (comprising and preceding disaffiliation) can include depression, anxiety, anger, grief, confusion, shame, guilt, and reductions in life satisfaction, optimism, and self-esteem (Abu-Raiya et al., 2015; Adam, 2008; Avance, 2013; Buxant & Saroglou, 2008; Dein, 2013; Ellison et al., 2013; Exline et al., 2000). Transitioning away from fundamentalism in particular may induce loneliness, isolation, trauma, sexual difficulties, fear of divine and community retribution, inability to trust others, bitterness, regret over lost time, and difficulty speaking about the past (Brent, 1994). Coates (2013) likewise lists “traumatic loss, overwhelming existential anxiety...dissonance and conflicts” as part of the transition process (p. 801). Exacerbating these

symptoms, disaffiliates often experience a loss of identity, loss of community and family support, and loss of a sense of divine protection or certainty (Ellison et al., 2013).

Reiterating the psychological symptoms listed above, Exline et al. (2000) found that religious strain, alienation from God, and religious rifts with family, friends, or institutions were all correlated with depression, while religious fear and guilt were correlated with increased risk for suicidality. These findings were present regardless of how deeply religious the subjects were (Exline et al., 2000). However, many studies find that the intensity of symptoms does correlate with the intensity of religious involvement (Abu-Raiya et al., 2015; Bromley, 1991; Dein, 2013; Ellison et al., 2013; Kézdy et al., 2011; Scheitle & Adamczyk, 2010). In stark contrast, Fenelon and Danielsen (2016) found that while disaffiliates of high-demand religions report significantly worse physical health than affiliates or the nonreligious, they report no decrease in subjective well-being. Dein (2013) and Krause et al. (1999) find that older adults are better able to mitigate spiritual struggles and accompanying symptoms, possibly because of more life experience, practice, and acquired wisdom. Conversely, Krause and Ellison (2009) later pointed out that older adults, who have been more deeply invested in their religions, may experience deeper identity crisis when faced with religious doubts. Disaffiliates who struggle with mitigating symptoms by themselves may be disinclined to pursue professional help due to lingering prejudice against the mental health field inherited from many high-demand religions (Friedson, 2015). Members of high-demand religions are likely to have been taught that mental health is a moral issue and under one's own control (Friedson, 2015).

Identity loss. Religion is a strong, stable aspect of personal identity for many people, with length of membership and level of religious involvement correlating with the prominence of religion in one's identity (Buxant and Saroglou, 2008; Bromley, 1991; Ellison et al., 2013).

Lifelong members of high-demand religions may not develop a primary identity independent of their community and beliefs (Avance, 2013; Coates, 2013; Scheitle & Adamczyk, 2010). The strength of religious identity correlates to greater symptoms of depression, anxiety, and other negative psychological effects when experiencing spiritual struggles (Ellison et al., 2013). Individuals who leave high-demand religions may thus experience a traumatic loss of identity, purpose, and self-worth upon exiting (Coates, 2013; Hookway & Habibis, 2015; Scheitle & Adamczyk, 2010). Coates (2013) describes this loss as an “identity void” (p. 798). For some of Berger’s (2015) participants, the loss of identity manifested literally through replacing their Jewish name with a secular one, including one participant who used one name in his daily life and his original Jewish name with his family.

Community and Family Consequences

High-demand religions provide both a powerful sense of belonging and a separation from the outside world, a combination that makes for a socially complex, destabilizing disaffiliation experience (Bromley, 1991; Buxant & Saroglou, 2008; Coates, 2013). The transition from an intensive religious culture to mainstream culture can result in the sense that former members “didn’t fit anywhere” (Hookway & Habibis, 2015, p. 850). Major life events and social occasions, such as weddings and funerals, may have been linked to or seen through the lens of religion (Buxant & Saroglou, 2008). Scheitle and Adamczyk (2010) point out that because of high time commitments from these religions, “individual’s social bonds will be concentrated within the group” (p. 326). Exiting a high-demand religion likely involves loss of friends, loss of social capital, and strains or severs in family relationships (Jacobs, 1987; Scheitle & Adamczyk, 2010). As Bromley (1991) put it, “To give up the group may well mean giving up the entire fabric of one’s social life.”

High-demand faith communities are likely to respond to wayward members with “concern, encouragement, or sanctions” (Bromley, 1991). Both Hookway & Habibis (2015) and McGinnis (2015) discuss the employment of shunning or disfellowshipping by certain high-demand groups to punish or shame. Avance (2013) also speaks of some former Mormons experiencing ostracism and excommunication. Berger (2015) found that the community reaction to disaffection was broadly described as negative, including gossip, rumors, hate-mail, and social shunning for adults and children with accompanying feelings of rejection, abuse, and of being a “black sheep” (Berger, 2015 p. 676). Some Ultra-Orthodox Jews reported sadness associated with the loss of their old community while others expressed relief (Berger, 2015). Each of Hookway & Habibis’s (2015) interviewees described a painful and isolating loss of community followed by the need to form new, outside social connections despite a handicap in secular customs.

While some people convert to high-demand faith traditions, many have inherited the beliefs from their parents and previous generations (Berger, 2015; Hookway & Habibis, 2015; Stokes & Regnerus, 2009). Stokes and Regnerus (2009) state that religious differences are more divisive in families from strict religious traditions with heavy focus on traditional family values. Leaving the family religion is most likely met with strong parental disapproval (Bromley, 1991). Relational solidarity, affection, and satisfaction may be reduced between parents and adult children with religious differences (Colaner, Soliz, & Nelson, 2014; Stokes & Regnerus, 2009). Stokes and Regnerus (2009) points out that typical parent-child relations have moments of strain, but divergent religious values cause distinct relational distress, and normal parent-child conflict may be ascribed with religious meaning. Every believing parent in Hookway & Habibis's (2015) research was reported to be concerned and upset about their child’s disaffection, believing that

their children would not enjoy eternal paradise by their side. Differences in faith are also likely correlated with other disparities of political, cultural, moral, and family values, further contributing to relational divide (Colaner et al., 2014). Hunsberger and Brown (1984) found that those who apostatize from the family faith report poorer relationships with their parents both before and after disaffiliation, which may be related to these differing values.

While family relationships may settle over time, there may remain a sense of distance or superficiality, with some families reacting as “unhappy but accepting,” (Berger, 2015, p. 674). Some families may be more supportive, particularly if one parent was less active to begin with (Hookway & Habibis 2015; Berger 2015). Other families may apply pressure to return, employing guilt, scolding, and distancing to punish those who have left (Berger, 2015; Buxant & Saroglou, 2008). McGinnis (2015) highlights the use of informal family ostracism as a shaming mechanism geared toward bringing back wayward members. Other families may completely cut off their disaffected family member, as in the case of one of Berger’s (2015) interviewees whose family conducted a funeral for her “because for them she was dead” (p. 674). Former Jehovah’s Witnesses risk being disfellowshipped and shunned by family and other believers (Hookway & Habibis, 2015). In one of Hookway & Habibis’s (2015) interviews, one doubting teenage Jehovah’s Witness was forced by his mother to choose between attending church or leaving the family home.

Marital decisions are likely to be influenced by high-demand religions through doctrine and social pressure (Bromley, 1991; Scheitle & Adamczyk, 2010). Mormons may be ostracized for marrying outside of the faith (Avance, 2013). Several of Buxant and Saroglou’s (2008) disaffiliated participants separated from their partners that did not exit the faith along with them. In cases where one parent is still a believer and the other is not, fear of losing access to children

may induce some non-believers to remain “closeted defectors” (Berger, 2015, p. 676). Khalil and Bilici (2007) similarly report that some former Muslims hide their deconversion, often because of marriage and family relationships, but sometimes because of a fear of harm by “radical Muslims” (p. 120). Relationships with children may change as well (Berger, 2015). Some Ultra-Orthodox Jewish children who leave the faith with their parents must adjust to new, secular clothing, schools, and sometimes even names (Berger, 2015).

Rejecting the faith of one’s family and community also entails rejecting concepts and practices that are considered sacred to loved ones (Stokes & Regnerus, 2009). Because of their new ideological positions, those who leave may reinterpret past events and have more negative views of their experiences than would a neutral observer, fostering cynicism (Bahr & Albrecht, 1988). Some disaffiliates may become vocal critics of their previous belief system and attempt to help liberate current believers, which could further strain relationships (Avance, 2013). Khalil and Bilici (2007) describe the creation and sharing of exit narratives, which they warn are subjective accounts and do not necessarily describe Islam accurately or fairly. Bromley (1991) and Avance (2013) similarly describe a process of formalizing a deconversion narrative that disaffiliates will share with others, possibly alienating them. Because of the high social and familial costs associated with being critical of the church or open about their disaffection, many former Mormons rely on online anonymity for free expression of their experiences (Avance, 2013).

On the Other Side

Adjusting to the outside world. In contrast with adult converts who later leave, those who were born into high-demand religions face unique issues of acculturation into the outside world once they leave (Bahr and Albrecht, 1989; Berger, 2015; Hookway & Habibis, 2015).

Berger's (2015) subjects describe "social, intellectual, legal, logistic, and financial" challenges of exiting their faith tradition and entering secular society without support, preparation, or skills (p. 674). Coates (2013) similarly describes some disaffiliates experiencing difficulties with housing, employment, and grasping mainstream culture. Ultra-Orthodox Jews who leave the faith may have to learn—without guidance or previous experience—how to drive, obtain an education, develop a career, use the internet, open a bank account, and find or rent a home. Participants found solutions to some of these problems by joining the military, accessing free community resources, and obtaining GEDs. Because of the difficulties of living among the old community while transitioning out of it as well as the opportunity to start over without old associations, some may choose to relocate to a new city or state (Berger, 2015).

Many disaffiliates identify a need to develop their own moral code, belief system, and worldview after the loss of their prescriptive, external guide (Hookway & Habibis, 2015). Former Ultra-Orthodox Jews likewise report a need for a "new intellectual framework" about ideas, information, independence, priorities, and decisions about food, friends, clothes, and leisure (Berger, 2015, p. 677). A participant in Davidman and Greil's (2007) research reported that without the structure of daily prayer and ritual, she did not know how to fill her hours.

All of Hookway & Habibis's (2015) interviewees retained some degree of Jehovah's Witness belief, with two returning to full activity after a period of disaffiliation. Because of this retained belief, many experienced a sense of guilt and ambivalence over their new, "hedonistic" life experiences, along with a sense of meaninglessness and reduced self-esteem (Hookway & Habibis, 2015, p. 852). Berger's (2015) interviewees also reported guilt, experiencing conflict between "what they were thinking and what they were raised that they were supposed to think" (p. 677). Particularly in light of the Jehovah's Witness belief that the world will end very soon,

some former Jehovah's Witnesses experienced a sense of dread over lingering beliefs that they may be in the wrong, trading eternal paradise for worldly pleasures and freedoms (Hookway & Habibis, 2015). Adam (2008) reports similar fear and guilt for those departing from fundamentalist teachings, with some fearing that they are being influenced by demonic forces.

In an attempt to fit in with the secular world, some Ultra-Orthodox Jews may actively study social networks, books, movies, and the people around them to "catch up with formal and informal knowledge" (Berger, 2015, p. 680). Davidman and Greil (2007) agree that "defection involves unlearning lifelong roles and the community's idiomatic ways of speaking, thinking, and acting and learning new, unfamiliar ones" (p. 202). One of Berger's (2015) participants reported practicing in the mirror to lose his accent and mannerisms and communicate more like a mainstream American. One of Coates' (2013) subjects found that while she was leaving one form of control by disaffiliating from her religion, fitting into the norms of mainstream society can be controlling in its own way. Some of those who leave high-demand religions involve themselves with things previously forbidden which may adversely affect their health, including drinking, smoking, drugs, sex, and crime (Coates, 2013; Fenelon & Danielsen, 2016; Hookway & Habibis, 2015).

Brent (1994) states that transition out of an intensive religion may be traumatic and emotionally difficult, requiring support from understanding individuals. Bromley (1991) agrees that disaffiliates are likely to seek out such support groups. Berger (2015) argues that social support is critical to coping with transitional stress, and so apostates may seek support from other apostates, "nonreligious relatives, online support groups, teachers, counselors, and the very few organized services available for those who leave" (p. 683). Some formal organizations exist to aid in the transition, including Hillel for Orthodox Jews and Fundamentalists Anonymous for

protestant defectors (Brent, 1994; Davidman & Greil, 2007). Avance (2013) notes the importance of online communities to the support systems of former Mormons, where ex-LDS can find fulfillment in sharing their narratives and offering fellowship to new disaffiliates. Avance (2013) states that “many heterodox or former Mormons explain that the Internet has been their sanctuary—quite literally—as they have explored and developed a new religious identity” (p. 16).

Establishing a new religious identity. Bromley (1991) states that over time, panic over loss of community and identity can lessen, and disaffiliates will find new religious causes and new roles to fill, possibly “playing out the role of public apostate.” Davidman and Greil (2007) also describe this deliberate apostate role, reporting that those who leave may “display relief and pride that they had the courage to leave the confines of the group” (p. 213). Buxant and Saroglou (2008) agree that being an ex-member may become an important aspect of a disaffiliate’s identity. Avance (2013) posits that former Mormons construct their new identities in the telling of their deconversion narratives, a parallel to how active Mormons construct theirs. Coates (2013) describes the post-disaffiliation development of identity as an “active and deliberate process that took time and effort” (p. 805). He goes on to suggest that membership and exit from a high-demand group may contribute to a higher sense of autonomy and personal reflexivity than the general population (p. 806).

Adam (2008) lists several possible levels of religious belief after apostasy, namely “deistic, moderate, liberal, post-liberal, atheistic, mystical esoteric, neo-pagan, gnostic, and agnostic” (p. 213). Adam (2008) specifies that there is no clear progression between these levels and no apparent correlation between level of belief and time elapsed since disaffiliation. Post-

disaffiliation belief stances may become aggressive reactions against previous beliefs, or they may become healthy integrations into a new worldview (Adam, 2008).

Many of Coates' (2013) subjects switched to other intensive religions or groups, sometimes repeatedly, after disaffiliating, which Coates views as "stepping stone[s]" toward developing a personal identity (p. 804). Bromley (1991) asserts that while returns to the faith do take place, departure from higher-demand groups are more likely to be permanent than from other groups. In contrast, several of the former Jehovahs Witnesses interviewed by Hookway & Habibis (2015) had returned to the faith at least once. Adam (2008) reports similar returns of some apostates from Christian fundamentalism. Khalil and Bilici (2007) report that former Muslims tend to go to atheism, agnosticism, or Christianity. All of Bahr and Albrecht's (1989) respondents left Mormonism but stayed within Christianity. However, six years earlier, Albrecht (1983) found that former Mormons are almost as likely to claim no religion as to switch to another faith, and they are much more likely to claim no religion than are former members of other denominations. Scheitle and Adamczyk (2010) likewise report that disaffiliates of high-demand groups are more likely to leave religion altogether than are disaffiliates of other faiths. Buxant and Saroglou's (2008) participants all retained belief in God and priority on spirituality, though religion became less important to them and most "claimed that they could no longer enjoy a religious group" (p. 261). Many disaffiliates are still active, however, in personal and spiritual growth in the form of lectures, books, self-reflection, therapy, retreats, and creative pursuits (Buxant & Saroglou, 2008; Coates, 2013).

Positive outcomes. While faith transitions can be painful and traumatic, they can also be a period of rediscovery, relief, independence, serenity, and freedom (Abu-Raiya et al., 2015; Avance, 2013; Fisher, 2016). Berger's (2015) participants reported continued struggle and

challenge associated with leaving, yet they universally spoke positively of their transitions and expressed no regret in their decisions to leave. Davidman and Greil (2007) recognize their interviewee's own sense of accomplishment and courage in their choice to leave their religion. Bahr and Albrecht (1989) report that their interviewees "viewed disaffiliation as a struggle in which they were true to themselves, and to equity and truth" and "view their present situation as an achievement, a stage of progress and growth beyond their former state" (p. 197–198). One of Avance's (2013) interviewees stated, "I have never been happier in my life" (p. 21). Davidman and Greil (2007) describe the experience of one of their participants who used her newfound freedom to travel throughout Europe and become more comfortable with participating in society.

The stress of a religious transition "can have a beneficial transformative function for the self," including increased emotional reflexivity, individuation, personal development, and tolerance for uncertainty and existential anxiety (Coates, 2013, pp. 802–803). Krause and Ellison (2009) agree that some who have struggled through doubt experience growth that "bolsters their sense of self-confidence, enhances their feelings of control, and helps them derive a deeper sense of meaning in life" (p. 297). One of Coates' (2013) subjects found that her involuntary expulsion forced her "to take personal responsibility and learn to manage and tolerate uncertainty and 'aleness'" (p. 800). Exline et al. (2000) state that "such hardship contains the seeds of spiritual maturity: growth results not from a lack of suffering, but from a constructive response to it" (p. 1494).

Integrating Art Therapy

While there is some literature regarding spirituality and art therapy, there is an absence of art therapy research regarding religious struggles or disaffiliation. Considering this deficiency, a connection to the faith transition experience might be possible through comparisons to similar

situations and life transitions. The general psychology literature provides some helpful metaphors for the faith transition process, namely immigration, “coming out,” and crossing a bridge. While there are many differences between these experiences and religious transitions, the similarities are enough to warrant consideration.

Coates (2013) posits that former members of high-demand religions are akin to other marginalized people who feel that they might not fit in to any one culture or group. Niens et al. (2013) assert that immigration and acculturation issues affect those of religious minorities. Berger (2015) compares those transitioning from the Ultra-Orthodox world to the secular to immigrants “thrown into a strange land where they do not know the rules, the language, what is expected and what is prohibited, without a script to guide them or anybody to support them” (p. 680). Bahr and Albrecht (1989) similarly compare religious switching to immigration from one country to another, leaving one community behind for a new, unfamiliar place. Art therapy research has been shown that artmaking can help immigrants “reconcile their two cultural worlds, express their feelings of loss, and share their coping strategies” (Rousseau & Heusch, 2000, p. 31). Art expression likewise aids in reconstructing two elements that may become damaged in acculturative transitions, namely a sense of meaning and of identity (Rousseau & Heusch, 2000).

Aside from metaphors of immigration and acculturation, there are many references in the psychological literature comparing a faith transition to the experience of being “closeted” or “coming out.” This comparison acknowledges that both religious disaffiliates and LGBTQ individuals can go through a process of hiding, revealing, and reconstructing their identities at significant risk of misunderstanding, rejection, alienation, and sometimes physical danger (Avance, 2013; Bahr & Albrecht, 1989; Berger, 2015; Fisher, 2016; Khalil & Bilici, 2007;

Pelton-Sweet & Sherry, 2008). Identity may be in flux for both disaffiliate and closeted LGBTQ populations, and Pelton-Sweet and Sherry (2008) posit that self-expression and the ability to “try on” different roles are important in constructing new identities (p. 171). Art therapy is ideally suited for this identity-formation process, and artmaking can also ease accompanying symptoms such as anxiety and low self-esteem (Pelton-Sweet & Sherry, 2008). As Pelton-Sweet and Sherry (2008) phrase it, “By nurturing and expressing the imagination, clients in the midst of clarifying their...identities may be able to protect their physical and emotional health while learning more about, and ultimately becoming, their authentic selves” (p. 173).

Some general psychology authors use the imagery of a bridge while describing the process of transitioning out of a religion (Bromley, 1991; Coates, 2001). Hays and Lyons (1981) employed the powerful metaphor of a bridge, with its capacity to illustrate “crossing over something ‘bad’...or going from some place to a better setting,” in their creation of the Bridge Drawing as an art therapy assessment for life transitions (p. 207). Hays and Lyons (1981) report that the Bridge Drawing can be used for gathering information and diagnosing in addition to use as a therapeutic technique to foster communication in therapy. Hays and Lyons (1981) assess for several elements in completed Bridge Drawings, including the apparent stability of the bridge; the places drawn on either end; the placement of self along the scene; and the direction of travel. Each of these elements may indicate some aspect of the artist’s conscious or unconscious conceptualization of their transition, such as their wishes for the future or perception of self in relation to the goal. Hays and Lyons (1981) found a consistent portrayal of “bad on left and good on right” in their research (p. 217). Teneycke et al. (2009) adapted the Bridge Drawing in their own research, and they valued the intervention for its ability to assess for an individual’s goals and sense of the future as well as its ability to organize thoughts and experiences. As Hays and

Lyons (1981) explain, “The drawing, like the real bridge it was patterned after, makes connections for people, helps in problem-solving or overcoming obstacles, and aids in communication.”

The research of Rousseau and Heusch (2000) addresses art therapy in an acculturative context, but their intervention is similar in concept to the bridge drawing in that they are examining the before, during, and after aspects of a life transition. Van Lith (2014) likewise describes the way that art therapy helps individuals in the “realigning of perceptions about who we were, who we are now, and who we want to be in the future” (p. 20). Van Lith’s (2014) research explores the use of art in making meaning and reconstructing identity after major life crises. Art may lend itself to “brief glimpses of an insight” that may not be workable in language form, and these insights may evolve as participants look at or consider their images at a later time (Van Lith, 2014). Avance (2013) suggests that former members of high-demand religions still “yearn for what religion claims to offer,” namely fulfillment, purpose, consistency, a framework for life and death, and fellowship with likeminded individuals (p. 24). According to Van Lith (2014), art therapy provides many of these yearned-for elements.

Conclusion

This literature review examined the psychology and sociology literature on religious disaffiliation from the past several decades, including the most recent research available. While much of the research is focused on Western Christianity, Judaism and Islam are also discussed. First, the causes, processes, and precursory struggles of disaffiliation were discussed. Many of the articles reviewed were simultaneously too narrow (focusing almost exclusively on western, Christian experiences) and too broad (focusing on religious disaffiliation generally rather than on the unique experiences of high-demand disaffiliates). Next, this review covered the negative

psychological symptoms of leaving on the disaffiliates, particularly the intense loss of identity that may be experienced by members exiting more intensive faiths. The authors were largely in agreement with each other here, differing only on the moderating effects of age and level of religious involvement. The literature then had much to say on the social and familial consequences of disaffiliation. Next, this review discussed the concluding phases of a disaffiliative transition, including adjustment to life outside of the faith, construction of new identities, and positive personal growth. Lastly, this review connected art therapy concepts and interventions to metaphors found throughout the previous sections. While some art therapy research exists around faith and spirituality, none focuses on doubt and disaffiliation. This review attempted to ameliorate the lack of art therapy research, illustrating how Hays and Lyons' (1981) Bridge Drawing could be a valuable tool for visualizing and conceptualizing this major life transition.

Research Approach

This qualitative research study explored the lived experience of high-demand disaffiliates in a way that “defies measurement” (Barbour, 1999, p. 159). Qualitative research is useful for finding unexpected consequences and insights, generating new hypotheses and future research questions, and developing practical, transferable practices (Barbour, 1999). The data collected in this study could provide insights to inform clinicians working with those suffering from the social, psychological, and spiritual impact of faith transitions.

This study asked subjects to illustrate their disaffiliation transition in a bridge drawing, an established art therapy assessment and intervention created by Hays and Lyons in 1981. Hays and Lyons (1981) state that “the purpose of this [Bridge Drawing] study was to obtain an indication of how a normal population that is going through a difficult change would draw a bridge going from some place to some place” (208). While their original research studied adolescents transitioning into adulthood, the metaphor of a bridge applies appropriately to those leaving a very controlled, familiar way of life, traversing a liminal space, and establishing new meaning, community, and identity (Avance, 2013; Hays & Lyons, 1981).

In addition to the bridge drawing, this study also employed a questionnaire with open-ended questions and some forced-choice questions intended to collect information on the subjects’ backgrounds, ideas, feelings, and experiences (Fink & Kosecoff, 1998). The forced-choice questions simplified comparison between certain, quantifiable aspects of disaffiliation while the open-ended questions captured subjects’ perceptions of their lived experience. Questionnaires can also work well in conjunction with other sources of information—in this case, a bridge drawing (Fink & Kosecoff, 1998). Hays and Lyons (1981) list “written associations to the drawing” as one important factor in interpreting the Bridge Drawing (p. 211).

The questionnaire used in this study, with several open-ended questions about the drawing and the transition experience, provided ample written associations for analysis. Hays and Lyons (1981) also provide twelve visual criteria by which bridge drawings can be analyzed, and this research integrates both visual and textual analysis to uncover emergent themes.

Methods

This study used a questionnaire and artmaking to explore the lived experience, visualizations, and conceptualizations of adult disaffiliates from high-demand religions. Subjects were recruited through a dedicated website, after which a questionnaire, art making materials, and instructions were mailed to them. All materials were then returned to the PI for analysis. Each of these steps is discussed in further detail below.

Definition of Terms

Fisher (2016) cautions against the use of potentially biased language, noting that some labels (such as *defection*, *loss of faith*, or *apostasy*) may imply deviance or wrongdoing and sound biased in favor of religion. The terms chosen here were selected for their neutrality and their ability to capture a range of experiences.

High-demand religion. Religions can be described as high-demand when they involve high time and resource commitments; emphasis on leadership, orthodox belief, and scriptural inerrancy or literalism; and strict behavioral codes including rules of diet, dress, tithing, education, sexual practices, media and technology use, language, social involvement, and marriage (Avance, 2013; Berger, 2015; Brent, 1994; Bromley, 1991; Coates, 2013; Davidman & Greil, 2007; Hookway & Habibis, 2015; Segady, 2006). Most authors discuss a degree of social, cultural, theological, and sometimes educational, economical, or geographic separation between high-demand groups and mainstream society (Bahr & Albrecht, 1989; Berger, 2015; Bromley, 1991; Davidman & Griel, 2007; Hookway & Habibis, 2015; Segady, 2006; Scheitle & Adamczyk, 2010). High-demand religions include, among others, Mormons (LDS), Jehovah's Witnesses, Ultra-Orthodox Jews, Muslims, and Protestant Fundamentalists, which are the groups

primarily discussed in the literature review (Adam, 2008; Brent, 1994, Davidman & Greil, 2007; Fenelon & Danielson, 2016; Khalil & Bilici, 2007; Segady, 2006).

These groups can be described with a wide range of labels, some with nuanced differences. In the included literature, these groups are called fundamentalist (Hookway, 2015; Segady, 2006); authoritarian (Brent, 1994); insular communities (Berger, 2015); enclave communities; intensive religious communities; social cocoons (Davidman & Greil, 2007); “high-cost” religions (Fenelon & Danielsen, 2016, p. 54; Scheitle & Adamczyk, 2010, p. 325); “high-intensity” faiths (Friedson, 2015, p. 698); “totalistic religious communities”; “communal religious organizations” (Bromley, 1991); and “high-demand” religions (Bromley, 1991; McGinnis, 2015, p. 79). Some of these groups (specifically Mormons, Jehovah’s Witnesses, and some Evangelical groups) also fit the category of New Religious Movements, or NRMs, which have also been called “cults” or “cultic groups” (Buxant & Saroglou, 2008, p. 254; Coates, 2013). The author’s preferred term is *high-demand religion*, which seems to imply little bias but still indicates the rigorous social, behavioral, spiritual, and time commitments required of adherents.

Disaffiliation. Bromley (1991) “define[s] disaffiliation in terms of change in either individual role-related activity (termination of organizational membership or cessation of active involvement in organizational activity) or individual connectedness (disidentification with a specific religious group or its belief system).” Some authors delineate the nuanced differences between the terms *disaffiliation*, *deconversion*, *leave-taking*, *defection*, and *apostasy* (Fisher, 2016), but in this study all processes are collectively described as disaffiliation.

Disaffiliate (noun). A disaffiliate is one who leaves or disaffiliates from a religion and “chooses to affiliate with another organization, or...ceases formal religious involvement

altogether and becomes a nonmember” (Albrecht & Bahr, 1983). This could include those who defect from a group joined at birth; those who deconvert from a group joined later in life; those who behave as if they believe for family or the community; those who openly disbelieve but still attend; those who still believe but reject the community or moral codes; and those who switch to another faith tradition (Avance, 2013; Bahr & Albrecht, 1989; Baker, 2015; Berger, 2015; Bromley, 1991; Davidman & Greil, 2007; Fisher, 2016; Hookway & Habibis, 2015; Wollschleger & Beach, 2013).

Faith transition. The author uses the term *faith transition* to captures the collective processes of spiritual struggle, faith crisis, disaffiliation, and the establishment of a new religious identity (Krause & Ellison, 2009; Fisher, 2016). Although this is not a term used in the peer-reviewed literature, *faith transition* is used here because it lacks negative connotation and encapsulates a full spectrum of experiences.

Design of Study

Sampling. The PI sought subjects who were male and female English-speaking adults (at least eighteen years old) who self-identify as former members of a high-demand religion, such as Jehovah’s Witnesses, Mormons, Fundamentalist Protestants, Ultra-Orthodox Jews, and Muslims (Brent, 1994; Davidman & Greil, 2007; Fenelon & Danielson, 2016; Khalil & Bilici, 2007). Subjects self-selected for participation by providing contact information through a central website created by the Principle Investigator for this purpose (<http://bit.do/religioustransitions>). The website explained the nature and purpose of the study and securely collected participant contact information. The PI publicized the website on social media groups and online communities for former members of the above listed religions. PI also verbally requested assistance from colleagues and acquaintances to locate potential participants, who were then

directed to the website. Interested participants inserted their contact information in the website. PI then mailed a packet to each participant containing the questionnaire, instructions, the consent form, the human subject bill of rights, art materials, and a pre-stamped return envelope addressed to the university. The participants were instructed to complete the questionnaires and make artwork at home, then mail the materials back to the university. After several participants registered from outside the U.S., the PI amended the research design to include international participants and digital submissions. PI aimed to recruit around ten participants but, due to greater than anticipated response, collected twenty-seven usable responses comprised of many former Mormons, four from Fundamentalist Protestant backgrounds, one former Jehovah's Witness, and one former cult member.

Gathering of data. After the subjects' contact information was gathered from the website, PI mailed or emailed out the questionnaire, artmaking instructions, the consent form, the subject bill of rights, and, in the case of the mailed packets, art materials and a stamped return envelope addressed to LMU's MFTH department. Subjects completed the questionnaire and artmaking in their setting of choice. These materials were then mailed or emailed back to PI in February 2017. The PI analyzed the data before destroying research materials. Participants had the opportunity to have their original artwork returned to them if desired.

Analysis of data. The PI aggregated all questionnaire responses in Qualtrics to organize them for comparison and analysis. The PI coded these textual responses. The few quantitative responses were collected in Qualtrics software, then visualized through a data visualization website (www.infogr.am).

The PI analyzed the artwork submitted by the subjects in two different ways. First, the PI printed the digital artwork submissions so they could be viewed comparably next to the hardcopy

artwork obtained by mail. Next, the bridge drawings were coded both independently by the PI and then as a research group to increase intercoder reliability. The PI then compared these codes with the textual coding to form emergent themes. Second, the bridge drawings were analyzed by the PI using adapted criteria established in Hays and Lyons' (1981) original bridge drawing assessment research. While the first coding was more general, this second analysis looked deeply at features particular to the bridge drawing assignment. Specifically, the bridge drawings were evaluated for directionality, placement of self in the picture, places drawn on either side of the bridge, solidarity of bridge attachments, bridge construction, matter drawn under the bridge, and written associations to the drawing. These criteria addressed specific aspects of the research questions and helped inform and reinforce the general visual and textual coding, which were then clustered into emergent themes.

Results

Presentation of Data

In February 2017, the PI activated the subject recruitment website and promoted it in a small number of online communities for former members of high-demand religions. Because of the PI's personal connections, promotion was most effective in online communities for former Mormons. The PI requested permission to promote in more diverse groups, but most community administrators never responded. Despite the limited range of outreach, the response was greater than anticipated. Within less than twenty-four hours of initial promotion, sixty individuals had registered to participate through the website. The PI amended the original research design to accommodate higher numbers and international participants. After continued attempts over two weeks to reach a more diverse audience, the recruitment site received approximately 530 page visits (based on unique IP addresses tracked through website analytics) and a total of seventy-six enrolled participants. Due to budgetary constraints, forty-eight packets were mailed out. The forty-eight recipients were selected based on completeness of registration and representation from a range of ages, sexes, locations, and relevant religious backgrounds. In addition to the forty-eight mailed packets, eight digital versions of the questionnaire and artmaking instructions were emailed to registrants outside of the United States. Packets were mailed back to Loyola Marymount University while digital submissions were collected through Qualtrics and a dedicated email address. In total, twenty-seven usable responses returned to the PI. Two other responses were not used due to personal connections with the PI.

The questionnaire, attached as an appendix, was written to address the research questions, elucidate the artwork, and compare participants' experiences with the findings of the literature review. Questions address demographics; early and current relationships to religion; reasons for

disaffiliation; the emotional, social, lifestyle, identity, and existential effects of leaving a high-demand church; meaning and symbolism in the artwork; and the experience and effect of making the artwork. To capture the subjective, lived experience of disaffiliates, most of the questions are in open-ended essay form. Demographic information and a brief Likert Scale-style section comprise the only quantifiable sections of the questionnaire. Domestic participants were given the option to complete the questionnaire by hand or by typing and attaching their responses. One subject typed her answers, providing four single-spaced pages of lengthy, detailed narrative. Another subject photocopied the questionnaire, shared it with a friend, and returned both sets of responses and artwork in the same envelope, resulting in one surprise subject who had not been recruited through the website. International participants provided briefer answers than domestic participants, possibly because the writing fields in Qualtrics are relatively small and the hardcopy questionnaires provided a large space for each answer. Participants were also allowed to skip questions as they wished. Some did not disclose their age or some of the personal effects of disaffiliation. One subject declined to answer about the psychological effects by writing, “This question is too huge to answer in this context.” Another declined to answer the final three questions of the survey about the meaning and emotional experience of making the artwork. However, most subjects answered all questions.

Demographic information. All subjects are self-identified disaffiliates of high-demand religions. Of twenty-seven subjects, seven identify as male, nineteen as female, and one as nonbinary. Subjects range in age from twenty to seventy-four, with a mean age of thirty-six (three subjects did not include their ages). Although not explicitly asked, one subject reports being on the autism spectrum. Twenty-five of the subjects report themselves as white or Caucasian, with one subject identifying as Latina and one as Nordic. Twenty-four of the

participants live across the United States, with a notable concentration who had lived or do live in Utah (seven). The three international participants live in Canada, England, and Denmark. Fourteen of the subjects are currently married, seven are single, five are divorced, and one is partnered but unmarried. Eight respondents have no children while the remaining participants have between one and five children.

All the participants come from Christian-based faiths. The subject pool skews heavily toward the ex-Mormon (LDS), with 21 participants identifying as formerly LDS. One participant is a former Jehovah's Witness, one is a former member of a "Christian-based cult," and four are from various branches of Fundamentalist Protestantism (one from the Plymouth Brethren, one from the Quiverfull movement, and two unspecified). All respondents report having been raised within their faith traditions, with their guardians also involved in the faith. Subjects report an average of thirty years of affiliation with their respective faith traditions, with twelve years as the briefest span of affiliation and sixty-four years as the longest. Subjects have been disaffiliated for an average span of 4.14 years, with zero years as the briefest and twenty-eight years as the longest. All but one of the subjects reported that their disaffiliation was voluntary, though two specify that they felt they had no choice due to various incompatibilities. The remaining subject notes that he is not technically disaffiliated, as he has not removed his name from church records, but he does not believe. For the purposes of this study, the subject still qualifies as a disaffiliate. Currently, fifteen of the respondents identify as atheist or agnostic, with six stating that they are non-religious, three identifying as Pagan, and one each as "agnostic Christian", "anti-theist", and "secular humanitarian."

Artwork. Most subjects used the provided materials to complete their bridge drawings. All but two of the mailed bridges were completed on the provided paper, with the others using

their own paper. All of the images fill the majority of the page space, with most including considerable detail. Subjects were encouraged to use their own materials if they wished. Eighteen of the subjects used the provided pastels, and twelve mixed the pastels with other media: ink, collage, watercolor, and pencil. Other subjects eschewed the pastels in favor of a combination of colored pencil, marker, ink, or graphite. Of the three digital submissions, two used black ink and the other used marker. Two were drawn on blank white paper and the last on lined notebook paper.

About half of the twenty-seven bridge drawings are presented here. Many powerful images have been omitted to keep the study focused and visually concise. The following examples were selected for being representative of a cluster of traits or relevant to specific points of discussion. Each figure is accompanied by the piece's title and brief demographic information about the artist.



Figure 2 - Enlightenment. Female, 74, former LDS

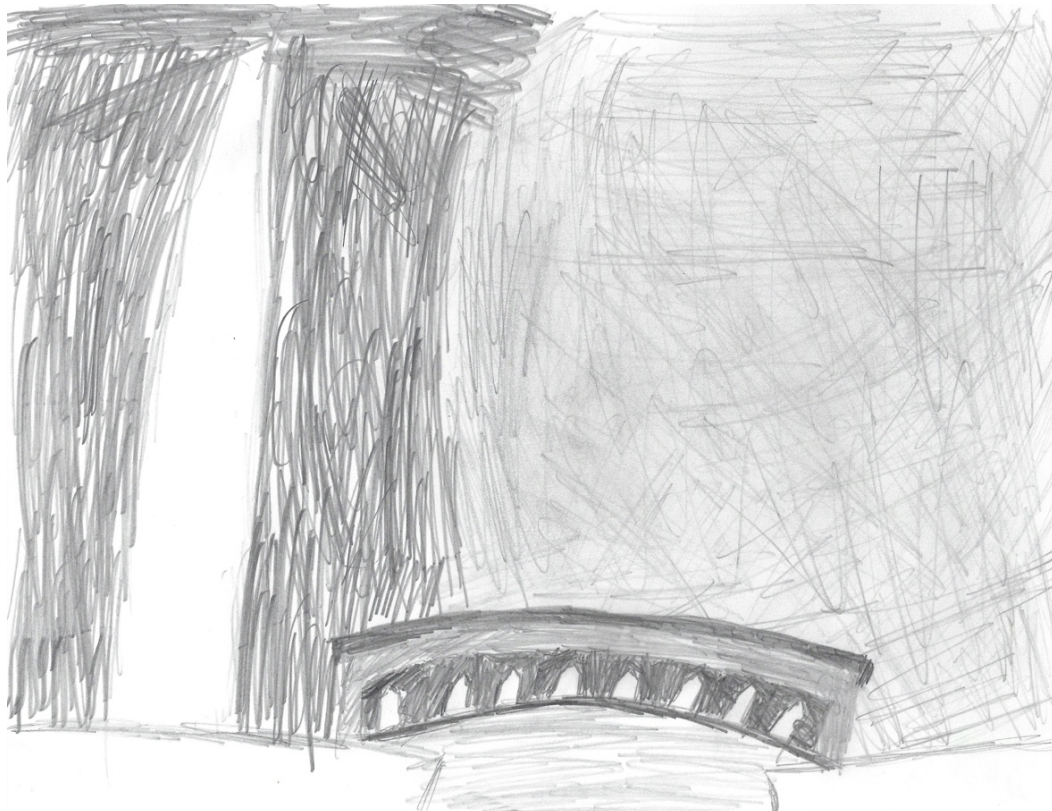


Figure 3 - Black & White vs Grey. Male, 29, former LDS



Figure 4 - Thou Mayest. Female, 24, former LDS



Figure 5 - Wherever I End Up, I'll Have Gotten There on my Own. Female, 35, former LDS



Figure 8 - Freedom. Female, 38, former LDS

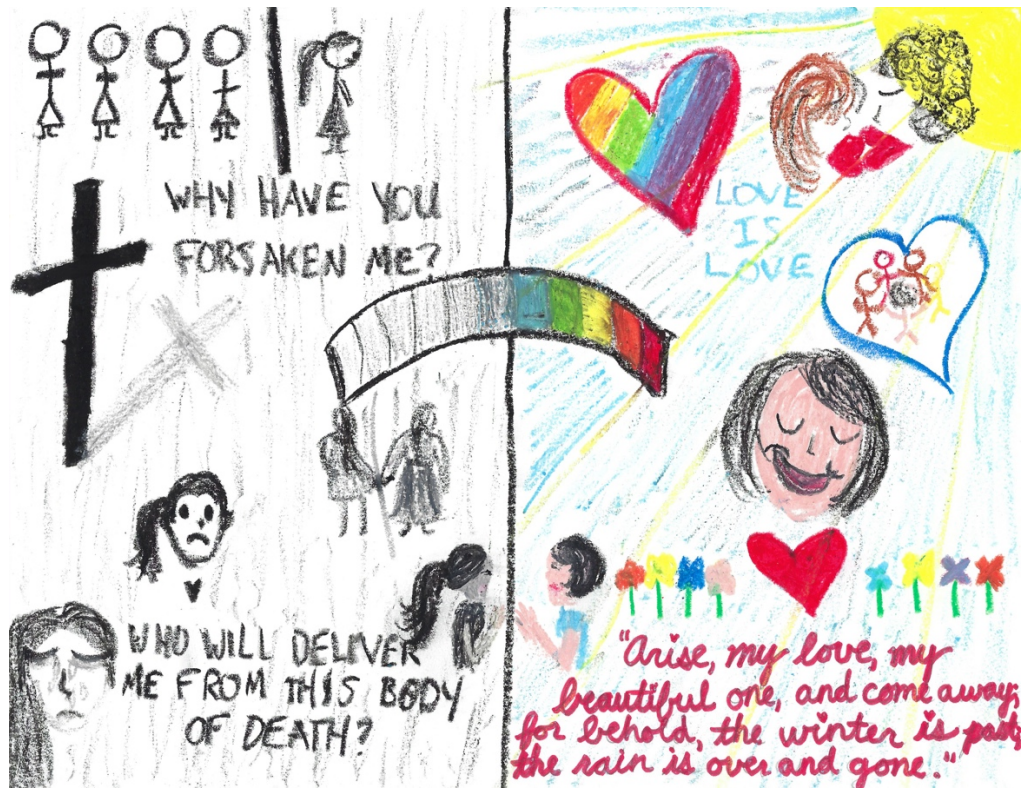


Figure 9 - The Winter is Past. Female, 24, former Fundamentalist Protestant



Figure 10 - I'd Rather Be a Hammer than a Nail. Female, 31, former LDS



Figure 11 - Taking the Plunge. Female, age unknown, former Fundamentalist Protestant

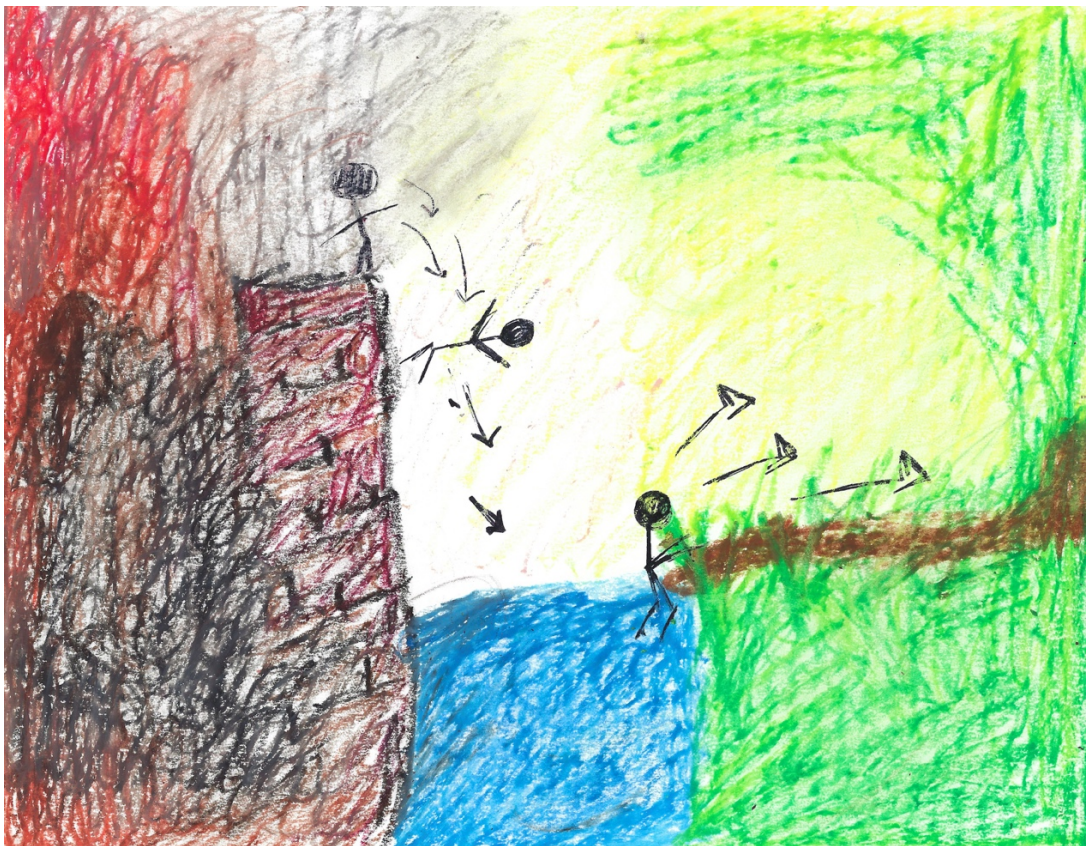


Figure 12 - Baptism. Female, 32, former LDS



Figure 13 - Out of the Box. Male, 65, former LDS



Figure 14 - The Golden Gamble. Male, 31, former LDS

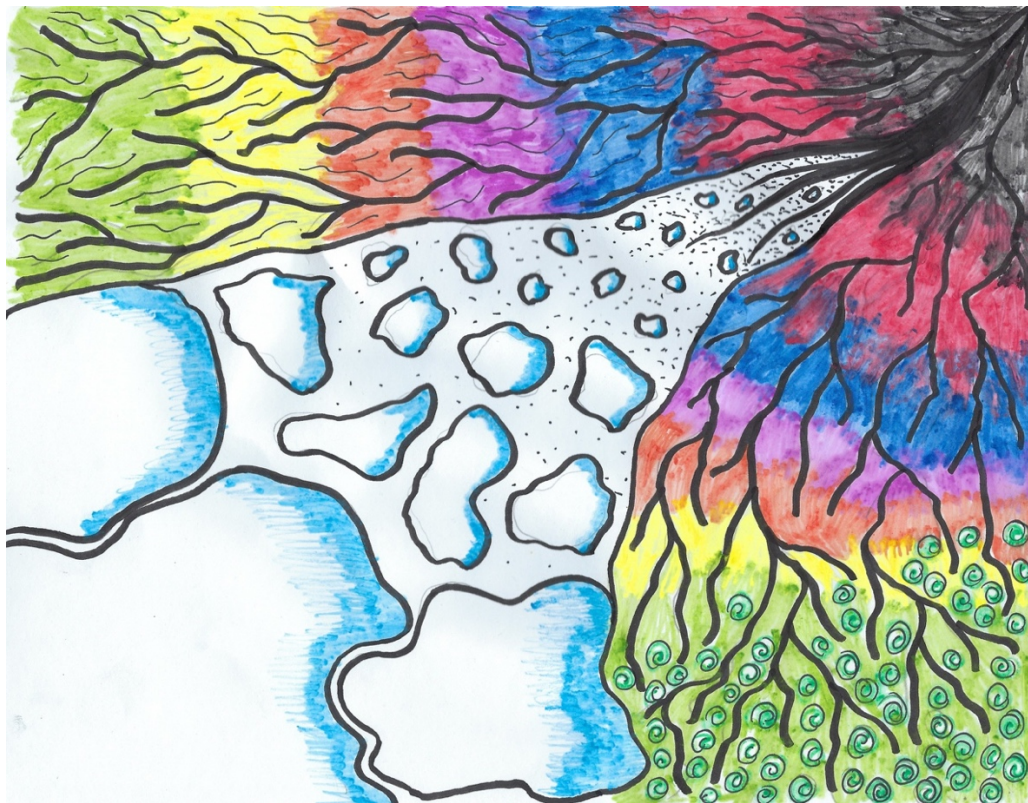


Figure 15 - Floating Footing. Female, 49, former cult member. Intended orientation unclear

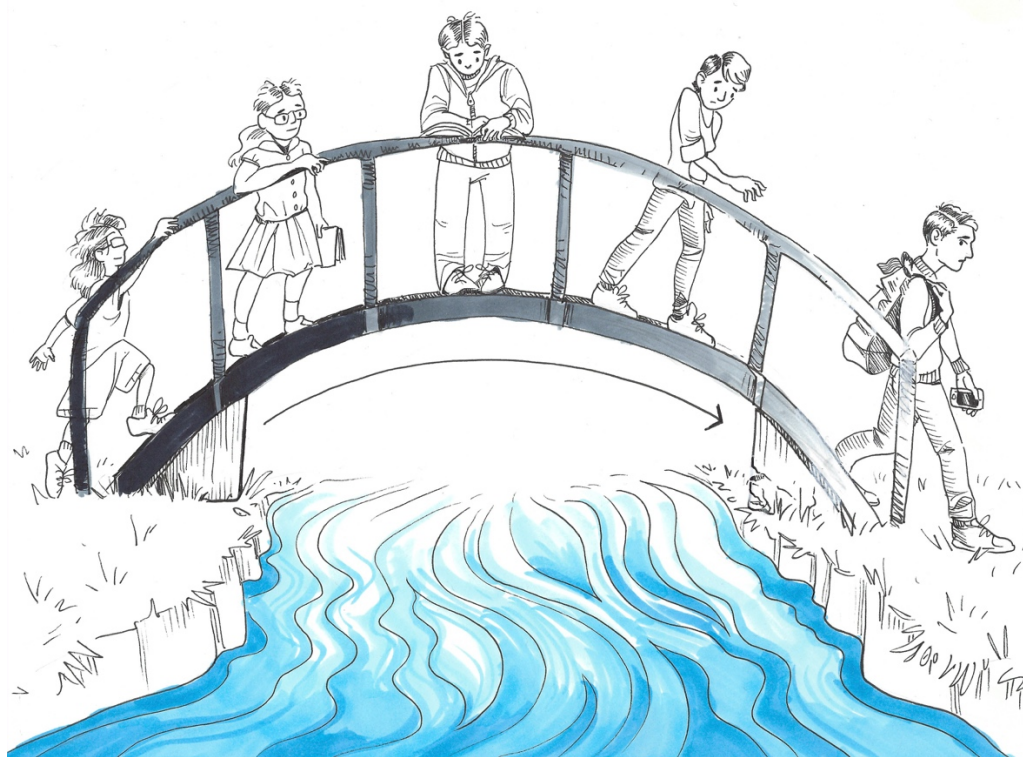


Figure 16 - Water Under the Bridge. Nonbinary, 20, former Fundamentalist Protestant

Analysis

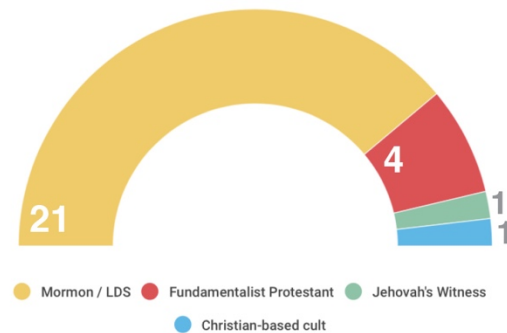
The PI first coded the bridge drawings through a priori criteria established by Hays and Lyons (1981), then developed emergent coding from the image set. The questionnaire asked directly about subjects' past and current relationships with religion; subjects' reasons for leaving; psychological, social, behavioral, identity, and existential effects of disaffiliation; symbolism and meaning in the artwork; and the experience of artmaking. These survey responses were also coded and compared with the emergent and a priori coding results of the visual analysis. The written responses are addressed below, then followed by discussion of Hays and Lyons' bridge drawing criteria, the artmaking process, the themes that emerged from the responses, and the research questions.

Past and current relationships with religion. While all twenty-seven subjects disaffiliated from Christian-based faiths, the majority come from LDS backgrounds. However, other than a few religion-specific references, the answers between the participants are nearly indistinguishable, and the lived experiences of transitioning away from any of the represented religions seem adequately comparable. Figure A below visualizes the past religious composition of the subject pool while Figure C shows their current religious identification. Between them, Figure B depicts various religious actions taken by subjects after disaffiliation, including temporarily re-affiliating, exploring other religions, self-identifying as atheist or agnostic, or some combination of these. Two thirds of the subjects never affiliated with alternate religions after disaffiliating, but one third did explore other faith traditions (including Buddhist, Pagan, Jewish, Baptist, Presbyterian, and Unitarian Universalist sects). All but one subject considered themselves atheist or agnostic at some point after disaffiliation but may not identify as such now. One subject describes her journey in and out of atheism this way: "Briefly I thought I was an

atheist, but then I started to connect with deity in a totally different way.” Thirteen of the subjects are open about their current religious status to others, while eleven are semi-open and discuss their status with select audiences. One participant is not open to anyone about his current religious status.

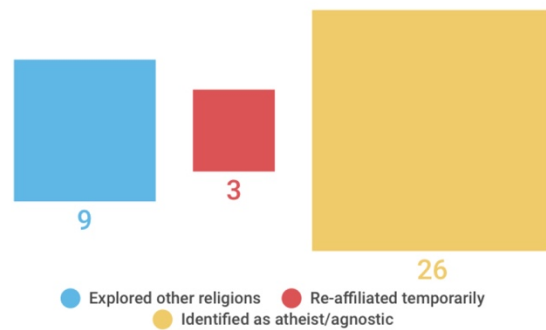
HIGH-DEMAND RELIGIOUS IDENTIFICATION

Figure A. All subjects come from Christian-based high-demand religions, including Mormons (LDS), Fundamentalist Protestants, Jehovah’s Witnesses, and a Christian-based cult.



RELIGIOUS ACTION AFTER DISAFFILIATION

Figure B. Subjects took different actions after disaffiliating, including exploring other faiths, temporarily re-affiliating with their high-demand religion, identifying as agnostic or atheist, or some combination of these.



CURRENT RELIGIOUS IDENTIFICATION

Figure C. Currently, the subjects claim a range of religious identifications (including non-religious). Agnostic and atheist are here combined because subjects most often listed both together.

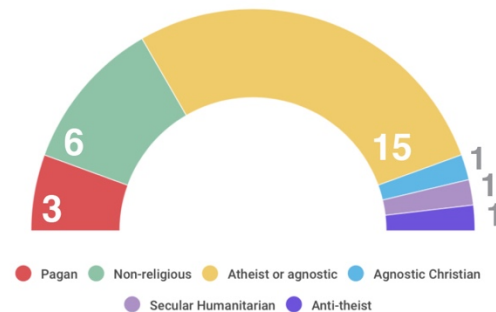


Figure 17 A B & C - Religious Identification

The questionnaire also assessed for a general faith transition timeline, asking about length of affiliation, length of disaffiliation, and length of any transitional period. Most subjects indicate

that they did experience this “in between” or transitional period, during which they considered themselves neither in or out of the faith, and for many it lasted years (averaging 3.4 years). This lengthy transitional period reflects the findings of Davidman and Greil (2007) and Fisher (2016), who note the often prolonged period of struggle that precedes disaffiliation. However, some subjects report no or little in-between time, with one subject reporting that his transition was “a matter of three days.”

AVERAGE FAITH TRANSITION TIMELINE



Figure D. The typical timeline of affiliated, transitional, and disaffiliated years, averaged from all subjects.

INDIVIDUAL FAITH TRANSITION TIMELINES

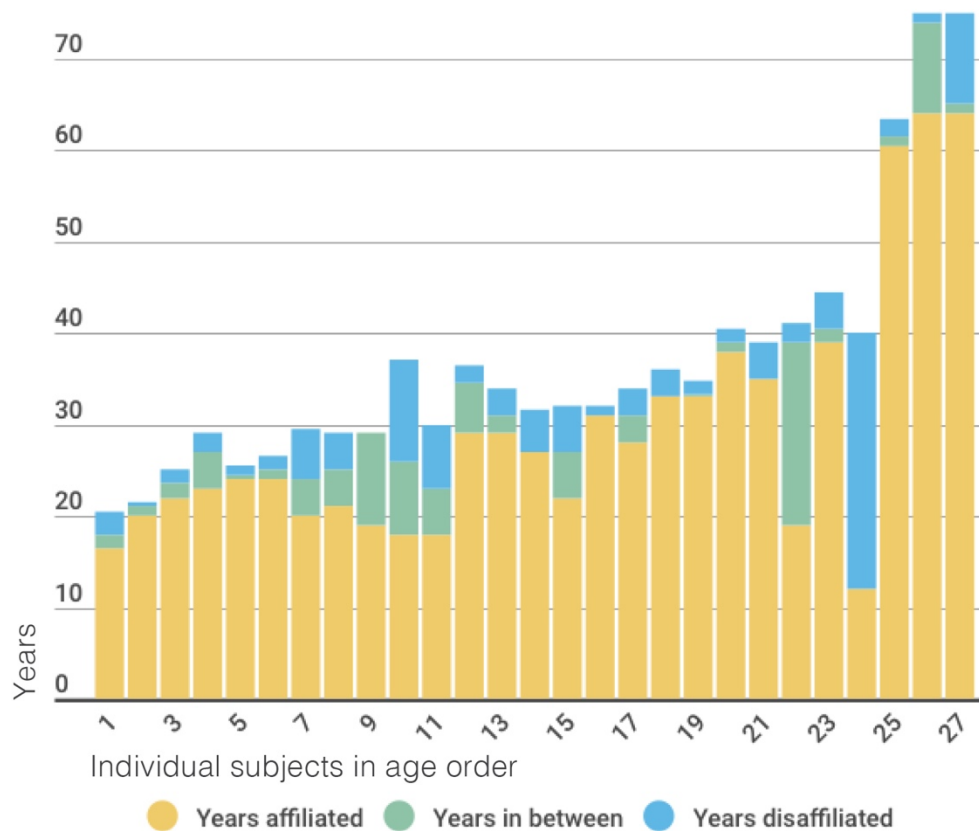


Figure E. The faith transition timelines of all twenty-seven subjects aligned from youngest to oldest. While three subjects did not disclose their age, these ages were extrapolated for this chart by adding their affiliated, transitional, and disaffiliated years. These extrapolated ages fit closely with the overall averages.

Figure 18 D & E - Faith Transition Timelines

Figure D illustrates the length of these three phases averaged across all twenty-seven subjects. Figure E illustrates these phases for each individual, arranged from youngest to oldest. Some individuals report phase lengths incongruous with their age. For example, number ten in the chart is thirty years old but reports eighteen years of affiliation, eight years of transition, and

eleven years of disaffiliation, totaling thirty-seven years. These incongruities likely reflect the fluid, overlapping, and self-defined nature of these phases. Stricter definitions and forced-choice questions could produce more congruous data in future studies.

Only one subject (number twenty-four in the chart) reports a longer disaffiliation than affiliation. The relative brevity of disaffiliation across the rest of the subject pool likely demonstrates some selection bias. Those who have left more recently might be more eager to share their stories or more likely to participate in the online communities from which subjects were recruited. Notably, three subjects specified a change in LDS policy in November 2015, approximately 1.5 years prior to this study, as their turning point. A total of seven formerly LDS subjects, including these three, report a disaffiliation length of 1–1.5 years.

Figure F compares the subjects' past and present relationships with their associated high-demand religion. It measures shifts in attendance, doctrinal belief, behavioral adherence, and the religious involvement of family of origin and family of procreation. Of all the measures, religious involvement of the family of origin changed the least, then involvement of family of procreation. Not all respondents have a spouse or children, and the results shown only reflect the percentages of those who do. Attendance shows the biggest change, with 100% of subjects reporting that they attended religious services at a "Very High" rate during their affiliation. After leaving, most subjects shifted to "Very Low" attendance, with a few indicating "Low" to "Moderate" attendance rates. (Seven subjects report continued, semi-regular church participation to support a spouse, children, or extended family.) Belief shows the second-most change, with mostly "Very High" and "High" belief shifting almost completely to "Very Low." Of the three non-family measures, behavioral adherence changed the least. As discussed in a later section on lifestyle changes, many subjects still adhere to the dietary codes of their associated religion.

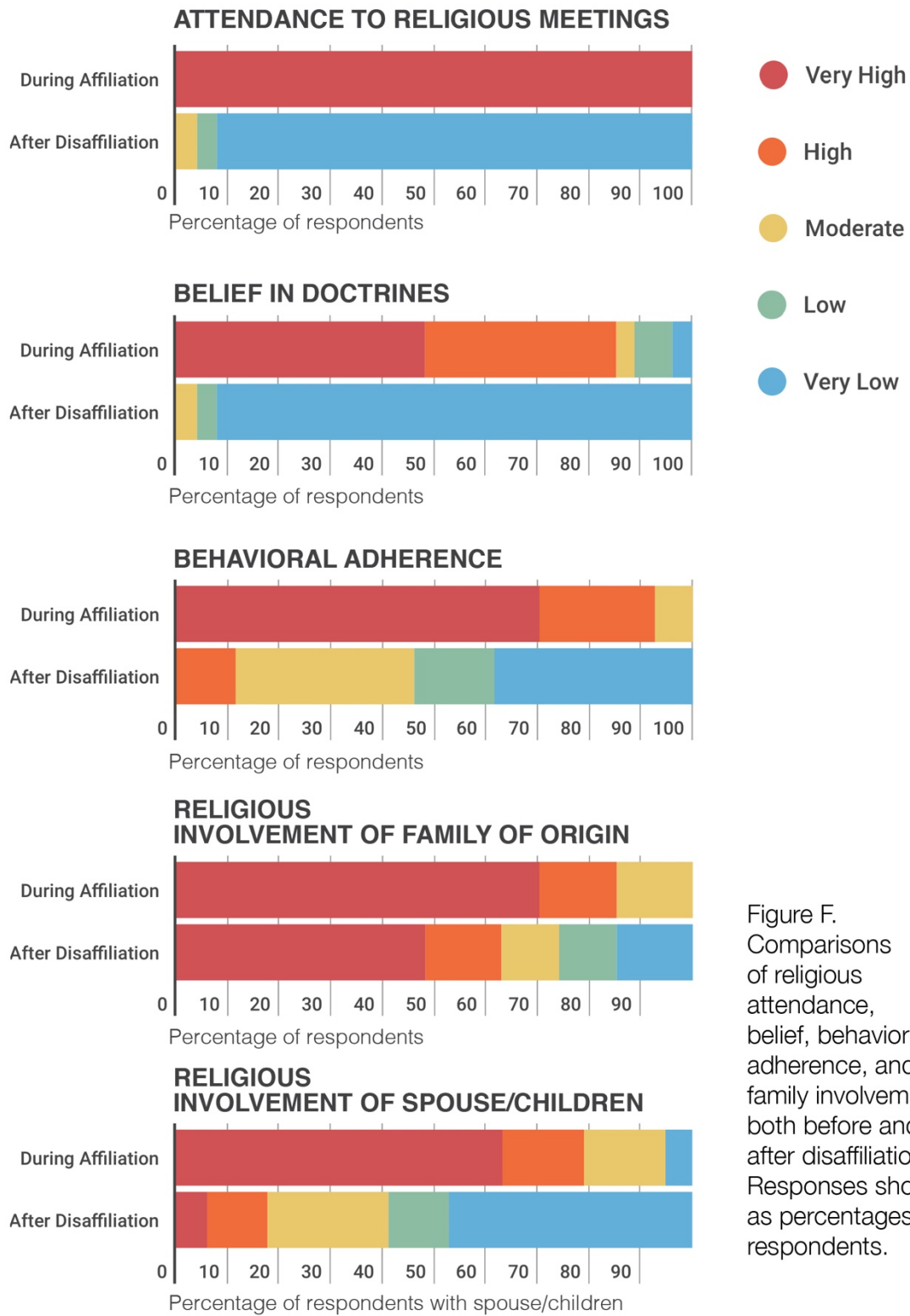


Figure F. Comparisons of religious attendance, belief, behavioral adherence, and family involvement both before and after disaffiliation. Responses shown as percentages of respondents.

Figure 19 F - During and After Comparisons

Notably, attendance and behavioral adherence levels are much higher than belief during affiliation. This may suggest that some subjects were going through the motions without believing, as with one subject who stated that she “realized [she] was faking the ‘belief’ part” during high school. It could also reflect an attempt to increase or maintain belief, as discussed later in more detail.

Reasons for disaffiliation. While five subjects named just one reason for leaving their faith, most subjects identified three or more factors. These factors are visualized in Figure G. The most common reason listed is social justice issues, with nineteen mentions. These include the treatment and role of women, historical and current stances on race, and the treatment of LGBTQ individuals. Several subjects mention relevant instances by name, including: a 2015 LDS policy change concerning children of same-sex couples; LDS efforts against a prominent marriage equality bill; LDS efforts against the Equal Rights Amendment; and the LDS history of polygamy. Eight participants identify as LGBTQ themselves.

Fifteen subjects report leaving due to historical issues or damning information about their religious founders and founding stories. Thirteen subjects mention personal conflicts with general doctrine or policy—separate from any social justice-related policies—such as the way the church is managed or the strictness of the behavioral codes. Eight subjects report that, for whatever reason, they simply stopped believing their church was true. Five subjects credit science, logic, and reason for their disaffection, while five others report leaving to escape perpetual shame, guilt, or anxiety over perfectionism. Four subjects never fully believed or fit in, and three were wary of raising their children in environments that promoted perfectionism and reduced the value of women.

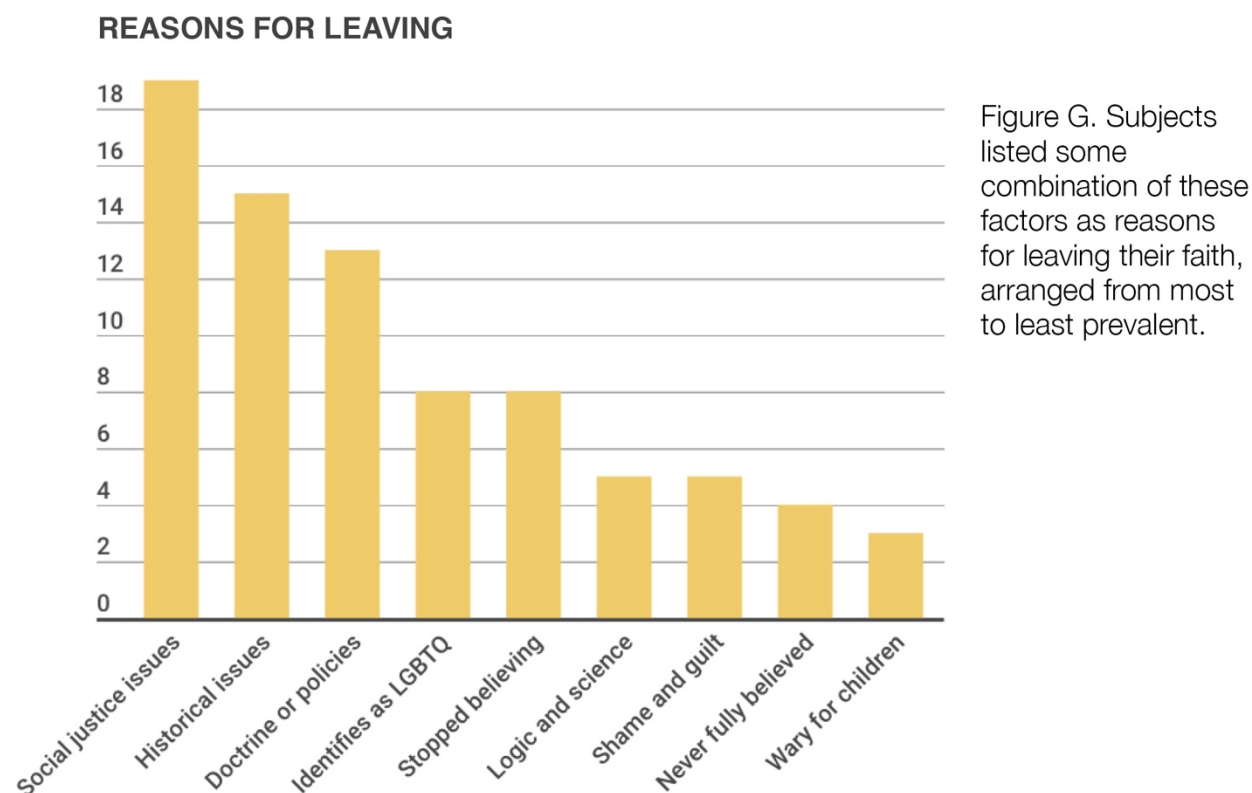


Figure 20 G - Reasons for Leaving

Psychological and emotional effects. Subject reports of the psychological effects of disaffiliation include both the negative experiences during the transition and the positive effects after resolution. One subject captures both the positive and negative effects, stating, “The period of time (years) which I debated leaving were so emotionally painful. I had panic attacks every Sunday. Once I left I was so relieved.” Another describes her disaffiliation as “the hardest, healthiest, most courageous decision I have ever made.”

Twelve subjects report experiencing depression and six report anxiety during their transition. Others listed symptoms of hopelessness, loneliness, paranoia, anger, fear, isolation, grief, feeling “crazy,” trouble sleeping, and frequent nightmares and crying episodes. One reports

lingering PTSD that is partially associated with her religious experiences. Faith transitions also caused strain in family relationships, especially marriages, as discussed in more detail below.

Three subjects report feeling suicidal during their faith transitions, and one other states that her fear of becoming suicidal kept her in the church for longer. She writes, “I was sure that if I lost my faith I would be suicidal and have nothing to live for, so I hung onto it for dear life...Once I finally allowed myself to not believe, I was not suicidal.”

Five subjects started seeing a therapist or taking medication to cope with the negative effects, and one was able to stop taking a long-term medication after resolving her faith crisis. Seven report feeling happier and healthier now. Many feel like a better person. Two mention relief and two a sense of freedom. Subjects also list gratitude, empowerment, acceptance, peace, security, and a reduced sense of shame as effects of leaving their high-demand religions. One writes, “It was like a death at first. I mourned. Now I feel joyful and free.”

Social and family effects. Nearly every subject reports losing most or all of their friends and support systems. The social isolation of high-demand groups is apparent in some responses, as with one subject who was “really only allowed to be around other Christians until I left for college.” Another admits, “Unsure how to have friends and a community w/o religion.”

Nineteen subjects report family strain, including emotional distance, reduced communication, and shunning behaviors. Seven report that their families were accepting but sad. Some families and spouses transitioned away together, but others fell apart. One woman writes, “Lost all my friends. My husband was terrified I would leave him. My parents and siblings ignore me unless they are trying to reconvert me.” Two of the subjects, both women, divorced in at least partial consequence to their faith transitions. For one, her husband left her because she left the faith, and her relationships with her adult children also suffered. The other woman

reports that her husband, who had already been abusive, increased his violence towards her when she transitioned away, eventually leading to divorce before she eventually came out as a lesbian.

For subjects living in areas densely populated by members of their faith of origin, social effects can extend into employment and the community at large. One subject writes that “we live amongst a tribe that are afraid of us now” while another says that the “faith community will always condemn me.” One subject tells no one of his religious status because “I fear retaliation in the workplace. I fear being isolated in my personal life.”

Effects on lifestyle and behavior. The most prevalent lifestyle change reported by subjects was partaking in previously forbidden substances—specifically alcohol, coffee, or tea. However, some subjects stipulated that they did not adopt these dietary changes, and in fact made no notable behavioral changes at all. Eleven subjects mention increased free time or changes in how they spend their time, such as spending Sundays outdoors or as family days. One subject refers to this new time as “Second Saturday.” Seven subjects listed clothing changes, specifically being less concerned with modesty or eschewing ceremonial LDS underwear. The artist of Figure 7 even drew herself in her “favorite dress, which isn't within church dress standards” due to bare shoulders. Next, seven subjects discuss changes in sexual expression and exploration, including coming out, dating someone of the same sex for the first time, trying new forms of sex, and masturbating without guilt. Some subjects report increases in physical health, such as weight loss, reduced stress, and decreased need for medication. Many discussed stopping observant behaviors, like church attendance, church-related service, or prayer and scripture study. Three subjects mention changes in media consumption. Another three talk about educational changes, with two stay-at-home mothers stating that due to their faith transition, they

returned to school to complete their degrees. One individual states that she increased her political engagement and social activism, and another discusses shifting into single parenthood.

Effects on identity. Many subjects indicate that their identities were “completely wrapped up in the church” before their disaffiliation. Ten describe a reduced, fragmented, or lost sense of self during their transition. Five discuss a current identity-rebuilding process, some with the aid of therapy. One subject writes that “being Christian and then ex-Christian still feels like one of the primary aspects of my identity as a person.” This echoes Buxant and Saroglou’s (2008) assertion that being an ex-member can be an important feature of a disaffiliate’s identity.

While many of the subjects qualify as LGBTQ, two subjects specifically discuss embracing their sexual identities for the first time after leaving the faith. In the words of one, “I can be my queer self now.” Two others discuss forming new identities outside of traditional gender roles.

Most subjects (twenty-two) state that they now feel a stronger sense of identity than they did prior to their transition, indicating that they feel “more authentically me” or “accepting of myself.” Seven of these describe a sense of freedom that came from being able to make their own choices or develop their own set of values. One subject summarizes the full cycle of identity deconstruction and rebuilding:

I felt like I didn’t know who I was without the church...After the initial pain, however, I have felt liberated. I can now discover who I WANT to be, and become that person, rather than being who I think I SHOULD be.

Effects on meaning and sense of purpose. Eleven of the subjects describe a new, more self-defined sense of meaning. Seven state that their sense of purpose is now altered from what it had previously been, while nine report a diminished or lost sense of purpose. Five indicate that

their new beliefs about the nature of mortality gives them an increased sense of urgency to participate in social justice and make change. Some subjects indicate that they miss the sense of purpose or certainty they derived from their faith traditions. Four used this question as an opportunity to discuss battling with uncertainty. In the words of one subject, “I find more meaning and awe in embracing uncertainty and the unknown now.” Embracing uncertainty, a theme which is repeated across both artwork and questionnaire responses, will be considered later in more detail.

Bridge drawing criteria. Emerging from the original bridge drawings of 1981, Hays and Lyons found “twelve variables which proved useful in the interpretation of the drawings. These variables are specific to this bridge drawing assignment” (p. 208–209). From Hays and Lyons’ original twelve, the PI has distilled the list down to seven features most relevant to the present study. Maintaining Hays and Lyons’ original sequence and verbiage, the seven adapted features are: directionality; placement of self in the picture; places drawn on either side of the bridge; solidarity of bridge attachments; bridge construction; matter drawn under the bridge; and written associations to the drawing. “Bridge construction” as used here includes “type of bridge depicted,” although Hays and Lyons (1981) kept the two features distinct (p. 209). This merging is due to the interdependence of the two features as displayed in the current artwork. The seven features are discussed below, followed by brief consideration of other features not captured by the criteria from the original study.

Directionality. This study’s artmaking instructions, like the original bridge drawing assessment, requested that the subjects use an arrow to indicate the direction of travel. Seventeen did so, though direction of travel in most of the others is clear from context or explained in the questionnaires. The majority of the bridge drawings (twenty-three) indicate a general left-to-right

direction of travel, with a subset depicting lower-left to upper-right directionality. Most of these portray a flat profile view of the bridges, though nine imply three-dimensional recession from or movement toward the viewer. One of the bridges, drawn from a bird's eye view, travels from the bottom of the paper to the top (Figure 12). The remaining three drawings are highly abstracted, with an indeterminate direction of travel (as in Figure 14).

Placement of self in the picture. First, six subjects portray multiple versions of themselves at different points in the drawing and will be discussed separately. Another five subjects do not place themselves in the drawing, or represent themselves so abstractly as to be indeterminable. The artist of Figure 2 writes, "I am not in the picture because I cannot let go... If I put myself in here, I'd be on fire." Of the remaining seventeen subjects, none place themselves before the beginning of the bridge. Half put themselves somewhere along the bridge structure: two on the first half, one in the middle, and five in the second half. Seven depict themselves fully beyond the terminal end of the bridge. The remaining subject portrays herself above the bridge, floating with the assistance of helium balloons (see Figure 1).

Of the six subjects who depict multiple versions of themselves, two have selves before the bridge and selves after, with no version of the self on the bridge structure. Two have three versions of themselves—one before, one in the middle, and one on the other side of their journey. These two images also share a notable lack of bridge structure. The first appears to be a dirt path along the ground (see Figure 3). The other has nothing to connect the left and right sides, and so the middle version of the self is falling into the water in between (see Figure 11). Similarly, another subject depicts multiple versions of herself as she falls from her bridge. Two selves are on the bridge, two are falling, and two have found solid ground beneath the bridge (see Figure 10). Lastly, one subject has five versions of the self, spanning from just stepping on the

bridge to just stepping off. These five selves also illustrate a transition from a feminine-presenting figure on the left to a masculine-presenting figure on the right (see Figure 15).

Places drawn on either side of the bridge. Most of the bridges depict land or rock on the left side of the bridge. Of these, seven appear to be cliffs and two are specified as islands. Eight images depict religion-specific locations on the left, with six LDS temples and two abstracted church structures (see Figures 4, 5, 13). Four begin with abstract representations (colors and symbols, as in Figures 8, 9, and 12). Three images depict prisons before the bridge (see Figures 3 and 5).

Most of the right sides of the bridges are rock or land, with nearly all of them showing flowers, mountains, or trees. One of the island drawings specifies that he chose to portray a small, homogenous island on the left and an expansive, varied mainland on the right because “the island represents safety, shelter, but is limited... The mainland is much more open and diverse and has freedom of where to go. It represents a much wider number of viewpoints.” Five of the images show no discrete place on the far end of the bridge because they continue off the page (see Figures 5, 9, and 14). As one of these artists writes, “I didn’t draw the exit because I don’t know what it’ll be.” One bridge ends in a burst of abstract colors and shapes (Figure 12) and another bridge trails into a starry sky (Figure 6).

Nearly every image shows a distinct contrast between the starting and the ending locations of the bridge. Four of the twenty-seven have no clear contrast, with nearly identical left and right sides (as in Figures 1 and 15). The remaining twenty-three fit into five categories of contrast: greyscale to color; manmade to natural; structured to unstructured; constrained to free; or dark to light. Several images fit into more than one of these categories. For example, Figure 3 begins with the figure in a black and white, manmade prison but transitions into a colorful, free,

natural landscape. Figure 4 similarly shows a grayscale manmade space to the left and a colorful, natural environment to the right. Both these images contain two versions of the sun: left side dim and right side bright.

Another pair of drawings shows striking similarities in their pre- and post-bridge spaces and in their overall composition. Both Figure 7 and Figure 6 depict an open cardboard box in the lower left corner and a single figure, walking away from the viewer, crossing a bridge structure to an open, natural space in the upper right. The artist of Figure 7 notes in her questionnaire, “I’m no longer inside the box of the LDS church (which I didn’t fit into anyway) and am moving away from it and into a freer...space.” The artist of Figure 6 similarly writes, “Leaving my religion has been like leaving a box. It was safe, certain, and easy. Once you’ve left the box and seen the bigger picture, you can’t go back. It’s a frightening and exciting journey into embracing the unknown.”

Solidarity of bridge attachments. Of the twenty-two images with clear bridge structures, fifteen are solidly attached at both the start and end of the bridge. Six trail off the page or into the distance and thus have no ending attachments (as in Figures 5 and 6). The beginning attachments on three images are obscured by scribbled cloud shapes, identified by two of the artists as “a storm” and “fog and confusion” (see Figure 9). One subject’s bridge is unattached at the beginning, with a dotted arch implying a leap from an island to the bridge. The artist states, “You have to actually jump to the bridge to leave—it isn’t connected, otherwise it would be too easy for people to leave.”

Bridge construction. Five of the drawings have an absent or indeterminate bridge structure. Several depict rope and wood slat bridges, described by various subjects as “treacherous,” “rickety,” and “unstable.” Others are made of fantasy material, such as ice or, in

two cases, rainbow colors (see Figures 9 and 14). Two of the bridges appear to be built from stone and three seem at least partially made of steel. Several are made of unclear material, represented simply as blocks of color. Ten of the bridges appear flat, eight arch upward, and four sag or arch downward.

Nine of the bridges progressively morph in some way. Most of these follow the same grayscale-to-color contrast scheme as discussed earlier (see Figures 8 and 9). Four alter in their physical construction. One is built of slats that are at first spaced far apart but grow closer together. As the artist explains, “the bridge gets stronger and more solid the further away from Mormonism.” Another bridge starts solid but disappears as it progresses, illustrating the impossibility of return (Figure 15). Two separate images depict a slat bridge that becomes a suspension bridge partway through. The artist of Figure 13 justifies this midpoint change in bridge type this way:

Leaving my faith is represented by a rope bridge, extending from a sheer cliff. It feels terrifying to leave what you know, but the farther you go the sturdier it gets. It transforms into the Golden Gate Bridge because now the world is free to be explored. It's bigger, stronger, and safer.

Matter drawn under the bridge. Nine bridges depict water beneath them. Five show nothing or an empty pit (as in Figures 4 and 13). Three have symbols beneath them, like hearts, question marks, and specific religious references (see Figure 5). Two show rivers of something other than water—one river of many colors and one that appears to be lava. Two show grass, and one of these has a “deep abyss” next to the grass (Figure 10).

Written associations to the drawing. While the questionnaires supply extensive written associations to the drawing, they are analyzed in other sections unless used to elucidate features

listed above. However, outside of the questionnaires, the participants provide other written associations, including titles and text embedded in the artwork. Among the twenty-seven titles, the most prominent motif is bridges, followed by growth, freedom or constraint, and uncertainty. These last three motifs prefigure some of the overarching themes found across both questionnaires and the artwork, to be discussed later in more detail.

Eleven of the bridge drawings include text as part of the artwork. Some of these are explanatory labels, as with the box label on Figure 7. Several are religious references, such as scriptural quotes or words associated with the faith of origin (see Figures 3, 5, and 8). Six drawings include warning signs or guideposts at the start of the bridge with phrases like “Danger,” “Warning,” and “Do Not Enter.” Three of these also have signs at the end of the bridge with the messages “Welcome,” “Trust Yourself,” and “You choose what comes next.” (see Figures 3 and 4).

Other considerations. Hays and Lyons’ (1981) twelve variables do not capture all of the notable features found in the artwork of the present study. However, these features were observed in the coding process. Specifically, many subjects use the sky, other people, and accompanying objects to illustrate their transition stories.

First, the weather, coloration, and placement of sun in the sky all play a deliberate symbolic role in about half of the images. Six use clouds, lightning, fog, and storms to depict struggle or confusion. Several use rainbows to symbolize hope, diversity, and LGBTQ issues. Eight place the sun on the right side, naming it as a symbol of hope and knowledge, while another uses the sun to symbolize Jesus Christ. Next, the colors of the sky have specific representations in some pieces. For example, the artist of Figure 1 uses a yellow patch in the sky to represent “knowledge.” In another case, the artist of Figure 7 writes that she is walking toward

a sunset “because I feel like I’ve wasted so many years and may not have a lifetime (a whole day) left.” Another uses sunset colors to “represent my excitement for all my life has to offer me.”

Figure 6 uses the sky, lit with stars, as a metaphor. The artist writes, “The bridge leads into the cosmos, illustrating the awe, vastness, wonder, and uncertainty of life and the universe without the box to comfortably block it out.”

Next, many subjects depict other people in their bridge drawings. Eight portray fellow church members or leadership before or on the bridge (Figures 5, 9, and 10). Five depict family, friends, or other supportive people on the other end of the bridge. The artist of Figure 8 includes both. In addition, she shows herself with her same-sex partner separated on the left but together on the right.

Lastly, seven of the individuals crossing bridges have accompanying objects with them, including backpacks, a suitcase, a blindfold, an apple, and a ball and chain (see Figures 4, 5, 9, 10, and 15). Some of these objects are “baggage” from the old religion, while the blindfold represents “the way you are programmed to not use logic and reason when you are religious.” One writes that “the hardest part of the transition [is] letting go of the baggage I had brought with me from the church that has been hampering my progress and slowing me down.”

Process and effect of artmaking. According to the questionnaire responses, drawing is an unfamiliar form of expression for most of the subjects. Ten discuss the drawing process as a new or challenging medium. Several mention that they had difficulty getting started, but that “ideas flowed” once they got started, and some note that they could not capture everything they wanted in a single image. Most subjects report a positive experience, using words like fun, enjoyable, hopeful, satisfying, peaceful, reflective, spiritually connected, and comforting. Eight express a sense of catharsis or release. As one subject put it, “It felt like releasing anger, drawing

all those damn temples.” Another writes multiple times throughout his questionnaire responses that he is less angry as a direct result of reflecting on his artwork. Nine indicate pride or a sense of empowerment at being able to see their progress visualized on the page. One subject exemplifies this experience when she writes, “I can see how far I’ve come and the progress I’ve made.... [I] have a ways to go but I’m happy to have made it this far.” Some subjects, though, experienced negative emotions while drawing their bridges, including stress, shame, pain, anger, melancholy, and sadness, with two crying while making the artwork. Another says she cried while answering the questionnaire but felt calm while drawing. Nine subjects describe the process as clarifying—useful for seeing things they had not seen before or for making sense of confusing events. Some subjects seem to have needed witnessing for their stories. One subject writes, “I feel heard by you,” and another says, “It felt like I was getting to say what I’ve needed to say for a long time...I felt like I was being trusted to tell my own story and my story is valid.”

Themes. After general coding across both the artwork and the questionnaires, seven overarching themes emerged. The themes are reinforced and illustrated in the bridge drawing criteria adapted for use from Hays and Lyons’ original 1981 study. The seven themes are: ambivalence; embracing uncertainty; social justice; simultaneous transitions; freedom and constraint; growth; and remaining ties. The PI did not seek out any of these themes or address them directly in the questionnaire—they unfolded naturally from the data provided by the subjects.

Ambivalence. Many subjects report a sense of reluctance or ambivalence about their departure. They describe their religion of origin with words like comfortable, certain, easy, stable, familiar, and, most prevalently, safe. One characterized his affiliation as “staying in the light.” Nearly all subjects acknowledge the fear they felt about leaving, with several discussing

various strategies to stay. One planned to adopt an identity as a “secular Mormon.” Most spent years in an in-between phase while they “debated leaving” or “fluctuated between in and out.” One gay subject “tried to live it for 3–4 years.... I began to explore the idea of marrying a man, but staying active in the church though not as a full member.” Others “wanted to maintain a belief” and actively worked toward that end. As one subject writes, “I desperately wanted the Church to be true, so for years I entrenched myself deeply into orthodoxy.” She increased prayer, scripture study, and church service because she “wanted to make myself believe.” Congruently, Figure F shows that during affiliation, more subjects met attendance and behavioral expectations at a “Very High” level than fully believed in the doctrines.

In the artwork, this ambivalence manifests in subtle, perhaps unconscious ways. The facial expressions of the subject in Figure 10 show terror and pain as she removes her blindfold, falls, and lands. However, the final figure’s expression appears confident and determined. In contrast, the facial expressions in Figure 15 progressively wane in confidence. The final figure glances backward with concern as the bridge vanishes away, making return impossible. Hesitation to begin the journey is also evident in the barriers to entry before many of the bridges: some have warning signs, some are clouded by fog or lightning storms, and one requires the subject to jump over a gap to mount her bridge. This trepidation is even evident in the rickety, unstable nature of the bridges themselves. One subject describes her ambivalence this way:

It would have been safer and easier for me to stay away from the bridge, and I wanted to and tried to for a long time, but the darkness on the left side of the bridge began to swallow me so I stepped onto the bridge.

Embracing uncertainty. More than half of the subjects discuss the topic of fearing, facing, and then embracing uncertainty. Several subjects write that the water or void beneath

their bridges symbolize the unknown, calling uncertainty “scary,” “frightening,” and “painful.” One of these subjects says, “it was soul-crushing and suffocating to be in this place, to feel like I had had Truth, and then to feel like I didn’t know anything anymore.” But many subjects then note a change in their feelings on uncertainty. In the words of the artist of Figure 10, “Once I finally fell in the hole (deconverted), it wasn’t nearly as bad as I thought it was.” Subjects describe the process as exciting, exploratory, unpredictable, and wild. The artist of Figure 2 illustrates the shift from certainty to uncertainty by placing black and white on the left side of his bridge and grey on the right. He writes, “Religion gave me absolutes. Life gave me greys...and I like it.” One subject drew a jump to mount her bridge, and she writes, “I felt like I was leaping into the unknown.... I became much happier NOT having a prescribed set of answers regarding meaning of life.” Some of the drawings incorporate question marks to symbolize uncertainty. In Figure 5, the progression of uncertainty is shown through a pathway lined with question marks leading from an area of “No Questions!” toward a questioning sun. The artist writes, “I’m content with a future of questions. The honesty of this existence is healthy for me.”

Social justice. References to LGBTQ issues are littered throughout the art (as rainbows, an affectionate same-sex couple, and an illustrated transition of gender expression). These references are even more prevalent in the questionnaires, with eight subjects identifying as LGBTQ and nineteen citing social justice issues as a primary reason for disaffiliation. While LGBTQ matters are the most prevalent among these, subjects also cite issues of race and gender equality. A few subjects also report shifting political ideals and increased activism work. The artist of Figure 9 exemplifies some of these social justice issues in her bridge drawing. She draws “the LDS church—male-dominated” on the left side of her bridge. She depicts an oversized, crowned man standing over a group of small women and children, all surrounded by male

symbols. On the right, the artist portrays herself smiling, surrounded by color, light, nature, and the female symbol, which represent “many beautiful choices...allowing myself to explore my sexuality... [and the] beauty of my identity.”

Racial issues, with five mentions, is the least prevalent of the social justice issues brought up in the questionnaire responses. One subject describes the issues as “historic...institutionalized racism,” but, as addressed previously, the LGBTQ-related struggles that so many subjects discuss are relatively recent. The one subject who referenced racism in his artwork (Figure 5) is one of the oldest at sixty-three years of age. With a subject pool that is 96% white, 70% female, nearly one-third LGBTQ, and thirty-six years old on average, it is likely that subjects feel most strongly about issues that are relevant to them both personally and temporally.

Simultaneous transitions. A large proportion of the subjects experienced other life transitions simultaneous to leaving their faiths. Some of these transitions are internal, such as some subjects experiencing a “feminist awakening” and some shifting in their political beliefs. Other transitions are more visible, as with the many subjects who came out about their sexuality or, in one case, transitioned from a female to a non-binary gender identity. These transitions are illustrated in the Figures 8 and 15. These bridge drawings not only visualize shifts in sexuality and gender identity, but the bridges themselves change from left to right. Nine of the bridges morph in some way across the page, suggesting that the journey itself is changing as it progresses.

Others experienced transitions in their marriages concurrent to their faith transitions. After disaffiliating, one subject thought her husband would leave her, and another subject’s husband thought she would leave him. Two others directly attribute their divorces at least partially to their disaffiliation. Another subject reports that her faith transition started after and

because she left her abusive husband. All of these transitions are multi-factorial and cannot be said to be exclusively causal of or caused by the subjects' faith transitions. But each of these transitions is informed by value systems that can vary widely from affiliation to disaffiliation and are worthy of consideration.

Freedom and constraint. Constraint is shown in many ways in the artwork. Three subjects depict literal prisons at the start of their bridge. The artist of Figure 5 writes, "I've been captive in a mental prison...I created it and I manage it myself." Another subject is dragging a ball and chain across the bridge with him. One bridge is populated with blindfolded churchgoers. Other individuals are impeded by more subtle forms of constraint: caution signs and unstable, unattached, or absent bridges. However, there is also a strong theme of freedom. The three prisoners have left their prisons behind. The blindfolded subject removes her blindfold. Two subjects who had been constrained in cardboard boxes are emerging. The shackled individual simply writes "Enslavement" on the left side of his bridge and "Freedom" on the right. Variations of the word "free" are used twenty-nine times throughout the aggregated questionnaire responses. Subjects discuss an array of freedoms, including freedom to express themselves, to explore new ideas, to eat and drink as they please, to break gender roles, to be themselves, and to love who they love. These freedoms are summarized in the title that one subject gives her bridge drawing, a scriptural-sounding reference to John Steinbeck's *East of Eden*: "Thou Mayest."

Growth. Personal growth saturates the art and writing of the subjects. Many have built or are building a new sense of self, new self-defined values, and an internal sense of meaning or spirituality. Several report increases in self-reliance and self-trust. One subject describes his church and transition experiences positively, stating, "[Church] was a good place, with many

happy memories, but I have outgrown it. I have grown to trust my own heart, and to have a relationship directly with God.”

Growth is represented metaphorically in some of the nature motifs repeated throughout the artwork. The right sides of the bridge drawings are littered with colorful flowers, roots, trees, and grasses. One of the artists writes that she is “confident...this path leads to more growth,” and another explains that “the flowers are me blossoming.” In Figure 3, the subject walks into a fertile, growing place, but her head also grows into large heart across three panels. She writes, “First I had to stop trusting in external sources; then I gained confidence to follow where my heart was leading me; and today I am discovering myself on the journey of my own choosing.”

Remaining ties. Throughout the artwork and questionnaires, subjects indicate various ways in which they are still tied to their faith of origin. These ties are in the form of family and social connections, continued attendance and behavioral observance, and affection for the religion itself. As Figure F shows, many subjects’ families (both originative and procreative) are still deeply involved in their respective religions. The artist of Figure 2 continually expresses a sense of feeling stuck, unable to fully detach from the church, to keep his wife and mother happy. Another subject continues to go to church, explaining, “I currently attend LDS meetings with my wife, semi-regularly, as a support to her.” Several subjects admit to missing their old faith, as the one who writes, “Sometimes I really miss my safe little box.” Many subjects acknowledge the goodness and beauty in their religions of origin.

Remaining ties are also evident in the artwork as the accompanying objects previously discussed: backpacks, a suitcase, and shackles. For the latter, the shackles represent his family slowing him down on his journey across the bridge. Some of the “baggage” is seen positively, as with the one who writes, “I am taking from my religion what works for me.” The artwork also

shows some subjects turning around or looking back across the bridge. The artist of Figure 8 writes, “On the right side is me now, free, joyful, with friends and a girlfriend, but still looking back and missing my Christian days.” Another subject writes that the figure in her drawing “has an eye to those still on the other side. Hoping to take the remaining friends and family by the hand.”

Research questions. When designing this study, the PI posed the following research questions: What is the lived experience of transitioning out of high-demand religions? How do disaffiliates conceptualize and visualize their transitions? Does the art reveal any latent content about their transitions? Does making art about their transitions assist disaffiliates in understanding and integrating their experiences? A discussion of these research questions and their answers follows.

Lived experience. While there are important unifying threads throughout the featured disaffiliation stories, each one comprises a discrete set of causes, effects, and experiences. Some subjects felt compelled into their faith transitions while others never believed. Many subjects miss their faith or were reluctant to leave, but others disaffiliated quickly and enthusiastically. Some subjects experienced other life transitions related to and concurrent with their disaffiliation. Many adopted previously forbidden behaviors. Across the board, disaffiliation caused negative psychological and social effects, with some outcomes more severe than others. Many had their identities and sense of purpose torn down, with some rebuilt and some not rebuilt yet. Most express a sense of personal growth and freedom as a result of this journey. And, despite considering themselves disaffiliated, many subjects still have familial, behavioral, or emotional ties to their faith of origin.

Conceptualization and visualization. The subjects seem adept at conceptualizing and visualizing their transitions through the metaphor of the bridge, with each adding details and symbolism that personalize their experiences and enrich their written narratives. Almost without exception, subjects depict their faith transitions as difficult, frightening, or dangerous. Their journeys are fraught with warning signs, unstable paths, falling, storms, fog, fire, and uncertainty. But, again with few exceptions, subjects visualize their faith transitions as journeys of progress. Hays and Lyons (1981) posit that in the bridge drawings, “the left side is considered the past, the right side is considered the future, and the direction of travel would be from the past to the future in our culture” (p. 209). While the bridge drawings of the present study do generally progress from left to right temporally, they also progress in color, light, unpredictability, personal growth, and freedom. One subject’s final summary: “Once I left the church the world really did seem more colorful, amazing, inspiring, and miraculous.”

Latent content. Some subjects depict an unstated, perhaps unconscious ambivalence about their journeys. Their bridge structures, warning signs, and facial expressions reveal mixed feelings or a hesitance to take this journey. But the midway shifts in bridge structure indicate that the journey itself changes part way through. Some of these shifts reflect concurrent life transitions, but they also reveal an increasing sense of confidence and stability. One subject phrases this explicitly, writing that the farther she went, “the more solid I felt—mostly about who I was as a person and what I wanted from life...the better I felt until I got off the bridge entirely.”

Hays and Lyons (1981) note that “the placement of...the self indicates the distance ahead in crossing the bridge as well as the distance that has been traversed” (p. 209). But while most of Hays and Lyons’ subjects placed themselves on the first half of the bridge, most of the present

subjects place themselves on the second half or beyond the end of the bridge. If this indicates the distance already traversed, then most of the present subjects have already come a long way in their journeys or perhaps consider their journeys complete. Some who declined to place themselves on the bridge, like the artists of Figures 2 and 13, may feel ambivalent about their progress. Notably, these two subjects have been disaffiliated for some of the briefest spans. Four out of the five who did not depict themselves in the artwork have been disaffiliated for less than the three years, far below the 4.14 year average shown in Figure D. This lack of self-representation could reflect unresolved identity re-formation in these four individuals who have so recently left. In contrast, one of the oldest and longest-disaffiliated subjects now feels so “joyful and free” that she floats in the air, no longer touching the bridge at all (Figure 1).

Value of artmaking. Must subjects report value in the artmaking experience. While some subjects report no positive effect, most describe a positive, clarifying, cathartic, or empowering experience. One writes, “Taking time to draw a picture was very calming for me and it felt like a form of self care.” Another subject specifies that he would like to continue, adding artmaking to his regular practice of writing to work through struggles. Many subjects, after reflecting on their bridge artwork, express pride or satisfaction in how far they’ve come in their journeys. The artmaking process seems to have been especially helpful for the artist of Figure 12 to accept and integrate his past. He writes:

As a result of this artwork, I was able to see more beauty in the old religion. It has felt quite ugly to me...so looking at "the whole picture," I can see that it has some beauty, and that it is a part of a fairly pretty representation/composition of my whole life. So I don't feel as angry as before.

Findings

The considerable demands of the religions represented in this study naturally tie themselves into all aspects of a believer's life. Because of the centrality of religion in these individuals' lives, mental health clinicians who encounter religious disaffiliation in their clients should assess the whole person (Brent, 1994). Considerations should include: the psychological, social, behavioral, identity, and existential effects of leaving; concurrent life transitions; ambivalence about leaving; and the client's current or lingering ties to their faith. High-demand religions provide clear and extreme examples of these considerations, but these struggles are likely not limited to high-demand disaffiliates. Depth of involvement may matter more than actual denomination, as the impact of religious struggle correlates to the level of religious investment (Abu-Raiya et al., 2015; Bromley, 1991; Ellison et al., 2013). This study is restricted to a small set of faith traditions, but those who have been deeply involved in other faiths may experience parallel struggles with corresponding treatment considerations (Dein, 2013).

The prevalent psychological effects found in the literature and in the present subjects include depression, anxiety, anger, and grief, among others (Abu-Raiya et al., 2015; Adam, 2008; Avance, 2013; Buxant & Saroglou, 2008; Exline et al., 2000). While these are symptoms familiar to mental health clinicians, in this population they may be aggravated by social and familial strain, identity loss, and reduced sense of meaning. When possible, family or couple's treatment might be indicated for religious disaffiliates, particularly those in mixed-faith marriages. Several of the subjects in this study correlated their divorce or marital strain with their religious transition. Religious differences can instigate or augment family tensions, and intensified family strain is correlated with the often heavy focus on traditional family values found in high-demand religions (Stokes & Regnerus, 2009). Cynicism and vocal criticism of the

religion often follow disaffiliation, and this stance can damage important relationships (Avance, 2013; Bahr & Albrecht, 1988; Khalil & Bilici, 2007). It may be important to aid the client in accepting their past, viewing the religion objectively, or even acknowledging the beauty and goodness in it. Establishing a healthy, non-combative relationship to their faith of origin may help clients from further damaging social and family relationships.

In addition to relational benefits, appreciating the good aspects of their religious history may help clients reduce their anger or grief and integrate their past as a meaningful part of their life story, as took place for some of the subjects in the present study. A recognition of growth and progress may also aid in reducing anger and increasing an empowered sense of self and purpose. Avance (2013) asserts that religious disaffiliates construct their new identities by telling their deconversion narratives, and Coates (2013) claims that developing identity after disaffiliation is a deliberate, active process. The bridge drawing has value both as assessment and intervention in this pursuit, and placement of self along the bridge can be informative to both client and clinician. Some subjects in the present study do not place themselves in their bridge drawings and reveal the depth of their existential struggles in their written responses. In contrast, many subjects portray themselves far along or completely past the bridge and report that creating the bridge helped give them a sense of how far they have come in their journey. It may be useful to draw a bridge at the start, middle, and end of treatment, so clients can visually track their own progress. This visual record harnesses art therapy's ability to make meaning and reconstruct identity after a life crisis, to capture "who we were, who we are now, and who we want to be in the future" (Van Lith, 2014, p. 20).

It is recommended that clinicians explore how their clients are experimenting with or embracing new behaviors after leaving. While the present subjects report nothing overtly

dangerous, some high-demand disaffiliates may adopt drastic and perhaps unhealthy behavioral changes (Coates, 2013; Fenelon & Danielsen, 2016; Hookway & Habibis, 2015). The attentive clinician may be wise to assess for risky over-compensation regarding previously restricted behaviors, i.e. uninformed or unhealthy drinking or sexual habits. Conversely, lingering trepidation may prevent clients from normal behavior or healthy sexual expression.

This researcher advocates that clinicians should also assess for ambivalence, concurrent life transitions, and remaining ties in clients who are struggling or disaffiliating. Although the current literature only addresses these topics briefly or indirectly, the present study highlights ambivalence, concurrent transitions, and remaining ties as critical aspects of the lived experience of disaffiliation. Family connections, fear, and attachment to religion likely evoke ambivalence about disaffiliation, sometimes spread over years, leaving clients with a complicated mix of grief and relief, pain and freedom. Clinicians can guide clients in processing and integrating these mixed emotions. This ambivalence may be compounded by the client's lingering social, familial, personal, and emotional connections to their faith of origin. Walking away from a high-demand religion rarely leaves a clean cut, and clinicians can assist clients in unpacking and processing the "baggage"—the backpacks, suitcases, and shackles—that disaffiliates are likely carrying with them. Complicating matters further still, clients are likely experiencing other life changes that are related to their faith transitions. Simultaneous transitions can include the previously-discussed marital and identity shifts as well as changes in education or career, political and personal values, gender roles, and sexual or gender expression. Each of these merits considerable clinical attention on their own.

The psychological literature does address some of the other themes found in the current study to varying degrees. Aligning with the theme of growth, many authors agree that religious

doubt and struggle can increase personal development, confidence, responsibility, sense of self, and spiritual maturity (Coates, 2013; Exline et al., 2000; Krause & Elliston, 2009). Coates (2013) further notes that faith transitions can increase tolerance for existential anxiety and uncertainty. This existential growth is evident in most of the subjects, with more than half reporting a wrestle and eventual embrace with uncertainty. And a sense of freedom, a very prominent theme in both the questionnaire responses and bridge drawings, is also discussed by several authors as a result of the disaffiliation process (Abu-Raiya et al., 2015; Avance, 2013; Davidman & Greil, 2007; Fisher, 2016).

Diverging from the extant literature, social justice is a far more prominent theme in the current study than in general findings. While many authors agree that some disaffiliates leave partially due to changing personal values that conflict with conservative church doctrines, no articles found by the author go into specific social justice issues as detailed by this study's subjects (Abu-Raiya et al., 2015; Bahr & Albrecht, 1989; Hookway & Habibis, 2015). The current subject pool comprises many straight allies and a disproportionate number of LGBTQ individuals, and, less prominently, many who are concerned with feminist and racial issues. These individuals list not only general doctrine but specific, often recent events that contributed to their disaffection, such as the previously addressed November 2015 policy change of the LDS church. The current relevance of LGBTQ issues may explain some of the discrepancy between the general literature and the current study. These social justice issues may become a relevant point of discussion in sessions with disaffiliated clients, particularly in cases where they feel personally marginalized by the policies or by believing family.

Relatedly, much of the literature compares leaving one's religion to the process of coming out as LGBTQ (Avance, 2013; Bahr & Albrecht, 1989; Berger, 2015; Fisher, 2016;

Khalil & Bilici, 2007). While these comparisons are metaphorical, many of the subjects' faith transitions occurred concurrently with coming out literally. According to Pelton-Sweet and Sherry (2008), art therapy can be uniquely suited to aid those who are coming out to construct new identities, test different roles, explore their authentic self, and ease anxiety and low self-esteem in the process. Other authors compare disaffiliation to immigration and acculturation (Bahr & Albrecht, 1989; Berger, 2015; Niens et al., 2013). One subject echoes this idea when he writes, "I left behind everything I've ever known, like leaving a whole world and discovering I live in a completely different place—a different reality—than I thought I did." Rouseau and Heusch (2000) argue that art therapy can help immigrants to cope, express loss, restructure identity and meaning, and "reconcile their two cultural worlds" (p. 31). Hays and Lyons (1981) similarly used the bridge drawing as a metaphor to connect and reconcile two different worlds. The various elements of the bridge indicate both conscious and unconscious aspects of the artist's life transition, aiding both in assessment and in organizing thoughts and experiences for use in therapeutic discussion (Teneycke et al., 2009). Art therapy interventions, including the bridge drawing, appears to be an ideal treatment modality for those dealing with religious struggles and difficult faith transitions.

Conclusion

Disaffiliation from a high-demand religion is a difficult, painful, and emotional process (Adam, 2008; Brent, 1994; Davidman & Greil, 2007). But disaffiliation and general religious struggle are increasing in relevance. The Pew Research Center (2015) reports that the religiously unaffiliated are the fastest-growing religious demographic in the country, making up almost a quarter of the US population in 2015. Speaking specifically of high-demand groups, Fenelon & Danielsen (2016) report that members disaffiliate at a rate of 17% (p. 57). The enthusiastic response to the limited call for subjects to this study demonstrates the resonance of the topic and the need for mental health services to respond. In a side note to the PI, one subject writes, “I’m very grateful to be part of the study, and that this issue is getting some attention. There’s an ever-growing population of us—we need each other. We need visibility.”

This study asked for disaffiliates of high-demand religions to literally give their journeys visibility. Twenty-seven participants were recruited online, then sent a questionnaire and artmaking instructions based on Hays and Lyons’ 1981 Bridge Drawing assessment for life transitions. The visual and textual responses were then collected, coded, and analyzed, providing a general sense of the lived experience of high-demand disaffiliates. The participants illustrate the difficult but often rewarding psychological, social, behavioral, identity, and existential effects of leaving one’s religion and revealed seven important themes that contribute to the overall understanding of religious disaffiliation: ambivalence; embracing uncertainty; social justice; simultaneous transitions; freedom and constraint; growth; and remaining ties. These themes align with and supplement the extant psychology and sociology research on religious struggles, adding the unique contribution of visualizing the disaffiliation experience through an art therapy assessment. Subjects report an overall positive, clarifying, cathartic, and empowering experience

with creating the art, supporting the use of the bridge drawing as both assessment and intervention in the treatment of religious disaffiliates.

Limitations and Future Considerations

This study has some notable limitations, including likely selection bias in the subject pool, a restricted range of demographics, potential bias in the research design and analysis, and a lack of clarity in some questions and definitions. Future studies could improve by addressing each of these limitations as well as expanding the analysis criteria and research questions.

First, subjects were recruited online, automatically excluding those who do not have access to or participate in internet communities. This could have unintended ramifications for the subject pool's demographics and range of experiences. Participation in online communities may correlate with age, socio-economic status, length of disaffiliation, extreme negative effects, lack of in-person social support, or resilience. Only one of the subjects was recruited in person through a registered participant who contacted her outside of the PI's knowledge. Future research could take advantage of this kind of snowball recruiting, potentially reaching more disaffiliates who are not active in online groups.

Second, while the present study represents a range of sexual orientations, genders, and ages, the subject pool was limited in other ways. Future research should include more non-white subjects, international subjects, subjects of differing cognitive and physical abilities, and subjects from a wider variety of religious backgrounds. The sample size of twenty-seven, while suitable for the scope of this study, could also be expanded in future research to supply more reliable and valid results. An increased shipping budget or the adoption of an entirely electronic system may aid in increasing the size and variety of the subject pool.

Validity would also be increased if the questionnaire used more forced-choice questions and stricter definitions of terms. While open-ended questions and self-report helped capture the lived experiences of the subjects, responses regarding timelines, specific effects, and religious labels could be clarified and more effectively compared if terms and questions were clarified. Clarification would also aid in reducing PI bias. The PI's personal experience with the subject matter could have influenced the questions asked and the responses emphasized. Inter-coder analysis would also reduce PI bias. Multiple coders did analyze the artwork, but they did not assist in textual analysis. Future research may benefit from more impartial and varied perspectives.

Future study could also expand the present research questions to include differences across demographic categories, the effects of elapsed time, and the cumulative disaffiliation experiences of couples and families. First, the data of the present study was not analyzed across demographics, such as comparing experiences of women to those of men, straight to LGBTQ, or older to younger. Subject responses indicate important differences here, but this analysis was outside of the scope of this study, which attempted to capture a general lived experience. Cross-sectional analysis may also yield valuable information. As was briefly discussed in the *Latent content* section, subjects at different points along their journeys seem to depict different kinds of experiences, and elapsed time appears to modulate some of the effects of disaffiliation. A longitudinal study tracking the progress of disaffiliates over years could also be informative. Lastly, future research should address the experiences of couples and families, both those who disaffiliate together and those who maintain mixed-faith relationships. Most of this study's subjects have children and are or were married, and they largely indicate that their faith transition

heavily affected these relationships. This area appears to have little coverage in psychological literature and could benefit from research-informed treatment considerations.

Implications for Treatment

As discussed in detail in the *Findings* section, mental health clinicians treating those with religious struggles or disaffiliation experiences should consider the following: negative psychological, social, behavioral, identity, and existential effects; ambivalence about leaving; simultaneous life transitions; and unresolved remaining ties to the faith of origin. Clinicians can help disaffiliated clients explore new freedoms responsibly while addressing any lingering shame or trepidation. Clinicians can also help clients process unresolved existential anxiety, as learning to embrace uncertainty appears to be an crucial step toward healing. Treatment should also highlight and foster the client's progress and personal growth, such as that demonstrated in so much of the present subjects' imagery. The bridge drawing has proven a useful tool for assessment and therapeutic intervention, but it is only one step in the healing after a difficult faith transition. Religious disaffiliates can continue to use art therapy to visualize their journeys, explore their experiences, rebuild their identities, and foster personal growth and a new sense of meaning.

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Appendices

Appendix A – Experimental Subjects Bill of Rights

LOYOLA MARYMOUNT UNIVERSITY

Experimental Subjects Bill of Rights

Pursuant to California Health and Safety Code §24172, I understand that I have the following rights as a participant in a research study:

1. I will be informed of the nature and purpose of the experiment.
2. I will be given an explanation of the procedures to be followed in the medical experiment, and any drug or device to be utilized.
3. I will be given a description of any attendant discomforts and risks to be reasonably expected from the study.
4. I will be given an explanation of any benefits to be expected from the study, if applicable.
5. I will be given a disclosure of any appropriate alternative procedures, drugs or devices that might be advantageous and their relative risks and benefits.
6. I will be informed of the avenues of medical treatment, if any, available after the study is completed if complications should arise.
7. I will be given an opportunity to ask any questions concerning the study or the procedures involved.
8. I will be instructed that consent to participate in the research study may be withdrawn at any time and that I may discontinue participation in the study without prejudice to me.
9. I will be given a copy of the signed and dated written consent form.
10. I will be given the opportunity to decide to consent or not to consent to the study without the intervention of any element of force, fraud, deceit, duress, coercion, or undue influence on my decision.

Appendix B – Informed Consent Form**LOYOLA MARYMOUNT UNIVERSITY****Informed Consent Form**

Prepared November 5th, 2016.

- 1) I hereby authorize Summer Myers to include me in the following research study:
Visualizing the Transition Out of High-Demand Religions.
- 2) I have been asked to participate on a research project which is designed to explore my conceptualization, visualization, and lived experience of transitioning out of a high-demand religion. I understand that research participation is expected to last one hour but may last longer, depending on my own response time. I understand that I must have my Return Envelope postmarked by Feb 13, 2017 at the latest to be included in the research.
- 3) It has been explained to me that my inclusion in this project is because I am an adult who has disaffiliated from a high-demand religion.
- 4) I understand that if I am a subject, I will complete a questionnaire, create original artwork, and mail the completed artwork and questionnaire back to the researchers before February 13, 2017. The investigator will then analyze my questionnaire responses and artwork in aggregate with the responses of other participants, then write a research paper including their findings. These procedures have been explained to me by principle investigator Summer Myers, an art therapy graduate student, through the instructions included in my research packet.
- 5) I understand that my artwork and questionnaire responses may be used in the final research paper, which will be submitted to LMU's database of completed research projects and may eventually be submitted for scholarly publication. I understand that my name and other identifying information will be removed from the finished research paper. I have been assured that the art and questionnaire will be destroyed after their use in this research project is completed. I understand that I have the right to have my artwork returned to me at my request. I understand that I also have the right to review the final research paper at my request.
- 6) I understand that the study described above may involve risks, including anxiety, sadness, or discomfort induced by personal reflection about my history with religion. I am aware that if I am not open about my religious disaffiliation, these research materials may pose a small risk of discovery and exposure while they are in my possession. I understand that these risks can be mitigated by keeping the research materials stored in their original envelope in a secure place, completed in private, and returned to LMU as soon as possible.
- 7) I also understand that the possible benefits of the study are greater understanding or integration of my religious and transitional experience, a sense of catharsis at sharing my story, and the option to keep the provided art supplies.
- 8) I understand that the research faculty sponsor, Paige Asawa, LMFT, ATR-BC, PhD, who can be reached at 310-338-7646, will answer any questions I may have at any time concerning details of the procedures performed as part of this study.

- 9) If the study design or the use of the information is to be changed, I will be so informed and my consent reobtained.
- 10) I understand that I have the right to refuse to participate in, or to withdraw from this research at any time without prejudice to (e.g., my future medical care at LMU).
- 11) I understand that circumstances may arise which might cause the investigator to terminate my participation before the completion of the study.
- 12) I understand that no information that identifies me will be released without my separate consent except as specifically required by law.
- 13) I understand that I have the right to refuse to answer any question that I may not wish to answer.
- 14) I understand that in the event of research related injury, compensation and medical treatment are not provided by Loyola Marymount University.
- 15) I understand that if I have any further questions, comments, or concerns about the study or the informed consent process, I may contact David Moffet, Ph.D. Chair, Institutional Review Board, 1 LMU Drive, Suite 3000, Loyola Marymount University, Los Angeles CA 90045-2659 at david.moffet@lmu.edu.
- 16) In signing this consent form, I acknowledge receipt of a copy of the form, and a copy of the "Subject's Bill of Rights".

Subject's Signature _____ Date _____

Witness _____ Date _____

Appendix C – Questionnaire

QUESTIONNAIRE PART 1

Please complete this portion of the questionnaire prior to making artwork.

Please write legibly with black or blue ink. If you would prefer to type your answers, please clearly label your answers in correspondence with the question numbers, then print and attach your answers.

1. Age
2. Gender
3. Ethnicity
4. Marital Status: Never married, married, divorced, widowed, other (please explain)
5. If you have children, how many?
6. What region of the country do you live in?
7. From which high-demand religion did you disaffiliate?
8. Would you consider yourself “raised in” or a “convert” to this religion? If a convert, at what age did you join?
9. Were your parents or guardians also affiliated with the religion? If no, please explain:
10. How many years did you consider yourself affiliated with the religion?
11. How many years do you consider yourself disaffiliated with the religion?
12. If there was an “in-between” phase during which you considered yourself neither fully in or fully out, how many years did it last?
13. Was your disaffiliation voluntary? If not, please elaborate.
14. Have you returned to affiliation with this religion now or at any time? Please briefly explain:
15. Please describe the timeframe and nature of any affiliation with a different religion from that in question 6:
16. At any time after your disaffiliation, have you considered yourself atheist, agnostic, or another nonreligious type? Please briefly explain:
17. In terms of religion, how do you currently identify?
18. Are you open to others about your current identification as revealed in question 16? If no, please elaborate:

In reference to your time of affiliation to the religion identified in question 6, please rate the following items:

19. Your attendance to religious meetings:
Very Frequent, Frequent, Sometimes, Rare, Very Rare
20. Your belief in the doctrines:
Very High, High, Moderate, Low, Very Low
21. Your adherence to behavioral expectations:
Almost Always, Usually, Sometimes, Rarely, Very Rarely
22. The involvement of your family of origin (your parents, siblings, etc.):
Very High, High, Moderate, Low, Very Low
23. The involvement of your family of procreation (your spouse, children, etc.):

Very High, High, Moderate, Low, Very Low, Non-Applicable

In reference to your present-day relationship with the religion identified in question 6, please rate the following items:

24. Your attendance to religious meetings:

Very Frequent, Frequent, Sometimes, Rare, Very Rare

25. Your belief in the doctrines:

Very High, High, Moderate, Low, Very Low

26. Your adherence to behavioral expectations:

Almost Always, Usually, Sometimes, Rarely, Very Rarely

27. The involvement of your family of origin (your parents, siblings, etc.):

Very High, High, Moderate, Low, Very Low

28. The involvement of your family of procreation (your spouse, children, etc.):

Very High, High, Moderate, Low, Very Low, Non-Applicable

29. Please briefly describe the reasons for your disaffiliation:

30. Please briefly describe the experience of transitioning from affiliation to disaffiliation in terms of—

a. Psychological or emotional effects:

b. Social and family effects:

c. Lifestyle changes:

d. Sense of self or identity:

e. Sense of meaning or purpose:

STOP. Please create the artwork now, then complete Questionnaire part 2.

Instructions for completing the artwork:

Please illustrate your transition experience out of a high-demand religion in the form of a bridge. In this bridge artwork, please consider where you have been, where you are, and where you are going.

The Bridge Drawing is an established art therapy technique for conceptualizing and visualizing difficult life changes (see <http://anothersample.net/the-bridge-drawing-a-projective-technique-for-assessment-in-art-therapy> for more information).

The purpose of this artwork is not to create a visually pleasing finished product. The completed image does not have to be realistic, literal, or representational. All quality and skill levels are acceptable. This artwork is intended to assist in processing, conceptualizing, and visualizing the transition experience.

Blank paper and pastels have been provided for completing the artwork, but participants are invited to use their own art materials instead of or in addition to the pastels. Please keep the artwork two-dimensional, within the bounds of the provided paper, and constructed such that materials will not smear, tear, or distort in the Return Envelope.

After completing the artwork, please complete Questionnaire Part 2.

QUESTIONNAIRE PART 2

Please complete this portion of the questionnaire after making the artwork.

Please write legibly with black or blue ink. If you would prefer to type your answers, please clearly label your answers in correspondence with the question numbers, then print and attach your answers.

31. Please give the artwork a title:
32. Please briefly describe the artwork:
33. Please explain any symbolism in the artwork:
34. After creating and looking at the artwork, how does your conceptualization of your transition compare to your answers in questions 29 a. – 29 e.?
35. Please briefly describe the emotional or psychological experience of creating the artwork:
36. Is there anything else you would like the researchers to know?

Thank you. Please return the Consent Form, Questionnaire parts 1 and 2, and the Artwork in the Return Envelope provided. Packets must be postmarked by Feb 13, 2017 to be included in the research.

Appendix D – IRB Approval

Gmail - IRB Approval/Myers

1/21/18, 5(10 PM)



Summer Myers <summerhmyers@gmail.com>

IRB Approval/Myers

Paterson, Julie <Julianne.Paterson@lmu.edu>

Wed, Nov 16, 2016 at 9:20 AM

To: "summerhmyers@gmail.com" <summerhmyers@gmail.com>

Cc: "Asawa, Paige" <Paige.Asawa@lmu.edu>, "Moffet, David" <David.Moffet@lmu.edu>, "Carfora, John" <John.Carfora@lmu.edu>, "Paterson, Julie" <Julianne.Paterson@lmu.edu>

Dear Ms. Myers,

Thank you for submitting your IRB application for your protocol titled **Visualizing the Transition Out of High-Demand Religions**. All documents have been received and reviewed, and I am pleased to inform you that your study has been approved.

The effective date of your approval is **November 16, 2016 – November 15, 2017**. If you wish to continue your project beyond the effective period, you must submit a renewal application to the IRB **prior to October 1, 2017**. In addition, if there are any changes to your protocol, you are required to submit an addendum application.

For any further communication regarding your approved study, please reference your **IRB protocol number: LMU IRB 2016 FA 41**.

Best wishes for a successful research project.

Sincerely,

Julie Paterson

Julie Paterson | Sr. IRB Coordinator | Loyola Marymount University | 1 LMU Drive | U-Hall #1718 | Los Angeles, CA 90045 | (310) 258-5465