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## Millennials Leaving Religion: A Transcendental Phenomenological Research Study on Religious Disaffiliation

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# Walden University

College of Social and Behavioral Sciences

This is to certify that the doctoral dissertation by

Elizabeth Rainwater

has been found to be complete and satisfactory in all respects,  
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Abstract

Millennials Leaving Religion: A Transcendental Phenomenological Research Study on

Religious Disaffiliation

by

Elizabeth Rainwater

MA, Adler Graduate School, 2011

BS, Minnesota School of Business, 2009

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Psychology

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## Abstract

Religious disaffiliation among Millennials has increased significantly in the past decade alongside rapidly changing social relationships amplified by social media applications. In the United States, many Millennials claim no religious identity with many leaving their religion for a variety of reasons. The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to explore the lived experiences of religiously disaffiliated Millennials regarding their psychological health and well-being. Self-determination theory fulfilled the theoretical framework for examining the lived experiences of young adults regarding their well-being after religious disaffiliation. A purposive sample of 12 male and female religiously disaffiliated Millennials was recruited for semistructured interviews. Content analysis was used to code interviews, identify themes, and explore the lived experiences of disaffiliated young adults. Six themes emerged from the data analysis that included religious disaffiliates inherited their childhood religion; contradictory experiences highlighted a need to disaffiliate; after disaffiliation, individuals stopped attending the church with no other actions; after disaffiliation, participants appeared to be able to connect with their authentic self; participants had negative connotations of religion after disaffiliating; and families accepted disaffiliation after it occurred. The implications for social change include providing better understanding of the psychological health and well-being of Millennials who have disaffiliated, as well as demonstrating a need for future research that focuses on future generational cohorts and how religious organizations and churches are accounting for disaffiliation within their congregations.

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## Dedication

I dedicate this dissertation to my Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, my family, and those who have ever left a religion. This educational journey would not have been possible without the support and tough love given to me by my family. Latonya, it has been quite a ride filled with many ups and downs, but through your wisdom and encouragement, I was able to change the way I think and keep moving forward. To my parents, I thank you for all of your prayers, sacrifices, love, and the many days and late nights spent talking to me. God, I do not take this opportunity lightly, and I thank you for strengthening me in times of obstacles and for always having a solution and a finish line to cross.

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written work. In reflecting on my journey, I am grateful that you pushed me to develop and present work that is not only scholarly, but work that I am proud of. Your words of encouragement inspired me to go beyond set goals and to work hard.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

### **Introduction**

Religion is a vital component of culture, one that is thought to provide access to a rich psychological knowledge base and considered by many to form the foundation of human civilization (Pankalla & Kośnik, 2018). An individual's religious foundation that has been established during childhood is sometimes challenged later in life to the point of religious disaffiliation (Gullickson, 2018; Rousselet, Duretete, Hardouin, & Grall-Bronnec, 2017). In many situations, the decision to disaffiliate from a religion is not completed in haste but takes place over a period of time (Thiessen & Wilkins, 2017). Many individuals who disaffiliate from religion have grown up in religious households, but for various reasons, have lost their sense of religious connection or experienced circumstances that have left them with more questions than answers or solutions (Rousselet et al., 2017).

An increase in religious disaffiliation trends is particularly evident in Europe and North America (Hackett, Stonawski, Potancokova, Grim, & Skirbekk, 2015), with these trends resulting in an increase of research focusing on atheism and disaffiliation (Smith & Baker, 2015). In this research study, I sought to add new knowledge to the existing scholarship on religious disaffiliation. This study involved an exploration of the lived experiences of Millennials who had become religiously disaffiliated with the intent of better understanding the perspectives and experiences of the disaffiliated. I also explored the perceived effects of disaffiliation on Millennials' psychological well-being. The resulting data offer insight into the experiences of disaffiliation among this

subpopulation, which had received little scholarly attention to date (Frost, 2019). In Chapter 1, I contextualize the study by providing an overview of the background of the topic. The problem statement and study's purpose are presented. Also discussed are the research questions, the theoretical framework for the study, its significance, and an overview of the study's method. Study assumptions, delimitations, and limitations are also highlighted. The chapter concludes with a brief summary and transition to Chapter 2.

### **Background**

The process of religious disaffiliation has increased in the United States, with 15% to 20% of residents claiming no religious affiliation by 2018--a rate that has increased by approximately 1% each year (Larson, 2017). Globally, the percentage of people claiming no specific religion comprised of 16.4% of the world's population in 2010 (Hackett et al., 2015). The trend of disaffiliation is particularly notable in North America and Europe (Hackett et al., 2015). In the United States, approximately 40% of Millennials claim no religious identity, with rates being higher amongst Generation Z individuals (Baart, 2018; Ferguson, 2018).

There are many reasons--some connected to beliefs and some not--why individuals disaffiliate from a religion (McClendon & Hackett, 2014). Irish researchers posited that disaffiliation was a phenomenon confined to young adults, with little disaffiliation among older adults (McClendon & Hackett, 2014). Consequently, disaffiliation in Ireland is partly related to stages of life. In contrast, older Austrians tend to disaffiliate from religious organizations in order to avoid religious taxes (McClendon & Hackett, 2014).

In the United States, disaffiliation is often associated with the formation of friendship bonds with nonreligious individuals (Sepulvado, Hachen, Penta & Lizardo, 2015), as strong social networks may encourage the disaffiliation process. For example, Downey (2014) found that increased Internet use is associated with decreased religious affiliation. Specifically, moderate Internet use of only 2 hours per week was associated with a decline in religiosity, with a steady decrease as Internet usage continued (Downey, 2014). Downey estimated that Internet use could account for the disaffiliation; although it is difficult to pinpoint any exact reasons, the researcher surmised that individuals using the Internet had greater access to information on other religious or nonreligious topics and access to such information, coupled with the amount of time that they spend online, could be factors in disaffiliation.

Research into the causes of religious disaffiliation has focused on individuals that identify as religiously unaffiliated. Research on disaffiliation and atheism has been limited in the past century (Smith & Baker, 2015). One finding is that disaffiliating from a religion does not make someone an atheist, as some still have faith and consider God and spirituality important (Rousselet et al., 2017). However, this trend in research has recently changed. The shift in emphasis has involved research topics such as subpopulations among atheists, how the nonreligious connect with the larger culture, and other diverse topics, such as atheism, agnosticism, and irreligion (Smith & Baker, 2015). Researchers have also examined how individuals raise their families, including how the religious unaffiliated raise their children (Edgell, 2017). Given the relative newness of the



research, it should be unsurprising that there continue to be gaps in the literature regarding religious disaffiliation.

Studies on religious affiliation, disaffiliation, atheism, and other related topics have become more prevalent over the past few years (Berghammer, Zartler, & Krivanek, 2017; Coates, 2013; Schwadel, 2010). Although researchers have delved into reasons for disaffiliation, few have specifically examined how this trend affects Millennials (Fisher, 2017; Vargas, 2012; Voas, 2006). Furthermore, a lack of qualitative investigation exists on the outcomes of religious disaffiliation among young people, based on my review of the literature.

Little is known about the lived experiences of Millennials who have gone through the process of leaving their religion. More specifically, there has not been a focus, according to my review of the literature, on their psychological well-being throughout the process of religious disaffiliation. Even though some individuals do not experience emotional strife after the process of religious disaffiliation, others can experience challenges that include grief, emotional distress, and even posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD; Knight, Esmiol Wilson, Ward, & Nice, 2019). Previous researchers have examined data from 1973 to 2012, finding that individuals leaving their church could experience diminished social relationships, practice, behavior, and health and well-being (Fenelon & Danielsen, 2016; LeCount, 2017). These changes could occur during a vulnerable time for some young adults. However, more recent researchers focusing on Millennials have discussed how some young individuals chose disaffiliation due to spiritual wounds experienced by exclusion from the church (Vaughn, 2016), cognitive

and spiritual disconnections, and disengagement for personal well-being (Chase, 2013). Studies have also revealed other challenges associated with leaving a religion, with individuals also experiencing the loss of family support, friendships, social isolation, political factors, religious skepticism, and the loss of self and social identity relationships (Fenelon & Danielsen, 2016; LeCount, 2017; Uecker, Mayrl, & Stroope, 2016; Vargas, 2012).

By 2060, the rate of religiously unaffiliated people in the United States is expected to increase slightly to approximately 1.20 billion, to include atheists, agnostics, and those who are not aligned with any particular religion (Pew Research Center, 2017, p. 1). These statistics demonstrate why understanding the lived experience of young adults regarding their well-being after the process of religious disaffiliation is important. The lack of research in this area has left room to explore the outcomes of religious disaffiliation using a qualitative approach to better understand the experiences of Millennials who disaffiliate. The results of this study provide a clearer understanding of the psychological well-being of Millennials who disaffiliated, and the events related to religious disaffiliation among them. Results also shed light on the process that Millennials experienced in religiously disaffiliating and the effect that it had on their psychological well-being, assisting mental health professionals in gaining a more profound understanding of the psychological factors that some individuals may experience during religious disaffiliation.

### **Problem Statement**

Religious disaffiliation has increased over the past 20 years (Fenelon & Danielsen, 2016; Gullickson, 2018). Increasingly, Millennials lack religious affiliation (LeCount, 2017), with several factors being associated with this decline. Politics, the Religious Right becoming extreme, and the inflexibility of the church towards LGBT and other minority groups are just some of the factors that affect Millennials' departure from religion (Baart, 2018; Packard & Ferguson, 2018). Other factors that can also contribute to religious nonaffiliation includes a reconfiguration of one's faith, changes that lead to opposition of previously held religious beliefs, and doubt regarding previously held faith beliefs (Fisher, 2017). Additional contributors to religious disaffiliation include Millennials becoming more global and inclusive while churches become more insular and exclusive (Djupe, Neiheisel, & Sokhey, 2018).

Religious beliefs and the strength of those beliefs arise from multiple sources (Manglos-Weber, Mooney, Bollen, & Roos, 2016). Individuals' specific beliefs may not align with their outward behaviors, leading to situations in which individuals feel detached from their experiences with religious organizations. This feeling of internal disaffiliation can lead to experiences of isolation and loneliness (LeCount, 2017). Essentially, before people formally disaffiliate from religious organizations, they may experience a process of internal disaffiliation. However, firm conclusions about how this process of internal disaffiliation occurs in Millennials are lacking (Fenelon & Danielsen, 2016). The lack of research on religious disaffiliation in Millennials has resulted in a lack

of understanding regarding the disaffiliation process and its aftermath. Specifically, little is known about the well-being of individuals following religious disaffiliation.

The specific problem of this research was that little is known about the ways that religious disaffiliation affects the psychological well-being of Millennials. As LeCount (2017) noted, there are few studies concerning the psychological well-being of young adults following religious disaffiliation and how they contend with the moral and ethical ambiguity that some individuals might experience after disaffiliation. I addressed this gap in the literature by conducting the present investigation.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to explore the lived experiences of male and female religiously disaffiliated Millennials regarding their psychological health and well-being. Results from this study expand the discussion on religious disaffiliation by viewing the phenomenon from the perspectives of religiously disaffiliated Millennials. Although some researchers have examined the impacts of religious disaffiliation on psychological health and well-being, few have considered these impacts on young adults and how this population contends with the moral and ethical ambiguity that some individuals might experience after disaffiliation (LeCount, 2017). The main goal was to shed light on an increasingly common phenomenon that remained overlooked in the literature, by exploring individuals' lived experiences in detail. In gaining insight into Millennials' viewpoints, attitudes, and responses towards religious disaffiliation, I hoped that my research would assist individuals in better understanding the process of leaving religion, along with how individuals could be better supported if or

when they needed help. To reach this understanding of the psychological well-being of Millennials after the process of religious disaffiliation, I conducted semistructured interviews with this population, who were between 24 to 34 years old at the time of the study. I asked questions that aided in identifying any personal characteristics and environmental factors related to the phenomenon. There is the potential for positive implications in facilitating adjustment and helping mental health professionals understand possible psychological challenges experienced by Millennials during the process of religious disaffiliation.

### **Research Questions**

I sought to answer the following two research questions (RQs):

RQ1: What are the lived experiences of Millennials regarding their well-being after their process of religious disaffiliation?

RQ2: How do Millennials adjust to the process of religious disaffiliation?

I developed interview questions based on the RQs and used interview responses to determine both major themes and subthemes.

### **Theoretical Framework for the Study**

Self-determination theory (SDT) provides a framework for understanding forces that influence individuals' motivation. The theory includes several forms of motivation, each having its own consequences for "learning, performance, personal experience, and well-being" (Ryan & Deci, 2000, p. 2). The goal of SDT is to clearly identify the components that support inherited human potentials required for growth, integration, and individual welfare (Ryan & Deci, 2000). SDT is also useful for examining courses of

action and stipulations that promote healthy development and an efficient functioning among individuals, groups, and surrounding communities (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

Researchers have used SDT in a variety of contexts. For example, SDT has been previously employed in other areas of research that focus on religion, specifically, religion and motives for sustainable behaviors (Minton et al., 2015). Minton et al. (2015) utilized SDT in their study focusing on the link between religion and sustainable behaviors and found that individuals who were more religious were more likely to participate in sustainable behaviors. In their study, sustainable behaviors included purchasing organic foods and recycling (Minton et al 2015). By using SDT, Minton et al. were able to determine that the influence on religion and the use of sustainable behaviors was consistent across all cultures (Minton et al 2015).

SDT originated in the 1970s, evolving from studies on human motivation, with an emphasis on the ways intrinsic motivators affect people's behaviors (Lepper, Greene, & Nisbett, 1973). In the 1980s, SDT was formalized as a theory; it evolved over the next two decades (Lepper et al., 1973). In expanding the theory, researchers never abandoned its core emphasis on intrinsic motivators, which are often at the heart of driving activities as people seek out a sense of self-satisfaction (Lepper et al., 1973).

The three intrinsic needs involved in self-determination include competence, relatedness, and autonomy (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Competence describes the desire to control outcomes and circumstances in one's life (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Relatedness describes the desire to be connected with others (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Finally, autonomy describes the desire to be the central driver of actions in one's own life (Ryan & Deci,

2000). These three needs will be able to aid in a discussion on how male and female Millennials experience disaffiliation, effects on their well-being, and adjustment throughout the process. This may perhaps be accomplished as Millennials discuss their need to experience acceptance, form a connection with others, and still have a sense of independence.

Deci's (1971) prior work in the area of competence revealed that positive feedback was associated with increased motivation, indicating that a sense of competence was associated with an increased desire to work on a task. Deci also examined autonomy and found that that not placing limits on an individual's autonomy, including not attempting to motivate them with external rewards, actually improved intrinsic motivation. In a study of infant attachment styles, Frodi, Bridges, and Grolnick (1985) found that those with secure, stable connections demonstrated more effort and task mastery. As a whole, increased competence, relatedness, and autonomy positively affects motivation and contributes to self-determination (Frodi, et al., 1985).

In their work on SDT, Carroll and Norman (2017) suggested that the actions people take are done to (a) make them feel competent, (b) generate meaningful interactions with others that create a sense of connection, and (c) engage in actions with which we identify. From such a statement, it may be possible to conclude that individuals chose to disaffiliate from religious organizations because they failed to meet one of these three conditions (Carroll & Norman, 2017). Perhaps participation in that organization no longer created a sense of connection or involved work with which a person could identify (Carroll & Norman, 2017). This approach indicated that people left religious

organizations and pursue alternatives that more adequately met these conditions for personal behavior (Carroll & Norman, 2017).

### **Nature of the Study**

The nature of this study was qualitative, following a phenomenological design. Individual semi-structured interviews were used to explore the processes that Millennials experienced when disaffiliating from religion. I focused on understanding the lived experiences of Millennials' religious disaffiliations and the influence that disaffiliation had on their psychological well-being. To answer the research question, I conducted an interview with male and female Millennials between the ages of 24 and 34 years of age who had separated from their childhood religion at least 2 years ago, in order to explore their perceptions of the effects of disaffiliation on their well-being. By implementing this approach, I gained knowledge of experiences of Millennials who disaffiliated from religion, including their experiences, views, and perceptions of psychological well-being after disaffiliation (Worthington, 2013).

### **Definitions**

*Millennials*: Individuals who typically range in age from 23 to 38 years old (Pew Research Center, 2018). The participant age range selected for the study was 24 to 34, based on Uecker et al.'s (2016) operationalization.

*Religion*: Faith that is arranged in more than one social category (Flunger & Ziebertz, 2010). Religion is also associated with the values that an individual maintains (Flunger & Ziebertz, 2010) and is defined by the magnitude of a group or community and the differences found in each individual's status (Flunger & Ziebertz, 2010).



*Religious beliefs:* Beliefs involving faith and spirituality within the organizational context of a specific religious (Flunger & Ziebertz, 2010).

*Religious disaffiliation:* The act of changing from identifying as religious to being nonreligious (Fenelon & Danielsen, 2016). Religious disaffiliation considers both the childhood religion of individual and his or her present affiliation with a religion (Fenelon & Danielsen, 2016). Four categories of religious affiliation and disaffiliation exist, including individuals who (a) uphold and remain in their childhood religion (consistent affiliation), (b) were raised with a religious foundation, but change to no religious affiliation (disaffiliation), (c) were raised nonreligious and unaffiliated and switch to being religious (converters), and (d) were raised nonreligious and remain nonreligious (consistently unaffiliating; Fenelon & Danielsen, 2016). Religious disaffiliation occurs in specific denominations, such as Evangelical Protestants, Mainline Protestants, Catholics, and “high-cost groups” (Fenelon & Danielsen, 2016, p. 5). High-cost groups are religious denominations that include Mormons, Jehovah’s Witnesses, and Seventh Day Adventists and that require a higher level of commitment from those who are members (Fenelon & Danielsen, 2016).

*Religious socialization:* The approach used by individuals to learn, incorporate, and uphold religious ways of thinking, standards, principles, and conduct (Gutierrez, Goodwin, Kirkinis, & Mattis, 2014). Religious socialization consists of a shared sense of like-mindedness among individuals concerning standards, principles, frame of mind, and practices (Gutierrez et al., 2014). Families also use religious socialization to force younger generations to form relationships and participate in moral communities and

settings to develop vital cultural, communal, and spiritual wealth, including religious knowledge by way of concrete skills (Gutierrez et al., 2014). Individuals discover the benefits of living a religious life through socialization, which derives from family dynamics during the early stages of development and remains throughout the lifespan (Gutierrez et al., 2014).

*Ryan and Deci's self-determination theory (SDT):* A theory that provides an explanation for human motivation as a way to satisfy individuals' psychological needs (Leavell, 2016).

### **Assumptions**

Assumptions are inherent to the study. For example, the I assumed that individuals would respond honestly to the interview questions posed. One problem that could have occurred in the semi-structured interviews was that of response bias. Individuals may occasionally attempt to answer questions in ways that they believed the interviewer wanted them to. Attempts to prevent dishonest or biased answers to the questions were undertaken by reminding participants that they had the option to skip or return to a question at a later time, to use clear language, to repeat a question or explain more in-depth, and to remain neutral throughout the interviewing process. The confidentiality of all participants' identities was ensured. I intervened during responses to interview questions only to clarify questions or ask follow-up questions. The intended result was to assure each participant that the study results would not reflect on them in any way that was public, and that I had no vested interest in answers that skewed one way or another.

### **Scope and Delimitations**

The scope of this study was limited to the experiences of 12 male and female Millennials between the ages 24 and 34 years old who resided in urban and suburban areas of Atlanta, Georgia and had experienced religious disaffiliation as adults. I sought to understand the lived experiences of Millennials who had become religiously disaffiliated. Data was drawn entirely from semi-structured interviews with participants. The study was limited to those who were already religiously disaffiliated, and I did not attempt to explore related phenomena, such as constant atheism from a young age or the experiences of Millennials who had generally not participated in religious organizations. Given that the study was conducted entirely within the Atlanta area, the scope of the study was regionally limited.

### **Limitations**

There were several limitations in this qualitative phenomenological study. The first issue was the small sample size, which could limit the generalizability of the study's findings (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013). Small samples allow researchers to collect rich textual data but precludes generalizability. The second limitation was related to the use of a purposive sampling technique. Non-random samples limit the generalizability of study findings. The sample may not have represented the target population in terms of age, ethnicity, gender, or socioeconomic background. The resulting sample may not have adequately reflected the study population, making it difficult to generalize findings to that of the larger population. A final issue was the limited geography of the study sample, which limited the generalizability of the study's findings (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013).

The factors mentioned above did not apply to the national population, and therefore, the results drawn from the data had limited generalizability to the larger population.

Limitations also existed in the time to collect and analyze the data, the data collection strategy, including how the researcher could interpret the perceived effects of disaffiliation with psychological well-being.

### **Significance**

The aim of this research study was to better understand the lived experiences of Millennials who disaffiliated from religious organizations. This study was conducted at a time when interest in topics such as atheism, agnosticism, and religious disaffiliation was on the rise. The shift in research to include these topics occurred as religious disaffiliation emerged. This research study was significant because it added to the growing body of literature on the topic. However, this study provided significant insights into the well-being of the religiously disaffiliated Millennials. This aided in determining whether efforts were needed to address poor well-being among religiously disaffiliated Millennials. As more interest builds on religious disaffiliation, specifically Millennials' understanding their faith, social experiences, and psychological well-being will be of importance for others going through similar processes or are curious but have no knowledge about this particular population.

### **Summary**

This research study followed a qualitative approach to better understand the lived experiences of Millennials who had become disaffiliated from religion. The framework consisted of self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000). This research study occurred

at a time when interest in religious disaffiliation, atheism, and agnosticism was increasing due to growing disaffiliation in certain parts of the world. To the researcher's knowledge, the study was the first to qualitatively explore the lived experiences of Millennials who had become religiously disaffiliated.

A number of factors can prompt religious disaffiliation. Religious affiliation and disaffiliation are complex phenomena; people may become internally disaffiliated prior to formal disaffiliation from religious organizations. Though interest in religious disaffiliation is on the rise, researchers rarely focus on the Millennial subpopulation of this phenomena. Results from this qualitative study shed new light on the perceived well-being of Millennials who disaffiliated from religion. Findings contributed value to the existing literature on disaffiliation by highlighting concerns and needs of Millennials who disaffiliated from religious organizations. Chapter 2 includes an examination of the current literature on the topic of religious disaffiliation while further exploring the theoretical framework of self-determination theory.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

### **Introduction**

In this chapter I provide important background on religious affiliation and disaffiliation, such as how religious beliefs are formed, the perceived value of religion, and what religion helps individuals achieve, with a focus on Millennials. In addition, research on the health and well-being benefits of religion is examined, along with the adjustment to disaffiliation in an individual's life. This chapter begins with a discussion of the strategies utilized to locate research for this chapter. Next, a discussion of research on family and childhood religious beliefs is provided, including the perceived effects of religion on individuals' social and personal relationships. A discussion on the incidence of religious disaffiliation follows. This chapter also focuses on religious socialization and the role of religious organizations. I review research regarding the motives for leaving religion as young adults and the influence of religion on individuals' lives.

The theoretical foundation section provides an in-depth discussion of Ryan and Deci's (2000) SDT. This section includes a review of the factors that influence motivation to satisfy the three psychological needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Miller & Gramzow, 2016; Sanchez-Oliva, Pulido-González, Leo, González-Ponce, & García-Calvo, 2017). I used Ryan and Deci's SDT to explore the degree to which the fulfillment of each need is accomplished and the overall impact on one's mental and physical health outcomes (see Miller & Gramzow, 2016). The final section of this chapter includes an overview of the study design of phenomenology, which is appropriate for exploring the lived experiences of participants (Patton, 2005). Using a

phenomenological design, I was able to explore the ways in which Millennials' form or maintain religious beliefs, and value and sense of accomplishment that religious affiliation provides.

### **Literature Search Strategy**

I accessed a number of sources to locate literature for this chapter. First, I accessed Walden University's online library to search several psychology databases, including PsycINFO, PsycARTICLES, PsycCRITIQUES, PsycEXTRA, SAGE Journals, and SocINDEX. The following terms were employed: *religious socialization, religious beliefs, religiosity, disaffiliation, family religiousness, young adults and religion, Millennials and religion, childhood and religion, childhood spirituality, health and religious beliefs, religious organizations, and Ryan and Deci's self-determination theory*. The search results yielded a sizeable return, which was reduced by limiting the search to peer-reviewed scholarly journals and adjusting the search parameters to articles published between 2013 and 2018. These adjusted search parameters produced current, relevant articles.

For the initial search, I used the Boolean terms *AND/OR* by searching for articles on Millennials AND religious disaffiliation OR abandonment. When searching for articles on one specific topic, such as Millennials or self-determination theory, Boolean terms were not used. I was able to retrieve 334 peer reviewed articles using Academic Search Complete and PsycARTICLES; when I employed additional databases, I located a total of 1,148 peer-reviewed articles. I identified additional articles by reviewing the references of previous articles. A large percentage of the articles employed as a source

for the literature review were obtained through Walden's online library services. Articles not obtained through Walden's online library services were retrieved through Google Scholar. The complete list of databases accessed for this review included Academic Search Complete, CINAHL Plus with Full Text, Education Source, ERIC, GreenFILE, PsycARTICLES, PsycCRITIQUES, PsycEXTRA, PsycINFO, Research Starters-Education, SocINDEX, and SAGE Journals.

### **Theoretical Foundation**

The framework for the research was self-determination theory, also known as SDT (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Researchers developed SDT to explore three psychological needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Sanchez-Oliva et al., 2017). These three dimensions are deemed to be psychological nutrients and are considered by theorists to be important for improving motivation (Sanchez-Oliva et al., 2017). SDT frames individuals as active beings with an inborn desire to grow along specific directions (Sanchez-Oliva et al., 2017). Humans have an innate tendency to grow and develop psychologically; however, these paths of growth differ between individuals. Differences in growth create variations in the way's individuals are motivated (Sanchez-Oliva et al., 2017).

In the context of SDT, autonomy occurs when individuals feel as if their work is initiated independently and they are willingly engaged in specific activities (Sanchez-Oliva et al., 2017). The second element of SDT is competence, which occurs when individuals feel as if they can successfully engage with their environments (Sanchez-Oliva et al., 2017). Competent individuals develop a feeling of achievement when



performing various tasks effectively. The final element of SDT is relatedness, which occurs when individuals derive feelings of achievement while performing tasks.

Relatedness occurs when the feeling of satisfaction is derived from simply from engaging in the task (Sanchez-Oliva et al., 2017).

With regard to motivating individuals, SDT contextualizes motivation into three specific types: autonomous motivation, controlled motivation, and amotivation (Sanchez-Oliva et al., 2017). The first of these, autonomous motivation, is driven by intrinsic desires. Individuals who are driven by autonomous motivations are involved in activities because they derive a sense of enjoyment and satisfaction from those activities. These individuals also find that the activities hold a specific personal relevance to their lives. Autonomous motivation has previously been associated with activities that protect against alcoholic consumption in alcoholics, as an example of its effects (Richards, Cabriaes, & Field, 2016). Autonomously motivated individuals are more likely to engage in protective strategies that guard against drinking and reduce their chances of harm, compared to those with limited intrinsic motivation.

In contrast to autonomous motivation, controlled motivation is driven by external regulations, which may include rewards and punishments as well as external expectations (Sanchez-Oliva et al., 2017). Essentially, controlled motivation is based on the desire to achieve external goals rather than intrinsic enjoyment of an activity. This form of motivation also occurs when individuals attempt to avoid feelings guilt or shame by taking specific actions. Among employees, those requiring extrinsic motivators are less likely to experience positive outcomes those who are intrinsically motivated (Kuvaas,

Buch, Weibel, Dysvik, & Nerstad, 2017). Findings from three cross-sectional and cross-lagged studies across various industries indicated that intrinsic motivation was associated with more positive outcomes than extrinsic motivation, demonstrating the value of encouraging intrinsically motivated individuals (Kuvaas et al., 2017).

As a result of SDT's emphasis on individual motivation, the theory is often used to contextualize and understand factors that influence motivation (Miller & Gramzow, 2016). This theory also provides a useful context for examining how individuals' abilities to meet their psychological needs influence their physical and mental health (Miller & Gramzow, 2016). Because individuals' levels of self-determination are predictive of their mental and physical health, researchers have often attempted to improve autonomous motivation (Miller & Gramzow, 2016). An increase in autonomous motivation is associated with improvements in positive health behaviors (Miller & Gramzow, 2016).

Consequently, SDT provides useful context for examining factors that hinder or encourage self-motivation (Miller & Gramzow, 2016). Researchers have suggested that people sometimes undermine their own psychological needs, inhibiting self-determination (Miller & Gramzow, 2016). Thus, SDT can be used to examine individuals' environments and identify factors that preclude self-determination and motivation. Educators interviewed regarding how to encourage intrinsic motivation produced several themes that may increase internal motivation, including placing increasing responsibility in students' hands, providing regular feedback to work done, and encouraging teamwork and group communications (Orsini, Evans, Binnie, Ledezma, & Fuentes, 2015). These attempts increasingly encourage individuals to become

producers of their own work (Orsini et al., 2015). Research into the use of SDT revealed that variables occurring in an individual's social context can be adjusted, with observed changes to how personalities manifest (Miller & Gramzow, 2016). As a result, the current study will demonstrate how some Millennials have used self-determination and their environment, as a form of motivation in deciding to disaffiliate or leave a religion.

Much research into the application of SDT was conducted to understand differences between internal and external regulations (Miller & Gramzow, 2016). Specifically, the theory has been used to understand how individuals' transition between different forms of motivation at different times. For example, individuals can be encouraged to foster greater internal regulation and internal motivation when they perceive their work as meaningful (Allan, Autin, & Duffy, 2016). Shifting work so that it felt more meaningful among employees is an example of how contexts can be changed to improve individuals' levels of self-regulation. Therefore, individuals can experience changes in motivating factors when the context of their goal's changes (Miller & Gramzow, 2016). Current research indicates that people rarely experience a single form of motivation, but can experience intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, simultaneously (Miller & Gramzow, 2016). Therefore, in this study, the theory was in alignment with the purpose, as Millennials who had experienced disaffiliation from their religion experienced a change of motivation, self-regulation, in conjunction with their religious and/or spirituality goals.

Within research into each of these types of motivation, several forces inspire action. Consequently, when used to understand what drives people to act and how to

motivate them, SDT suggested that different approaches may be needed to motivate different individuals. The theory has also been used to examine how specific types of motivation are both created and maintained, as well as how different factors may undermine the three forms of motivation (Miller & Gramzow, 2016).

While acknowledging that people are self-determined individuals who are often driven by internal forces, SDT makes room for psychopathologic developments in which intrinsic forces are undermined (Miller & Gramzow, 2016). These developments occur in a wide variety of settings over an individual's life, suggesting that different dynamics may be at play in different contexts (Miller & Gramzow, 2016). Certain types of motivation may be more likely to arise and thrive in specific contexts, and less likely in others. For example, intrinsic motivation is most likely to occur when people experience a perceived sense of security (Miller & Gramzow, 2016). When provided with the right context and support, extrinsically-motivated behaviors can transition to intrinsically-motivated behaviors (Miller & Gramzow, 2016). This form of autonomous behavior is characterized by individuals' beliefs that they possess the abilities to accomplish their goals (Miller & Gramzow, 2016). Given the wrong contexts and lack of support, individuals may require extrinsic motivators and demonstrate poor independent initiatives (Miller & Gramzow, 2016). This may occur in a number of contexts, from religious experiences to the workplace, with individuals demonstrating behavioral patterns contingent upon extrinsic motivators. These same unsupportive contexts may also lead to associated declines in performance and/or attendance (Miller & Gramzow, 2016).

When working with SDT, researchers may first examine individuals' social contexts to explain the lack of intrinsic motivation (Miller & Gramzow, 2016). After examining the social context, they look to a person's developmental environment to better understand if development in areas like competence or autonomy have been undermined during the person's development phase. Finally, social contexts may affect individuals' experiences and fulfillment of their basic psychological needs, thereby promoting or discouraging intrinsic motivation (Monteiro, Mata, & Peixoto, 2015). Beginning at birth, individuals require supports to cultivate a sense of competence, autonomy, and relatedness (Miller & Gramzow, 2016). This process continues well into individuals' schooling years and adulthood, following them as they transition into a number of roles, later in life (Giordano, Cashwell, Lankford, King, & Henson, 2017). As in this research study, religious communities can act as a strong support system for individuals yet may change as a level of importance in later life through disaffiliation.

A lack of appropriate psychological support may create distress and undermine the development of qualities needed to become internally motivated (Giordano et al., 2017). Current research lacks an examination of how Millennials experience religious disaffiliation; thus, little is known about how religious organizations may adjust to better approach and guide individuals during their transition into adulthood. Instead, researchers have focused on family religious beliefs, the benefits of religion concerning one's health, and passing along religious beliefs to adolescents with the expectation that he or she will remain religious into adulthood (Crosby, Ritt, & Slunaker, 2018; Jorgensen, Mancini, Yorgason, & Day, 2016). Therefore, Self-Determination Theory will be helpful for

exploring how autonomy, competence, and relatedness may play roles in religious disaffiliation. For example, if findings from this research study reveal that religiously disaffiliated Millennials lack a sense of autonomy, religious organizations may examine ways that autonomy may be better fostered in a religious context. Perhaps, Millennials disaffiliated because they lacked a sense of control over how religious texts are interpreted or applied to their lives; if this was the case, religious organizations may revise religious instruction to be more participative and less directive. Ryan and Deci's (2000) SDT was useful for exploring individuals' motives for religious disaffiliation as they responded to personal experiences with religion. Results from this study in the context of SDT, aided in guiding religious organizations to adopt to the needs of their young flock so that their parishioners did not become disaffiliated. Religious organizations also understood why millennials were disaffiliating from religion.

### **Literature Review Related to Key Constructs**

The existing and steadily growing conflict surrounding religion among Millennials has contributed to plummeting rates of church attendance and participation (Bart, 2018; Gullickson, 2018; Hughes, 2014). This trend in disaffiliation has increased amid church leaders' lack of understanding for the reasons behind the disaffiliation of Millennials. According to Hughes (2014), little understanding exists regarding the high rate of religious abandonment in the United States. The following literature review provides insights into what is currently known about the formation or maintenance of set religious beliefs among Millennials.

## **Millennials and Religious Disaffiliation**

Religious disaffiliation has increased over the past 20 years (Fenelon & Danielsen, 2016; Gullickson, 2018). Increasingly, Millennials lack religious affiliation (LeCount, 2017), with several factors being associated with this decline. Politics, the religious right becoming extreme, and the inflexibility of the church towards LGBT and other minority groups, were just some of the factors that affect Millennials' departure from religion (Baart, 2018; Packard & Ferguson, 2018). Other factors that can also contribute to religious non-affiliation includes a reconfiguration of one's faith, changes that lead to opposition of previously held religious beliefs, and doubt regarding previously held faith beliefs (Fisher, 2017). Additional contributors to religious disaffiliation include Millennials becoming more global and inclusive, while churches become more insular and exclusive (Djupe et al., 2018).

Within the U.S. population, Millennials are least likely to identify with a religious group, or, if they do identify within a religious group, are most likely to be religiously unaffiliated (Lipka, 2015). Twenge, Exline, Grubbs, Sastry, and Campbell (2015) discussed how Millennials entered the pool of religious unaffiliates after the year 2000, with trends identifying Millennial females as being less likely to be affiliated with a religious group and whose fathers did not identify with a religion. There are many factors as to why Millennials are seen as moving away from religious affiliation, with some studies suggesting that Whites, low socio-economic individuals, and those who reside in the geographical region of the Northeastern United States are more likely to experience low rates of religious affiliation. Alternatively, Millennials who identify as African

American and are politically conservative are more likely to be affiliated with a religion (Twenge, et al., 2015; Waters & Bortree, 2012).

Many studies have focused on why Millennials leave their church more so than previous generations and have highlighted some important results. Vaughn (2016) discussed that many Millennials leave a church or an entire religious organization, deciding to move into a category of *nones*. *Nones*, a group of unaffiliated religious individuals is on the rise throughout the United States, with Millennials moving into this category due to spiritual wounds experienced from exclusion from their church, corresponding attitudes due to the lack of exclusion, and the fact that they view the church as having a lack of authenticity. Fosse (2015) supports the notion of Millennials becoming disaffiliated from religion and cited that due to the increasing trends of science and technology, combined with growing up in a non-traditional household is why the United States is seeing approximately 40% of Millennials moving into a category of *none*. Brauer (2018) purported that many Millennials may decide to disaffiliate due to identifying as religious, but unable to accurately describe their beliefs. Comparing Millennials against older generations, the author found that the United States was on a similar track of experiencing disaffiliation of religion than that of European countries, citing that further research needs to be completed as it is difficult to ascertain whether this decline is due to particular cultural movements or long-term ongoing processes.

Reed (2016) discussed how it was possible to aid Millennials in moving back to religion by having churches focus on ensuring that the Bible teachings were relatable to



Millennials' lives. The author purported that Biblical study classes should aim at highlighting the importance and relevance of the teachings, to increase appeal to this generation that was leading the movement towards *nones*. Biblical study classes should ensure relevancy for Millennials and be used as an example of human creativity, group reflection, political rhetoric, and social discourse in order to engage individuals, which many churches are not doing (Reed, 2016). Further, because many Millennials experience careers and lifestyles that focus on a global environment, there is an increased need to restructure Biblical study classes to demonstrate connections between the church and differing worldviews.

Because religious affiliation is associated with better mental health, it is important to better understand the reasons why Millennials leave a church or religion, to combat negative effects from the transition (May, 2018). May (2018) completed a study that focused on individuals in three categories; stayers (individuals who had considered dropping out), leavers (individuals who had dropped out of religion), stable affiliates (individuals who were consistent in their religion), and stable *nones* (non-religious affiliates). After studying mental health issues within the four the different groups, the author found that individuals who had considered dropping out, but had ultimately stayed within their religion, experienced higher levels of depression and an increase in depressive symptoms over time than any of the other groups. This appeared to differ with the study of Reutter and Bigatti (2015), who purported that religion aided in the improvement of mental health, in all generational groups.

### **Family Religious Foundation**

McNamara-Barry, Prenoveau and Diehl (2013) conducted a study on the relationship between religious faith activities performed at home during childhood and adolescence with the persistence of emerging adults' religious practices and beliefs. The sample was comprised of 551 undergraduate students ranging from age 18 to 29 attending four-year universities in the United States (McNamara-Barry et al., 2013). Findings indicated a significant positive correlation between frequency of religious faith activities during childhood development and subsequent religious practices and beliefs of emerging adults. Findings also supported the role of faith activities in households of emerging adults reared in "explaining religious practices and beliefs and the changes that occur in emerging adults' religious beliefs and practices" in one year (McNamara-Barry et al., 2013, p. 10). In particular, faith exercises performed at home often provided free forecast of both religious practices and beliefs at Time 2 (T2) well beyond the impact of the religiousness indicators found in Time 1 (T1) (McNamara-Barry et al., 2013).

French, Eisenberg, Sallquist, Purwono, Lu, and Christ (2013) found that parental warmth and parental religiosity predicted adolescent religiosity for a sample of 296 Indonesian Muslim adolescents and their parents. Data for parental warmth was collected using the Warmth subscale of the Parenting Styles and Dimensions; religiosity was measured using the Religiosity Scale (RS) developed by Purwono (2010) in consultation with Indonesian religious leaders and university faculty, and graduate students (French et al., 2013). The RS was administered to both parents and adolescents to compare the degree of compliance between generations (French et al., 2013). The sample reflected the

diverse Indonesian culture: 14% of mothers and 22% of fathers had less than a high school degree, 42% and 45% respectively, had a high school education, 11% and 14% respectively, had technical training, and 31% and 18% respectively, held college degrees (French et al., 2013). Research revealed that transmission of parental religious convictions to children was aided by parental warmth, which was consistent with results that this warmth produces a level of openness to parental influence (French et al., 2013). Findings also show that supportive parenting was related to internalized submission to parental expectations and the internalized values of a parent (French et al., 2013).

Chalik, Leslie, and Rhodes (2017) conducted a *switched at birth* study with 350 children ages 5 to 10, and adults 35 years old to examine religious affiliation. Findings indicated that religiosity of a baby born to parents of one religion but raised by parents of another religion were significantly more likely to affiliate with the adopted family religion (Chalik et al., 2017). Participants were either Jewish or Christian, and 73% of the sample was White, 7% Black, and 19% other (Chalik et al., 2017). The findings were significant across religious backgrounds, and age groups suggesting that cultural context is vital to a developing child's religious affiliation later in life (Chalik et al., 2017). Younger children were open to both religious possibilities regarding essentialism and cultural contribution, despite each child's individual religious background (Chalik et al., 2017).

Kim-Spoon, Longo, and McCullough (2012) conducted a study of 322 adolescents and their parents or primary caregivers (parents) to examine the relationship between parent-adolescent relationship quality and intergenerational transmission of

personal and organizational religiousness. Personal religiousness was measured using the two items from the Multidimensional Measure of Religiousness/ Spirituality and four items the Value on Religion Scale (Jessor & Jessor, 1977; Kim-Spoon et al., 2012). Organizational religiousness was measured using two items regarding participant's involvement in a formal religious services and activities (Kim-Spoon et al., 2012). Parent-adolescent relationship quality was measured using the Inventory of Parent and Peer Attachment (Armsden & Greenberg, Kim, Chen, Wang, Shen & Orozco-Lapray 2013; Kim-Spoon et al., 2012). The IPPA was administered to both adolescents and Parents and consisted of three subscales: quality of communication, degree of trust, and alienation (Kim-Spoon et al., 2012).

Kim-Spoon et al. (2012) reported a significant correlation between parents' and adolescents' personal and organizational religiousness in the range of  $r=.40$  to  $.61$ ,  $p<.01$  for all comparisons. Researchers found a modest positive correlation between parent-adolescent relationship quality and adolescents' personal and organizational religiousness in the range of  $r=.23$  to  $.31$ ,  $p<.01$  for all comparisons (Kim-Spoon et al., 2012). Parent-adolescent relationship quality positively moderated the relationship between parents' and adolescents' personal and organizational religiousness (Kim-Spoon et al., 2012). In summary, there was a strong association between parents' religiousness and their adolescents' religiousness and the association was stronger for those with higher parent-adolescent relationship quality (Kim-Spoon et al., 2012). There were no significant differences in the study based on adolescents' gender (Kim-Spoon et al., 2012).

Power and McKinney (2013) communicated that a wealth of information was available concerning the religion of one's parents and the manner in which parents influenced them during childhood. For example, Petts and Knoester (2007) analyzed data generated from "two waves of the National Survey of Families and Households" (p. 6). Wave 1 described a cross-sectional national probability sample made up of 13,007 adults during 1987 through 1988. Within this sample were families composed of minorities, single parents, stepchildren, cohabiting couples, and newly married individuals. Newly married couples in Wave 1 with children ages 5 and 17 were also interviewed in Wave 2. The aim of this study was to examine the connection between each parents' religious heterogamy and the welfare of their children (Petts & Knoester, 2007). The overall findings suggested that differences exist between religiosity heterogamous families and same-faith families, which influenced one measurement concerning each child's well-being identified as delinquent behaviors (Petts & Knoester, 2007).

**Religiosity as intergenerational threads.** Religiosity is often the result of *intergenerational threads*, which describe the relationships formed between grandparents and grandchildren (Bengtson, Copen, Putney, & Silverstein, 2009). Bengtson et al. (2009) utilized 30 years of information gathered from individuals of multigenerational families through a Longitudinal Study of Generation (LSOG). The focus of this study was on "the transmission of religious beliefs, values, and practices" from four generations starting in 1971 to 2000 (Bengtson et al., 2009, p. 16). The goal was to gain knowledge about the manner in which religion is passed on to younger generations from the formation of single irreducible family units and distant family settings to the role of

grandparents during the transmission process and the difference in the processes across generations and time (Bengtson et al., 2009). Findings confirmed that grandparents had a direct influence on their grandchildren concerning religious socialization specifically with their granddaughters (Bengtson et al., 2009). Findings also confirmed the continued resilience and relevancy in families involving the passing on of religious customs and beliefs to younger generations (Bengtson et al., 2009).

Negru, Haragâș and Mustea (2014) led a subjective report that analyzed the interrelationship of religious discernments, conduct, and feelings observed in prospective grown-ups. Their example comprised of Romanian youth that were Orthodox Christian, Roman Catholic, or Neo-protestant. In looking at the parent-kid relationship, a second report was directed on family relationship and religious socialization once people achieve adulthood. This investigation had approximately 14 members. Findings demonstrated that religious families were even more eager to talk about their religious convictions, rather than non-religious families. Meetings included children and their parents.

Hwang, Silverstein, and Brown (2018) offered in-depth research on the impact that a parent's religious personality and conduct concerning wrongdoing was displayed by adolescents. Behavior was affected from one's parents, peers, and other agents that were social amid one's adolescence. Results demonstrated that both the religious characteristics and parental practices affect the reprobate conduct that is developed in a child. Leonard, Cook, Boyatzis, Kimball, Flanagan and Kelly (2013) discussed how parental religiosity levels were shown to affect child and adolescent religiosity; therefore, emerging adult religiosity was high and similar to that of their parents' levels of religiosity. Leonard et

al. (2013) investigated the association shared between the improvement of grown-up religiosity and the obvious religiosity found in parental figures. Likenesses were uncovered concerning both mothers and fathers' religious convictions and their need to bring up youngsters under a particular conviction framework, parental confidence bolster, and the connection that one has to his or her parent. This investigation comprised of 481 graduated class members that originated from two Christian schools. Findings reported that the religiosity shared regular points in the two guardians and their youngsters moving toward adulthood.

Manning (2015) investigated an examination on religiously unaffiliated guardians who decided the way in which they will raise their children with the inclusion of religious qualities and convictions. A qualitative methodology with the application of grounded theory was utilized to look at changed perspectives concerning the expression "*None*" and the way in which the beliefs tended to decide how a parent will bring up their children (Manning, 2015). This investigation comprised of 48 religious guardians who were unaffiliated and lived in the United States from 2005 to the year of 2007. Findings affirmed the acknowledgment of secularism, otherwise called theism. Religious pluralism is likewise acknowledged by a few. In light of a person's decision and his or her encounters, they will have the ability to shape a perspective in the future.

Marks and Dollahite (2016) revealed that the religious conversation between religious parents and their children in modern America needed to be modified, in order to grant autonomy within an individualistic culture (Marks & Dollahite, 2016). Researchers also confirmed that there were several types of religious conversations initiated between

adolescents and their parents (Marks & Dollahite, 2016). These religious conversations can be adult-dominated, or discussions that are reciprocal and are experienced in an empathetic manner both by adolescents and their parents that encourage the independent investigation of religious subjects and religious socialization among youth (Marks & Dollahite, 2016).

**Parental religiosity and the disaffiliation of their children.** Although previous studies have highlighted how children obtain their religion and religious affiliation from their parents, other studies convey how parental religiosity can aid in the disaffiliation of their children. Glass, Sutton, & Fitzgerald (2015) completed a study that focused on religious switching among conservative protestant youth and found that families, who have a strong religious affiliation as conservative Protestants, provide more difficulties from switching to a different religion in early adulthood. For example, the authors found that crucial markers of completed educational attainment, age at first marriage, age at first birth, and income play a role in one's ability to switch religion; however, family religious affiliation appeared to delay switching for these young adults.

Similarly, Bornstein, Putnick, Lansford, Al-Hassan, Bacchini, Bombi, & Malone (2017) completed research on different religious groups that included Catholicism, Protestantism, Buddhism, and Islam, and found that throughout all groups there were two negative markers found for parents who held and followed religious practices. The authors concluded that negative associations occurred within their parenting experiences and their child's adjustment when their child was eight years old. They found that due to greater parental religiousness levels, higher levels of parental control were needed and in



return, their children exhibited more internalizing and externalizing problems through to the age of 10. The study found that higher levels of parental religiosity was associated with higher levels of controlling parenting, which accounted for problematic behaviors and the possibility of children moving away from religion as they entered young adulthood.

### **Disaffiliation in Earlier Generations**

To gain a better understanding of Millennials and the factors that prompt religious abandonment, it was vital to focus on the lived experiences concerning religion up to disaffiliation. Flannelly, Galek, Kytte, and Sifton (2010) conducted a study that aimed to understand the ever-changing scene of religious affiliation in the United States. Data were obtained from the National Opinion Research Center during the years of 1972 through 2006, accessible through a national survey conducted with American adults (Flannelly et al., 2010, p. 4). Twenty-three surveys were conducted over six five-year periods with 45,463 participants' (Flannelly et al., 2010). Findings from this study aligned with Gullickson (2018) and Kosmin and Keysar (2008) by verifying that a decline had occurred in religious affiliation within the United States among adults since 1990 (Flannelly et al., 2010). Second, the study corroborated that the trend in the decline of religious affiliation existed many years ago (Flannelly et al., 2010). Third, Gallup and Castelli (1989) verified the extent of the decline in religious affiliation, with the inclusion of Kosmin and Keysar (2008), and the rates concerning religious affiliation that Flannelly et al. (2010) discovered when examining different periods. Findings also reported that there was a significant decline in the attendance of religious services among those

expressing religious affiliation (Flannelly et al., 2010). Lastly, the South was viewed as more religious and the West as less religious, in comparison to different parts of the nation (Flanelly et al., 2010). Older African American women that resided in the South were also viewed as more religious when examining measures presented in the study. Birth-cohort had no immediate effect on religious measures (Flannelly et al., 2010).

To examine religious disaffiliation across different generations, it was important to understand religious practices amongst generational cohorts. For example, Chase (2016) highlighted how gender affects religious practices across the different generations. Baby Boomer and Millennial women attended religious services more often than men did; however, there were no noted gender differences among Generation X individuals. Additionally, as the Bible being the word of God, Baby Boomer women believed this more than men, and Generation X women believed in life after death more so than their male counterparts (Chase, 2016).

Leaving a religion is not an act done in haste, but something that occurs over time. For example, empirical research confirmed that separating from the Catholic Church was a process that occurs throughout one's life in Austria, and is not something that happens only during adolescence and early adulthood (Berghammer et al., 2017; McClendon & Hackett, 2014). Berghammer et al. (2017) examined the reasoning behind disaffiliation from the Roman Catholic Church as the first procedure prompting changes in the religious organization of the Austrian populace.

Berghammer et al. (2017) concentrated on family-related issues and encounters in investigating this matter. Data were retrieved by conducting qualitative interviews with

19 individuals who identified as former Catholics. The researchers utilized the “Generations and Gender Survey,” which allowed them to analyze the attributes linked to Catholics who disaffiliated during the survey period from 2008 to 2012 (Berghammer et al., 2017, p. 19). From this data, it was discerned that the qualitative and quantitative sample presented two types of leavers (attached and distant). Both the attached and distant leavers hardly ever attended church service and were disapproving of the church. Attached leavers were described as individuals who regardless of their disaffiliation, still held religious convictions and occupied with religious practices (Berghammer et al., 2017). Distant leavers, on the other hand, were individuals whose thoughts were far from religion and did not participate in any religious activities (Berghammer et al., 2017).

Chan, Tsai, Fuligni (2015) addressed the fact that transitioning to young adulthood is a stage that involved social change, which influenced some developmental changes in one’s religiosity. Approximately 744 students participated in the study, with the focus being on both 12<sup>th</sup> graders and individuals who left high school four years prior, and how their religiosity changed since adolescence into adulthood (Chan et al., 2015). Follow-up data were collected two years later with 525 of the 744 original participants (Chan et al., 2015). Findings concluded that this transition also prompted reevaluation and further exploration of religious identity and participation.

Religious interest decreased for the individuals who upheld religious participation amid secondary school, bringing about low levels of cooperation for some individuals four years after finishing secondary school (Chan et al., 2015). These findings proposed that religious character may have increased positive emotions, such as “meaning and

purpose, yet it may not secure against negative well-being” (Chan et al., 2015, p. 11). No determination had been found on whether an individual’s affiliation with religion would decrease as it had in previous years, become stable, or rebound in the future (Chan et al., 2015).

### **Youth Development and Experience of Religious Beliefs**

Religious development could describe the manner in which young individuals absorbed a specific set of knowledge, then incorporated and preserved attitudes, individual values and beliefs, and actions connected to one’s religion (Gutierrez et al., 2014). Through religious socialization, one can both develop and share their belief system with others. Religious socialization is based on the family dynamic, which is developed from childhood and throughout one’s life (Gutierrez et al., 2014).

Schwartz (2006) focused on approaches to uncover what is adding to both the transmission, notwithstanding the value-based models of socialization and the change model to gain knowledge on the social variables and the impact that they have on young adult religious faith. Four thousand Christian adolescents finished numerous measures related to faith (Schwartz, 2006). The outcomes showed that both guardians and friends had an influence on participants' religious confidence (Schwartz, 2006). Inside this investigation, mediated regression analyses uncovered that faith support from a friend had an effect on the faith support that originated from guardians concerning religious confidence (Schwartz, 2006).

Alisat and Pratt (2012) conducted longitudinal research that investigated religious and spiritual peak experiences that shaped the religious self in young individuals. These

profound accounts of narratives discussed by individuals entering early adulthood connected both subjective and quantitative strategies in the authors' research (Alisat & Pratt, 2012). Every story shared was done so in comparison to individuals who shaped religious convictions and personality status at around 17, 19 and 23 years of age (Alisat & Pratt, 2012). The findings uncovered a connection between one's personality status and the religious account introduced, which affirmed different formative stages and attributes identified with the advancement of one's religious convictions (Alisat & Pratt, 2012). For example, participants in his research highlighted how one's life story of identity development, coincided with an illumination of a religious experience.

Roehlkepartain (2014) surveyed the most commonly used definition of spirituality as one's "search for the sacred" (p. 2). This research examined diverse models of theory that included both stage and non-stage theories also known as continuous and discontinuous. Diverse models of theory assume that each theory should be used to explore both one's religious and spiritual development to provide a clear picture of the process of religious transition. It was discovered in examining both religious and spiritual development that a connection was shared in the following areas: physical, cognitive, emotional, and social development" (Roehlkepartain, 2014, p. 2). Emerging adults tended to distance themselves from their parent, form their own identity, and engage in new practices that involved his or her own family (Roehlkepartain, 2014).

Jules and Maynard (2016) conducted a study that examined the advancement of one's spirituality, addressed the positive influence that interfaith had on Caribbean youth, yields clarification to "rising adulthood and the related psychosocial attributes" that

contribute to one's profound improvement (p. 1). The findings discovered that growth in one's spirituality offered a sound working family, alongside a positive association with their companions (Jules & Maynard, 2016). There is additionally a reduction in the likelihood of pre-adults taking part in the consumption of liquor and cannabis (Jules & Maynard, 2016).

Religious youth groups can aid young individuals in developing and experiencing their religious beliefs. Davis & Kiang (2015) highlighted how young individuals who attend religious events and follow religiosity tend to experience higher levels of self-esteem, greater positive affect, and reduced depressive symptoms.

### **The Role of Religious Organizations and Religious Beliefs**

**Religious organizations and service in the community.** Research highlighted that 68 percent of individuals between the ages of 18 and 29 years old were religiously affiliated; this was a lower percentage than other groups identified, and lower in comparison to other generations at the same age (Gullickson, 2018; Reutter & Bigatti, 2015). For instance during the 1970s, just 12% of adults between the ages of 18 and 29 reported being unaffiliated with no specific religion. During the 1990s, the percentage of the religiously disaffiliated increased by 4% to 16% and is currently close to 32% (Ferguson, 2018; Reutter & Bigatti, 2015).

Anshel and Smith (2014) dove deeper into the roles of leaders in religious organizations, to examine how they could encourage a healthy lifestyle. Anshel and Smith (2014) demonstrated how religious leaders could aid in shaping behaviors of both congregational members and individuals in the community. When religious leaders

preach about living a healthy life with the support of scripture, it then serves as a source that fosters healthy habits and decreases the costs in medical services (Anshel & Smith, 2014). Approaches that facilitated a change were offered to religious leaders to highlight healthier habits to use in religious communities. Some suggestions offered included: becoming a sponsor to wellness programs and services, including facilities within the community, and designing a fitness room inside church buildings (Anshel & Smith, 2014). Additional suggestions included: hiring health experts, arranging seminars and workshops that focus on a wellness program and Bible study, and lastly creating a mentoring program that utilizes ethical role models (Anshel & Smith, 2014).

Leung, Chin, and Petrescu-Prahova (2016) demonstrated how religious organizations often provided an adequate amount of assistance to immigrants regarding spiritual and moral support. Specifically, religious organizations had offered cultural shelter, several social services, and the opportunity to be a part of a community (Leung et al., 2016). Therefore, religious organizations influenced different cultures and took leadership roles in issues that were non-religious such as well-being advancement (Leung et al., 2016). The data for this study was obtained from research conducted over a 6-year period with Chinese immigrant religious institutions and the likelihood of becoming involved with HIV/AIDS activities (Leung et al., 2016). The hypothesis of this study implied that no difference would show in HIV/AIDS involvement based on the role that religious organizations have in the lives of immigrants. Findings revealed that religious organizations that were involved with HIV/AIDS activities demonstrated a lower level of bonding social capital based on having fewer connections and shared attributes (Leung et

al., 2016). However, findings also highlighted that “high bridging social capital linked to HIV/AIDS involvement” based on organizational members demonstrating more connections to individuals outside their congregation or sanctuary (Leung et al., 2016, p. 7). Findings were consistent with the vague suspicion that spanning social capital was identified with more receptiveness towards differing or disputable thoughts and data (Leung et al., 2016). Findings also revealed the significance in looking past different religions and characteristics of leadership in informal community structures among individuals with the end goal to likely disclose association level openness to HIV/AIDS inclusion (Leung et al., 2016).

Religion can promote the satisfaction of human needs, though this may occur in a variety of ways dependent on the type of religion; commonly, religions promote transcendence. Transcendence is the ability to rise above something to be in a superior state (Joas, 2015). Buddhism is an example of a non-theistic religion that requires individual self-transcendence, which is promoted among followers by asking them to relinquish their own desires (Xu, 2018). Theistic religions promote transcendence in an alternative way through some form of eternal reward (Burns, 2015). Among the most common portrayals of this eternal reward is the idea of Heaven, a place where the dead are reunited with their loved ones and experience eternal satisfaction.

Well-being and religion are an increasingly important issue in Petts’ (2014) study. The objective of this examination was to additionally examine connections between family attributes, religious participation, and the welfare of an adolescent (Petts, 2014). The study was completed utilizing longitudinal information and consolidating an



assortment of measures (Petts, 2014). The measures focused on “family structure, changes in family structure, the value of the parent-adolescent relationship, adolescents’ regular religious participation from late youth throughout young adulthood and going to church services with parent(s) in late adolescence” (Petts, 2014, p. 7). Longitudinal data were examined on 5,739 adolescents and young adults, from 1992 to 2006 (Petts, 2014). The sample was retrieved from a National Longitudinal Survey of Youth from 1979 (Petts, 2014).

These findings were in alignment with previous research revealing that the structure of the family and the quality of the parent-child relationship during late youth were linked to psychological welfare (Petts, 2014). Results expressed that children raised in families with married parents seemed to pursue a direction of higher well-being all through adolescence, than youth brought up in nontraditional families (Petts, 2014). Results showed that youth who go to church services with their parent(s) in late youth would probably encounter a direction of higher mental well-being all through adolescence (Petts, 2014). Results demonstrated that joining parents in attending church services while a youth might be advantageous to youth (Petts, 2014). Finally, this study was unable to corroborate that estimated percentages of religious participation from late adolescence through young adulthood could be useful to youth brought up in nontraditional family structures (Petts, 2014). Interestingly, overall religious participation after some time seems, by all accounts, to be less gainful to youth raised by single guardians than youth raised by married guardians (Petts, 2014).

Allen and Wang (2014) examined religion and well-being from the views of yet another religious population known as the Latter-Day Saints (LDS/Mormons). The study aimed to determine whether there were connections between “religious responsibility, compulsiveness, and scrupulosity and their effect on psychological outcomes connected to despondency, tension, confidence, and fulfillment with life in an entirely LDS setting” (Allen & Wang, 2014, p. 2). The sample consisted of 267 LDS individuals that resided in a religious LDS community in a southwest district of the United States (Allen & Wang, 2014). First, findings revealed that there was a definite connection that existed between religious commitment and fulfillment with life as a whole (Allen & Wang, 2014). Results also showed that the sample population was placed into the category of adaptive perfectionists because members presented an increased level of intrapersonal and interpersonal commitment to their religion, confidence, and overall fulfillment with life (Allen & Wang, 2014). Findings suggested that LDS members be assisted in gaining an understanding of their views regarding faith because it is probably one-sided based on perfectionistic discrepancy (Allen & Wang, 2014).

**Religious organizations and potential causes of disaffiliation.** Individuals who are neglected are likely to decide to leave the church, as the levels of dissatisfaction increase (Olison & Roloff, 2008). Neglect and exit were also identified as “forms of organizational withdrawal” concerning congregation members’ absence of voice in church (Olison & Roloff, 2008, p. 10). Lastly, researchers anticipated that congregation members who had been with the church for a brief timeframe would exit because of authoritative disappointment versus individuals who had been members for a longer

timeframe (Olison & Roloff, 2008). The last hypothesis was confirmed as new members with shorter timeframes at the church contemplated leaving the church more so than extended timeframe members (Olison & Roloff).

Olison and Roloff (2008) conducted a quantitative study by applying a critical incident method, asking participants to recall the last time an unusual choice was made by leaders in the church, and what their feelings and reactions were once the decision was announced publicly. A sum of 193 congregational individuals from an inner-city church residing in Chicago's southwest side was enlisted to take part in this study (Olison & Roloff, 2008). This particular study explored the indicators of the extent to which congregational members stayed committed and active in their church congregation (Olison & Roloff, 2008). Second, researchers focused on examining the social exchange of ideas and the effect of voice (Olison & Roloff, 2008).

Findings showed that congregation members who felt dissatisfied decreased the amount of time spent interacting and their involvement in the church. Congregation members in this case also strongly considered terminating their membership with the church (Olison & Roloff, 2008). Third, researchers anticipated that congregation members who were disappointed and decided not to leave the congregation, would choose to express their disappointment by downsizing their commitments to the congregation (Olison & Roloff, 2008). When examining the contact between both neglect and satisfaction statistical significance, with the form being opposite of the expectations , Olison and Roloff (2008) found that neglect and exit also showed a relationship, mainly when the level of satisfaction was low.

**Religion and protective factors.** In most Western societies, religion is of great value in the lives of an immeasurable amount of people (Thomas, Völlm, Winder, & Abdelrazek, 2016). Research shows that religion has a positive effect on quality of life (Thomas et al., 2016). Living a lifestyle that involves some form of religion has been linked to a reduced level of crime, increased ability to deal with stress, improved self-image and mood, increased life expectancy, and reduced depression, suicide, and self-harm (Thomas et al., 2016).

Religion seems to exert a protective influence against criminal behavior, indicating that those who value religion are less prone to such behaviors (Salvatore & Rubin, 2018). As individuals become more engaged with religion, the likelihood of criminal behavior declines (Salvatore & Rubin, 2018). The degree to which people value religion is often assessed via two separate aspects of religious behavior; private religious adherence and outward attendance of religious services. High levels of private religiosity were found to have an inverse relationship with criminal behaviors, as was religious services attendance (Salvatore & Rubin, 2018). Consequently, those who value religion are associated with personality types that are less prone to criminal action.

In studying sexual offenders, faith-based communities seemed to protect individuals from repeating their behavior (Kewley et al., 2015). Kewley et al. (2015) examined how sexual offenders behaved following release. Religion's role in this context surrounded the faith-based communities in which individuals participated. These communities surrounded individuals with protective factors that prevented reoffending apart from religion (Kewley et al., 2015). As such, the researchers concluded that religion

could prevent repeat behavior, even if the cause may have been due to the socially supportive factors apart from religious groups (Kewley et al., 2015).

Religion has a protective effect in the face of distress (Rosmarin, Pirutinsky, Greer, & Korbman, 2016). Specifically, researchers examined how religion affected feelings of gratitude in times of distress. Rosmarin et al. (2016) examined how individuals coped and how religion sustained feelings of gratitude, even during difficult times. The phenomenon under study was benefit detection, which dealt with the perception of having gained something when another person voluntarily and intentionally took an action to benefit the person (Rosmarin et al., 2016). Religiosity had a positive effect on benefit detection, indicating that religion helped individuals cope with their distress and preserved feelings of gratitude, even during distress (Rosmarin et al., 2016). Consequently, religion may help preserve individuals' feelings of gratitude toward others' beneficial actions (Rosmarin et al., 2016).

Religion and spirituality had a protective effect among aging individuals who were HIV-positive (Emlet, Harris, Pierpaoli, & Furlotte, 2017). Researchers studied adults over the age of 50 to examine how religion and spirituality intersected with aging. Participants often described undergoing two journeys; aging and surviving HIV. Spirituality helped individuals maintain resilience and strength among older HIV-positive individuals (Emlet et al., 2017). Consequently, the value of religion was in its ability to protect individuals against the mental stress of aging with HIV (Emlet et al., 2017).

Even individuals who do not attend religious service may continue to be privately religious is an indication of religiosity (Roger & Hatala, 2017). For those with chronic

illnesses, religion may serve as an important coping mechanism by which they deal with their sickness (Roger & Hatala, 2017). Researchers argued that medical professionals should take into consideration the value of religion and spirituality in helping patients cope with illness (Roger & Hatala, 2017). Given the increasingly diverse U.S. population, it is important for doctors to become better acquainted with various faiths and how they might support those dealing with long-term sickness (Roger & Hatala, 2017).

Religion may not always have a beneficial impact in the face of illness, at least when considered from the position of medical professionals (Bowie, Bell, Ewing, Kinlock, Ezema, Thorpe & Laveist, 2017). Researchers studied individuals with cancer and how religion affected types and sources of information patients drew upon to make treatment decisions (Bowie et al., 2017). Also studied were other factors, including race and marital status. After adjusting for several factors, religion's intersection with race emerged as a factor in how people made cancer treatment decisions (Bowie et al., 2017). Racial differences led religious individuals to consider cancer as a punishment from God or a test of faith (Bowie et al., 2017). In other cases, individuals believed cancer could be cured with enough prayer (Bowie et al., 2017). Race also influenced the number of advisors an individual consulted, particularly when they felt cancer was a punishment from God or a test of faith (Bowie et al., 2017). There may be times when religion's influence may have had a negative impact on the well-being of an individual, as indicated by those who did not seek advisors when coping with cancer (Bowie et al., 2017).

The value of religion in the lives of the individual tends to be associated with other characteristics that vary by culture (Bernardo, Clemente, & Nalipay, 2016).

Investigators conducting indigenous research among Filipinos found that religiosity, the degree to which individuals were religious, was positively associated with the characteristics of conformity (Bernardo et al., 2016). In contrast, religiosity was negatively associated with an individual's feeling of personal power (Bernardo et al., 2016). These findings suggested that individuals within the Filipino culture, who were highly religious, might be more prone to conforming personalities, though whether religion caused a conforming personality was beyond the scope of the study (Bernardo et al., 2016). In other cultures, those who were highly religious may have been associated with different personality types (Bernardo et al., 2016). Culture affects the degree to which religion influences individual well-being (Bond & Lun, 2017). Researchers hypothesized that religiosity occurred within specific social and psychological contexts with all three factors (Intrinsic, Quest, and Satisfaction with life) converging to produce different outcomes for individuals of different cultures (Dowson & Miner, 2015). Following an analysis of data from across multiple nations, including religious beliefs, practices, and the impact of those beliefs and practices on subjective wellbeing, the researchers concluded that religion's impact on individuals was culturally determined (Bond & Lun, 2017). The degree to which an individual values religion might have had a differentiated impact on well-being, depending on culture.

Religion was also associated with increased personal well-being in a study of Muslim female academics in Malaysia (Achour, Grine, Nor, & Yusoff, 2015). Religiosity referred to participation in prayer, worship, and personal beliefs (Achour et al., 2015). The researchers also examined coping strategies of Muslims in the face of negative

circumstance and their reliance on God and religion under those circumstances (Achour et al., 2015). The findings revealed that reliance on religion was positively and significantly associated with well-being (Achour et al., 2015).

Beyond simply being of great personal value in the lives of many people, religion may also protect against negative behaviors and mindsets (Thomas et al., 2016). Religiosity may prevent criminal behavior (Salvatore & Rubin, 2018), though the evidence for preventing repeat offenses was mixed, with some researchers finding only limited evidence against protecting against recidivism (Stansfield, Mowen, & O'Connor, 2017) and others pointing to religion's social effect as protecting against repeat behavior (Denney, 2018). Beyond criminal behavior, religion was also cited as exercising a protective influence over distressing circumstances such as grief (Mangione, Lyons & DiCello, 2016; Rosmarin et al., 2016). Religiosity may also protect against loneliness and strengthen the inverse relationship between hope and anxiety (Ciobanu & Fokkema, 2016; Dipierro, Fite & Johnson-Motoyama, 2018). Religion was also used as a coping mechanism to deal with disease, though the influence was not always positive and sometimes led to negative healthcare decisions (Bowie et al., 2017; Emler et al., 2017). Religion also seems to have a positive impact on well-being (Achour et al., 2015; Bourne, Sharpe-Pryce, Francis, Hudson-Davis, Solan, Lewis & George, 2016). The body of literature therefore suggested that religion positively influenced well-being in a number of ways.



## **Phenomenological Research**

The design chosen for the study was phenomenology. Qualitative phenomenological research allows researchers to collect in-depth, descriptive information on specific topics, based on individuals' lived experiences (Moustakas, 1994; Patton, 2005). Through the employment of phenomenological theory, meanings are derived from individuals' perceptions, ideas, and personal human experiences (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). To be precise, phenomenology considers the experiences that individuals endure as they occur. Phenomenology carefully captures each experience in its entirety by way of examining all sides of an incident, various angles, and numerous perspectives (Moustakas, 1994; Patton, 2005). While phenomenology seeks to grasp the meaning of experiences, its main goal is to obtain detailed descriptions as they emerge (Moustakas, 1994). Phenomenological researchers assume that the experiences described are conscious and focus on the concept (Creswell & Creswell, 2017).

In this study, individual's experiences were collected using semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions. Millennials were questioned about their childhood religious beliefs, in addition to their current religious beliefs. Phenomenology creates an outlet to explore all relationships, including those with friends, family members, and spouses and/or partners, and how people interact with millennials concerning influences on one's religious beliefs (Moustakas, 1994). The essence of always having a religion, changing religion, or recently coming into religion was captured through semi-structured interviews reported and communicated in the participants' own words.

## **Summary and Conclusion**

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to explore the lived experiences of religiously disaffiliated Millennials regarding their psychological health and well-being. Millennials who become disaffiliated from their religion may feel psychological repercussions, though not all individuals who become disaffiliated will face these difficulties. This study examined these difficulties and helped create a better understanding of the impact of religious disaffiliation.

There was significant support in the literature regarding the positive influence of religion on individuals in a number of contexts. From acting as a means of coping with trauma and disease to preventing criminal reoffending and helping prevent negative mental states, religiosity was associated with a number of positive outcomes. Despite these positive benefits, researchers had documented the phenomenon of younger people, including Millennials, abandoning their religion even when earlier family members were adherents. This abandonment of religion often occurs during the transition into adulthood when individuals are more likely to reevaluate their personal beliefs and positions.

Despite the positive impact of religion found in the literature and research into the abandonment of religion, there was little in the way of better understanding how religious disaffiliation impacted Millennials. This left a gap in the literature that the study addressed. Chapter 3 describes the study's research design, the sample, tests performed, and methods of analyzing the data. Religious disaffiliation was studied using a phenomenological design, producing qualitative research data drawn from the perceptions and lived experiences of a sample of male and female Millennials who left

their religion. Results of the study will be presented in Chapter 4, followed by a discussion of findings and a conclusion of the study in Chapter 5.

## Chapter 3: Research Method

### **Introduction**

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to explore the lived experiences of male and female religiously disaffiliated Millennials regarding their psychological health and well-being. There are potential positive and negative psychological ramifications of religious disaffiliation, such as negative health and well-being, confusing emotions, and negative feelings towards religious organizations (Fenelon & Danielsen, 2016). Similar to Bowie et al. (2017), I provided insight into people's perception of the effects that religious disaffiliation had on their well-being. I also added to the body of existing literature by examining religious disaffiliation among Millennials at a time when a decline in religious affiliation among this population was occurring. As noted by Baart (2018) and Packard and Ferguson (2018), increasingly, Millennials consider themselves unaffiliated with religious organizations.

This chapter includes a description of the study design; an overview of the target population, the sample, and method of powering the sample; and the procedures used for data collection and analysis. Also included in this chapter are the research design and rationale, participant recruitment strategies, and instrumentation. Data from the study were gleaned from one-on-one interviews that focused on the lived experiences of religiously disaffiliated Millennials. The chapter closes with a summary and transition to Chapter 4.

## Research Design and Rationale

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to provide insight on the experiences of Millennials regarding religious disaffiliation and psychological challenges endured after religious disaffiliation. In this study, the term *religious disaffiliation* was associated with doubt and questioning, faith reconfiguration, and disagreement with prior religious beliefs (Fisher, 2017). I sought to answer main research questions:

RQ1: What are the lived experiences of Millennials regarding their well-being after their process of religious disaffiliation?

RQ2: How do Millennials adjust to the process of religious disaffiliation?

Based on the primary questions, a list of interview questions was presented to all participants. I used this qualitative research design throughout the interviewing process with Millennials who reported religious disaffiliation as adults. The semistructured interview questions allowed me to explore each participant's experiences of religious disaffiliating, with a focus on the perceived effects of disaffiliation on participants' psychological well-being. In addition, I examined each participant's description of religious disaffiliation.

As a qualitative study, this research did not contain independent or dependent variables, as one would find in experimental or correlational studies (see Savin-Baden & Major, 2013). Rather, the aim of this study was to gather rich data on the experiences of those Millennials who became religiously disaffiliated. I employed a phenomenological approach (Moustakas, 1994) to gather and analyze study data. Phenomenological

researchers leverage interviews to investigate a phenomena, as one form of data (Moustakas, 1994). The phenomenon of investigation in this study was the lived experiences of religiously disaffiliated Millennials regarding their psychological well-being. A qualitative phenomenological approach is appropriate when attempting to explore phenomena for which little research exists based on my review of the literature (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013). In cases of experimental or correlative studies, there are clear dependent and independent variables; researchers conducting these types of studies seek to better understand relationships between those variables (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013). However, phenomenological studies are appropriate when little understanding of the study phenomenon exists, and for which clear variables have yet to emerge (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013). A qualitative study allows for the collection of rich data that can be the basis for future studies.

A review of qualitative phenomenological data can reveal consistent themes regarding individuals' experiences of study phenomena. From these reviews, a phenomenon can be refined, allowing researchers to identify themes and potential independent and dependent variables to inform future research (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013). The topic of Millennials who have become religiously disaffiliated had yet to be studied enough to allow for the creation of variables, based on my analysis of the research literature. In conducting this study, I identified variables that affected the outcomes related to well-being among religiously disaffiliated Millennials in the study.

### **Role of the Researcher**

In qualitative investigations, the role of the researcher is to question participants and to clarify points of dispute (Savin-Baned & Major, 2013). Researchers must minimize their interference during data collection and allow participants to respond to interview questions without intrusion or bias from the researcher. It is particularly important for qualitative researchers to avoid leading participants, which can place them at risk of researcher-oriented bias in which they respond in ways they believe the researcher wants them to (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). To prevent personal bias and my professional background as a religious leader from influencing the data in any way, I practiced bracketing and kept a reflexive journal. Bracketing involved intentionally reviewing and setting aside any personal biases before, during, and after data collection (see Creswell & Creswell, 2017). In addition, I used a reflexive journal to note my personal opinions, thoughts, and biases, to prevent subjective thoughts and experiences from coloring the study data. My personal biases were also managed by discussing them with my mentor. My note-taking procedures also included taking notes of nonverbal signals, cues, and communication that could not be captured during the audio recordings of the conversation.

Following the conclusion of the data collection phase, I transcribed, reviewed, and coded the interview data. In this capacity, I was responsible for reviewing the transcribed records line by line, identifying and highlighting recurring key words, phrases, and ideas, and inputting these themes into categories with labels in a table. Following this process, I was better prepared to eliminate redundant themes and collapse multiple, related

categories into singular categories. Finally, I was prepared to present these recurring themes in a logical way that addressed the research question. These steps were completed by following the modified Van Kaam method (Moustakas, C. (1994).

## **Methodology**

### **Participant Selection Logic**

The target population for this study was religiously disaffiliated Millennials. The number of religiously affiliated people is in decline around the world (Hackett et al., 2015). The trend in religious disaffiliation is strongest in North America and Europe (Hackett et al., 2015). Researchers have estimated that religious disaffiliation will continue to increase globally over time (Hackett et al., 2015). The number of religiously disaffiliated Millennials is particularly high in the United States, where 40% of the population claims to be disaffiliated (Baart, 2018; Packard & Ferguson, 2018).

I employed a purposive sampling strategy to recruit male and female participants for this study. A purposive sample of religiously disaffected male and female Millennials between the ages of 24 and 34 years was recruited using the recruitment flyer (see Appendix A), which I distributed to areas around Atlanta, Georgia, such as Roswell, Alpharetta, Canton, Ballground, Woodstock. A purposive sample is a nonprobability sample of individuals who share characteristics common to the target population (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013). No efforts were made in sample recruitment to represent any particular demographic composition. A purposive sample allows researchers to draw the sample more easily in the presence of limited resources (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013). To be eligible for this study, individuals must have met the following criteria: (a) be



religiously disaffiliated and (b) be between the ages of 24 and 34. The reason for limited the number of participants in this way was twofold. First, in this qualitative study that leant so heavily on interviews and the statements of participants, a significant amount of data was collected despite the small sample size ). Second, the sample was limited based on age in order to target the population of male and female religiously disaffiliated Millennials. The small sample size is adequate for a qualitative study, based on Boddy (2016), which states a sample size of 10 to 30 is common in qualitative research studies.

**Research setting.** All participants were recruited in the community of Atlanta, Georgia via recruitment flyer (see Appendix A). The flyers were posted and handed out in the community. No organization served as a community partner. By recruiting in the community, I had access to a diverse population. I was also able to access eligible participants in the community. As volunteers contacted me by phone or e-mail, I provided more information on the nature of the study. When volunteers contacted me via phone or e-mail, they were asked two brief questions to determine whether they align with the study. The two questions were

1. Have you personally experienced religious disaffiliation as a young adult?
2. Are you between the ages 24 and 34 years old?

Both questions were found in the recruitment flyer (see Appendix A).

Once interested individuals agreed to participate in the study, a consent form was provided for their signature and returned before scheduling an interview. After receiving the signed consent form, participants scheduled their one-hour interviews at times that were convenient for them. I conducted semi-structured interviews to collect study data.

Interviews with participants took place in a private meeting room at a local library, where there were no distractions or interruptions during the interview process. Permission was granted to use a meeting room for one to three hours when interviews were scheduled. This environment protected the safety and comfort of participants during the interviews.

**Sampling procedures.** I received approval from the Walden University Internal Review Board (IRB) and was assigned the IRB approval number [06-27-19-0323605] to conduct my research study. The sample population included males and females who were religiously disaffiliated Millennials between the ages of 24 and 34 years old. These individuals were required to have experienced leaving a religion that he or she was reared in as a child. The experience of disaffiliating from a religion must have occurred during adulthood. All participating individuals were required to reside in the Atlanta, Georgia area. Study participants must have been willing to share their experiences of religious disaffiliation as an adult. The sample included a total of 12 male and female participants; one participant dropped out of the study leaving 11 participants in total. I interviewed participants who met the criteria of the study until data saturation was reached.

I posted the flyer for the study throughout the community to recruit participants. The flyer included contact information and stated how many volunteers were needed for the study. Immediately after participants responded to the flyer, I called and emailed them to review their eligibility. I provided several times and locations for eligible interviewees to choose from, and then scheduled interviews according to participants' availability. Prior to the screening process, I provided more details on the study, including the risks/benefits, participants' right to withdraw at any time, and the process of

informed consent. Participants were screened both in-person and over the phone to determine whether they met all outlined criteria for the study. If a potential participant did not meet the requirements of the study, he or she was informed. Participants who met all requirements were required to provide informed consent prior to interviews. Purposive sampling was used (Patton, 2015). In selecting purposive sampling, I was able to gain an in-depth understanding of millennials' perspectives about religiously disaffiliating, and their sense of psychological well-being during the process of disaffiliation (Patton, 2015, p. 53). All questions were open-ended to foster detailed responses. The open-ended questions centered on participants' past and present experiences. The employment of semi-structured interview questions offered participants the opportunity to speak freely about their experiences related to the topic.

**Sampling size.** The initial target sample size was 12 male and female participants to increase the likelihood of achieving data saturation. If data saturation was not reached with the initial participants, additional individuals were recruited until saturation was indicated. However, the sample consisted of approximately 11 male and female participants in total. The twelfth participant dropped out of the study. Creswell (1998) and Creswell (2013) suggested a sample size of 5 to 25 people in conducting a phenomenological study, while Moustakas (1994) recommended approximately 8 to 10 participants, or more, until data saturation is achieved. I employed a purposive sampling strategy to select participants. In using purposive sampling, I focused strictly on characteristics that aligned with the population of interest and answered the research questions. Purposive sampling is commonly used when conducting qualitative research to

focus on gathering rich information (Patton, 2015). This type of sampling allowed me to identify and select participants that had experienced the phenomenon in question or were knowledgeable (Creswell, 2007). No additional sampling strategy was necessary because purposive sampling provided 11 participants, which was within the required number of participants to conduct this study.

**Consent process.** Participants were provided with an informed consent form that explained the nature of the study in depth, including the role of the researcher, and the stated expectations of each participant. The informed consent form was written in a clear and concise manner that participants understood. As the researcher, I was responsible for providing participants with a set of information before he or she decided to agree to participate (APA, 2010). I explained the purpose behind the research, the time allotted for the study, study procedures, and the participant's right to participate, decline participation, or withdraw from the study at any time (APA, 2010). In addition, I explained how study information was to be collected from participants and applied within the study, all potential risks/benefits, participants' right to privacy and confidentiality, limitations, and information on who to contact with questions pertaining to the study or participants' rights (APA, 2010). The informed consent was designed as a written agreement between participants and myself as the researcher. In signing this form, both parties were stating that they understood all aspects of the study including, their roles in the research, and their willingness to participate in the research study (APA, 2010). Potential participants were provided the opportunity to ask questions for clarification and receive answers that explained what he or she had agreed to (APA, 2010). I also provided

sample interview questions that potential participants viewed as they read the consent form. Participants were informed of the types of questions that would be asked regarding their disaffiliation with a childhood religion, how they addressed issues following disaffiliation, and the influence that religious disaffiliation had had on their lives. By providing a sample of the interview questions to potential participants in advance, individuals were able to reflect upon their experiences of disaffiliation to prepare for the interviews.

### **Instrumentation**

The primary data source for this study was semi-structured interviews consisting of open-ended questions. I asked questions regarding participants' past and present status since religiously disaffiliating, yielding in-depth data on the phenomenon being studied. Member checking was used while each interview was taking place to determine whether participants felt that the summarized findings were accurate (Creswell, 2014). The initial interview was expected to take approximately 50 minutes to one hour to complete. Additional time was scheduled if needed when conducting each interview. In Chapter 4, an in-depth discussion will be provided on the interview process, the collection of data, and data analysis.

A researcher-developed protocol was followed for the semi-structured interviews (see Appendix B). To ensure validity, the set of interview questions was reviewed and approved prior to the study being conducting. Using semi-structured interviews, I guided participants using a set of interview questions, while still allowing for independent responses. All sources for the study included the 12 male and female participants drawn

using the aforementioned purposive sampling method. Participants were interviewed individually, and the same set of questions was asked of all participants.

### **Pilot Study**

A pilot study was conducted to verify reliability and validity of the semi-structured interview (Roberts, 2010). The pilot study took place after the researcher received IRB approval. I approached the pilot study in the same ethical manner as this study, to see firsthand what could transpire in conducting a study with male and female religiously disaffiliated Millennials. The semi-structured interview questions for the actual study were used in the pilot study. The pilot study interview took place at the local library in a private meeting room. The interview was expected to take 50 minutes, but no longer than one hour. After the pilot interviews were completed, I was able to determine how much time was needed to conduct the actual interview and transcribe. Individuals were notified that their participation was voluntary, the study was explained, and a consent form was signed. During the pilot study, I tested the interview questions with two random individuals that were between the ages of 24 and 34 years old and religiously disaffiliated. The pilot study participants were not included as a part of the actual study sample and their responses are not included in the final data analysis. In asking the interview questions, I discovered the following: (a) what type of answers were likely to be given; (b) whether the questions presented were clear to participants; (c) if certain questions needed to be revised or removed; (d) what each participant found interesting or difficult about the questions during the interview; and (e) what the reactions of participants were to the questions. The opportunity to conduct a pilot study enabled me to

fill out the study and make changes in how I presented both myself, and the interview questions.

### **Procedures for Recruitment, Participation, and Data Collection**

I personally recruited the research participants for my study by distributing and posting flyers (see Appendix A) in the community of Atlanta, Georgia. No organization or group of individuals was recruited in an attempt to assist in distributing or posting flyers. I researched and drove around to public places in various neighborhoods and public parks handing out flyers and posting them within the community. I avoided any form of solicitation in recruiting participants. Surprisingly, I anticipated that it would take weeks to recruit participants, but in a matter of three days, I received my first email from a potential participant and the following week I was able to recruit 10 more participants. All participants had viewed the flyer and responded via email stating that they are millennials who have disaffiliated with a childhood religion and were interested in the study. For some of the participants' they were informed about the study through a friend or acquaintance, but only individuals that fit the criteria of the study were invited to participate. Individuals who contacted about the study were questioned to ensure that they fit the study before being offered an invitation. It was not difficult to recruit and gather participants because Atlanta, Georgia is a state that is home to many religions. Through the participants I learned that there are a variety of practicing religions from Catholic to Methodist, Baptist, non-denominational, Pentecostal, Islamic, Judaism and more. When sharing further information about the dissertation, I discovered that there are many people who want to express what they have experienced in leaving a childhood

religion. Unfortunately, the recruitment process revealed that there are many individuals who were once affiliated with a religion, but now have disaffiliated as adults.

Recruitment took place using flyers posted on bulletin boards and handed out in the community parks and neighborhoods to draw in participants located in Atlanta, Georgia areas. Personal contacts were not notified or sent an announcement to participate in the study. Participants were alerted to the study and provided initial contact information to send an email if they wished to participate. After receiving the initial email, I responded and ensured that the respondents met the minimum criteria for participating in the study. All participants were required to sign an informed consent form prior to interview. If vulnerable adults participated in the study without the researcher's knowledge, their inclusion was justified. There was no reason to exclude pregnant women, those with emotional disabilities, those who are from the LGBTQ community, and those who still held religious beliefs, but had disaffiliated with a religion, etc. because this study posed no more than minimal risk to them. All participants were able to withdraw from the study at any time. The researcher monitored each participant and expressed that the interview would be stopped if she felt that a participant was becoming distressed. No form of distress occurred in the study.

Data were collected on a one-on-one basis using semi-structured interview questions and field notes (see Appendix B). Each question was structured to gain specific responses; however, participants were able to discuss any related topic that he or she felt was important to talk about. This procedure allowed for the collection of information that directly addressed the interview questions, while allowing related information to be



provided. Aside from the interview questions, I minimized my interactions with the participants to avoid leading their responses. During the interview process, I supplemented the audiotaped answers provided by the subject by taking hand written field notes. Field notes captured nonverbal signals and my observations as the researcher. The Audacity® application was used to audio-record participant interviews. Once recorded, I transcribed all interviews using Express Scribe Pro®. Hand written field notes were transcribed into a Microsoft Word document. The researcher provided a summary of the results, by email, to all participants recapping the details of the research study. No participants were identified in the shared summary of the results. All participant email addresses were confirmed at the time of the interview.

### **Data Analysis Plan**

Data analysis involved the capture of essential experiences, perceptions, and concepts that participants used to create meaning (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). Analysis was conducted through line-by-line analysis, identification of emergent themes and patterns, development of a framework for relationships between themes, organization and format of themes, development of personal narratives, and, lastly, “reflection on one’s own perceptions, conceptions and processes” (Smith et al., 2009, p. 79). The data analysis process was a non-linear, iterative path to a final internally-consistent representation of experiences. The process required patient reflection to find a path that spoke to participants’ lived experiences.

Coding was accomplished using a spreadsheet to collect words and phrases organized by initial themes (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013). As data accumulated, themes

were revised and subthemes emerged (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013). I created specific headings and edited, merged, or deleted themes as necessary (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013). This iterative process allowed for comparison within and across interviews for connected experiences (words and phrases), to distil interviews into insights (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013).

Findings were reported as follows: First, a table was created that summarized participants' demographic data for age, gender, ethnicity, and employment status. Second, a personal narrative for each participant using their own words was included. Finally, themes and subthemes were reported and analysed using the literature review as context.

**Coding process.** The modified Van Kaam method was used to provide an analysis of the phenomenological data collected from each participant (Moustakas, 1994). The seven steps outlined in Moustakas (1994) was applied to all transcribed data. First, horizontalization took place by listing all of the relevant meanings that resulted from dataset. Coding involved listing the expressions relevant to each participant's experience (Moustakas, 1994). Second, I used reduction and elimination, to identify codes that were both relevant and incomparable (Moustakas, 1994). In identifying these particular codes repetition and extraneous data were eliminated (Moustakas, 1994). Third, thematization of the invariant constituents were performed to group codes that were related into categories, to determine the themes (Moustakas, 1994). The grouped and labelled constituents served as the core themes of the experience of Millennials' religious disaffiliation. Fourth, a review of the themes occurred (Moustakas, 1994). In this step,

themes were reviewed according to the dataset to confirm that the findings were supported by the documented interview transcripts (Moustakas, 1994). Any information that was not explicit or compatible was viewed as irrelevant and was deleted (Moustakas, 1994). Fifth, a creation of individual textural descriptions occurred, which involved producing a summary of each participants experience verbatim from the transcriptions (Moustakas, 1994). Sixth, a creation of structural descriptions occurred allowing me to explore all possible meanings based on textual summaries and imaginative variation (Moustakas, 1994). Seventh, the creation of a composite description occurred producing rich descriptions of the lived experience of each participant incorporating textual-structural descriptions (Moustakas, 1994). Lastly, based on the individual textual-structural descriptions a merged “description of the meanings and essences of the experience” was developed in representation of the participants as a group (Moustakas, 1994, p. 121).

### **Issues of Trustworthiness**

One of the issues inherent to this study was the limited generalizability of study findings. The purposive sample for the study was small and drew on the personal experiences of religiously disaffiliated Millennials. This created a situation in which certain variables inherent to other locations were not captured in the responses of the participants. The inclusion criteria for study participation included religiously disaffiliated males and females who were considered Millennials between the ages of 24 to 34 years.

Trustworthiness was established within this qualitative study by displaying credibility, dependability, and confirmability (Creswell & Miller, 2000). Confirmability was established by use of reflexivity. I reflected on my role in the study, personal background, culture, and experiences that could potentially shape the interpretations of themes and meanings ascribed to all data collected (Creswell, 2013). Member checking was used to increase the credibility of the study. Once all interviews were transcribed, and the preliminary analysis was finalized, I provided a copy of the themes that emerged from the compiled data to each participant via email. In the email, participants were instructed to provide brief feedback stating whether the themes matched their personal perceptions and true experiences. I applied all feedback received from participants to finalize the results documented in the data analysis. A detailed description of the environment (Atlanta, Georgia) and the participants (male and female Millennials ranging from 24-34 years of age, residing in Alpharetta, Canton, Roswell, Woodstock, Cummings, and other surrounding counties and having disaffiliated with a religion), contributed to determining transferability within the sample population of this study. An accurate description of the components of this research study, the participants, environment and experience, aided others with the possibility of transferability of this research. Dependability and credibility were achieved through my field notes and face-to-face audio recorded interviews. The theoretical lens of Deci and Ryan's (1985) self-determination theory (SDT) informed components of this study. Deci and Ryan's theory helped establish adequacy in the responses self-reported by each participant concerning

(environmental factors and psychological needs) as the analysis, and interpretations were examined against this theoretical framework (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

### **Ethical Procedures**

Permission was requested and obtained from the Walden University Institutional Review Board (IRB) before participants were recruited and data was collected for the study. Those who participated in this study did so on a voluntary basis; I did not directly approach anyone or solicit. Participants were recruited as responses were returned via email in response to the flyer. No harm was expected to occur to those participating in this study. Interview-based research did not face the same sort of ethical difficulties of an experimental style study. There were fewer issues than in correlational research. Given that no experimentation was being performed on the participants, risks of harm to participant were inherently minimized. However, it was still important that participants were fully informed about the study before providing informed consent. Participants needed to be given the opportunity to fully consent to all aspects of the study.

In order to ensure that participants were given the chance to fully consent, they first were informed of their rights in the study. Participants were allowed to withdraw from the study at any time. The consent form was given prior to the start of each interview and individual signatures were collected. As such, they were provided with my contact information prior to agreeing to participate. During the introductory email, participants were informed about the nature of the study, how their responses would be used, and how their identities were masked. Names were only be contained in the raw data but masked in the study itself via pseudonym.

All data, collected and analyzed, was kept secure on a flash drive in a coded folder and placed in a filing cabinet at my home office. The coded folders included all documented notes, transcripts from the interviews, and audio recordings. Separate files for each participant were created for their interview transcripts and audio recordings. I am the only person who had access to any of the data collected in this research study. I eliminated any information that could reveal the identity of participants to make certain that their privacy was maintained before transcribing and analyzing the data. The files will be permanently deleted on the flash drive by clicking on the icon that says, “safely remove mass storage device” and selecting the coded folder. All notes and signed documents will be shredded. I applied pseudonyms when reporting all findings concerning the analysis. I also examined and double-checked the quotes of each participant to ensure that their identity or personal information was not revealed.

### **Summary**

There is a growing trend of religious disaffiliation in the United States and around the world, particularly with young adults between the ages of 23 to 38 years of age (Bart, 2018; Packard & Ferguson, 2018). This study used a phenomenological design to allow for the generation of rich data from which insights into Millennials’ experiences with religious disaffiliation was gained, and general themes identified. This study provided a basis for identifying variables that could be used to inform future quantitative studies. I employed thematic coding to identify common themes between religiously

disaffiliated Millennials, hopefully capturing the challenges they faced. Chapter 4 includes a presentation of study findings and discusses methodological issues that arose.

## Chapter 4: Results

### **Introduction**

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to explore the lived experiences of male and female religiously disaffiliated Millennials regarding their psychological health and well-being. The aim of the study was to understand the lived experiences of Millennials regarding their well-being after they adjusted to the process of religious disaffiliation. I used a phenomenological design to allow for the generation of rich data on Millennials' experiences with religious disaffiliation.

### **Pilot Study**

I conducted a pilot study to determine whether participants would understand the interview questions and to ensure that the protocol for the interview was valid and was capable of evaluating what it was designed to evaluate. In recruiting, I posted flyers in the community on public bulletin boards and handed out flyers in the park and in random neighborhoods to random people. People showed interest, as I handed out flyers and began to inquire. On Day 1 of handing out flyers, one individual contacted me, and we discussed the research study and whether they fit the study. This individual fit the criteria for the study, and an interview was scheduled. Every day, I posted flyers and within two to three days individuals would contact me. Some individuals who reached out did not fit the criteria and were not invited to be a part of the study. It took 2 weeks to recruit participants who fit the criteria of the research study. I received e-mails from people based on the flyer. Prior to the study, I did not know any of the participants. There were no previous relationships, and none of the participants reported knowing one another.



Two participants who fit the same criteria outlined in the research study were invited to be a part of the pilot study. After recruiting the two participants, I determined that the results obtained from the research questions were adequate enough to be applied to the research study. The two pilot study participants met in a private room at the local library to engage in an interview designed specifically for this study. I followed the same interview guide designed for the main study by asking the interview questions word for word in the original order that was outlined. I audio recorded and transcribed each 60-minute pilot study interview using the Audacity application. During the interview, participants were encouraged to ask for clarification of interview questions to improve understanding. After each pilot interview, participants had the opportunity to provide feedback during member checking. While member checking, participants reviewed responses for accuracy; this activity created an opportunity for participants to share their thoughts regarding the interview. Pilot participants expressed satisfaction with the interview process, which provided cues to recall important details, and expressed that they felt sharing their story was important. Both participants noted that the questions were not invasive.

The pilot study revealed that the interview questions were sufficient and should be used to answer the overall research questions in a 60 minute or less interview. Surprisingly, the pilot study interviews took only 30 minutes to complete, and both participants were very detailed in their answers. I considered the responses to each question and whether the interview questions were suitable or needed to be changed to fit

the initial research study. The pilot study did not indicate the need to revise the initial interview questions for the research study.

### **Setting**

I conducted the interviews in a private room at the local library to ensure that each participant's interview responses remained confidential. Participants had the choice of meeting at a local library in either Canton, Alpharetta, or Atlanta, Georgia, and selecting a date that was convenient for them to meet for an interview. Because the flyers were handed out in the community, all potential participants indicated that the location easiest for me would be fine. I collected the signed consent forms one to three days before the actual interview. All interviews were conducted at local libraries in Canton, Georgia and Alpharetta, Georgia. I received permission from the libraries to use a private room, and the seating was relaxing, which allowed participants to engage in an open-ended conversation relevant to the research questions. No distractions occurred during any of the scheduled interviews.

### **Demographics**

Findings are reported in three ways. First, Table 1 characterizes study sample demographic data for age, gender, ethnicity, and employment status. Second, I offer a personal narrative for each participant using their own words. Finally, themes and subthemes are reported and analyzed using the literature review as context. The study required 12 participants, and 15 to 20 individuals responded. I invited 15 individuals to interview after they answered questions that determined whether they fit the criteria of the study. Two of the 15 individuals participated in the pilot study, and 11 were a part of

the research study. Two participants never fulfilled the requirements of the study and were disqualified from participating to uphold the integrity of the study. I recruited more than the amount needed in case a participant decided to not continue or did not fulfil the requirements needed. All participants expressed that they had disaffiliated or left a childhood religion. Demographic information is shown in Table 1. Data revealed that the majority of participants were Black females, who were college educated and working full-time jobs. Six individuals identified as single, while five were married. All participants were between the ages of 26 and 34 years of age. Five participants lived in the main geographical location of Atlanta, and the rest were from Acworth, Augusta, Brunswick Grovetown, Kennesaw, and Marietta, Georgia. Participant 1 is the only participant who openly acknowledged not being heterosexual though many briefly mentioned the LGBTQ community and how they are not accepted in the religious community.

Table 1

*Participant Demographics*

Demographic variable	<i>n</i> (%)
Gender	
Male	3 (27%)
Female	8 (73%)
Ethnicity	
White	4 (36%)
Multiracial	1 (9%)
Black	6 (55%)
Educational attainment	
High school diploma	1 (9%)
Some college	2 (18%)
Associate's degree	1 (9%)
Bachelor's degree	5 (46%)
Postgraduate degree	2 (18%)
Employment Status	
Full-time	9 (82%)
Part-time	1 (9%)
Unemployed	1 (9%)
Marital Status	
Single	6 (55%)
Married	5 (45%)
Religious status	
Disaffiliated (no new faith)	6 (55%)
Switched to a new faith	5 (45%)

*Note.* *N* = 11.

### Data Collection

#### Interview Questions

1. What religion did you disaffiliate with and when/where did the disaffiliation occur?
2. Can you describe the situation(s) that influenced your decision to disaffiliate with a religion?

3. What steps did you take in disaffiliating with that particular religion?
4. Can you describe your lifestyle since disaffiliating with a religion?
5. What role did you take on in your childhood religion prior to disaffiliating?
6. What influence did immediate or extended family relatives have on your religious beliefs during your childhood?
7. How would your decision to disaffiliate from a religion change based on time and experience?
8. What issues did you face at the time of disaffiliating and how did you address those issues?
9. What are your feelings towards religion as a whole today and the possibility of affiliating with a religion?
10. How did religious disaffiliation change your relationships with family, friends, and community? How did friends, family, and community support your decision to disaffiliate with your religion?
11. What advice do you have for those who considering religious disaffiliation and why?
12. How do you see yourself today, in terms of your decision to disaffiliate with a religion?

### **Transcription of Participant Interviews**

In transcribing, I played back all audio-recorded files of the 11 participants' interviews. In playing the recorded interviews, I wanted to ensure that the information transcribed was accurate. The 11 interviews were transcribed verbatim, and any questions

participants emphasized were included in the write-up. All transcriptions were confirmed by checking them against the audio recordings. The recordings were played back for two to three days to make certain that all transcriptions were valid and accurate according to what each participant shared.

### **Data Analysis**

Data analysis involved the capture of essential experiences, perceptions, and concepts that participants used to create meaning (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). Analysis was conducted through line-by-line analysis, identification of emergent themes and patterns, development of a framework for relationships between themes, organization and format of themes, development of personal narratives, and, lastly, “reflection on one’s own perceptions, conceptions and processes” (Smith et al., 2009, p. 79). The data analysis process was a non-linear, iterative path to a final internally-consistent representation of experiences. The process required patient reflection to find a path that spoke to participants’ lived experiences.

Coding was accomplished using a spreadsheet to collect words and phrases organized by initial themes (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013). As data accumulated, themes were revised and subthemes emerged (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013). Coding began with factors affecting religion developed by Fenelon and Danielsen (2016). Interview content was initially categorized using the following: 1) lost belief in spiritual or dogmatic beliefs, 2) political considerations, such as treatment of LGBTQs, 3) dissatisfaction with the social aspects of the congregation, and 4) personal lifestyle issues. As interview content formed in these categories, some content remained uncoded, requiring new broad

theses. Once content stabilized into themes, the wording of the categories was changed to more accurately reflect the primary theme in the block of quotes. Finally, themes were divided into subthemes based on quotes into meaningful collections. This iterative process allowed for comparison within and across interviews for connected experiences (words and phrases), to distil interviews into insights (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013). Six different themes emerged from the data.

### **Religious Disaffiliates Inherited Their Childhood Religion**

The first theme that emerged from the data included how the participants inherited their childhood religion. Ten out of the eleven participants reported being heavily involved in their religion due to the expectations set forth throughout their childhood. This was evidenced when Participant 2 stated:

So, what they believed in is what I believed in and since I was a child, I didn't have a choice. If they went to church, you were going to church, when they leave church you leave church. You had to go to children church, and that sort of thing; I had to follow what they believe. I had to follow the belief that was in my household, basically, because I was a child.

Participant 3 echoed similar thoughts to that of Participant 2 when stating:

Between my mother and my aunt, yes, they influenced me because they were the two main people, I did attend church with on weekly basis. When I was younger, my mother did kind influence me in a way, um, she did raise me to be Baptist, but I guess I never made my own decisions.

Participant 5 discussed being quite active in the church, participating in many different extra-curricular activities:

I sung in the choir and sung gospel songs with my family when I was younger. My mother is the only person who had a major influence on my religious beliefs as a child. I understood at a young age that serving God was important and I never voiced to my mother that I had a problem with going to church or learning about God.

Participant 8 reported a similar high active lifestyle in the church by stating:

As a child, I was pretty involved, youth group from age 6 to middle school ages 13 and 14, Sunday school, trips, children choirs, bells in the church, I was also the acolyte light on some Sundays, I was baptized when I was born. My family went to Wednesday night suppers, worship, but doing those things were not my choice. My friends did it as well, so my brother and I thought that it was the norm. I didn't really want to do those things.

Participant 6 reported going to church because it was what was expected of her; following the family rules and beliefs:

I just did it, went to church, and was involved because I thought that's what I was supposed to do. My mentor was in church; my evangelist was in church, so I thought that's what people do. So, it was the people around me that were involved in my life on a daily basis that influenced my religious beliefs during my childhood.



Finally, Participant 9 discussed how her mother heavily influenced her religious upbringing by stating:

My mom taught us kids' bible study. She would get us all in a little area and she would teach the bible to us. That's how we came to learn about God and the bible. So, overall my mom influenced my religious beliefs.

Overall, the participants were able to discuss how they were active in the church when younger, following their family's vision of religiosity and conforming to family norms. They never voice their thoughts, or questioned being involved in the activities of the church.

### **Contradictory Experiences Highlighted a Need to Disaffiliate**

Before disaffiliating, many of the participants were able to describe how they experienced a contradiction between the word of God, the church's teachings, and their involvement with the congregation. This was apparent when Participant 2 stated:

It was definitely restrictive and controlling, especially when I thought that Christianity was supposed to be like build on love and acceptance. It was just having those types of thoughts, [not accepting of LGBTQ community] that influenced my decision. Atlanta has like a high population of the LGBTQ community and just the reaction of churches when it comes to LGBTQ and having to have the congregation leader address the congregation telling them that they are just like you, really turned me off. That really was not right because they are supposed to be seeking God and supposed to have love for everyone and appreciation for God's people.

Similarly, Participant 6 discussed the contradictions by stating, “I just couldn’t connect with the message being preached, how I was treated [Church not accepting of my friends], the culture and the denouncing of people who are of color, and LGBTQ.”

Participant 7 echoed similar thoughts by stating, “I felt like the church turned their back on us. The church judged a lot and gossiped; they talked down on people and instead of doing like the bible says, they tried to shame me and other people.”

Participant 5 was able to provide a deeper understanding of the contradictions by providing a personal example when it came to attending church:

I was in church and I walked up to the altar for prayer and the pastor refused to pray for me; he walked around me as if I was not there and went to other people. I stayed standing there thinking that he would eventually get to me, but he never did, and I went back to my seat embarrassed.

Participant 5 also highlighted how this contradiction was weaved into the congregation by stating:

Some congregation members whispered, “I wouldn’t pray for him either; you know that he’s gay.” I would usually overlook this kind of ignorance, but this time it got to me because I was really sick. I am constantly ridiculed on a daily basis, about the way that I dress, how I do my hair. Some people think that I am eccentric or weird. However, this situation was the breaking point for me.

Participant 10 reported:

Well, I disaffiliated simply because in the beginning in joining the church, everything was fine and everything aligned the teachings and, you know,

everything properly aligned; but as time went on and I got a little bit older, everything changed. Nobody cared about the values; they no longer cared about the values that they upheld in the beginning. It was more about following the people that's over them's vision versus doing what is right for the congregation.

Participant 11 reported an experienced contradiction when he stated:

They were all about love your neighbor and do good. I was not living the life of a faithful Christian; I was still drinking and smoking. People in the church were not practicing what they were preaching. Some of them tried to help get you kicked out of church if you didn't follow what they wanted you to.

Participant 11 further reported:

The Baptists twisted the word to fit what they wanted it to sound like and to fit their own standards. Some of the leaders were all about their own status and position; they did not treat everybody the same.

### **After Disaffiliation, Some Individuals Stopped Attending the Church With No Other Actions.**

The third theme that emerged was behavior after disaffiliation occurred; the majority (six out of 11, or 55%) of participants stopped attending church and sought no other affiliation. Participant 5 reported, "I just left and never entered into that church again [she switched churches]." Participant 8 stated "I just stopped going. I don't go to church no more or practice religion. I didn't take any steps," and Participant 7 reported, "Basically, I just stopped going. I still don't read the bible, stopped talking to a lot of family, cut myself off from that part of my faith that I was raised in."

Other participants stated that they did attempt to complete different steps when thinking of disaffiliation, with reports of them praying, talking with the pastor, or that of family members. Although these participants reported that these steps were taken, disaffiliation still appeared to occur rather quickly. Participant 6 stated, “I just started disassociating with some of the people that I used to hang out with, and I grew apart from the people that I used to know and interact with.”

Five of 11 participants affiliated with another religious group. Participant 1 reported, “I just stopped going to mass after I realized what they were about.” Participant 4 reported that she had no choice but to quickly leave when disaffiliating due to the type of religion that she was involved in; stating:

At first, I was ready to move, the Jehovah Witness did not want me to move. I ended up leaving in the middle of the night; I just packed my things up and moved to Atlanta, Georgia.

Participant 1 was affiliated with the Catholic religion, but decided to join an Episcopal church. While participant 4 is now a Baptist and joined a Full Baptist church.

Participant 10 reported that he attempted to talk to his pastor and other church members, yet that did not assist him in changing his mind. Participant 10 further reported that he attempted to try attending other churches, and that aided in his decision to disaffiliate. He stated:

While I was sitting in that service, I realized that I didn’t want to be in the Methodist system anymore. Once I decided that, I didn’t go back to speak with

the pastor; I didn't bother letting him know that I was leaving. I never made it official. I just left. He doesn't know to this day, but I did disaffiliate.

Participant 11 also echoed similar steps of attending other churches to aid him in his decision to disaffiliate when he stated, "I just started going around to other churches. I did a lot of research and studying before going out to other churches."

### **After Disaffiliation, Participants Appeared Able to Connect With Their Authentic Self**

The fourth theme that emerged from the data highlighted how after disaffiliation participants appeared to be able to connect with their authentic self. Some participants discussed how they were happier, whereas other reported that they felt freer.

Participant 2 highlighted this theme by stating:

I still live the same life that I did then, as it pertains to spirituality and religion. I have personal time for meditation and self-development books, to kind of harvest my own inner being, and strengthen my thoughts, and find the proper tools to live the best life that I can.

Participant 3 reported:

I feel like I don't need religion to be a good person, a caring person, or a loving person. I treat everyone equally or how I like to be treated; uhm, I just don't feel like I need to rely on a superficial-being to get through life, or to make me happy, or anything like that.

Participant 6 reported that they felt freer and less restricted after disaffiliating when stating:

My lifestyle since disaffiliating with being Baptist is that I feel freer. I do what I want to do, when I want to do it. Some of the values about good character, I still feel are important. I am no longer facing the judgments that people had against me and other people. How I live, I don't feel any pressure.

Participant 10 also discussed connecting with their authentic self when they stated, "since disaffiliating with being a Methodist, I feel free, so much lighter."

Interestingly, some participants reported how their disaffiliation aided them in a stronger connection in their current religion and spiritual practice. This was evidenced when

Participant 9 stated:

It's great now, I mean I found a good church. The people are wonderful; um, and the pastor and his wife are good people, as well. You can go and actually do work in there. I have been able to get myself fully together and I joined several ministries and I like to pray for people and help out in the church.

Participant 9 was affiliated with the Baptist religion, but is now affiliated with a Pentecostal church and considers herself to be a Pentecostal.

Participant 11 agreed with Participant 9 by stating:

Yes; ugh, I am faithfully serving, faithfully going to church, and faithfully spreading the gospel. I am now filled with the Holy Spirit; I study God's word more and pray more. I'm happier, my understanding is better about God's will. I now do more to teach people about the Lord.

**Some Participants Had Negative Connotations of Religion After Disaffiliating.**

The fifth theme that emerged from the data included how participants appeared to have negative connotations regarding religion after disaffiliating. Six of the 11 participants reported such feelings. Participant 2 reported that they felt that religion acted as a form of control when they stated:

I respectfully believe that everyone is entitled to believe in what they want to believe in, practice what they want to practice, but also, I feel like religion is very controlling. I think that some of the guidelines and rules and things that people follow that are written in bibles or books about the history of the gods are used as a method of control where people can't live their life in a certain way.

Participant 3 similarly reported:

I don't need it; I don't need it in my life, and I don't want it. I just basically ignore the fact family will sit there and be like "I'm praying for you" or "I'm sending up some prayers for you." I just ignore it because people show their true side and it doesn't matter if you believe in a higher-being or God; it's about following through. Religion does not make you a good person. Religion doesn't justify anything. I don't need religion in my life to be happier or to be a good person. I don't need religion and I don't think there is a possibility that I would go back to religion at this point.

Participant 11 was able to discuss their main thoughts on religions, which appeared positive; however, he also was able to discuss how he felt that the majority of religions are "evil" and "wicked" when he stated:

I think following Jesus Christ is the real religion, and His way is the right way and the truth. I think that a lot of these religions are false, and they are just traditions of man and are not of God. Religion that is not led by the Holy Spirit of God is not of God. A lot of these religions out here are wicked and evil, and I do not trust them if they do not start with the name of Jesus and his Holy Spirit. I believe that religions that do not have these things are just false and tricky.

Other negative connotations of religions appeared when Participant 4 stated, “I feel like some religions are made up, they take the bible and flip it to brainwash people. It’s a lot of religions that are used to manipulate people,” and Participant 6 stated, “they’re a bunch of rules and most of it is not based on a religion’s belief system, it’s based on people’s ideas.”

### **Families Accepted Disaffiliation After It Occurred**

The final theme that emerged from the data included that the participants’ family members accepted disaffiliation after it occurred. Participant 7 reported that “I distanced myself from friends, I didn’t really have to many friends when growing up. I didn’t get too close to anyone.” She did state:

My fiancé supports me, and he understands; he is a Christian and he understands why I don’t go to church. At the time of disaffiliating, not too many people supported me, just my fiancé.

Other participants reported that their family of origin appeared supportive of their decision to disaffiliate when Participant 6 stated, “family, um, it didn’t affect it that much; they understood why I disaffiliated,” Participant 5 stated, “Nothing changed when



it comes to my family. My friends and my mother supported my decision to disaffiliate and to move from North Carolina,” and Participant 3 stated, “My family, as I’ve gotten older, just learned to accept my decisions and my so-called beliefs as well. Participant 3 also stated, “uhm, they are aware that I am an open-minded person and basically they’re OK if I do my own thing.”

### **Evidence of Trustworthiness**

Trustworthiness was established within this qualitative study by displaying credibility, dependability, and confirmability (Creswell & Miller, 2000). I used all data collected from the rich descriptions obtained; the audio recorded face-to-face interviews, and follow up interviews (if necessary). Member checking was also used to increase the credibility of the study, where I reviewed the transcripts of the interview with each of the participants. In this instance, each participant reported that their answers were accurate, and the transcripts provided a strong reflection of the information that they wanted to convey. A detailed description of the environment (Atlanta, Georgia) and the participants (male and female Millennials ranging from 24-34 years of age, residing in Alpharetta, Canton, Roswell, Woodstock, Cummings, and other surrounding counties and having disaffiliated with a religion), contributed to determining transferability within the sample population of this study. An accurate description of the components of this research study, the participants, environment and experience, aided others with the possibility of transferability of this research. Dependability and credibility were achieved through my field notes and face-to-face audio recorded interviews.

## Results

The results of the data analysis were able to answer each of the following research questions:

RQ1: What are the lived experiences of Millennials regarding their well-being after their process of religious disaffiliation?

RQ2: How do Millennials adjust to the process of religious disaffiliation?

In terms of RQ1, the participants were able to discuss their lived experiences regarding their well-being after the process of religious disaffiliation. This was evidenced when participants discussed how their well-being had improved- from experiencing contradicting events while attending religious events and services, to after disaffiliation where the majority of participants reported feeling “freer” and “happier”. Their lived experiences also included discussing how they had to remove themselves from social circles after disaffiliating, with even some participants having to move geographical locations in order disaffiliate properly. The data obtained to answer the first research question appeared to answer the first research question in full, simply because all participants appeared to be able to discuss a well-rounded lived experience of their disaffiliation process by discussing both positive and negative aspects.

In terms of RQ2 that addressed the adjustment to the process of religious disaffiliation, this research question appeared to be answered by the data collected. Many of the participants reported a positive adjustment after disaffiliating from their religion; however, many of the individuals, although they reported feeling “freer” and “happier” appeared to have negative connotations regarding religion, even if they had transitioned

into a new or different religion. In this respect, many of the participants demonstrated some negative connotations that highlighted their previous experiences with their past religion, even though they stated they were experience positive events in their new religion. Adjustment also appeared to be addressed by the data as the participants were able to discuss familial aspects to their disaffiliation, with the majority of participants discussing how their disaffiliation did not change any communication or relationship elements with their parents or family members. A few participants reported not having positive relationships with their parents or family members, even before disaffiliating, but were able to highlight positive individuals, such as fiancés and partners, that supported them throughout their journey.

### **Summary**

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to explore the lived experiences of male and female religiously disaffiliated Millennials regarding their well-being. Eleven participants participated in the study, with the following six themes emerging from the data analysis:

1. Religious disaffiliates inherited their childhood religion.
2. Contradictory experiences highlighted a need to disaffiliate.
3. After disaffiliation, some individuals stopped attending the church with no other actions.
4. After disaffiliation participants appeared to be able to connect with their authentic self.
5. Some participants had negative connotations of religion after disaffiliating.

## 6. Families accepted disaffiliation after it occurred

These themes highlighted important answers to the research questions that guided the study, focusing on the lived experiences of Millennials regarding their well-being after their process of religious disaffiliation, and how they adjusted to this process. The next chapter includes the discussion, and findings are interpreted in relation to the literature, followed by discussion of the study's limitations, recommendations, and implications.

## Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

### **Introduction**

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to explore the lived experiences of male and female religiously disaffiliated Millennials regarding their psychological health and well-being. The nature of this study was qualitative, following a phenomenological design. I conducted individual, semistructured interviews to explore the processes that Millennials experienced when disaffiliating from religion. The specific problem of the research was that little was known about the ways that religious disaffiliation affected the psychological well-being of Millennials. Specifically, there have been few studies on the psychological well-being of young adults following religious disaffiliation and how they contended with the moral and ethical ambiguities, they may have experienced after disaffiliation (LeCount, 2017).

### **Interpretation of the Findings**

Study findings highlighted the lived experiences of Millennials regarding their well-being after adjusting to the process of religious disaffiliation. Findings indicated six themes: (a) religious disaffiliates inherited their childhood religion, (b) contradictory experiences highlighted a need to disaffiliate, (c) after disaffiliation some individuals stopped attending the church with no other actions, (d) after disaffiliation participants appeared to be able to connect with their authentic self, (e) some participants had negative connotations on religion after disaffiliating, and (f) families accepted disaffiliation after it occurred.

### **Religious Disaffiliates Inherited Their Childhood Religion**

The first theme that emerged from the data highlighted how religious disaffiliates inherited their childhood religion from family members. Many of the participants discussed how they attended church or religious services because it was the norm within their families; some participants highlighted how their parents were actively involved in the religion, and some indicated a cultural component from within their community. This theme is in alignment with McNamara-Barry, Prenoveau and Diehl's (2013) study that focused on the relationship between religious faith activities performed at home during childhood and adolescence with the persistence of emerging adults' religious practices and beliefs. Within their study, McNamara-Barry et al. found that the results provided a significant positive correlation between the frequency of religious faith activities during childhood development and subsequent religious practices and beliefs of emerging adults. In this current study, the participants discussed how they would regularly attend religious and church events as children and adolescents because it was the norm within their family, thereby shaping their beliefs as emerging adults. However, the present study findings did not confirm McNamara-Barry et al., there was no clear relationship between the frequency of religious activity partaken in by youth and their disaffiliation in young adulthood.

Additionally, Bengtson, Copen, Putney, and Silverstein (2009) completed a study that focused on the intergenerational threads of religiosity and how religion is passed down from one generation to the other. The goal of Bengtson et al. was to gain knowledge about the manner in which religion was passed on to younger generations,

from the formation of single irreducible family units and distant family settings to the role of grandparents during the transmission process and the difference in the processes across generations and time (Bengtson et al., 2009). Findings confirmed that grandparents had a direct influence on their grandchildren concerning religious socialization specifically with their granddaughters (Bengtson et al., 2009). Findings also confirmed the continued resilience and relevancy in families involving the passing on of religious customs and beliefs to younger generations (Bengtson et al., 2009). The results of this current study were in alignment with Bengtson et al., as many of the participants discussed how grandparents, parents, and cultural expectations were a result of their religious views and levels of attendance. Although most participants reported that church and church event attendance was expected, there was no clear relationship between frequency of religious attendance and disaffiliation in young adulthood, which was a surprising observation.

### **Contradictory Experiences Highlighted a Need to Disaffiliate**

The second theme that emerged from the data included that of participants highlighting contradictory experiences that influenced their need and decision to disaffiliate. Djupe et al. (2018) focused on religious disaffiliation and Millennials and concluded that Millennials were becoming more global and inclusive while churches were becoming more insular and exclusive. This current study's findings align with those of Djupe et al., as many of the participants discussed a pulling away from the church's traditional beliefs and value systems, including viewpoints of the church towards social issues such as those related to the LGBT community and people of color. Baart (2018)

and Packard and Ferguson (2018) both reported how politics, including a sense that the Religious Right is becoming more extreme, and inflexibility of the church towards LGBT and other minority groups, were just two of the factors that influenced Millennials' departure from religion. This is another indication that the theme in question is in alignment with current research.

Fischer (2017) also discussed how doubt plays a role with Millennials when it comes to affiliation with a religious organization. Within this current study, the participants discussed doubt in terms of their experiences with religion while growing up and following the family trends of attending religious services and church. Many reported that they attended religious and church services because it was what they had always been told to do; however, many participants discussed how their beliefs and value systems were not aligned with that of the church. Vaughn (2016) discussed that many Millennials leave a church, or an entire religious organization, deciding to move into a category of *nones*. Nones, a group of unaffiliated religious individuals, is on the rise throughout the United States, with Millennials moving into this category due to spiritual wounds experienced from exclusion from their church, corresponding attitudes due to the lack of exclusion, and the fact that they view the church as having a lack of authenticity (Vaughn, 2016). As a result, this research study will provide descriptive information on the experiences that led some Millennials to leave church, decide to disaffiliate, or become a nones.

Neglect and exit have also been identified as “forms of organizational withdrawal” (p. 10) concerning congregation members' absence of voice in church and



being overlooked or ignored (Olison & Roloff, 2008). Researchers anticipated that congregation members who had been with the church for a brief time would exit because of authoritative disappointment, when compared to individuals who had been members for a longer time (Olison & Roloff, 2008); this is consistent with the findings of this study. Researchers discovered that unsatisfied church members concerning high financial contributions and volunteering limited their involvement within the church. These members were new members, not long-term members of the church (Olison & Roloff, 2008).

### **After Disaffiliation, Individuals Stopped Attending Any Church**

The third theme that emerged from the findings highlighted how after disaffiliating from their church, participants stopped attending church and followed no specific steps. For example, many participants in this current study reported that they simply stopped attending church, with some even removing themselves from social contact with members outside of church attendance. Participants reported, “I just stopped going to mass after I realized what they were about”; “I just left and never entered into that church again”; “I just stopped going. I don’t go to church no more or practice religion. I didn’t take any steps”; and “Basically, I just stopped going. I still don’t read the bible, stopped talking to a lot of family, cut myself off from that part of my faith that I was raised in.” Berghammer et al. (2017) and McClendon and Hackett (2014) discussed how disaffiliating from a religion is not a process that occurs overnight; rather, it is more of a process that occurs over a lifetime. The authors provided an example where they highlighted that separating from the Catholic Church is not something that occurs

overnight, as it occurs throughout both adolescence and early adulthood (Berghammer et al., 2017; McClendon & Hackett, 2014). The results of Berghammer et al. and McClendon and Hackett do not appear to be in alignment with this current study, as many of the participants reported separating from their church as a process that required time.

### **Participants Appeared to Connect With Their Authentic Self**

The fourth theme that emerged from the findings included that the participants appeared to connect with their authentic self after disaffiliation. Many of the participants discussed how they felt “free” and “happy.” Similar findings were found in prior studies, where participants were able to discuss how they did not feel connected to their values or beliefs when attending their church or religious activities. May (2018) completed a study that focused on individuals in three categories; stayers (individuals who had considered dropping out), leavers (individuals who had dropped out of religion), stable affiliates (individuals who were consistent in their religion), and stable *nones* (non-religious affiliates). In this current study, disaffiliated participants reported being happier and freer, which aligns itself with the results of May (2018). Additionally, Reed (2016) discussed how it was possible to aid Millennials in moving back to religion by having churches focus on ensuring that the Bible teachings were relatable to Millennials’ lives. The author purported that Biblical study classes should aim at highlighting the importance and relevance of the teachings, to increase appeal to this generation that was leading the movement towards *nones*. Biblical study classes should ensure relevancy for Millennials and be used as an example of human creativity, group reflection, political rhetoric, and social discourse in order to engage individuals, which many churches are not doing

(Reed, 2016). In this current study, many participants reported that the church's values did not correspond directly to that of their personal values, as many individuals reported being passionate and a member of the LGBT and African American communities. In relation to this interpretation, some participants discussed how they were treated differently due to being LGBT or African American by not only the pastor of the church, but also that of the congregation and church communities. Baart (2018) and Packard and Ferguson (2018) also highlighted this point when they discussed that politics, the religious right becoming more extreme, and the inflexibility of the church towards LGBT and other minority groups, are just some of the factors that affect Millennials' departure from religion. It would behoove churches and their institutional affiliations to think more clearly on these issues in order to ensure that they are in alignment with the teachings of the Bible, versus that of the people of the church, as some of the participants in this current study reported.

In regard to the psychological health aspect of the study, participant 3 stated that "I'm not so much as miserable" after disaffiliating, while participant 1 stated "I would be depressed if I had to grow up around it or be around the Catholic religion because they judge people." Participant 1 was able to choose whether she wanted to be Catholic or not when she was in college. Participant 4 felt brainwashed and confused, when affiliated with the Jehovah Witness religion stating that "I feel like some religions are made up, they take the bible and flip it to brainwash people." Participant 5 stated "I am at peace and I am hopeful", after disaffiliating. Participant 7 stated "I'm skeptical, I have doubts, my perspective changed. I don't pray or go to church or bible study", after disaffiliating.

Participant 9 stated “I faced issues of hurt, shame”, while affiliated with the Baptist religion because her clothing was inappropriate most of the time. However, once disaffiliating she stated “I am at peace and can move forward”. Participant 10 expressed “I felt like I was sinking deeper and deeper; I felt stressed” when affiliated with the Methodist religion.

### **Participants Had Negative Connotations of Religion after Disaffiliating**

The fifth theme concentrated on participants having negative connotations on religion after disaffiliating. Although some of the participants had reported attending a new religion and church, they still appeared to demonstrate negative connotations towards religion as a whole. This was evidenced when participants reported negative connotations such as “I feel like some religions are made up, they take the bible and flip it to brainwash people.” “It’s a lot of religions that are used to manipulate people”, “there a bunch of rules and most of it is not based on a religion’s belief system, it’s based on people’s ideas.”. In relation to previous literature, Djupe et al. (2018) reported that this shift in attitudes towards religion is not only based on experiences that caused disaffiliation but is also due to Millennials becoming more global and inclusive, while churches become more insular and exclusive. Reed (2016) discussed how it was possible to aid Millennials in moving back to religion by having churches focus on ensuring that the Bible teachings were relatable to Millennials’ lives, which could be another shift caused by negative connotations. If religious bodies and churches could ensure Bible teachings are more relatable to Millennials’ lives then this disconnect could possibly be lessened, as evidenced by the data in this previous study.

### **Families Accepted Disaffiliation After It Occurred**

Within this current study, a theme that emerged included that many of the participants' families accepted their disaffiliation after it occurred. Participants were able to highlight their experiences by stating, "Family, um it didn't affect it that much; they understood why I disaffiliated," "nothing changed when it comes to my family. My friends and my mother supported my decision to disaffiliate and to move from North Carolina," and, "my family as I've gotten older just learned to accept my decisions and my so-called beliefs as well. Um, they are aware that I am an open-minded person and basically they're ok if I do my own thing." Within previous literature, Jules and Maynard (2016) conducted a study that examined the advancement of one's spirituality, addressed the positive influence that interfaith had on Caribbean youth, yields clarification to "rising adulthood and the related psychosocial attributes" that contribute to one's profound improvement (p. 1). The findings discovered that growth in one's spirituality offered a sound working family, alongside a positive association with their companions (Jules & Maynard, 2016). Jules and Maynard's results appear to align with this current study, as many participants reported a continued and unchanged strong relationship with family members after disaffiliating, with most participants maintaining positive relationships with their family members even when transitioning to a different religion. Most participants who remained disaffiliated saw no change in their relationship with family and friends, while other participants family members were unhappy with their decision to disaffiliate. Participant 2 had family members that questioned whether she was atheist or doesn't believe in God at all. While Participant 7 stated that she doesn't

speak to most of her family; they are not on speaking terms. The grandmother of participant 4 was disappointed and did not understand why she disaffiliated.

### **Interpretation of Findings in Relation to Self-Determination Theory**

Self-Determination Theory (SDT) provided a framework for understanding forces that influenced individuals' motivation to act by exploring several forms of motivation, each having their own consequences for "learning, performance, personal experience, and well-being" (Ryan & Deci, 2000, p. 2). The goal of SDT in this study was to identify clearly the components that supported inherited human potentials required for growth, integration, and individual welfare (Ryan & Deci, 2000). SDT was also useful for examining any courses of action and stipulations that promoted healthy development and efficient functioning among individuals, groups, and surrounding communities (Ryan & Deci, 2000). In terms of the findings of this current study, disaffiliation practices were supported by SDT, as many of the participants were able to justify their reasoning for disaffiliating from a religion due to the identification of contradictory experiences. Therefore, in this study, participants were able to identify these experiences and identify components that supported growth, integration, and individual welfare. This occurred by the participants discussing how they were able to identify beliefs and morals that ran through their lives that were not in alignment with the church and its subsequent congregation, in addition to changes that they made by deciding to disaffiliate. This appeared to promote healthy development and efficient functioning as evidenced by the participants discussing that they felt more "free" and "happy."

Autonomy, confidence, and motivation are aspects of SDT that also were highlighted by the results. The participants were able to make autonomous decisions that aided them in obtaining higher levels of confidence and the ability to be motivated to make changes immediately.

### **Limitations of the Study**

There were several limitations in this qualitative phenomenological research study. The first issue was the small sample size, which limited the generalizability of the study's findings (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013). This small sample allowed the researcher to collect rich textual data; however, precluded generalizability. The second limitation was related to the use of a purposive sampling technique. The non-random sample limited the generalizability of this study's findings. The sample used in this study may not have represented the target population in terms of age, ethnicity, gender, or socioeconomic backgrounds. The resulting sample may not have adequately reflected the study's population, making it difficult to generalize findings to that of the larger population. A final issue was the limited geography of this study's sample, which limited the generalizability of the study's findings (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013). The factors mentioned above did not apply to the national population, and therefore, the results drawn from the data had limited generalizability to the larger population. Limitations also existed in the time to collect and analyze the data, the data collection strategy, including how the researcher interpreted the perceived effects of disaffiliation with psychological well-being.

## **Recommendations**

The results of this study have highlighted different recommendations. With regard to future studies, researchers should focus on a population that is larger than the one studied within this current research. For example, a limitation in this current study is the fact that the resulting sample may not have adequately reflected the study's population, making it difficult to generalize findings to that of the larger population. Future studies should focus on the national population by creating research that examines disaffiliation outside of these current parameters. For example, studies could focus on more of a longitudinal aspect of Millennials, continuing to follow their trends on a longitudinal basis. Additionally, future research could also aim to follow minority groups, such as that of individuals of the LGBT and African American community to aid in exploring how disaffiliation has affected them personally over a longer period.

Future research could also follow one specific religion, as in this study, it was unknown what religion each participant was involved in prior to disaffiliation, unless they reported this information. Following an individual religion or spiritual group could aid in understanding disaffiliation from a much concise perspective. Additional research could also follow the trends of newer generational cohorts- such as that of Generation Z and their religious affiliations and movements, which in future studies could be strongly related to that of the Millennials.

## **Implications**

There are some implications to this study that should be discussed. This study supports positive social change simply because it allows identification of areas that can



be examined by both disaffiliated individuals and their families, churches and religious organizations, and wider community members. For disaffiliated individuals and their family members, this research may provide a deeper understanding of their experiences within context of their values and beliefs. Although in this study, many family members appeared supportive of disaffiliation, this may not always be the case. Therefore, this study may aid in providing families information on why their loved ones may be interested in disaffiliating, which in turn can create a strong discussion.

For churches and religious organizations, this study may aid them in understanding why Millennials decide to leave or disaffiliate from the religion, assisting them in perhaps approaching the Millennial population differently. Because many Millennials felt that the church was out of touch with their lives, values, and beliefs, this research can aid religious bodies in gaining a broader understanding of why Millennials disaffiliate, while aiding them in creating a way in which to retain their Millennial members.

For the broader community, this study is helpful as it allows for a better understanding of why Millennials disaffiliate from a religion and the process in which it is completed. Perhaps this study can aid other individuals who are feeling disconnected from their church in either strengthening the connection or finding alternative ways in which they can begin the disaffiliation process, while understanding the effects that it has on their lives. Future research should follow these individuals, as well as religious bodies to aid in better exploring and understanding how they have approached the topic of

disaffiliation and what they are doing to decrease the amount of disaffiliates within their congregations.

### **Conclusion**

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to explore the lived experiences of male and female religiously disaffiliated Millennials regarding their psychological health and well-being. The findings in this study determined six different themes; religious disaffiliates inherited their childhood religion, contradictory experiences highlighted a need to disaffiliate, after disaffiliation individuals stopped attending the church with no other actions, after disaffiliation participants appeared to be able to connect with their authentic self, participants had negative connotations on religion after disaffiliating, and families accepted disaffiliation after it occurred.

It is important to continue to research this topic perhaps in different manner, such as completing longitudinal studies on Millennials after they have disaffiliated or concentrating on how churches and religious organizations approach disaffiliation within their congregations and what steps they can do to decrease the number of disaffiliating individuals from leaving their church. Religion is a vital component of culture, thought to provide access to a rich psychological knowledge base, and considered by many to form the foundation of human civilization. An individual's religious foundation, established during childhood, is sometimes challenged later in life to the point of religious disaffiliation. Research for this study allowed for a deeper understanding of the experiences and challenges that disaffiliated individuals encountered on their journey to peace and happiness.

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## Appendix A: Recruitment Flyer



## Millennials' Leaving Religion

Walden University Doctoral Research Study

Have you personally experienced leaving a childhood religion as a young adult?

Are you between the ages 24 to 34 years old?

Would you be interested in talking about it?

If your response is yes, you are a possible candidate for this research study.

All participation is voluntary.

I would like to interview you!!!

If you meet these criteria, please contact the student researcher Elizabeth Rainwater by email at [redacted] or phone at [redacted]. Please note that you can withdraw at any time from this study.

## Appendix B: Interview Questions

1. What religion did you disaffiliate with and when/where did the disaffiliation occur?
2. Can you describe the situation(s) that influenced your decision to disaffiliate with a religion?
3. What steps did you take in disaffiliating with that particular religion?
4. Can you describe your lifestyle since disaffiliating with a religion?
5. What role did you take on in your childhood religion prior to disaffiliating?
6. What influence did immediate or extended family relatives have on your religious beliefs during your childhood?
7. How would your decision to disaffiliate from a religion change based on time and experience?
8. What issues did you face at the time of disaffiliating and how did you address those issues?
9. What are your feelings towards religion as a whole today and the possibility of affiliating with a religion?
10. How did religious disaffiliation change your relationships with family, friends, and community? How did friends, family, and community support your decision to disaffiliate with your religion?
11. What advice do you have for those who considering religious disaffiliation and why?
12. How do you see yourself today, in terms of your decision to disaffiliate with a religion?