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*University of Central Florida*



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WHY THEY STOP ATTENDING CHURCH:  
AN EXPLORATORY STUDY OF RELIGIOUS PARTICIPATION DECLINE AMONG  
MILLENNIALS FROM CONSERVATIVE CHRISTIAN BACKGROUNDS

by

JESSICA CHASE  
B.A. University of Central Florida, 2010

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of the Master of Arts  
in the Department of Sociology  
in the College of Sciences  
at the University of Central Florida  
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Major Professor: David Gay

## **ABSTRACT**

Using a grounded theory approach, this study examines the reasons why Millennials from conservative Christian backgrounds stop attending church. The purpose is to understand why attendance attrition is at an all time high for those in the Millennial generation, ages 18 to 29. Data from 18 semi-structured interviews with former attendees demonstrate that this phenomenon is not due to a simplistic list of reasons but is actually a result of a complex development involving varying interrelated processes. The primary processes at work are cognitive and spiritual disconnection and disengagement for personal wellbeing.

for my baba

## **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

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## INTRODUCTION

For some time, researchers have shown that early adulthood generally corresponds to the least amount of religious service attendance. Furthermore, the life cycle thesis contends that those who attend church in their youth are likely to stop attending during early adulthood, only to return when they start forming families and having children (Arnett and Jensen 2002; Firebaugh and Harley 1991; Hoge, Benton, and Luidens 1993; Uecker, Regnerus, and Vaaler 2007). In fact, Jeremy Uecker et al. (2007), assert that this occurrence has become so commonplace that many social scientists have ceased seeking an explanation for it. The assumption is that decreased religious participation in young adulthood is the result of a normal developmental process that ebbs and flows, yet does not disrupt the average number of total religious attendants in the aggregate. In other words, though generations of young adults are less religious during their early adult years, they eventually return to religion when they get older and replace the older generation as they die off, and thus will not affect aggregate attendance averages.

However, recent studies have shown that the Millennials, individuals born after 1980 and coming of age in the 2000s, are attending religious services at the lowest rates of any previous generation (see Pew Research Center 2010, Jones, Cox, and Banchoff 2012), with generation defined as an age group cohort that shares a common position socially in history (Mannheim 1952). This includes Generation X (born 1965 to '80), Baby Boomers (born 1946-'64), Silent Generation (born 1928-'45) and the Greatest Generation (born before 1928) (Pew Research Center 2010; Jones et al. 2012; Smith and Snell 2009).

Millennials also have the highest rates of those who are religiously unaffiliated; studies show 25 percent of the cohort reports no religious affiliation (Pew Research Center 2010, Jones et al. 2012). This includes a relatively large proportion of Millennials, about 20 percent, that have switched from conservative Protestant affiliation in their teen years to being “nonreligious” in early adulthood (Smith and Snell 2009). In fact, of all religious affiliations, the largest switching trend from youth to young adulthood among Millennials is into the nonreligious category (Smith and Snell 2009).

The issue at stake here is the possibility that the Millennial generation could have vastly different reasons for leaving their religious institutions than previous generations. If so, those reasons could possibly influence the likelihood of their future return, or lack of return, to religion. Indeed, recent studies have shown that the Millennials are much less receptive than previous generations to organized religion, including those who have been reared in a religious environment (Arnett and Jensen 2002; Jones, Cox, and Banchoff 2012; Kinnaman 2011; Kinnaman and Lyons 2007; Sandfort and Haworth 2002). The implication is that if Millennials are more resistant to organized religion, the number of returning Millennials to religious participation might be much smaller than for previous generations. Even though the “nonreligious” come from a wide range of religious groups, it is clear that a significant percentage is coming from conservative congregations. My research will address the question, “why are Millennials from conservative backgrounds no longer attending church?”

My research examines religiosity at the individual level. I use the term “religiosity” to describe an individual’s religious behavior, particularly participation or attendance at religious services. Moreover, participation or religious attendance is an indicator of public commitment to a religious faith (Ellison et al. 1989). My study concerns the religious participation of religiously socialized Millennials in the Christian faith and the reasons why they stopped attending church when they reached early adulthood. The term spirituality is defined as the beliefs and practices used by individuals in the attempt to connect to the divine (Wuthnow 1998). The decision to study only those who were socialized in Christianity is based on the fact that Christianity is still the dominant faith in the United States (Newport 2011). In addition, the highest numbers of Millennials who are quitting church in adulthood are from the Christian faith (Smith and Snell 2009).

## LITERATURE REVIEW

As of yet, the existing literature does not yet clearly explain why Millennials from conservative Christian backgrounds are leaving church. Existing studies on the subject of attendance attrition are sparse and mostly dated—the majority of them are from the 1970s or 1980s. This review will examine the existing pieces of literature and describe the past findings for attrition that might also be applicable to today's formerly conservative Christian Millennials.

Several qualitative interview-based studies were conducted in the 1970s inquiring about the reasons why their participants stopped attending church (Hartman 1976; Savage 1976; United Presbyterian Committee 1976; Hale 1977). Three primary reasons were documented in these studies. The most commonly discussed reasons related to conflict within the church, such as feeling unwanted by church members. More specifically, John Savage (1976) concluded that people leave the church often because they are hurting, struggling, angry, and they feel helpless with seemingly hopeless circumstances. Additionally, reasons related to personal circumstance were second in importance. These include changes in employment or health, which caused people to stop attending. The least reported reasons related to church irrelevance or a dislike of the worship music.

In his study of the “unchurched” or people who do not claim to be members of a church, Russell Hale (1977) developed categories to describe why people leave churches. First, he describes the Anti-Institutionalists as those who leave because they feel the church is more concerned with itself than its congregants. Second is the Boxed-In category of

people who leave because they feel the doctrines of church are restrictive and smothering. Thirdly, the Burned-Out group feel manipulated or used by church. The Cop-Out group on the other hand never felt particularly committed to the church in the first place. And the last two include those who are more interested in the pleasures of life than religion (the Happy Hedonists) and those who feel rejected from church (the Locked-Out group) because of things like social status, income, or other demographics.

By contrast, some questionnaire studies point to secularization as the reason for quitting church among college students (Caplovitz and Sherrow 1977; Wuthnow and Mellinger 1978). Secularization here is considered to be the cognitive dissonance related to exposure to secular and religious worldviews. Moreover, in a study using 1978 Gallup survey data, David Roozen (1980) found that the dropout rate among teens primarily pointed to the decrease in parental influence and a sense that church was not personally relevant or interesting to them. This supports the findings of an earlier work by Alexander Astin (1977) who used national sample longitudinal data from 1966 to 1970 and found that moving away from home was positively correlated to disengagement from church among college students. Astin (1977) concluded that this was possibly due to separation from the influence of parents.

On the other hand, in a more recent study Robert Wuthnow (2007) posits that factors such as marriage, children, and employment explain the decline in church attendance among young adults. He observed that regarding marriage and children, young adults are postponing both. Since marriage and children traditionally correlate positively

to church attendance, this social institution postponement is supplied as a reason for lack of church attendance among younger adults. Additionally, Wuthnow (2007) explains that increased rates of women being employed full-time may be limiting the amount of time they dedicate to things like church involvement.

In another recent study, Jeremy Uecker et al. (2007) tested among college students some of the most cited explanations for the decline in religious experience during early adulthood: the secularizing effect of higher education, cognitive dissonance relating to deviance from religious norms, and factors relating to the life course. His findings showed these reasons explained little of the attrition in attendance. With regard to education, Uecker et al. (2007) found that those who did not go to college were in fact less religious than those who did. With regard to cognitive dissonance, there is a correlation between deviant behaviors and less religious attendance. Nevertheless, Uecker et al. (2007) observes that it is unclear whether dissonance is the cause or the result of attendance attrition. His findings were similar for the life course factors such as marriage and cohabitation. Though marriage is correlated with higher religious attendance and cohabitation is correlated with lower attendance, the causal direction is similarly unclear. The conclusion by Uecker et al. (2007) is that further study is needed to explain the decline in early adulthood religiosity. This research is meant to address this gap in the literature with regard to Millennials from conservative Christian backgrounds.

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

For this study, the inductive methodology of grounded theory was utilized as my theoretical paradigm. Throughout the research process, I relied heavily on the guide “Constructing Grounded Theory” by Kathy Charmaz (2006). Charmaz (2006) describes grounded theory methodology like this:

Stated simply, grounded theory methods consist of systematic, yet flexible guidelines for collecting and analyzing qualitative data to construct theories “grounded” in the data themselves.

Thus, the goal of using grounded theory is to essentially start with data and discover the theoretical “truth” contained within. Coding is the method of extracting theory from the data, which means attaching representative labels to pieces of the data. Codes make it possible for researchers to compare the various segments of data and conceptualize them. Out of these conceptualizations, broader themes about the data emerge. The result is a comprehensive understanding of the narrative being communicated by the data.

A key distinction between Charmaz’s (2006) constructivist grounded theory and the more traditional form described by Glaser and Strauss (1967) has to do with the influence of the researcher in the grounded theory process. Glaser and Strauss (1967) state that grounded theory emerges from the data distinct and separate from the influences of the researcher. However, Charmaz (2006) contends that the researcher himself or herself cannot be excluded from the theoretical discovery process. For example, Charmaz (2006) describes it like this:

My approach explicitly assumes that any theoretical rendering offers an *interpretive* portrayal of the studied world, not an exact picture of it.

This means that the perspectives, experiences, and knowledge of the researcher fundamentally contribute to the construction of their theories.

Additionally, Charmaz (2006) recognizes the influence of researchers' background suppositions and their discipline-related orientations that guide their research investigations. She discusses the importance of researchers sensitizing existing research to help guide and determine the focus of their grounded theory research. Regarding this study, I began with an awareness of existing theories and literature dealing with religious decision-making. For example, rational choice theory is an existing framework that focuses on the factors that affect an individual's decision to remain religious or not and is based on preferences to maximize benefits and fulfill personal needs (Stark and Bainbridge 1987). Although I was aware of this theory, my intention for this research was not to test existing theories or try to fit the data into pre-existing frameworks. Because much of the existing research in the area of young adults departing from religious institutions is quantitative, the purpose of using this methodology was to provide an alternative perspective that comes directly from the experiences of the people it involved. Thus, by using this inductive methodology, I was afforded the freedom to let the data speak for themselves and tell the larger narrative of exiting church for Millennials from conservative Christian backgrounds while remaining mindful of my own influences in the process. These influences are discussed in more detail in the reflexive statement of this paper.

Through my coding and analysis of the data, I developed two major explanatory processes that cover the various aspects of participants' reasons for leaving church. The first process is the cognitive and spiritual disconnect. This process describes how many Millennials are leaving church because of a lack of spiritual connection to God and a general intellectual incomprehension regarding various aspects of the faith. The starting point for this process deals with the goal or motive of the Millennials: they are searching for objective truth. This search leads the Millennials down a path of intellectual discovery and education that exposes them to competing worldviews including other religions and science. Their decision to abandon one worldview for another is rooted in which one makes the most sense to them, and whether or not they are able to have a spiritual connection to the Christian God. The absence of personal understanding and relevance of the faith combined with a lack of spiritual connection to God is actually the leading cause of church abandonment for the majority of Millennials I interviewed.

A second major reason why Millennials stop attending is because they feel that church is a hostile environment that is contrary to their wellbeing. The second process is distinct from the first because it concerns a rejection of the setting and culture of church rather than the beliefs of Christianity. This encompasses a sense of feeling that church is an unsafe place physically, emotionally, and cognitively or psychologically. Some Millennials feel physically unsafe due to abuse they experienced or witnessed in church. Moreover, some feel church is emotionally or psychologically manipulative. Many also do not feel comfortable sharing their doubts about the faith with the church community due to fears of

ostracism or shame. In the end, the sense that church is not a good environment is enough to make many Millennials want to leave.

The last major theme that I explore in this paper discusses Millennials' use of excuses to avoid church and this is included because of its relevance to the literature. Several studies in the past have cited "passive processes" or "personal contextual" reasons for people leaving church (see Roozen 1980). This included things such as moving away from a home church, employment and other time constraints, as well as going to school or college. The final theme of this paper demonstrates how these contexts are used specifically as excuses to cover up and conceal the true reasons behind Millennials' departure from church. The motive for doing so is to avoid controversy and to minimize upsetting and worrying religious individuals that have a stake in their religious decisions, such as parents or close friends. Altogether, these themes encompass the various factors influencing Millennials' decision to stop attending church.

## **METHODS**

Semi-structured interviews were conducted to gather data from the participants. The questions used were open-ended and inquired about the reasons the participants left church, the influence of church in their lives, their current views on church, and if they felt they would return later in life. Several additional probe questions were also employed. During the interviews, I asked additional questions to clarify topics brought up by the participants.

### Recruitment

The participants in this study were recruited using non-probability sampling techniques. Specifically, I utilized the convenience sampling method that depends on respondents' proximity and availability (Berg 2009). The decision to use a convenience sample was due primarily to the time constraints I faced in completing my thesis. I also used snowball sampling because this methodology is suitable for studying difficult to reach populations and can be based on the specific criteria being examined within the study (Berg 2009).

Three criteria were used to select the participants. First, in order to qualify as being part of the Millennial generation, participants had to be between the ages of 18 and 29. Second, all respondents have regularly attended conservative Christian churches for a period of time during their youth. Finally, the participants could not be currently attending church.

Eighteen total respondents were interviewed as part of this study. Several respondents were already acquaintances of mine: two were colleagues and one was the son of a friend. Additionally, I used a flyer containing the criteria and information about the study to recruit four respondents. This flyer was posted to a friend's Facebook page and the respondents contacted me via email to let me know of their interest in participating. Seven of the eighteen respondents were acquaintances who worked in close proximity to me at the University. I discovered over time through casual conversations which of those individuals were from conservative Christian backgrounds. When I began my study, I was afforded the opportunity to formally invite them to participate in the research and tell their stories. I was also aware of the secular club on campus, which is a community of students at my University that are non-religious and promote secular values and scientific knowledge, and I attended one of their meetings to invite potential participants among their members. This made sense to do since I know from my own experience that many of their numbers come from former churchgoers. I reached out to the club's president and was subsequently invited to recruit participants at one of their meetings. From that meeting I was able to recruit four participants.

## Respondents

Twelve of the eighteen respondents in this study were males and six were females. Of the male respondents, three were black and one was Hispanic. The remaining nine males were white and two of those were Hispanic. Regarding the female respondents, one was black and another was of mixed racial heritage. There were four white females and one Hispanic female. With regard to sexual orientation, four males identified themselves as homosexual and one male identified himself as bisexual. The remaining thirteen respondents either identified themselves as heterosexual or did not mention their sexual orientation. Furthermore, 17 of the 18 participants were enrolled at a large university in Florida. The respondent not enrolled in college was unemployed at the time of the interview.

Most of the participants developed their own systems of beliefs by pulling ideas from varying worldviews, religions, and concepts. Fifteen of the eighteen respondents no longer self identified as Christian in any sense. Eleven of these claimed to be atheists. One respondent said she was agnostic. Another participant claimed to be something between a pagan and an atheist. Two respondents had no label for their beliefs. Furthermore, three of the eighteen respondents claimed some version of Christian-like beliefs, although none of the respondents' beliefs fit into the category of conservative Christian. Only one of these seemed to genuinely believe that God exists. However, all three felt that God did not inspire the Bible; they also did not necessarily believe in the power of prayer. Furthermore, no respondents espoused conservative values consistent with conservative

Christianity. Like their non-Christian counterparts, these participants' beliefs were also syncretistic. For a complete list of all the participants and a brief summary of their demographics and background see appendix A.

### Data Collection

Sixteen interviews were conducted face-to-face in public locations convenient for the participants and two were conducted over the phone. All the interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed after the interviews were conducted. I tried to maintain the emphasis used by the respondents by using italics. All interviews were transcribed into Microsoft Word documents. I used the iTunes program to playback the recordings until they were fully transcribed. The audio recordings were destroyed after transcription. All names of the participants have been changed to pseudonyms for confidentiality. Before the start of each interview, I provided each respondent with a physical copy of the Institutional Review Board approved Participant Informed Consent Form. For this form see appendix B. The phone-interviewed participants were sent copies of this form via email prior to the interviews. The interview format was semi-structured with open-ended questions. Open-ended questions allowed me to gather rich and detailed narratives from the participants and the semi-structured format provided me the freedom to ask clarifying questions of the participants as new themes emerged. The interviews lasted approximately between 30 and 90 minutes. The interview questions are included in appendix C at the end of this paper.

### Human Subjects and the Institutional Review Board

Each respondent was informed that they had the choice to decline or accept participation in the study and that they could withdraw from participating at any time during the interview without penalty. If they chose to withdraw, I informed them that no record of their participation would be kept and all of their previous responses would be destroyed. I was careful to select participants who were not under my authority in any way in order to avoid direct or indirect pressure to answer the questions in a certain manner. IRB approved Informed Participant Consent Forms were provided to all respondents, but they were not required to sign them. Only the principal investigator managed the personally identifying information of the respondents and these were all kept private. All transcripts are stored in a locked file and no personal identifiable information is contained in them. Several respondents asked for a copy of the thesis after it is completed.

### Analysis

I analyzed the data using a grounded theory approach. The purpose of using this approach was to avoid framing the data within preconceived ideas about the research question. In this way I was able to allow the data to speak for themselves and I developed themes as they emerged from the data through systematic coding processes. After transcribing, I conducted initial line-by-line coding to identify preliminary concepts throughout the data. Then, I used focused coding to consolidate the findings into meaningful themes. Lastly, axial coding was the final step of coding that allowed me to make connections between the themes uncovered during focused coding. Furthermore, I

developed many concept maps to establish relationships between the themes and the larger processes at work.

### Reflexive Statement

This research answers a question that is very personal to me. I did not grow up in church, but when I was 11 I was enrolled in a Christian private school that I attended for a year and during that time I regularly attended the school's Baptist church. The experience was pretty negative for me and I was glad to be able to quit attending church at the first opportunity. Years later, I found myself hovering somewhere between agnostic and atheist. My experience made me wonder about others' experiences with leaving church. I developed this research question based on my desire to know if my reasons for leaving were also the reasons of others.

Because of my own experiences and my understanding of the existing literature, I started this project with a pretty strong expectation of what I was going to find. However, as I began to interview people I quickly realized that I was dealing with something much more massive in scale than I had originally thought. My expectation was that the participants would explain a neat and simple list of clear-cut reasons for leaving or at least one as simple and straightforward as existing studies suggested. The reality was, there were numerous interacting processes—many overlapping and interrelated—that developed over time into a decision to leave. Not only that, but these developments emerged with feeling and conviction. I quickly realized that this was not going to be a light task.

The interviews themselves often left me very emotional afterwards. Although I was very mindful of my displays and body language during the interviews as to prevent the participants from feeling uneasy, the things they would say often startled me. I think I was even more startled by the fact that I was taken so off-guard by their insights. I am not used to being surprised by people.

Additionally, the respondents often had such poignant observations that it felt as though everyone I interviewed was a social scientist. More often than not their words haunted me throughout the process as well. For example, when two participants told me about abuse they witnessed or experienced at the hands of people in church, it broke my heart. It was also very difficult to hear about the struggles of the gay participants who realized as young teens that the way they were made was not compatible with the institution they attended. Moreover, my heart went out to one participant who longed to be able to return to church and faith in Christianity because he loved how comforting it is to believe. Nevertheless, without the conviction that Christianity was the truth, he found it impossible to return. There are so many experiences like this and I must have broken down and cried at least a half dozen times after the interviews not only because of how emotional this was for me, but also because of how strongly these people and their faith were affected by their experiences.

Finally, another benefit of this research is that I feel I have acquired a much deeper appreciation of grounded theory and qualitative research in general. Not that I'm in any way against quantitative research, but with regards to this particular question—I don't

think I would have ever been able to develop a survey instrument that could tap what I have found by using this methodology. The richness of the data that has emerged through this process is priceless in my opinion. I am so thankful to have been afforded the opportunity to do this work and learn so much.

## FINDINGS

My research describes two main processes that explain the departure from church attendance of Millennials raised in a conservative Christian environment. Although often occurring concurrently in individuals, they remain distinct processes that do not require the presence of the other to stimulate the decision to quit church. The first process deals with the cognitive and spiritual disconnect that many Millennials describe. This process examines how learning from religious authorities and secular experts shapes Millennials' understanding of spiritual and cognitive truth, resulting in defection from church. Next, I illustrate how the church environment is driving Millennials away because it is perceived as hostile and contrary to wellbeing. Together, these processes describe the decision making process of Millennials in leaving church.

### Cognitive and Spiritual Disconnect

Millennials describe a process that demonstrates how they are not just quitting church, but in many cases they are fundamentally rejecting Christianity's philosophy of life. This is not because they just want to ignore what Christianity teaches, but rather because they simply do not believe it is true. Martin says it this way:

I'm not an atheist because I hate God or something. I'm an atheist because I don't think He exists. It's...not like I converted to atheism, I just—I lost my connection to Christianity.

Oftentimes they want to believe it is true, but their search leads them to dead ends both intellectually and spiritually. Cognitively, many cannot reconcile what they have learned outside of church with lessons taught inside church as Chris describes:

Most Christians will say, well you had that seed of doubt you were never fully Christian or whatever. And, I don't know if it was a seed of doubt so much as sometimes I couldn't reconcile what was happening in the real world compared to what the Bible said life should be like, if that makes sense?

Spiritually, the Millennials have little to no experience of the supernatural presence of God, which could supplement the church's teachings and provide a personal witness of the veracity of the faith. In this example, Jason describes his feelings about his lack of supernatural experience:

I was always brought up to believe that you would pray for things and then God would answer it but I never actually saw anything happen so I was always under the impression that I was getting kind of negative special treatment.

The absence of both cognitive and spiritual connection puts Millennials in a difficult position regarding Christian faith and attendance. They feel that they must either suppress their intellects or leave. Since Millennials find it difficult to suppress their intellects for long—if at all—they respond by abandoning the congregation to which they belonged, and often enough, their faith as well.

#### *Questioning: The Search for Objective Truth*

If Millennials are reared in church or attend voluntarily, their decision to leave is heavily influenced by what they learn and what they perceive to be true. As Millennials learn and become progressively educated, they become increasingly interested in the search for truth from an objective standpoint. "Questioning" is the analytical method used by Millennials to deconstruct their experiences and find meaning in the things they learn. To better clarify this concept of questioning, here are some examples of the usage

described by Millennials. First, Ashley describes questioning Baptist Christianity on its claims as a transformative power:

Why I stopped going? Well, um around that time was when I started questioning things and um, started thinking outside of that and is this really it? And you know I always, they always did the thing where you commit your life to God and all of that stuff. And everyone always seems so really changed by it and I did that and it felt absolutely no different.... So like it just...so like then you start questioning things. Like, okay well why is it not working, what's up?

Ashley is describing how she questions her lack of experience and reconsiders the truthfulness or authenticity of Christianity. This is similar to how Jason in the earlier example lacks answer to prayer and wonders if God is ignoring him deliberately.

Additionally, Eric describes his experience with questioning the Bible and the result of his search:

Like in that time, like fourteen was when I first started questioning and then there was a period of reading the Bible and questioning it and not finding the answers...um until finally at sixteen was when I was like, ugh I want to get out of this.

Here, Eric is questioning or evaluating Biblical scripture with the intent of finding specific answers regarding his faith. Upon being unable to find a suitable answer, he realizes he wants to leave both church and the Christian faith. This result is not uncommon. As Millennials become aware of the lack of connection they feel to Christianity, their reaction is usually to start questioning their faith. The actual "act" of questioning is more of an inner dialogue that the Millennials have within themselves as they wrestle with their experiences and the things they learn. It is precisely this inner dialogue that will be examined as these Millennials describe the intellectual and spiritual struggles that put them out of church.

## Passive Learning: How Observation Leads to Alienation

Millennials are highly educated about the beliefs and doctrines of Christianity, the customs, and the behaviors of those who are in leadership as well as laities. However, a large portion of this education is acquired through passive observation. Observational learning is described as passive here because the Millennials are mostly absorbing information with little to no external reaction to what they observe. This is the part of the process that is almost completely cognitive. Although they are learning passively, they are actively identifying their feelings regarding what they observe and developing their sense of identity. For example, Patrick describes the process of observational learning as he started being mindful of the implications of his same-sex attractions as a pre-teen in Catholic Church:

I was an alter-server, that type of thing, and I saw people getting married—that type you know, and I assisted in Mass and that. And I—I uh, it sort of crossed my mind, you know, like, ‘oh, like, I don’t really think much about getting married to a woman or anything like that, maybe there is something wrong.’ So I probably just kept quiet about it, you know um, these feelings will pass, thought it was a phase type thing, um, yeah. Or you hope that it’s just a phase (laughs) at that age, especially with you know, what you see. I—I think at that age, it’s not what you’re being told, but it’s what you see. You know, you’re at that age where you just sort of just like soak things in, in that regard, and then when you get to maybe high school or college, it’s sort of what you’re told and what you learn and what you’ve experienced, you know?

Furthermore, a significant struggle that Millennials have when observing the behaviors of religious authorities and other believers is the concern over hypocrisy, defined as behavior that fails to conform to publicly held beliefs and standards of morality. Millennials often have the perception that the behaviors of Christians and Christian leaders contradict both doctrinal and scriptural commands as well as their expectation of Christian moral

uprightness. The result is that Millennials develop a deep sense of distrust for Christians and particularly for those in leadership. In addition, Millennials tend to express strong emotions that emphasize their convictions. For example, Louis observed this scene as he approached the local Catholic Church in Haiti for his first communion and could not reconcile it with the teachings of Christian love:

So, you go to church and everyone, like, if you go to Haiti, you have to be clean...I mean, look the best—your best clothes you've ever, you've ever owned! You put it on to go to church. You've got to be very, very, like, presentable. You know, people bring all their pearly whites, everything of the sort. You walk in front of the church—the church is surrounded by poor-ass people that are just in poverty. Your stacking with cash, but...you know, these people are not even stopping. You know?... They're not even stopping to give cash or anything to these poor folks that are, like, around! Um, and where's that, you know, love your brother, love your sister thing? Um, so, I don't know, I found like a lot of Christians to be such like hypocrites...

Louis spoke quite emphatically and with strong emotion—it was clear that he was shocked and angered by what he saw. Another common pair of emotions I found in several of my participants was anger and horror, which I observed in Samantha, a white female who attended a Baptist church growing up as she made this observation as a Sunday School teacher's aide:

I know there was one specific example that got me quite angry one day in my Sunday school class because the teacher remarked something—I believe it was about the Muslim religion and she basically said in a nutshell to these third and fourth graders who don't know any better that their (Muslim) religion is based off of hate. And that they kill each other because it says so in their holy text and I just really just did not know what to say because she's telling these little kids something that they're not going to know any better, and it was just so hateful and ignorant...

Chris, a white male attending a Non-denominational congregation, observes hypocrisy and rhetoric inconsistent with his knowledge of the tenets of Christianity, which then causes

him to lose trust in the organization and its congregants. He also expressed strong negative emotions including disgust:

Becoming well educated was a part of it. Um...and you know a lot of it was also...the fellowship itself was, not falling apart but there was...there were some really fucked up things going on there, you know? The daughter of the man who taught it, I always remember this one specific case because it may be the reason that I actually stopped going to that particular fellowship, but anyway the daughter was always kind of...um I don't know, promiscuous, I guess...kind of flighty...but that's whatever. That's a personal thing, but she got pregnant on accident and she miscarried and I remember her saying that God did that; that God made her miscarry the child because, you know, I don't know, it was better for her or something. Like God knew it was better, so it was basically God's will that this miscarriage happened. And it just didn't meld with anything I had ever heard before and it just made no sense to me, it just didn't. And it was kind of the beginning of the end, of like...what they said and what they did kind of unraveling.

The hypocrisy observed in Christian leaders even goes to violent extremes. For example, Eric's Baptist youth group played volleyball against teams from other churches and this is his account of the unfriendly competition he observed:

And um we'd play volleyball against other churches and that got extremely competitive. And so there'd be things where like um, our-our youth pastors; our coaches would be like, 'don't worry about it, just knock 'em in the face.' And we're like, 'what?' (Laughs) 'That's not...good or Christian.' And they'd be like, 'it doesn't matter; we gotta win.' And I mean it was not just him doing this kind of thing; it was the whole I guess like...culture? Especially like volleyball competitions where it was just like, 'you wanna go out there and win for Jesus? WIN FOR JESUS, then!' And most of us were pretty cool with it and honest to God I would still be cool with it if it wasn't wrapped up in Jesus—because it's kind of like...sportsmanship is, 'you fucking win,' but you don't go out there and say, 'fucking win for Jesus!' There's where kind of like the hypocrisy all comes in. Think of it like a big ten school where you're told you have to go out there and throw elbows and shit and that's what you do. But if you're a big ten Jesus fan, and you tell a guy to go out there and throw elbows and shit it's kind of...it's kind of fucked up. What would Jesus do? Would Jesus throw elbows?

Finally, another significantly impactful hypocritical observation mentioned by numerous Millennials involves the sexual scandals they become aware of taking place within their congregations. Phil accounts for one such scandal that almost broke up the church. It is evident from his testimony that this experience and others have made him highly skeptical and distrustful:

Well, I mean I've had some really bad experiences, like at the Presbyterian Church: there was like a scandal with like the pastor there. Like the pastor was like abusing his power to like assault a young woman and it's like...and this is the youth pastor. And then like whenever that was like an issue he tried to like...pretty much divide the church and say like, you know, 'this didn't happen' and it's like...uh...people in...ugh. It was just a headache. And I don't even know if there actually was an assault; there was just like so many rumors flying around. I know for a fact he like tried to divide the church and like break the church up. I don't know if he actually committed an assault...I mean but that definitely seems like a real possibility because he was a...handsome white guy. And that's what assholes like that do. (laughs)

Relating a scandal involving another youth pastor is Christina. Her account also captures the betrayal and distrust that followed the incident at the Methodist church:

And then it was a small group and that's when we had a youth leader. And we had him for like a year and then all of a sudden he tells us at one of the Friday meetings, 'oh, I...I can't do this anymore; I'm leaving. So, I'm leaving you guys.' So, of course, I think I was 12 or 13 years old. Obviously, you know, he couldn't tell us the reasons why, but at that age it's like, 'why did you make all these promises and now you're leaving?' And of course people talk so, we ended up finding out later on that it was that he was divorcing his wife; he had cheated on her. And he was divorcing his wife to be with the other woman and he left youth group because he felt like he was in sin or I don't know. And then everything just basically was ruined after that. Some people left. Some people stayed. And it was just nothing was consistent anymore after that....So, I started to umm not trust people. After that I didn't really trust anybody who would tell me things. Like, 'oh I do this or I do that; this great person' but...I started not trusting that, you know? I would sit back and watch, so that made me observe a lot of people after that.

These data reveal how impactful these hypocritical observations are on the young Millennials. The Millennials' strong reactions underscore how they find these external observations incompatible with trust, their beliefs, and further participation with the church. However, this is only the beginning of the unraveling. The active learning component cements the negative feelings Millennials begin to accumulate during their tenure in church.

### Active Learning: Education and Worldview Flux

Ultimately Christianity, like any worldview, is portrayed as the answer to life's hard questions such as, what happens after we die? What is moral? What is our purpose? It presents itself as objective and exclusive truth. It is objective because God, the ultimate authority, communicates it to man in the form of the Bible. Secondly, it is exclusive because it is presented as the only means for salvation as well as the antidote for damnation. On the other hand, science and the scientific process present Millennials with an alternative version of truth—one that is backed by rigorous empirical testing and evidence and does not depend on divine influences or ancient manuscripts. In this section I will describe Millennials' experiences as they seek a worldview to connect with and understand.

Millennials indicate that they learn from a variety of venues including religious authorities, family, the Internet, friends and social groups, books, music and other media, as well as part of formal education in classes at church, school, and college. This section describes both the different components of active learning Millennials use when creating their worldviews and how this learning tends to have the unintended consequence of

alienating Millennials from Christianity. The first component of active learning is participation in spiritual endeavors. This is where the person actively tries to learn about and participate in a spiritual experience or environment. The second aspect of active learning deals with what Millennials learn from Christian and non-Christian sources; this includes learning about doctrine, the Bible, and apologetics (defenses of the faith) as well as humanistic ideas and scientific explanations for the natural world. Based on their education, Millennials actively form their systems of belief concerning Christianity, truth, and life's important questions. These experiences highly influence Millennials to quit attending church and often to discard their Christian beliefs as well.

As previously stated, one of the ways Millennials initially attempt to connect with Christianity is through participation in spiritual behaviors. They are encouraged to do this by their religious authorities, and/or parents and peers. The most common spiritual engagement mentioned by Millennials is that of prayer. Although prayer is touted in the religious community as a failsafe option for resolving conflicts in the spiritual and natural realms, many Millennials find it severely lacking in results. Here are some examples of these experiences and the subsequent reactions. First, Jason says this about his experience with prayer:

Well, this could...this might be like...transitioning into not believing anymore but, it just seems like they were...Okay, part of my story I guess I should go back is that...I kind of, I grew up believing that you can pray and have those prayers answered but I actually never saw them being answered. So, for me living in a church kind of community where I was hearing about people's prayers getting answered, but not actually seeing any of them. Or any of the things that they were claiming were them being answered, which were just typical things that would happen anyway. Um...it's like I started hearing more and more about these prayers being answered and I was

looking around and not seeing, not actually seeing anything. So the being ridiculous would be them like attributing all these things to prayers being answered.

Here, Jason's response to not seeing results from prayers is that he found the whole idea ridiculous. Also, Olivia echoes the sentiment that prayer is ineffective and unnecessary in her statement:

Um well there was a part after my parents divorced when I was about 11 and there were a series of events of things that happened to me and my brother and my mom. And my mom always you know, her thing was always, you know, 'I'm gonna pray about it' you know, 'God is going to deliver us; he is going to help us' and for me...I never saw that help. And so I saw for my mom and for a lot people in my family, you know, they equated, you know, doing well and being happy with the grace of God and because I didn't see you know, wellness happening and because I wasn't happy but I was always praying and you know, my mom stuck it to me that we have to pray and even when I did it even when I didn't want to do it—I didn't see what you know we were expecting to get from it. And so I think that's what started the whole you know, 'am I really? Do I really need to do this? Is this really doing anything for us?'

In this example, the dissonance that occurred between the act of prayer and the lack of results caused Olivia to reconsider the need for prayer. Additionally, Ashley had this to say about her attempt to commit her life to Christ and receive a spiritual impartation after an alter call:

Um and so I went down and I did it, and I said the prayer because he says the prayer with you and then somebody came and got me and you know, we talked about it. And I just remember kind of being like, 'this feels no different...I feel absolutely no different.' ....Yeah, I remember like looking around and I was like...where's the epiphany I was supposed to have? You know and it was just like, damn it! You know I thought that this was going to be it! I thought this was going to change my life forever! (laughs) And nothing's different. And of course I went on for you know, and I thought well maybe I have to give Him some more time, maybe I have to pray more, so I would say for a couple more weeks you know I went and then it was like okay...really—nothing is different....No, I didn't share—because I felt bad! 'Cause I was like, 'maybe I said the prayer wrong—did I forget a word?' (Laughs) 'Cause you know I'm a little bit younger so I was like if I did it wrong, maybe I don't want—maybe there's something wrong with me...like He doesn't want to like, you know. It

was all these different things so I didn't want to bring it up. And then after, you know, a while I just stopped going. And then right—pretty soon after that is when I kind of merged into kind of that higher thinking of well like maybe this religion and stuff just isn't real!

What is significant about Ashley's disappointing lack of experience with the supernatural is that it not only caused her to leave church soon thereafter, but it contributed to extinguishing her basic belief in Christianity. Lindsey, a white female Millennial from a Pentecostal background describes a similar lack of experience with the supernatural. Like Ashley and Jason, she feels as though this is the result of something being wrong with her:

But even back then I noticed that I had felt a disconnect from my peers because they were happier with it. Like, they...I, I associated with people who were more, I guess you would say more of the evangelical tradition, so more emphasis is made in Biblical literalism and on prayer and the idea that the relationship, this personal relationship with God is not just something you would pray about...it's like—you're supposed to get something back. And I didn't feel like I could do that. I felt like I was great at praying but I didn't feel like anything I heard was distinguishable from the voices I heard in my head, I guess. Yeah, so maybe I held a higher standard of uh, you know, proof maybe than some other people do, I don't know, maybe it's the fact why I ended up as a science major. But, it, of course I didn't. Of course I suppressed that you know, that, so of course I didn't think about that too much because it's scary. Well, I did! I actually thought about it a lot but I didn't think about it in the sense that maybe God didn't exist, I thought something was wrong with me. I spent many years believing that something was wrong with me.

These are just a few examples of how attempts at spiritual participation in the supernatural resulted in a failure to connect to the divine and produced negative thoughts about prayer, Christianity, and themselves.

Another way Millennials learn as part of their objective search for truth is through the education that comes from Christian and secular sources. Christian sources offer information about the doctrine of Christianity, scripture, and apologetics or defenses of the

faith. On the other hand, Millennials' secular education makes them aware of an alternative worldview that is oftentimes very contradictory of what they were raised to believe from their Christian education. They learn about science in more depth and the arguments of the skeptical community about religion, Christianity, and God. Upon comparing these competing systems of information, nearly all the Millennials decide that the information they learn from secular sources is more credible. That is not to say this is an easy admission for them to make. Some Millennials become saddened or angry initially when they first become exposed to those ideas and try to avoid them for a period of time. Others initially try to contend with the ideas directly by attempting to defend their Christian beliefs. Nevertheless, eventually most of them end up admitting that they simply find the secular arguments and ideas more credible than the religious ones. For example, Lindsay describes what this process was like for her:

I checked out some books on apologetics, like defending the Christian faith, and I remember thinking their arguments seemed weak. But what do I know? I'm a 15 year old kid; these are men with degrees, they know what they're talking about. So it comforted me for a time, like oh well smart people believe this, what I didn't realize was that smart people believe a whole range of things, you know.... One of the things that was a catalyst for me leaving the faith was uh, evolution. I'm a biologist and I was raised to be creationist and I was homeschooled. And the text that we used were creationist and um tried to present evidence against evolution which I later learned was wrong. And um, I split—I started suspecting it was wrong when I started you know, going to college and stuff. Then I read a really great book that laid out the case for evolution from a Christian perspective actually and I thought, 'oh, you know, this makes more sense.' Whatever and I still felt like I was in flux with my...faith, which how did I get to there I don't know.... And, um, but I thought when I realize the truth about evolutionary theory and science I thought, well, whatever faith I have needs to be compatible with this...and somehow over that time, 2010, it would be about when I was 19, somehow, I'm still not sure how, maybe just because I was on the Internet more or reading more books, I came...would come across opinions that were not what I was raised with, atheistic or secular opinions. And at first it was just too much and I would just shut it off and it would make me go crazy

and run away you know, it was almost like getting desensitized to it. The more little things that I read though, the more that I started to go, 'they have a point.' Maybe...maybe this Biblical literalism stuff doesn't make sense.

In this example, Lindsey describes learning the Christian worldview from her creationist homeschooling and Christian apologetics materials, and contrasting it with the things she was also learning from secular books and the Internet. In her search for understanding, Lindsey is confronted by competing versions of truth about the origin of the natural world—it is either the result of evolution or God created it. Lindsey quickly concludes in favor of evolution and mentions how she felt she was taught the wrong information about evolution from Christian sources. This is important because her words suggest that she felt misled by her creationist materials, which indicates a loss of trust in that source.

Additionally, though she was scared at first of what she was learning, Lindsey viewed the arguments made by Christians as weak compared to those in the secular community and she eventually responded to this conviction by recognizing they had made arguments that were reasonable to her—more reasonable than Biblical literalism such as the creations of the earth in six days. Similarly, Phil said this about the convergence of his Christian education and secular education:

And I, like in college I was an English major so I learned right away about deconstruction and postmodernism and every like the most popular intellectual movement of the last 50 years or whatever and I was like, 'oh that explains why I was told in high school one version of truth and now I'm being told a current version of truth.' It's like oh that actually makes sense about how the world works is people are just saying what they think is true. And then coupled with the fact that I took the Human Species and like I learned about evolution and it was like, 'oh I understand now' because...I guess in High School they were like oh there's a difference between micro and macro evolution and like, you know, one isn't true and the other one is, and I was like, 'okay that makes sense.' And then someone with actually a degree instead of just you know an old housewife who is now teaching at a school um

actually told me it's like, 'oh it's just the same thing, just on a longer time frame.' .... And I was like, 'oh that's evolution; oh I understand, I get it.' And then...between like realizing that everything I was taught about Marxism and Freud was wrong, everything I was taught about evolution was wrong, the fact that just going to church made me feel like shit because I was gay. Like I was just like, 'oh I just don't need to go anymore.'

In similar stride as Lindsey, Phil describes a kind of awakening experience where he becomes aware that he was misled by his Christian education and is glad to finally learn an unadulterated version of events and history. Phil observes that the Christians who taught him are just teaching what they believe is true, though he did not perceive them to be very credible sources of information (housewife vs. person with degree). Thus, the result of these revelations for Phil is the conclusion that further participation at a church is unnecessary. In another example, Eric contrasts his reading of the Bible with the ideas influencing him from secular literature:

Uh well when I was thirteen I went to a church camp and had like a come to Jesus moment—like a revolutionary moment of faith, love of Jesus, whatever. And I was convinced that I had seen Jesus; that He had talked to me, that I was saved. Um that all that stuff was great and so I got back from church camp and went and hung out with my girlfriend at the time, and went over to her house and saw her parents drinking liquor or something. And I was like, 'those sinners! those sinners!' and wrote her like a huge letter about how we had to break up because she didn't love Jesus enough. And so I started going through reading the Bible and being like, well is this like righteous anger, is this like something that I should look at, is this a problem in my own faith, like whatever. And then through that process of reading the Bible and trying to figure like what my faith should be, what my faith is...uh I really just lost all of my belief in divinity, really.... At the time too I was reading um...a bunch of science fiction and speculative literature, stuff like that, and that was really critical of Christianity and of faith basically. It was like, 'no, you need to stop believing in things and start testing things.'

In this example, Eric turns to the Bible as he is questioning his faith and the anger he has been feeling at other Christians after his supernatural experience. He actually finds that he

loses his faith in the course of his study of the Bible. Furthermore, he is also highly influenced by the secular works he was being exposed to at the time, which is partially responsible for his decision to exchange belief with the more scientific process of deriving knowledge—empirical testing. Additionally, Julio says this about his education:

Well I had already started going to church, and of course in the University you start learning a lot of stuff and around that time I started learning about the skeptical movement and one of my favorite people are Penn and Teller and.... Especially Penn Jillette, what are like; what he had to say. The first time I actually started listening to atheists, and listening to what they had to say. And I still like was holding off, it took a little bit of time to actually call myself actually an atheist actually....

Furthermore, Julio explained to me what effect this learning had on him personally:

Well that, I guess that the church was not the 'end all be all' of truth and knowledge. There were other places, especially when you had the Internet and other cultural sense—other thought and points of view. Like the church wasn't the only place to have truth and knowledge.

In this testimony, Julio describes University classes, the Internet, and atheist role models as being highly influential in his observation that there is truth apart from Christianity.

Additionally, Omar also describes the connection he made between learning and lack of belief:

Um I never really believed in that stuff and the more I learned about science...and (unclear dialogue) and all that stuff, the less sense it made. I just kind of kept going because it was the socially acceptable thing to do.

Omar directly expresses the relationship between an increase in knowledge of science and the resulting decrease in belief and understanding of Christianity. As a result of this internal decision, he observes that he only continued attendance because of the social obligation he felt and not because of any personal conviction or belief in the faith.

Moreover, Chris extrapolates that there is no objective or absolute truth shortly after beginning attendance at University:

And then I went to college, and um, started to learn more about the world and about people. And you know what I really, what really stuck with? Early in college I learned that there's no, well I didn't learn but I think I just kind of intuited that there's no absolute truth to the world because there's so many people with so many different beliefs. Even within Christianity you have disagreeing people. And something that I've stuck with since I was 19 and I may hold the rest of my life is that there is no absolute truth, that every knowledge, everything that humans know is constructed—it's socially constructed.

By contrast, John, a white male from a Non-denominational and Presbyterian background describes trying to initially defend the faith against the secular arguments as well as inspire other members of his youth group to consider the arguments themselves:

I was doing four religious things and I found out that I was playing devil's advocate a lot because I guess just because I went on this forum; it's actually a gaming forum—major league gaming—it's like a professional gaming league. But I would often go to the thought provoking discussion section, which is filled with a lot of atheist people who think differently from me. And I was open to that—I thought that they were wrong, but I was also open to what they had to say. And um, there are a lot of smart theists on there, smarter than me and there are also a lot of atheists on there. And a lot of the time, the atheists would be making better arguments than the theists would be and it'd just kind of, you know, mess with what I was thinking. And so I'd be in these bible studies and I would find that uh people would bring up arguments that I already heard. Like every single argument brought up—I'd already heard, so just in the sake of uh keeping the discussion lively and you know, going, I would play devil's advocate. Just be like well...here's a counter argument to the argument that you are proposing. And then they would have nothing to say after that and this was every single time and they would be like, 'oh, well you are not reading it within the context' and I would explain the context to them and it would be like, 'yeah I am explaining within the context.' ....So yeah, it was that and um then uh it was just as I was going to church—oh and then Sunday mornings before church I started going to a book club, where we would read Christian novels and it was basically Christian nonfiction and we would discuss those, so I was doing a lot of Christian stuff. And um again more arguments that—I was reading books that before had made such *valid* and *great* points and I was looking at them and as I'm *reading* them, you know, as a Christian I am debunking every argument that I come across and I'm like, 'am I

supposed to be doing this right now?’ And you know, I would do that in the meetings and they would be like you are missing the point John, the point is that you just have to trust God. And I was like, no, no that’s not the point! This argument is fallacious; it’s circular. This argument doesn’t even work! You can’t, you know, say this is a great argument and then when I show its *wrong*, be like, ‘oh, well you know it’s just like a moral story.’ That’s not how this works.

In this example, John starts learning new ideas from a discussion forum on the Internet. He immediately observes that the atheists were making better arguments for their worldview than those who believed in a divine power. John reacts by trying to defend his faith by playing devil’s advocate in his Christian involvement groups and is met with disappointing results—lack of involvement of his peers. The result of his education is that he increasingly is more adept at debunking Christian arguments in the Christian books he at one time had so much respect for. He clearly is recognizing the credibility and usefulness of these new ideas that are contrary to his beliefs.

#### *Untenable: Disengagement from Christianity and Christians*

Through the reflexive process of learning and questioning their beliefs, Millennials identify alternative perspectives that cause them to make decisions about what they believe about the truthfulness of Christianity. At this stage, many conservatively raised Millennials are discovering that Christianity and church are no longer viable options for them. The reasons for this are twofold. First, they are finding that they feel very disconnected and disillusioned with Christianity, the Bible, and Christians. Second, they are discovering that they believe something new that replaces the need for belief in Christianity. Thus, the result is that these Millennials are no longer seeing church as a personal necessity.

## Converging Incompatible Philosophies

Something interesting starts to happen when Millennials begin to think more scientifically: they become aware of a philosophical disconnect happening between them and their faith as well as with other Christians. One factor leading to this disconnect is the lack of comprehension Millennials have concerning the reason for belief in the faith. This comprehension is lacking in many cases because of the absence of meaningful discussion about the issues these Millennials are struggling with and questioning. Oftentimes they find that Christians are unwilling to engage in discussion and often resort to overly simplistic or faith-based answers to their questions and concerns, which make little or no sense to Millennials who are struggling to understand why they should believe at all. This behavior is described here as the result of an incompatible philosophy, defined as competing views about the nature of reality, knowledge, and existence. As the Millennials increasingly employ the empirical evaluations they learn about with regard to the ideas and beliefs of Christianity, they often discover that Christians have a competing mindset that is difficult to engage with and hinders effective communication. This is a point of frustration for many Millennials. Because of this and because of what they learn over time about Christians and Christianity, they find themselves becoming very disillusioned with the whole Christian package—the lay believers, the faith, and church leadership. For example, Lindsey describes it this way:

So that was....my getting further involved in church wound up just cementing my ideological opposition to Evangelical Christianity, you know?.... I would find some alternative because I think, I think that you can easily find a church that is what I would call, a social good. Like, there may be; they're pro-gay rights, they're pro women's rights and all of this stuff you know; they're a force for social good. But I

can't get away from the fact that as long as they're still holding a belief in a God, in a Bible that proclaims so many things that are harmful, I just, I can't associate myself with that, even if, they ignore 90% of it and are a force for good.

Lindsey is describing how her fundamental beliefs or ideology about the existence of a God has shifted and the result is that all the other corresponding beliefs of the religion become meaningless because they are incompatible with her lack of belief in a God. Christina similarly describes her shift:

And I became more educated about certain things and now I won't let anyone tell me certain things that I feel are not true. Just because they're saying, 'you should do it this way, this is the best way.' It's like, 'ok what's your proof? How do you know that's the best way?' Basically. I'm not living in illusion anymore, basically.

In this example, Christina's ideology—scientific process of evaluating truth—shows itself in her statement demanding evidence to support a claim. Her additional statement that she does not live in illusion anymore further signifies that her core beliefs are no longer compatible with those who are still living in the illusion, i.e., Christians.

Additionally, the Bible is just another man-made creation to the Millennials. For example, Patrick describes the Bible this way:

....—and I personally don't think, I personally don't think the Bible is that written text by God, you know, like it is it is a man-made doctrine, uh which is to be followed to some degree but I think that it's—it's more to like learn from as opposed to, you know, follow by these abiding rules or abide by these rules and that sort of thing.

Because Patrick does not believe that the Bible is a God-inspired document is precisely why he does not feel the need to follow it literally. At best it is a guide to how to live one's life.

Another woman, Jasmine, echoes this sentiment as she describes her conviction that the Bible is a man-derived work:

To me, I'm like, 'where did we get the bible from?' Some guy just wrote it, that's how it happened to be completely honest.

Additionally, Louis observes this about the creation of the Bible:

So, the more and more, you know, I dive into it, it was just like, the *origin* and *the spread* of Catholicism, for me, got to a point where, I don't know, I didn't like it, I'm not about it, I really didn't believe about it, and the more I learned about the constitution of the Bible, or that you know that—the Bible is man made. You know, like, they decided which book they wanted to put in it and which book they didn't want to put in it. You know? They had, I think it was called the Nicene Creed, or, um, Nicene Creed, um, where you know, like people would—when they had, they had like a big, you know, um, arguments, uh, or discussions, upon like what's right or what is not right about the Bible and these people would *vote* on it.

In other words, the more Louis learned, the more he became aware of his own doubts about his faith and the book that the faith is based on. He viewed the compilation of the Bible as being a significantly uninspired event; men argued, discussed and voted the books of the Bible together. Furthermore, this conviction made it difficult for Louis to view the Bible as a holy and spiritual document worthy of his belief.

Combine this lack of belief in the spiritual authenticity of the Bible with a lack of answers from the Christian community to the Millennials' questions and the result is a recipe for departure, both from church and oftentimes from faith in Christianity as well. For example, Millennial Omar, a Hispanic white male from a Catholic background says this about his experience with questioning scriptures, the authenticity of the Bible as a divinely inspired book, and lack of discussion by religious leadership:

Yeah, they *don't* go over that kind of stuff. Which I feel like they should address, but I don't know how they're going to justify it...um but I'm sure that they go about their ways....Yeah, there's just a lot of bad things going on in the Bible, which I couldn't go along with. Yeah, I mean there—it needs to be properly interpreted and all that stuff but I know a lot of these have...explanations, but I think that most explanations that

I've seen are just trying really, really hard to explain something. Like make it good out of something that is not going to be good because it's—. After all, it's just a book that we found in the desert, well—put together by...I forget the council's name. Isaiah I think or something? Some council in Roman society I think put together the Bible. I mean I'm not very informed on this I just kind of heard um...when is it—I don't think they were going to get it right at that point just from what we knew about the world and now we're just struggling really hard to make it fit....Um...I just—it started turning me *very* much against it. And I got *so* frustrated because most people don't question it, most people don't even—most people have never read the Bible. And...so there I was alone with my struggles...the priest telling me, 'okay, it's okay—just don't think about it.' Some of them would...when talking to a Christian, usually what I find is that they don't really...it's almost like they're searching for talking points. So you can give them a bunch of things, um, tell them about...alright the bear summoner, the flood, all these sort of things that you don't agree with and then mention Timothy and they'll be like, 'aha! Timothy! That's the new Testament and that guy was only trying to adapt to Roman society because they were not going to survive if they did not adapt to women's role in Roman society.' But then they've ignored every other point I've made—and that deterministic point you just can't justify. So I mean it's one of those things and then they'll summon faith. They'll say, 'well you have to have faith.' I guess that's just something I don't have in me.

Another Millennial Louis, a black male from a Catholic background, describes his disconnect from faith this way:

Um, really, like I stopped going to church because, I don't know, I reached a point where, there was a disconnection. Like, like, I don't know what the hell the guy was talking about....Back, back in Haiti a lot, what they do is a lot of the churches—they're like *super* official and, you have, you know like, the priest or the highest of the priest that is there, he comes and he opened up the book and starts talking in Latin and like people are like looking at him and not knowing what the hell he is saying.

Louis is saying that he is feeling disconnected because he cannot understand what is being said by the Priest. The format of presenting the information is literally in another language and does not lend itself to be understood by laypeople without any training in obscure ancient languages—hence the inability to relate to the material. However, later on Louis explains an additional component of his disconnect with the doctrine of the faith:

So, I just felt like...a *big* disconnection, in terms of like, yeah, I did my first communion. When I did it, I did not know all the Ten Commandments. Um, like, I wasn't the holiest person there. You know, like, for me, why did I get, you know, where's my...I got, I got—I did my first communion because I was supposed to do my first communion.... Um, but to say that, I did not really know...I wasn't like, I wasn't too deep into it, in. I wasn't deep, I don't think, I don't think I should have gotten, I should have, me, gave my communion I think maybe more like did, had an adverse effect... Because, I felt like more, like, yeah, we had to pay money, you know, to get my first communion. You know, like, like you pay money for it. So, I don't know, like, it's *not* like I don't know my ten—my Ten Commandments; I'm paying *you*, you understand? So, it's not like, "learn these and understand them," you know? Like, memorize. You know, not like, "thou shalt not kill." "Why, why shall I not kill?" You know, there was no way of discussion on it. So that kind of just brought me away from the Catholic Church, to say. But, upon coming here, um, friends would invite me to different churches and um, I still attend, um, but, it was always, with like...like a bias of, I understand that, you know, like, you move the masses. I'm personally not someone, I don't like to be a part of the machine, you know? Like, I don't like to be pushed around, told what to believe, you know? How to think and, and, like, I'm very independent and I have an idea that's tied to freedom and to—to the thought process that I felt was not—was not...correct. And—and you had a lot of the same, um, you know, *Christians* and everything of the sort being one of the *evilest* people in the—the planet.

Here Louis is explaining that he only did his first communion, a critical rite of passage of the Catholic faith, because he felt obligated to do it and not because he was spiritually ready for it. Furthermore, he did not have a grasp of the reasons for the Ten Commandments that would enable him to personally connect with the doctrine. This is primarily due to the lack of discussion involved with the process—it was dependent only on money and rote memorization. This cold and passionless exchange left Louis far from satisfied with his experience and he delineates how this had an influence in driving him away from church. His disillusionment is evident in how he describes occasionally attending church with bias—refusing to be manipulated. His opinion of Christians being evil is especially telling

of his current resolve not to be affiliated with church. Here is how Jason describes his experience:

Well, the Catholic Church—I didn't have a lot of these doubts back then, so I just lost interest in it. It was the non-denominational one, where if I had any questions about it—actually I did bring it up with someone in Bible study. Like there was something that was in the Bible that I was like, disagreeing with or interpreting it how differently than what they were saying I was supposed to interpret it. And I brought that up and it was just, 'no no, you are supposed to take it this way, not that way.' Even though it says this other thing. Like it blatantly says something else but I'm supposed to interpret it some other rose-colored way.... I felt like...well it was that feeling that they were like dodging something. Like, they wouldn't have to be so...um dodgy about something if they knew it was the right thing, you know? They knew that they—if they had a feeling that they were wrong about something they wouldn't be supporting it. Or maybe they did know that they were wrong so they *had* to go out of their way to kind of.... One of the things I guess that the church, uh, part of the brainwashing is that it brings you up to believe things and not have it change, like no matter what, like that's a bad thing to change your mind. And the problem with that is that if you're wrong, and you don't change your mind, then you continue to be wrong. So one of the things that I was noticing there is I was sort of you know, thinking through what they people were telling me to interpret this stuff as and I was actually interpreting myself, and there was a disconnect there. And they were telling me, no just believe—or interpret how we're going to interpret it and don't think for yourself essentially. Yeah, and I couldn't do that anymore. Even though I kind of went along with it, I didn't actually tell them that I wasn't interpreting it how they were, I just kind of dropped the subject and let it slip by.

In this example, Jason is discouraged from thinking for himself about the discrepancies he notices in the scriptures of the Bible. He wonders about why Christians seem so evasive about these issues and considers the possible motives for this behavior. He ultimately concludes that he cannot suppress his intellect and resolves the issue by not voicing his objections anymore. Also, John had this to say about the mindset of Christians in the face of an uncertain and very serious moment in his life:

Um and then in February of 2011, my dad had a massive heart attack, almost died—what, what they call the widow maker. Um he had a 2% chance of survival, a 0.02%

chance of surviving with full functionality afterward. So uh that was like a—that was a big thing that you know of course made me very negative and people were just like, ‘oh you gotta have faith and God will fix everything’ and I’m like, ‘dude!’ That is like, that’s not—and that’s when I started realizing the kind of thinking that Christians get into that I just didn’t agree with. Um and I was like, ‘no, the doctors are like—they are doing everything.’ And they were like, ‘oh well, God is guiding the doctors’ and I was like, ‘have you ever considered, you know, maybe what would happen with heart attacks before we had the ability to take care of people? Like would God have saved them then?’ No! Because it’s all within the capability of the doctors, not this omniscient being who’s supposed to be doing these things. So oddly enough, as soon as doctors figure how to, you know, take care of people who have had massive heart attacks and keep them alive until they get better, that’s when God starts helping people with heart attacks...the prayers are working! Imagine that? So that um, I started to become way more skeptical at that point in time and this just kind of continued as I was going to church until about August. Um and I would be going to church and I would just not be learning anything new anymore; I’d be like I already know this story, I already know how it turns out, I already know everything about it. The pastors are supposed to know more than me, you know, they would be like presenting things, like ‘oh well here’s what you should be getting out of this’ and I would be like, ‘well duh, I already know that.’ I wouldn’t be getting anything new.

In this example, John was frustrated with the statements of faith made by Christians when his father was met with a potentially killer heart attack and was in the hospital. He felt disconnected and angered by their optimism that God was going to supernaturally work everything out. He reasoned that trust and belief pragmatically belonged to the doctors that were actually present and working on his dad rather than a supernatural being. In this example, Kris laments over how his mother is now difficult to relate to due to her Christian beliefs and mindset:

My mother is infatuated with like God and like all that sort of stuff. And I’m okay with that, I’m all right with that, but she’s so into it to the point where the person she used to be before all that is just nonexistent.... Well she was more like open about the world most of the time. Whenever we talk about anything when it comes to like politics or about like family or things going wrong, she always has to include Jesus, Christianity...belief in God. I mean, I have nothing wrong with that, but whenever she talks about that it seems like she’s using that as an excuse like every

time like that's the answer to everything, and it might be, but you shouldn't just like, use that every time you feel like you're incorrect. But like I won't speak to that to her directly because I don't want to like argue with her or hurt her feelings or nothing. I just want her to be happy and if this makes her happy then I'm good with it. But...(pause)....I feel like she can't come up with a better excuse, like she always has to include God as her belief because she can't come up with a real world response and stuff, she can't speak like a normal person would, she can't speak like you should. Like yeah it's always like, you should pray to God and stuff, mostly because she can't think of anything else to believe in other than that. It's not a bad thing, its just not the way I view things.

Kris feels disconnected from his mom almost as if they are speaking different languages, and in a sense they are—she is speaking the language of her beliefs in otherworldly things and he is speaking according to the physical world he can interact with. Kris is one of only three Millennials that I interviewed who maintains some form of Christian belief. Yet, like the Millennials who have lost their belief, he also cannot relate to the mindset of Christians who see nothing else but their own spiritual perspective. Like Kris, Samantha also remarks on this mentality as she observed it in her mom:

And I'd asked that—those kind of questions; not quite in that detail but um my mom would basically just say, 'because the Bible says so, or go ask the pastor,' like I never really got answers from my mother. She was the *worst* one when it came to getting answers. And I remember like the frustration kind of grew specifically with like people that I kind of associated with my mother that they just kind of blindly believed. And I just never quite understood that.

Similarly, Chris echoes this sentiment that Christians use their Christian beliefs as an excuse. This is what he said about gay marriage when I asked if he ever brought up his concerns with the leaders in his congregation:

But, for some reason you have this—literally this mental block. There's this wall of Christian beliefs that says 'no, no, no...they can't get married.' 'Why can't they get married?' 'Because the Bible says so.' 'No but, *why?* Is there a better reason, is there a logical reason?' 'Well because God says so,' and that is—I give respect to that; that

is logic to someone that believes in God. I mean I believe in human equality, that's a belief that I have, that's my *reason why* they *should* be able to get married. But the reason for Christians is because God says so. Equally as logical, but in my mind, as somebody that doesn't believe in God, it's...it means nothing.

In this testimony, Chris is not given any satisfactory answers to his questions or doubts.

Like others, he perceives that Christians use God and their beliefs as answers for things that carry very little to no explanatory power or weight for someone without the same beliefs. Thus, Millennials are left to fend for themselves intellectually and spiritually in many cases, grappling with their doubts and their questions until they find a resolve.

Unfortunately for the church, this resolve is often contrary to belief, adherence to the faith, and attendance.

### Replacement Worldview

After struggling with their doubts about Christianity, Millennials finally resolve their search for truth. The common resolve is that there is no objective truth outside of what they can discover through empirical testing. Regarding objective truth, Millennials overwhelmingly adopt the scientific method for understanding the natural world around them. For example, Hector outlines this process for himself:

I go home and then I look up just random stuff about evolution and sexuality and stuff like that on the internet, like lectures. And at first it kind of angers you because you've been taught all this throughout your 17 years and this comes in and makes too much sense so you shut it out. But then gradually, you know, it starts sinking in and you realize that, you know, those other people are wrong and these people here with the science are right. So that's pretty much why I stopped.

Furthermore, Chris articulates how this lack of spiritual or supernatural experience has personally affected him:

But for *me*, not seeing is not believing and I don't think that's *fair*, if that makes sense. Why wouldn't God reveal Himself to us in a more tangible way—especially now when you have less believers than you've ever had and Christianity is...uh it's shrinking. I think that in uh, a 100 years it's going to be dying...even. Ugh...you never know. Especially the more I learn about science, you know? And in that respect I think that science has replaced my understanding of God, because the idea of God is that it's creation.

What started out as a lack of spiritual connection reaches a resolve to not only disbelieve in God but to cling to science instead.

For trickier subjects like morality, Millennials have to rely on their best judgment and the guidance of non-dogmatic ideas from a variety of sources including other religions. By this point, the Millennials' experiences have convinced them that evidence for belief in and adherence to the Christian God's strict morality (i.e. the 10 commandments) is significantly lacking. The resulting freedom from belief in literal, conservative Christian doctrine allows them to construct their own beliefs in a way that most benefits them as individuals. In other words, objective conviction that there is no God allows for a subjective compilation of beliefs that are personally suited to each Millennial. For example, this is how Ashley describes her belief development:

So you know, and also as you get older you kind of start to look for things on your own, and so then I started researching other religions and you know those kind of sounded good but then eventually I was like of like well more of the same...So then like probably around the age of like 15 or like 16 I'd like declared myself as an atheist. And so obviously when you're an atheist you've got to stop going to church (laughs)... I mean when you look at it; it's kind of all like as far as like on a God level—it's kind of the same story but rehashed in different times and in different ways. And then like Buddhism was kind of like, well it's not really a religion it's more just like kind of a lifestyle. So it's kind of like sure I agree with those things but I wouldn't identify as a Buddhist, so it's kind of like...Or then the same thing with like Hindu stuff—that was all the reincarnation stuff, and I was kind of like...ugh, that's kind of as hokey as the other stuff was so...I was just kind of like well none of

this really—and the only thing that did sound good was the atheism, where there's science and there's facts, and you know, that seemed like the most logical thing to go with and so that's where I'm at.

Ashley's desire for objectivity leads her to what she considers to be the only objective and logical worldview—atheism—precisely because it does not involve “hokey” beliefs that have no evidence to back them up. She adopts the worldview that operates through empiricism and is devoid of unnecessary and undesirable speculative spirituality.

Additionally, Chris describes his beliefs this way:

Um I don't have a problem with the Word itself, I mean how could you...it's—in some ways I feel about Christianity these days the way I feel about Buddhism; there's good things to take from it, there's also things I don't believe. I don't believe in reincarnation. But um I do believe that it's very helpful to meditate on your feelings sometimes and to um to try to understand of the existences around you, you know? Basically nature; to get in touch with nature and how by helping nature you help yourself because we live off of nature and nature lives off of us, and it's a Buddhist ideal and Taoist type stuff too. But I wouldn't call myself a Buddhist, you know? So and I think the only reason I now identify as an atheist—and I have friends who believe almost exactly like I do, and they don't call themselves atheists, um and that's because I *do not* believe in a god, I don't think there is a god.

Here, Chris sees the value of pulling ideas from Christianity and Buddhism without becoming dogmatic about either. However, the core worldview he has resolved for himself is atheism, since he has found no reason to believe in the existence of God. In a more dramatic example, Phil describes his current beliefs in a sharp departure from his former beliefs:

Um I'm like a—pseudo pagan. Like I say I worship the devil because I find it funny and shocking (laughs). And I guess maybe I do...I don't know. Like that's all...I mean the devil is just based on images of pan from like Greek mythology so...like even saying “the devil” is like buying into the whole Christian worldview all over again so. I don't know I guess I would say it's like pseudo-spirituality—where it's like I feel

spiritual but like I understand like our—my understanding is, you know, like you're basically on your own in the world, besides all the other people here with you.

Although Phil may say that he has “pseudo pagan” beliefs or worships the devil, his underlying verdict is the atheistic conviction that there is no such thing as God or the devil.

Moreover, Jasmine makes this observation about her personal beliefs:

So I need that time to review on what makes me *me* and how that interplays with my belief system. I don't see myself necessarily following a really large organized belief system or anything like that, I do however see myself grabbing different beliefs from everything that I've encountered. Um, as much as I'm—I really don't know whether or not I believe that there is a God.

Jasmine, like the others before her, is describing both a subjective and objective belief structure. Her objective belief is that she doesn't necessarily believe in God. That core understanding allows her to freely pull ideas from different sources to create her own unique beliefs. Finally, Louis expresses his enthusiasm for creating a system of belief that is uniquely his own:

The ultimate question is, do you believe in God? No or Yes? And, and that is directly, no....Um, so with Buddhism it installed the idea that like okay so, that where we first started doesn't really matter. Whatever. Um and it built upon the concepts of karma. Um, of *energy* and that's what was one of my *biggest* things that tied into, was energy. Um, and when I say energy, just like, I say loosely based off of my definition. What Buddhism gave me, Buddhism gave me the tools to *create my own religion*. You see, *Louis's world religion*. It's *not* Christianity, it's not blah, blah; it's *mine*. You know, it's *my* belief systems, it's *my* morals, it's *my* values, but it has kinda given me a framework to put that under.

In this example, Louis clearly describes a similar process of resolving within himself that God does not exist and our origin is irrelevant to our behavior and life on earth. What we do with our lives is what matters—hence the mention of karma. With this core belief that God is not real, Louis is free to construct his subjective beliefs into a unique religion of his

own making. These findings are strongly supportive of Jeffrey Arnett's (2002) findings that emerging adults are constructing personalized belief systems. Indeed, they are—but now the reasons for them doing so are more clear. They simply do not believe that Christianity is objectively true—therefore they feel free to believe as they choose and to change their beliefs as they grow and develop new ideas and opinions.

#### Hostile Environment: Disengaging for Personal and Social Wellbeing

Viewing church or a congregation as a hostile and morally unsound environment is another major factor in the decision of many Millennials to stop attending. This feeling of hostility in church concerns both the individual and the group or society. In other words, Millennials anticipate or directly observe the potential for the church community to be hostile to themselves and/or others and this knowledge is acquired through first-hand experience and education. Although this process can be a totally independent cause of church defection, it often occurs alongside the cognitive and spiritual disconnect previously discussed.

#### *Feeling Unsafe in Church*

When discussing why they stopped attending church, many Millennials describe church as an unsafe place. The sense of feeling unsafe in church encompasses physical, emotional, and psychological components. Though there are many emotions and reactions Millennials have or perceive in others as a result of their inferences and experiences, fear is by far the most commonly mentioned emotion.

In discussing the physical element, I will demonstrate how observed and experienced physical harm and abuse negatively impacts Millennials' experience with church. For example, Jasmine describes how the physical abuse she sustained by an older boy she would be forced to see in church influenced her to stop attending:

Ok, I stopped going to church after the incident, I was maybe 10 or 11 and I was actually staying with a family friend he was about 2 years older than me and he wanted to play house which took a horrible turn for the worst and he's not a fan of the word "no," so, the only place I ever had to see him after that even though he was kind of a family friend was at church. His mom and my aunt were really close friends so they used to go to the same church together every weekend and it was the only place I ever had to deal with him coming up to me and making comments about it or like trying to threaten me with it. So, by avoiding church I avoided him and the whole issue and I just got to forget about it. And that was, other than that, I just—I never was able to feel comfortable in another church; I would go somewhere else and I guess I just kinda kept a wall up and I didn't want to be comfortable in the church grounds to be honest, so, after my family stopped pushing, I think was maybe when my mom moved to North Carolina, she was pregnant so she couldn't go and no one else was pushing me to try and find a church so I just stopped going completely in high school.

This instance of abuse had a profound effect on Jasmine's ability to attend church. After the abuse occurred, not only was she unable to feel comfortable in the church within which she was reared, but in all churches. Nor did she desire to find that comfort—she was done with church. Additionally, Christina became aware of her friend being abused and describes how it impacted her:

We kind of grew up together. I met her when I was probably when I was like 14 and then all the way until I was probably like around 18. And she had a step farther and they were new to church and you know the stepfather would always be like, 'oh I love God' and you know, everyday, 'God changed my life' and I would actually go to her house and I would go out to eat with them. My parents would let me but there was something about him that I never really liked. And then I guess, all of a sudden, it blew up that her mother caught them in the sexual act and.... He was molesting her from a young age, from since she was, I guess, 11 or 10. And she came to the

youth group and she was still getting molested....Umm, then you know, things lead to things and she became pregnant.... It was from her boyfriend that she was having.... Becomes pregnant, tells me first and another friend we had, you know, grew up together....And you know, I decide, we decide we should to tell our moms; my mom and our friend's mom and then they're going to tell *her* mom....And then after that it was kind of like...everything like blew up in my mom's, like face, basically. They were saying like my mom *knew* the whole time and a lot of people started like in the church saying that-that my mom was telling everybody or....So, that really like separated me. I was like; I don't want to be in this environment when people are treating us bad when we were trying to help. So after that, that was like my last straw. I didn't want to be in the church anymore.

Although the physical abuse did not happen directly to her, Christina was aware of the effect it had on her friend and she tried to intervene on her friend's behalf afterwards when she became pregnant. The result of doing so was destructive and she resolved within herself that the church environment was no longer worth her attendance because it was contributing so much negativity to her life.

Furthermore—regarding the emotionally and psychologically hostile component—Millennials discuss how emotional distress resulting from the church environment also plays a key role in Millennials' decision to leave. This aspect involves feelings of fear or isolation relating to Millennials' experiences with being homosexual and/or having doubts about the faith. For example, Olivia expresses how her struggle with a lack of spiritual connection left her isolated in her highly religious community:

And I think it contributed to my struggle with questioning, you know, because I feel like everyone had this faith in God and seeing what that faith did for other people around me and how, you know, it got them through the roughest of times, and I didn't have that; I couldn't connect with that.... I felt really, really *bad*—really *lost*. Like, 'what am I not doing, is there something that I'm not doing that I should be doing?' Um, you know, 'why am I not feeling this?' Like, I'm going to church, I'm praying, but I just don't get it. I felt really lost.... I did. And that's probably a reason why I choose not to attend church now is because when I—even after I've decided

not to go to church, I have gone and I just feel very...by myself. And sometimes it can be uncomfortable, and I'm—actually I've been trying to figure out why I feel so uncomfortable in that situation; if it's more about me and my comfort level than it is about the actual church atmosphere?... It's a struggle. Especially being African American or just being black and how prominent religion is in the black community and me being, you know, the only one of my friends, like my best friends that don't attend church, that don't believe in God and isn't religious like that...it's like, it just feels weird. Like I feel very by myself.

In her testimony, Olivia recognizes that she was feeling very lost in her church environment and community, since everyone seemed to be a believer except her. Furthermore, Ashley describes a similar sentiment where she felt inferior because of her lack of spiritual experience:

No, I didn't share—because I felt *bad!* Cause I was like, 'maybe I said the prayer wrong—did I forget a word?' (laughs) Cause you know I'm a little bit younger so I was like if I did it wrong, maybe I don't want—maybe there's something wrong with me...like He doesn't want to like, you know. It was all these different things so I didn't want to bring it up. And then after, you know, a while I just stopped going.

Ashley was describing how she felt rejected by God when she engaged in an altar call and prayed to receive salvation in her Baptist church. The interpretation she took away from her experience was that maybe God didn't want to reveal himself to her; maybe she was broken. If the one who was supposed to love her unconditionally was rejecting her by not revealing Himself, then why should she announce such a defeating reality to the people around her? Who knows what their reaction would be if God had rejected her. Ashley resolves to do the only thing that she feels won't hurt her further—slip away quietly and never return. Moreover, Patrick had this to say about his fear of being treated negatively because of his homosexuality:

A fear almost went into it as well, which yeah I guess now that I really think about it, yeah, there really was almost a fear. A fear of what could happen or what could be said, um which is partially maybe why I stopped going...sorry I had to think about that myself.... Yeah Yeah, um, and again not fear as in what are they are gonna say to me now, but what could they say to me because I've heard other cases or you know, like, what could be done...um, I mean as I've said thankfully I had my family there, the ones that truly cared for me regardless of who I am.

Similarly, Hector also mentions his homosexuality as being a major factor in him not wanting to be a part of the church environment:

Um, well I stopped going mainly when I was um around 16/17—that sort of deal um mainly because I was gay and there's just so much times that they tell you that your going to hell before it starts pissing you off so I, you know, just kind of....Yeah. So...then it starts getting to you and stuff like that, you know?

Another aspect of the emotional and intellectual component describes how Millennials' awareness of morally questionable aspects of the church also makes it a hostile environment. In this component, Millennials often discuss how they find it unwise to “blindly follow” church leadership and thus make themselves vulnerable to manipulation. This uncritical, unthinking type of devotion is usually mentioned as something to be concerned about. For example, Omar describes this concern in more detail:

I think that it, that it encourages like a group-thinking; like getting rid of individuality. Um, there's a lot of brainwashing that I notice um...it's like, whoever the leader is, just kind of spouts out anything and the people just...absorb it into them. It's...there are some dangerous things that can also be taught that I've noticed.

Here, Omar is describing the mentality of Christians as a type of groupthink, which can be defined as the practice of thinking that discourages dissenting opinions. He states this mentality is dangerous because it leaves the individual susceptible to manipulation. In

another example, John describes the feeling of being unsafe in one's own thoughts as another type of manipulation the church authorities conduct:

Fear, it's fear mongering...um essentially. They're saying, you know, 'oh well, like yeah, do what you want, you know, because we are all sinners but just know that it displeases God.' And all you *want to do* is please God; that's the whole purpose of all this is making sure God is pleased, so don't do things that displease God because if you do, then he's going to know. And if you don't, but you think about doing it, then he's going to know that too. So then you're kind of just completely shafted no matter what because you have this omniscient, omnipresent being who's everywhere and inside your head and any time. And he knows what you're going to think in the future, so it's like you're already *screwed* because you're like, 'well okay God, I'm sorry; I won't do that anymore I promise' and God's like, 'well actually on Tuesday, you know, around 8:07pm you are going to have those thoughts again, I know this' and but for some reason (laughs) it's like you're still taught like—it's just heavily upon mind—like editing yourself and editing your own thoughts and I don't know. It just seems kind of pointless to me. Not only is it wrong to make people edit their thoughts, but if you have a God that can get inside your head and knows what you're going to think in the future anyway, it kind of defeats the purpose because it's like, 'well He already knows what I'm going to think why would I bother? Like He knows what's going to happen no matter what,' so they're like, 'oh but that's not the point, the point is that you're supposed to try.' 'Oh! So it's like I get an A for effort and still fuck up anyway? That's the point? Okay.' So yeah, that's God being the Boogie Man, I guess.

Here, John is explaining his perception of how believers are manipulated into trying to censor their thoughts by the lingering and ever-present worry that God is watching and waiting inside their minds to see if they will slip and have bad thoughts. He calls this "God being the Boogie Man"—a emotionally, psychologically manipulative element akin to Santa knowing "who's naughty and nice." According to his thought, this is a no-win situation because no matter how hard a person tries to censor their thoughts they will never be able to completely succeed in doing so and thus will fail to fully please God. Therefore his fear mongering reference is meant to address how such a tactic can be used as a method of

control. Similarly, Julio describes what happens when he tries to hold back his thoughts for fear of God monitoring them:

And I remember that one of the main the biggest things for me was that God also looks at your thoughts and supposedly if you think it, about the thought, that's like if you have done it, and after—right after receiving my first communion, right after that, I felt like I was rid of all of my sins but right after I came out of the confession booth I couldn't hold back bad thoughts, so I thought that was like a contra—I think that is when I first started questioning, really questioning my belief in gods and stuff and slowly went from there and like just stopped going when I was—came to the University until I actually became an atheist.

In this example, Julio's reaction to not being able to control his thoughts immediately after his first communion has the inadvertent effect of making him question the existence of God.

Finally, while many of these examples deal with how the hostile environment of church directly affects these Millennials, I also want to demonstrate the concern these individuals have for the effect of Christianity on the wellbeing of people other than themselves. For example, this is what heterosexual Chris says about gay marriage:

So that being said, um I think that in some cases Christianity really fosters extreme, very prejudiced views about people and about things. And I think it's been delivered in a way—it's been wielded by people in a way that fosters hate. Especially, you know, there's absolutely no legitimate, logical reason that homosexuals should not be able to be as miserable as the rest of us and get married. ....And I think that any time you're denying somebody joy...and it's not going to hurt anybody else—it's not hurting anybody in the world directly when homosexuals get married. I mean there's no science in the world that *will* show that and *has* not. So...I think that—you can't call that hatred so much as ignorance.

Additionally, Hector expressed his concerns over the pope portraying contraceptives as worse than AIDS:

Oh well, like I've said, there's people that usually say that, you know, uh the church does a lot of charity work and stuff like that, and that is true. But then when the pope goes to tell Africa, the most AIDS ridden country in the world, that AIDS is bad

but condoms are worse, which he said, I'm like just flabbergasted! That AIDS is bad but condoms are worse. They actually spread a lie that condoms spread AIDS instead of, you know, counteracting it. And they've had like...even this bishop from Nigeria I believe it was, who went there and is still a member of the church. And that to me is—his African brothers and sisters are dying and they are not doing anything to help but doing something to actually hinder them. They say that abstinence, well technically abstinence is the best prevention for AIDS, and that's fine, but people are going to have sex and if you had any understanding of human nature, you'd realize that condoms are probably the best solution to any of that. And just spreading a disease like that is just inexcusable no matter how many charities you contribute to monthly or something like that, you know?

In this example, Hector is reacting to his observation of the use of lies by the Catholic Church to intentionally mislead African Catholics about the spread of AIDS solely to support its doctrinal ban on contraception. He realizes that the result of this will be the inevitable harm caused to the African Catholics. Lastly, Louis has this to say about the racist and destructive origins of Catholicism in his home country:

Um, so, back to what I saying, learning more about the Catholic church, about the Crusades, um, and very much on *how* did Christianity or Catholicism, came to my country. Um, and it was in a very brutal way. You know, Catholic church always had power. Um, they always, *always* had power and racism was never right but they never, you know like, if, if your so-called religion and your representation of God and all that is good, then *why* are you telling these people that *black* people need to sit in the back and white people need to sit up front. You know like, in Haiti, they literally would be like, "Yo, these are, these are, these are, these... *you're* the child of God, you know, and *you're* made in Jesus Christ's image. And, the more I did my research—okay Jesus Christ is *not* in my image. This guy is *not* black. You know? Um, so, and what, the trace of that is *this*; is that; *wherever* Christianity or Catholics went or the Crusades went was a destruction of already established religion and beliefs and I'm going to put *my* own there. You know, um, and you know, you have a whole bunch of people clapping; "Hallelujah" and things. And I'm just like, like, they were *okay* that you were slaves, you know, like, like, this image of God that they give you that's all-forgiving. Like, *not* too long ago, you know, 40 or 50 years ago like, like, "No, you are made, you are *not*. *You're black*. You're *not* going to be going to heaven." .... I don't believe in *blindly* following, not me, I can't. I can't believe, and like, *blindly* following. Um, and seeing everything that the masses say, you know like—no.

To Louis, it is inconceivable that Haitians should embrace something that was so destructive to their people only a few short decades before. He describes Catholicism similar to an invading and occupying nation—a foreign agent that brutally comes into his country, takes over and displaces the previously established religions, and then expects the natives to embrace its beliefs. Hence Louis’s statement that he refuses to be a blind follower along with the masses—he refuses to be manipulated by this foreign oppressive religious system.

#### Strategic Church Avoidance Tactics

Interestingly, Millennials are often utilizing excuses to conceal their true reasons for wanting to avoid attending church. They employ such pretexts as employment, moving away from home and their church, or having to focus about education to cover up their desire to evade church while maintaining civil relationships with family and religious others. For example, Eric explains his moving away from home as his opportunity to stop church attendance in this way:

The reason I stopped going to church and the reason I was *able* to stop going to church was because I moved to a different state and like lost that kind of parental supervision over it. So for a while I lied about it, it was like, ‘no, I’m trying to find a church you know, whatever, I’m trying to work this out, whatever.’ But...wasn’t going. And so I think it was kind of active in that sense, in that it wasn’t just like oh I got busy and I stopped going, but really it was a decision to not go anymore...and try and cover it up. And then eventually just like, fuck it and just tell them and whatever. So it was not...like a slackening and a drop off, it was just a ‘no, not going anymore.’

At first, Eric is trying to conceal his desire to stop attending church from his parents.

Eventually however, he chooses to reveal his beliefs to them. Another example comes from

Samantha:

I actively decided that I did not want to go to church anymore but as I said, I lived with my mother so I did have to go to church. Um so I mean like there were several times where I tried to explain to my mother that I didn't want to go to church, but she'd always guilt trip me into going, um so...um I'd go and stuff but it was more of a reluctance—only doing it because my mother wanted me to do it. Um I guess it kind of active but then gradual at the same time when I moved out because I no longer lived near my own church so there was nothing to tie me to get a new church....But basically I say that because...to her, like if I don't go to church—if I say, if I told her the things I'm telling to *you*, um she would automatically in her head go, 'oh my God, my daughter is going to hell!' Like there would be no wiggle room for her, and I guess it's one of those things that it's hard to get myself to tell her that I feel like I'm kind of like at a agnostic place in my life because to her it will be, 'oh no, my daughter's gonna go to hell, she will burn forever and it's all my fault because I'm a bad mother.' Um so it's kind of like, she'd guilt trip me saying, 'oh you know you need to go to church because what are people gonna think? Or you need to go to church because you're falling out with God.' And things like that, and it was just like really hard to get myself to a place where I could actually tell her and not feel as bad. But I mean it's my mom; it's hard to do that

Even though Samantha did not want to attend church anymore, the pressure from her mother kept her in church only until she moved away. Then she was able to stop going altogether. Still, her mother's religious fears stopped Samantha from fully disclosing her lack of belief because she did not want to worry her mother. Moreover, John explains that his job and college eventually became a valid excuse for him to avoid finding a new church when moved away from home:

It just kind of happened. Um it would be like, you know, I was in school at the time and I was working and uh it was kind of like uh...I wanted to get a new job so I freed up my Sundays....Um but eventually I started working on Sundays so I wouldn't be able to make it to church in the morning, sometimes I'd be able to make it to youth group at night, but I just kind of not liking where it was going; I was getting bored

with it. I wasn't like into the games; I wasn't into the lessons. The music was boring me. It didn't help that the music was getting progressively worse; that didn't help. It was like, 'oh the music used to be good, now it sucks' so, yeah, I just stopped going to that and uh, I planned on going more, then I moved down to Orlando to go to school here and that kind of helped solidify it. So it was probably the middle of the summer I started working more and I stopped going to church on Sundays, then the middle school youth; I just hated middle schoolers. I was like, 'I can't stand these kids. I cannot do this and preserve my sanity.' They were like, 'understandable, that's fine,' so I stopped doing that. So now I'm cutting my church duties in half and um you know I would go like maybe 2 times over the entire summer and then I moved down to Orlando. And I had a valid excuse, you know? I was like, 'yeah I'm trying to get into \_\_\_\_\_ University, and I'm trying to get everything going for that, getting all my preparations done.' As an education major at the time there's like way more things you have to do, like you have to take these tests and all their crazy crap just to get in that program so, yeah. Um, so I moved and I was like I don't want to drive an hour to go to church and they were like, 'oh you should go to this church down here' because I had other friends down here I was like I don't really feel like doing that either. I just ended up not going to church anymore and then by the time August came around, like at the beginning of August I was like, 'I don't want to go to church anymore' like I don't want to waste my time there anymore.

Initially John did not get a job or go to college to deliberately avoid church, but as his dissatisfaction with church increased over time, these contexts provided non-confrontational reasons to avoid it. In another example, Jasmine explains how she gave excuses to her grandmother to avoid attending church:

My Grandma; I've given her every reason in the book to not attend church. I haven't really explained to her. I tried and she got really upset. My grandma is very southern so it's just—there is no getting it past her. Um, I think she has given me a reprieve for the moment since I'm in college....When I got to college it was the, 'I'm studying' or 'I just don't have time' or 'no, they don't have churches on campus,' which they do have an organization that preaches on campus but I would be like 'no Grandma, I don't have a car so I have no way to get to a church.' I tried everything. I would always try to play it off like it was no big deal, like it was something I would do later on in life. She completely stopped asking maybe by my junior year/senior year of college she just completely stopped asking....I worked very hard to explain to my Grandma that I'm in college and I'm paying for an education, I'm not paying to find religion, Um, I'd like to say that I'm open to the idea of religion later on in my life, not really, um, not religion as I knew it growing up. Nothing near Christianity or anything of that sort, I have nothing against it, but I just don't think it's right for me.

I don't see myself being able to open back up to that so I might look at something different in life but, it's all in the air right now....

In this example, Jasmine describes how she avoided telling the truth about her beliefs—that she no longer wanted anything to do with Christianity—because it made her grandmother upset. Instead she chose the more diplomatic option of employing excuses for why she could not attend church. This tactical approach produced the desired result: her grandmother stopped asking her about church and she was able to stop going without disrupting the peace. Additionally, Christina also describes how she employed the use of excuses to conceal her desire to not attend church anymore.

Um I was starting to not like the environment I was in. I mean there wasn't like many people my age. There were mostly older people so; I didn't feel I felt like everyone was judging me all the time so I didn't want to go anymore. I didn't want to be in an environment where I didn't feel...like I belonged. So, I didn't want to go anymore so, I made excuses and slowly started not going to church and as soon as I hit 18, they couldn't really force me anymore. So, I just started working. That would be my excuse, 'oh I'm working.' .... Yes, I was planning it. It was slowly like, 'ok, I don't feel like going to church today,' I'm not going to wake up. I'm going to lock my door in the morning and not wake up. They would knock on our door, 'oh I don't feel good, I'm tired; I'm not getting up.' And they would have to leave because if not then they were going to be late. So, they would leave me. So, then I would wake up and act like nothing happened. So, that slowly started happening. I found a job and she was like can you work on Sundays? And I was like, yes. So I slowly started working on Sundays, you know, slowly. Like, 'oh, she has to work, she has to work.' I would make up excuses, well I have to pay my phone bill or, I have to pay for senior year. And then as soon as I hit 18 it was like, well I was working every Sunday anyways and they really couldn't really tell me when to go because I didn't feel comfortable so, I just stopped going completely. Ever since then I haven't been back.

Christina felt her church was a hostile environment and she did not feel like she belonged there. She knew she wanted to leave so she developed excuses like feeling sick or finding a job to avoid attending.

What is noteworthy about this finding is that Millennials are concealing the underlying reasons for their absence by using personal contexts as less controversial explanations. They generally do this because they want to avoid hurting the people who want them to attend.

## DISCUSSION

Although sociologists and psychologists have documented that the Millennials have the lowest attendance rate of any previous generation in America at the same age (Arnett and Jensen 2002; Pew Research Center 2010; Jones and Cox 2011; Jones, Cox, and Banchoff 2012), this study seeks to explain the underlying reasons for that attrition rate—at least among those raised in conservative denominations. One reason Millennials are choosing to quit church is because of a spiritual and intellectual disconnect from Christianity. The second is because they view church as a hostile environment that is contrary to their wellbeing and that of other people. Though distinct, these two causes of church attendance attrition often occur together to produce their results.

There is a strong disparity between the idealism of conservative Christianity and the experiences of these former attendees. Conservative Christians have strong faith based convictions and believe deeply in the power of prayer, conservative values, having a personal relationship with God, and the literal interpretation of the Bible. They also traditionally oppose key social issues like abortion and gay marriage. Furthermore, they present Christianity as the exclusive truth about the world, the afterlife, and our purpose on earth as given by the ultimate religious authority—God—who is the objective source of all truth. Yet when Millennials describe why they left these evangelical congregations, they describe experiences that left them struggling deeply with all of these elements.

Interestingly, the Millennials appear to describe a de-conversion experience that closely follows the steps of the Lofland (1977) Process Model of Conversion: tension,

religious problem-solving perspective, religious seekership, and turning point in life. This model describes how people convert to a religion and is based upon Neil Smelser's (1962) "value-added" model, which posits that the aggregate effect of various factors influence specific behavior. Lofland (1977) recognizes that only people who have experienced all the factors of the conversion process will experience a religious conversion. The aforementioned steps are what Lofland (1977) found as cumulatively contributing to the religious conversion of an individual. Yet, these steps fit neatly into the cognitive and spiritual disconnect process of de-conversion from Christianity for the Millennials I interviewed. That is, instead of being converted into believers, these Millennials are being converted into non-believers. For example, the hypocrisy Millennials observe among Christian leadership and other believers causes them to become distrustful and disillusioned with the Christian community. This starting point resembles the tension stage of the Lofland (1977) process, which is characterized by dissatisfaction with current circumstances. Additionally, the inability to connect to God—the only source that could prove the truthfulness of the faith—leaves the Millennials only with the Bible and the many varying subjective interpretations of it made by Christians. This step represents the religious problem-solving perspective of the Lofland (1977) process, which is marked by the proclivity of individuals to turn to religious authorities for solving their tension-related problems. Without answers from the religious authorities, confusion only mounts as the Millennials learn about other religions, points of view, and science. The Millennials then appear to enter the next stage of the process, religious seekership, where the individuals search for truth that is compatible with their outlooks on life. Through intense soul

searching and questioning the Millennials eventually find the answers they are looking for, but not in church or in the Christian faith. Instead, their search leads them to embrace the only objective truth they can find: facts derived through empirical science. This resolve represents the turning point in life stage of Lofland's (1977) process, characterized by a moment of no return. However, because science does not answer questions of spirituality or morality, it is up to the Millennials to develop these beliefs individualistically, meaning they develop their unique systems of belief through autonomous syncretism. As a note, there are additional steps of the Lofland (1977) process which are not discussed here because they are beyond the scope of this analysis.

Additionally, Millennials are leaving church because they perceive it is a hostile environment contrary to other people's wellbeing and their own. The primary feeling that this environment produces in Millennials is a sense that they are somehow unsafe in church. This sense can take several forms. For example, the most obvious is physical safety. Some Millennials feel physically unsafe in church when they have suffered abuse by those in church or they have witnessed abuse happening to others. But there are other ways besides physical harm that can make Millennials perceive church as hostile. For example, some Millennials are unwilling to discuss their doubts about the faith openly for fear of ostracism or backlash. Additionally, many Millennials perceive that some Christian leaders manipulate facts and information to support their ideology. To Millennials, this emotional and intellectual manipulation is viewed as inherently harmful and witnessing these behaviors on the part of Christians causes them to recoil from the community. The

eventual result of feeling negatively about their community of faith is that the Millennials choose to withdraw themselves from it.

Finally, many Millennials seem to know that their real reasons for wanting to avoid church are controversial, so in order to avoid disrupting the peace with their parents, peers, or other religious authorities, they decide to use cover reasons for why they cannot attend. The excuses include employment, time constraints, and preoccupation with school. Also, Millennials often mention using these excuses because they do not want to hurt or unnecessarily worry religious parents or others that are invested in their religious decisions. Since their ultimate goal is to avoid church, many feel comfortable allowing others to think that they are leaving because of more palatable reasons than disbelief and disliking the environment.

In conclusion, these data show a significant unanticipated result: many Millennials are leaving church *because* they stop believing in the truthfulness of Christianity. If there is no God and the Bible is just written by men, then besides community attachment there is no good reason to continue attendance. The issue with that is the church community itself drives many Millennials away. Instead of being the warm, welcoming community that preaches unconditional love and truth, these Millennials find church to be a physically, emotionally, and intellectually hostile environment. Together, these elements create a kind of “perfect storm” for church participation attrition: Millennials do not believe in the doctrine or God of Christianity and they do not want to belong to the church’s community. With no social, intellectual, or spiritual ties to church or conservative Christian belief, their

response is to abandon both, although many of them do so quietly and under the auspice of uncontroversial personal contexts such as moving away from home, not having time because of a job, school work or other personal constraints.

### Limitations

One limitation of this study is that all but one of the participants are students at the same large public university in Florida. First, this is a limitation because it is highly probable that being enrolled in a public institution creates the atmosphere for a more liberal education than what might be expected from a private college. Not having any respondents from a private Christian college precludes my ability to represent those viewpoints in the data. The fact that many respondents attended churches in the “Bible Belt” region of the United States, a significantly conservative region, may have had a skewed effect on the findings of this study. Additionally, there may be factors that affect Millennials differently if they did not attain higher education after high school. These views are also not represented in this study.

Another shortcoming of this study is that the respondents all had well-developed thoughts on why they left church and were very willing to discuss these thoughts with me. It is possible that there are Millennials from conservative Christian backgrounds that have left church for different reasons than the ones discussed here and they simply did not have the conviction, desire, or recall of their reasons for leaving to want to discuss these reasons with me.

Finally, since this is my first interview-based study, I occasionally felt after my interviews that I could have asked more clarifying questions of the participants. I sometimes was hesitant to ask certain kinds of clarifying questions because I did not want to impose any personal bias or interpretation onto the participants' thoughts. With more experience and understanding of how to handle these delicate interactions, I may have been able to gather even more comprehensive data.

### Implications

The results of this study have significant implications for the future of conservative Christianity in the United States. Due to lifecycle effects, the rate of church attendance has stayed relatively consistent over time. Although it is a pronounced phenomenon that people tend to attend church the least during their twenties, a significant majority of these individuals also return to church when they start forming families and settling down. The result is that when one generation starts dying off, the next generation after it will replace it and church attendance rates will not experience a significant variance. However, this research hints at the possibility that the Millennials might upset this lifecycle process. Specifically, if Millennials do not believe in the doctrine of the faith and they are repelled from the community of believers, they may choose not to return to church in the future. If this happens we could see a significant decline in the attendance rates of conservative American churches. This would likely be catastrophic for these churches as they depend on the income of their membership for survival.

### Future Research

Future studies could also identify the reasons why Millennials leave mainline denominations to see if there is a difference between their reasons and those of former conservatively Christian Millennials. Additionally, it would be insightful to gather data from Millennials who are currently in the workforce and/or did not attend college because they may have different reasons for leaving the church than their college educated counterparts. Finally, additional work could be conducted with participants from conservative backgrounds in alternative regions of the country to determine if these results are unique to the southeastern United States.

## **APPENDIX A: PARTICIPANT SUMMARY**

Louis is a 22-year-old black male. He attended Catholic Church in Haiti and some Protestant churches the United States. He currently claims no religious label and maintains a uniquely developed belief system. He draws his beliefs from a variety of sources but primarily eastern religions.

Jasmine is a 21-year-old multiracial female from a Baptist background. She currently claims no religious label. As part of her beliefs, she deeply values nature and the ideas of eastern religions.

Jason is a 25-year-old white male who attended Catholic and Non-denominational churches. Although raised Catholic, he voluntarily attended a Non-denominational church in high school. He currently labels himself as an atheist.

Omar is a 23-year-old white Hispanic male who was raised Catholic in Peru. Later he briefly attended various Protestant churches including Presbyterian and Non-denominational churches in the United States. He attended the Protestant churches voluntarily at age 13 because they were more appealing to him. Currently Omar labels himself as an atheist.

Olivia is a 22-year-old black female from a Baptist background. She currently does not claim a specific religious label, but she expresses that she does not believe in the existence of God.

Chris is a 23-year-old white male who was raised Baptist. In high school he voluntarily attended a Non-denominational congregation. He currently describes himself as an atheist.

Hector is a 20-year-old black Hispanic male who was raised Catholic in the Dominican Republic. He currently labels himself as an atheist.

Samantha is a 21-year-old white female who was raised Baptist. She currently labels herself agnostic.

Eric is a 23-year-old white male from a Baptist background. He currently labels himself as an atheist.

Kris is a 19-year-old white male who was raised in a Non-denominational church. He still believes in the existence of God, but has beliefs that deviate from conservative Christian beliefs. For example, he believes that lack of attendance, prayer, and full commitment to God has no spiritual consequence.

Lindsey is a 22-year-old white female from a Pentecostal background. She currently labels herself as an atheist.

Christina is a 20-year-old white Hispanic female from a Pentecostal and Methodist background. She believes in God, but recognizes it is because she was socialized to do so. Her beliefs vary from traditional conservative Christian beliefs. For example, she does not really believe in God answering prayers but does believe in it as a personal catharsis.

Martin is a 20-year-old black male from a Catholic background. He currently labels himself as an atheist.

Ashley is a 23-year-old white female who voluntarily attended a Baptist church from ages 10 to 13. She currently claims to be an atheist, but she identifies some of her beliefs are consistent with Buddhism.

Julio is a 28-year-old white Hispanic male who was raised Catholic in Puerto Rico. He currently labels himself as an atheist.

John is a 22-year-old white male who voluntarily attended a Non-denominational church and a Methodist church. He currently considers himself to be an atheist.

Patrick is a 22-year-old white male who was raised Catholic. He still claims to be a Catholic although his beliefs vary from conservative Christian beliefs. For example, he does not believe that the Bible is divinely inspired and he looks forward to one day having the ability to be freely gay and married with a family in the Catholic Church.

Phil is a 22-year-old white male who attended various Protestant churches including Baptist, Presbyterian and Non-denominational. He currently claims to be a "pseudo pagan" and while he practices some elements of witchcraft, he recognizes it is not real. His core beliefs are closer to atheism as he does not believe in any God.

## **APPENDIX B: IRB APPROVAL LETTER**

University of Central Florida Institutional Review Board  
Office of Research & Commercialization  
12201 Research Parkway, Suite 501  
Orlando, Florida 32826-3246  
Telephone: 407-823-2901 or 407-882-2276  
[www.research.ucf.edu/compliance/irb.html](http://www.research.ucf.edu/compliance/irb.html)



## Approval of Exempt Human Research

From: **UCF Institutional Review Board #1  
FWA00000351, IRB00001138**

To: **Jessica M. Chase**

Date: **November 15, 2012**

Dear Researcher:

On 11/15/2012, the IRB approved the following activity as human participant research that is exempt from regulation:

Type of Review: Exempt Determination  
Project Title: Why They Stop Attending Church: Religious Participation  
Decline Among Millennials With Evangelical Backgrounds  
Investigator: Jessica M Chase  
IRB Number: SBE-12-08864  
Funding  
Agency:  
Grant Title:  
Research ID: n/a

This determination applies only to the activities described in the IRB submission and does not apply should any changes be made. If changes are made and there are questions about whether these changes affect the exempt status of the human research, please contact the IRB. When you have completed your research, please submit a Study Closure request in iRIS so that IRB records will be accurate.

In the conduct of this research, you are responsible to follow the requirements of the Investigator Manual.

On behalf of Sophia Dziegielewski, Ph.D., L.C.S.W., UCF IRB Chair, this letter is signed by:

Signature applied by Joanne Muratori on 11/15/2012 12:04:41 PM EST

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads 'Joanne Muratori'.

IRB Coordinator

## **APPENDIX C: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS**

## Interview Questions for Participants

1. Tell me about why you stopped going to church.
  - a. Was this a decision that you made or something that just happened?
  - b. Does your family know you no longer attend church?
    - i. How do they feel about it?
2. Was the church a major influence in your life?
3. What are your thoughts and feelings about church now?
  - a. Since you have stopped attending, has your opinion about church changed?
4. Do you believe you might start attending again later on in life?

Could having a family of your own influence your decision to attend church?

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