

1-1-2016

# African Americans And The Communication Of Religious Exit

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**AFRICAN AMERICANS AND THE COMMUNICATION OF RELIGIOUS EXIT**

by

**WILLIAM P. COOPER**

**THESIS**

Submitted to the Graduate School

of Wayne State University,

Detroit, Michigan

in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

**MASTER OF ARTS**

2016

MAJOR: COMMUNICATION (Comm. Studies)

Approved by:

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Advisor

Date

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## DEDICATION

To my mother, Frances –

It has been some time since you've departed from Earth, yet there is not a day when I don't feel your love, support, and encouragement. I know that you are proud of me. Thank you! I love you.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank the participants of the study. Some described the topics of religion and spirituality as private, personal, and difficult to talk about. This thesis could not have been completed without their interest and willingness to speak with me about such topics and emotional events that have taken place in their lives.

I, of course, am forever grateful for my thesis committee, Dr. Rahul Mitra and Dr. Pradeep Sopory. Their guidance throughout the project greatly assisted me in developing my thoughts and ideas into a feasible study.

I also owe thanks to my other professors within the department: Dr. Julie Novak, Dr. Stephanie Tong, Dr. Donyale Padgett, Dr. Karen McDevitt, Dr. Lee Wilkins, Dr. Patricia McCormick, and Dr. Matthew Seeger. Throughout the master's program they have encouraged, supported, and helped facilitate my scholarly development.

Last, but not, least, I am so grateful for my friends and loved ones. They continuously support my endeavors and celebrate my successes, even when I don't celebrate them myself at times.

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## CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

Religion and spirituality are topics of interest in social scientific research (Hill et al., 2000, p. 53). Religion and spirituality are separate constructs with commonalities and distinct differences (Altmeyer et al., 2015; Hill et al., 2000; Zinnbauer et al., 1997). Scholars have historically conceptualized religion with three definitions: a supernatural power to which individuals are motivated or committed, the feeling present in individuals that feel such power, and ritual acts carried out in reference to that power (cited in Hill et al., 2000, p. 51). Scholars have been interested in topics regarding religious practices. Additionally, studies have investigated individual disaffiliation from religion, known more commonly as religious deconversion in the literature. Religious deconversion is the abandonment of religious beliefs and affiliation. According to Koschmann (2013), religious congregations are sites of organizational communication (p. 110). However, Garner and Wargo (2009) argue that religion has been neglected in organizational communication scholarship (p 393). This exploratory study will focus on the relationship between communication and religious disaffiliation, specifically regarding disaffiliation as a form of organizational exit enacted through communicative practice. Moreover, for the purpose of this study, I will focus on the African American community.

According to The Pew Research Center (2015), there has been an 8% decline in Christianity and 7% increase in unaffiliated religious orientations (including atheist, agnostic, no answer) between 2007 and 2014. Recent disaffiliation literature focuses on ex-Mormons, as the Church of Latter Day Saints (LDS) is more totalistic compared to other Christian denominations. There are few scholarly studies that focus on religious disaffiliation, and in recent years, popular press articles have identified a decline in religiosity amongst both members of the millennial generation and African Americans (Davis, 2014; Hudson, 2012). Yet, historically, African

Americans have reported higher levels of religiosity than other minorities (Hudson, Purnell, Duncan, & Baker, 2015; Pew Research Center, 2015). Additionally, Ellison and Sherkat (1990) argued for disaffiliation research to focus on individual-level reasons for religious disaffiliation. Therefore, this study will delve deeper into the communicative processes of religious disaffiliation in general, within the African American community more specifically.

There are several practical implications provided by this study. First, it provides information beneficial to churches and other religious organizations such as potential reasons why members are leaving. This information can be used for developing strategies to deter members from disaffiliation. Second, from church members' perspective, data highlights strategies that individuals have used to communicate religious disaffiliation. Individuals that are contemplating religious disaffiliation can find strategies that may be useful in their journey of exit. Additionally, knowing that others are experiencing similar thoughts can provide a sense of comfort, as the disaffiliation process may be challenging for some.

Data was collected using one-on-one, in-depth interviews. Interviewing can uncover data that may not be discovered through other qualitative methods because qualitative interviews can allow both researcher and participant to learn more about themselves and others (Edwards and Holland, 2013, p. 3). Potential participants were recruited via flyers posted through buildings on campus and the researcher's social media sites, as well as participant referrals. The interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed, and coded for analysis to uncover common themes. Additionally, a demographic questionnaire was used to capture the profile of the participant sample. In the following pages, I will discuss relevant literature regarding religious disaffiliation followed by a description of the data collection methods. Finally, I will discuss the findings,

theoretical and practical implications, limitations, and areas for future research regarding religious disaffiliation.

## CHAPTER 2 LITERATURE REVIEW

### Religion as Communicative Practice

Religion has long been a topic of interest within various fields, including communication. Scholars have argued that religion is constituted through communicative practices such as, but not limited to, identity formation, organization, media consumption, and information sharing. Religion and spirituality have been investigated through various communication behaviors. For example, Croucher, Sommer, Kuchma, and MeInychenko (2015) examined the role of communicative behaviors, such as media use and preferences, communication for/in health care, and interpersonal communication, in reinforcing religion and spirituality.

Communication scholars have also examined the role of storytelling, communication competence, and dissent triggers in fostering religious commitment (Cheong, Huang, Poon, 2011; Coopman & Meidlinger, 2000; Garner, 2012, Garner & Wargo, 2009). Cheong, Huang, and Poon (2011) investigated the role that the internet plays on epistemic pastoral authority established through communication, that is, pastoral authority to issue judgments, persuasions, and commands, based on role and status (p. 940). She found the internet can delocalize pastoral authority, while also providing opportunities for pastors to acquire new competencies (p. 938). Garner and Wargo's (2009) study focused on dissent, which is the expression of dissatisfaction, in the church. The authors found that church leaders believe that members are more likely to express dissent to their peers, not to the leaders themselves. On the other hand, church members discussed dissent with church leaders more than other members (p. 375). In another study, Garner (2012) investigated reasons for dissent within the church. Church leaders identified children's programs, use of church facilities, and women in leadership as common dissent triggers. On the contrary, church members identified budget issues, the behavior of other

members, worship style, behavior of leaders, and gender as common issues of dissent (p. 50). Moreover, in a study of Roman Catholic parish members, Coopman and Meidlinger (2000) found that storytelling reinforced church hierarchy (p. 567) (also see the 2011 special issue of *Journal of Applied Communication Research* on religion and spirituality).

In addition to examining the influence religion has on an ongoing basis in people's lives, researchers have also sought to study the impact of religious disaffiliation, more commonly known as religious deconversion, or what happens when individuals tend to exit their religion. Wright, Giovanelli, Dolan, and Edwards (2011) pore over various definitions of religious deconversion, finally contending that deconversion (also referred to as exit or defection) is a break from religious affiliation and beliefs (p. 2). According to Uecker, Regnerus, and Vaalor (2007), 30-40% of adults disaffiliate from religion during emerging adulthood. Additionally, there is agreement that religious disaffiliation occurs during the late teens and early twenties (cited in Regnerus & Uecker, 2006). For the purpose of this paper, I use the term religious disaffiliation (rather than "deconversion") to highlight both the centrality of organizational structures and practices that constitute religion, and the ongoing processes of organizational exit and departure from religious beliefs.

The motivations that lead individuals to religious disaffiliation are also a topic of interest. Higher education, deviation from religious teachings (e.g. drug use, alcoholism, pre-marital sex), and life course factors were found to be common explanations for disaffiliation (Uecker et al., 2007). More recent studies have focused on religious exit from the Church of Latter Day Saints (Mormon) community (Avance, 2013; Hinderaker, 2015; Hinderaker & O'Connor, 2015). Avance (2013) found that ex-Mormons often disaffiliated due to dissonance between doctrinal teachings and their personal everyday experiences (e.g. exposure to anti-Mormon media or

protests) or through an individual discovery path (p. 20-22). The internet is also used as a space for former Mormons to recreate communities, through the ritualistic sharing of individual exit narratives (p. 23).

Moreover, McNamee (2011) and Silva and Sias (2010) looked at the intersection of religion and identity. When studying the individual-organization relationship with Seventh-Day Adventists, Silva and Sias (2010) found that, group interaction provided opportunities for individuals to produce and reproduce identification with the organization (p. 159). Furthermore, McNamee (2011) found that organizational and individual religious identities do not always overlap and noted that congregation members may experience tension between their personal connection to God and their identity as a church member. Additionally, specific group circumstances such as setting and purpose of meetings and the messages used also shape member identities. (p. 436). In 2013, Koschmann noted that communication scholars have developed a fair amount of scholarship related to religion and spirituality (p. 110). Examples included organizational leadership, spirituality in the workplace, and mission building (p. 110).

McNamee (2011) conceptualized Faith-Based Organizations (FBOs) as “organizations whose expressed central purpose is to provide product/services which highlight religious/spiritual values, issues, or needs (p. 424). Churches are included in this definition. According to Jenkins (2015), religious organizations have the ability to address various social issues (p. 87). He proposed a taxonomy of contemporary congregational purpose that expands upon Driscoll and Breshears’ (2008) taxonomy of four types of church purposes. Jenkins’ taxonomy asserts ten types of church purpose. They are commercial, communal, corporal, evangelical, familial, integrational, intellectual, intercultural, marginal, and seclusional. Based on these classifications, Christian congregations can have goals such as increasing size, wealth,

and influence; bettering the community through outreach efforts; and promoting group fellowship. According to the Executive Board of the Tennessee National Baptist Convention (2005), Baptist churches may organize themselves through governing documents “to accomplish their mission in an effective and efficient manner” (p. 1). Examples given include obtaining incorporation, charter, or 501(c)(3) tax exemption status; creating a constitution and bylaws; and obtaining a Federal Employer Identification Number (FEIN) or exemption from state sales tax (p. 2-3).

It is evident that churches act as organizations. Additionally, scholars have situated religious studies through an organizational communication lens (Garner and Wargo, 2009; Garner, 2012; Koschmann, 2013). Therefore, this study will investigate religious disaffiliation using Jablin’s model of organizational disengagement/exit.

### **Organizational Socialization and Exit**

In 1987, Jablin introduced a phasic model of organizational assimilation, which includes anticipatory socialization, organizational entry, and metamorphosis to explain how organizational members gradually become a part of the organization they join (Jablin, 2001, p. 758). This assimilation process is marked by multiple communication processes including orientation, socialization, training, formal and informal mentoring, information seeking, and relationship development (Jablin, 2001). The socialization phase (as well as orientation, training, and formal mentoring) focuses on newcomers’ communication interactions with sources of information (p. 759). Furthermore, its noted that research on socialization tended to focus on the intersection of socialization strategies and newcomers’ adjustment (p. 763). The model was later extended to include voluntary disengagement, which includes members’ preannouncement of exit from the organization, the actual announcement of exit, and members’ lives post-exit. Each

of the stages are marked by particular cues and signals communicated to others. Cues can express explicit dissatisfaction, may be communicated intentionally or unintentionally, and can be available to members of the workgroup, supervisors, or even organizational outsiders such as peers and family members (p. 786). Nevertheless, Gordon (2011) critiqued Jablin's model of organizational exit for not accounting for the exit interview (a conversation between an organizational representative and departing employee to determine reasons for leaving), which is crucial to voluntary disengagement (p. 60).

Scholars have been concerned with the individual stages of organizational entry in organizations other than the paid workplace. For example, Kramer and Danielson (2016) investigated socialization in zoo volunteers during periods of initial entry and time of organizational change and found that opportunities for individualization were limited (p. 113). Dunleavy and Yang (2015) described the college campus as, "an important agent for organizational socialization" and used the context to investigate the effect of memorable messages on female body behavior (p. 225). Taylor et al. (2015) looked at socialization in members of the Church of Latter Day Saints and suggested, "joining faith-based organization involves additional layers of complexity because faith and values are central to an individual's membership in the organization" (p. 81).

The phasic model of organizational exit has also been applied to study instances of voluntary exit in contexts other than paid workplaces. For example, Davis and Myers (2012) used the model to study sorority members, a unique population because they are aware that they must leave sorority houses upon graduation or their fourth year. The authors proposed a model of Planned Organizational Exit, which includes, focus on the future, focus on the present, and focus on the past and future (p. 201). Kramer (2011) used the framework to investigate the



assimilation process in a community choir, a voluntary organization, and found that the stages of anticipatory socialization, encounter, metamorphosis, and exit are similar with employees and volunteers (p. 52). However, he found that volunteers' exit differed from employee exit as members often exited the choir with or without plans to return, with or without notifying leaders (p. 67-68). Additionally, Hinderaker (2015) used Jablin's model of organizational exit as an underlying framework to study ex-Mormon disaffiliation, finding both areas of overlap and difference. Notably, Hinderaker found that ex-members did not verbally communicate their thoughts regarding disengagement to their families and friends within the LDS community (p. 99). In fact, ex-Mormons participated in an active concealment of exit, in contrast to Jablin's (2001) model, which assumes an explicit announcement of exit.

While Hinderaker's (2015) study examined religious disaffiliation through the lens of organizational exit, the relatively totalistic nature of the Mormon Church might account for the variations in exit strategy her study found. As she noted, Mormons "engage in highly structured and institutionalized faith practices and an enacted culture that are far more totalistic than other organizations" (Hinderaker, 2015, p. 94). Moreover, Avance (2013) observed, "Mormons who do not toe the line in belief or practice face disappointing family and friends and even run the risk of ostracism or excommunication from their community of faith" (p. 23). Accordingly, there is a need to extend this line of research, by studying the communicative practices of religious disaffiliation in other religious denominations, perhaps less totalitarian, by other populations. With this in mind, this exploratory study examines religious disaffiliation by African Americans from Christianity, a potentially stigmatized identity, from the perspective of organizational exit.

### **Stigma Management Communication (SMC)**

According to Goffman (1963) a stigma is an “identity discrediting mark on someone of questionable moral status” and may be physical, social, or moral (as cited in Meisenbach, 2010, p. 268). Meisenbach (2010) noted that stigmas are linked to a variety of negative outcomes, therefore stigmas are managed communicatively (p.269). Here, a typology of stigma management communication was developed based on existing stigma management communication research. Her typology proposed that stigma communication strategies be classified based on four criteria. That is, if the individual accepts that the stigma applies to self, individual challenges that the stigma applies to self, individual accepts public understanding of stigma, and individual challenges public understanding of stigma (p. 278). A brief description of the communication strategies follows.

Individuals that accept both the application of stigma to self and the public’s understanding of stigma use *acceptance* strategies which include passing (silent acceptance), disclosure of stigma, apologizing, using of humor to ease comfort, blaming stigma for negative outcomes, self-isolation, and bonding with other stigmatized individuals. Individuals that do not accept that the stigma applies to self, but accept the public’s understanding of stigma utilize *avoidance* strategies, which include hiding or denying stigma attribute, avoiding stigma situations, stopping stigma behavior, and distancing self from stigma. Individuals that accept the stigma’s application to self, but challenge the public’s understanding of stigma utilize *evading responsibility* (provocation, defeasibility, and unintentional) and *reducing offensiveness* (refocus, minimize, reframe) strategies. Finally, individuals that challenge both the stigma’s application to self and public’s understand of stigma either *deny* (simply or logically) or *ignore*.

Scholars have worked to extend the SMC typology (Mitra & Doctor, 2016; Noltensmeyer & Meisenbach, 2016). The SMC typology was used by Noltensmeyer and Meisenbach (2016) to identify interpersonal stigma management communication strategies in burn survivors and their partners. The scholars identified four patterns of strategy usage (accepters, challengers, dissembling challengers, and situational adopters) based upon which strategies were used amongst accepting, avoiding, reducing offensiveness, denial, and ignoring/displaying. Mitra and Doctor (2016) focused on silence (passing) in gay Indian workers and identified five sub-strategies of passing. They are distancing from coworkers, active concealment, reframing discourse on non-stigmatized attributes, reframing discourse on less stigmatized attributes, and the partitioning of people and spaces based on level of disclosure (p. 10-14).

### **African Americans and Religious Disaffiliation**

Multiple studies posit the central role of religion in the African American community. According to the Pew Research Center (2009), 79% of African Americans say that religion is important to their lives, as opposed to 56% amongst all adults. African Americans reported attending religious services, praying daily, and certainty of God's existence more than any other racial or ethnic group in the United States. In a study on religiosity and depression, Hudson, Purnell, Duncan, and Baker (2015), found that African Americans and Caribbean Blacks report higher levels of religiosity than whites (p. 584). As of 2009, 45% of African Americans were Baptist, 8% Pentecostal, 5% Methodist, 5% Non-denominational, and 5% Catholic (Pew Research Center, 2009). Okulicz-Kozaryn (2010) suggested that there are two types of religiosity. Social religiosity includes activities such as spending time at church and belonging to religious organizations, while individual religiosity can include belief in God, importance of God, belonging to a denomination, and belief that religion is important (p. 155). Research

suggests that religion and spirituality are culturally significant to many individuals in the African-American community.

Recently, observers have been concerned with African Americans, especially members of the millennial generation, leaving the church (Davis, 2014; Hudson, 2012). For example, Davis (2014) discussed a meet-up group, “Black Skeptics of Los Angeles,” which finds religion problematic when thinking about the struggles of women and the LGBT community (para. 3). Also, a Baptist pastor revealed in an interview that he’s noticing people move to “spiritual, not religious” orientations, and identifies politics and scandals as issues that turn individuals away from the church (para. 38-39). Scholars, such as Glenn (1964), argued that African Americans would leave mainline religious groups or abandon religion all together, while others have noted the need to examine religious disaffiliation at both the individual and social levels, to understand ethnic and political factors for disaffiliation. (Sherkat & Ellison, 1991, p. 432). Ellison and Sherkat (1990) suggested that individual spirituality is important to Black religious behavior, and should be examined in detail (p. 551).

Drawing from the literature review in this section, the guiding research questions (RQ) may be stated:

RQ1: How do participants recall the religious socialization process?

RQ2: What are some catalysts for African Americans disaffiliating from their former Christian denominations?

RQ3: How does the exit process unfold communicatively for African Americans? Specifically, did participants utilize any strategies of SMC in their communication of exit?

## CHAPTER 3 METHODS

Due to the nature of this study, qualitative methods were utilized to answer the research questions. First, this was an exploratory, descriptive-level study that focuses on organizational exit as a process. This type of information can't be obtained from quantitative methods. Also, Tracy (2013) argues that interviewing, the data collection method used in the present study, "provide opportunities for mutual understanding, discovery, reflection, and explanation via a path that is organic, adaptive, and oftentimes energizing" (Chapter 7.1). In the following section the recruitment methods, participant sample, data collection and data analysis are discussed.

### Recruitment and Participants

This study was reviewed and approved by the Wayne State Institutional Review Board (refer to Appendix A). First, flyers advertising the study were posted in buildings around the campus. Second, electronic versions of the advertisement of the study were posted to the researcher's social media sites including Facebook, Instagram, and LinkedIn (refer to Appendix B). Finally, snowball sampling, utilizing participant networks for data collection was used (Tracy, 2013). Nineteen individuals responded to recruitment methods via telephone or email. Here, the investigator answered questions, ensured qualifications for participation were met, and scheduled the interview. Three individuals did not qualify for participation; one still identified as Christian; one, the only referral, did not meet age criteria; one withdrew interest to participate due to scheduling conflicts. Sixteen interviews were scheduled. One scheduled participant did not arrive to the session and failed to reschedule. A total of 15 interviews were completed (N=15). Recruitment for participants ended once there was a stop in the emergence of new data.

The sample included African American adults between the ages of 18 and 30-years-old. According to Keeling (2003), members of the millennial generation were born between the years

1982-2003. That would make members of this generation between 13 and 34-years-old. The participants ranged in age from 22 and 28-years old, with a mean of 26-years-old ( $M = 26$  years). All participants identified as African-American and ex-Christians. Thirteen participants identified as former members of the Baptist Christian denomination ( $n=13$ ), one Church of God in Christ (C.O.G.I.C) ( $n=1$ ) and one identified as formerly being a non-denominational Christian ( $n=1$ ). Nine participants were male and eight were female. Nine participants held High School diplomas and six held Bachelor's degrees. Participants indicated former Christian affiliation lasting from 7 and 23 years with a mean of 16 years ( $M = 16$  years) and 1 to 14 years since their time of exit with a mean of 6 years ( $M = 6$  years). Refer to Table 1.

Table 1

*Participant Demographics*

Participant	Gender	Age	Highest Education	Former Denomination	Length of Former Affiliation (years)	Time Since Exit (years)
Karen	F	27	Bachelor's	Baptist	7	3
Marcus	M	26	Bachelor's	Baptist	17	4
Simone	F	27	High School Diploma	Church of God in Christ	17	10
Alicia	F	26	Bachelor's	Baptist	20	6
Talisa	F	26	High School Diploma	Baptist	10	13
James	M	25	Bachelor's	Baptist	16	5
Xavier	M	27	High School Diploma	Baptist	13	14
Renita	F	25	High School Diploma	Baptist	22	3
Darrien	M	27	High School Diploma	Non-denominational	17	10
Natalia	F	26	Bachelor's	Baptist	10	5
Brianna	F	26	Bachelor's	Baptist	19	7
Patrick	M	26	High School Diploma	Baptist	17	1
Lamar	M	28	High School Diploma	Baptist	23	5
Unique	F	22	High School Diploma	Baptist	20	2
Cortez	M	23	High School Diploma	Baptist	15	7

**Data Collection**

Semi-structured, respondent interviews and a post-interview demographic questionnaire were used to collect data. According to Tracy (2013), respondent interviews take place with social actors who have appropriate experiences that align with the research goals. Moreover, semi-structured interviews provide opportunities for additional data relevant to the research question, which may not have been explicitly included in the interview protocol, to emerge during research-participant interaction. Ten interviews were completed via video conferencing programs (Skype and Messenger) and five interviews took place in a private study room on Wayne State University's campus in Detroit, MI. The interviews were audio-recorded for transcription and the investigator took notes. The interviews lasted between 18 min and 40 sec

and 49 min and 20 sec with an average interview time of 27 min and 54 sec (M = 27 min and 54 sec).

Before the interviews began, the investigator verified that participants had received and read the research information sheet (refer to Appendix C) and answered any questions posed by the participants. From there, participants were asked questions regarding their former Christian identities and affiliations, current religious identities and affiliations, and the process of exiting from their Christian denomination. Refer to Appendix D for a complete list of interview questions. After the interviews were complete, participants were asked to complete the demographic questionnaire (refer to Appendix E). For participants that completed interviews via videoconferencing, the researcher verbally asked the participants to respond to the prompts and their responses were recorded. Finally, participants were asked to refer any friends that may qualify for the study.

### **Data Analysis**

This study utilized a qualitative, iterative approach. The researcher used a deliberate naïveté stance in which presuppositions and judgments are dropped leaving room for new and unexpected findings to emerge (Tracy, 2013). Data was manually coded through multiple rounds of primary and secondary cycle coding. Primary coding involves assigning words and phrases to capture the essence of transcribed data. Primary coding uses a constant comparative method to modify and redefine themes. That is, carefully reading the data multiple times to access the applicability of codes. According to Tracy (2013), “an iterative analysis alternates between emic, or emergent, readings of the data and an etic use of existing models, explanations, and theories, rather than grounding the meaning solely in the emergent data (Chapter 9.1).” The



primary codes were then used to group together secondary codes, or major themes. A description of the analysis follows.

First, 79 pages of interview transcripts were read carefully, three times, to identify data that was relevant to the research questions. The data taken from the transcripts then went through the primary coding cycle. Here, line-by-line text was assigned codes that identified who, what, and where-type data. This included: social actors, organizations, thoughts and feelings regarding Christianity, communication regarding the exit process, and current attitudes towards spirituality. A codebook was developed to organize code names, abbreviations, definitions, and examples. Two rounds of primary-cycle coding yielded a total of 53 codes. From here, the codebook and transcripts were reviewed with a trained independent coder. This process included refining the definitions of codes, combining and deleting codes, and the development of new codes, leaving a final count of 51 primary codes. The interview data was then coded again based on the modified primary codes.

Next, the 51 primary codes were then used to develop themes that address the research questions. Two approaches were used to develop themes. First, some primary codes were ordered to create themes. For example, there were four primary codes that addressed participants' former involvement with church organizations during the time of the Christian affiliations: Organizational Involvement Frequent, Organizational Involvement Occasional, Organizational Involvement Intermittent, and Organizational Involvement Rare. These codes were combined to create the theme Frequency of Organizational Involvement. The second approach involved unpacking primary codes to create a theme. That is, utilizing data organized within a primary code to create a secondary-level theme. For example, the primary code Communication with Non-Christian Family members was used to categorize statements regarding Christian disaffiliation

throughout stages of organizational exit to Non-Christian family members. Data from this primary code led to two themes: disclosure and bonding with stigmatized. The iterative approach utilizes emergent data as well as existing literature, therefore relevant literature was reviewed by the researcher throughout the analysis process. Through this iterative approach, SMC was selected as a theoretical framework in the early analyses stages as participants suggested there is stigma attached to not being a Christian. A total of eleven major themes emerged that address the research questions. The following section addresses these themes (represented as third-level headings)

## CHAPTER 4 RESULTS

The following section discusses the results of the study. Here, themes and sub-themes (primary codes) are discussed in relationship to the research questions. Additionally, participant examples are provided and analyzed.

### RQ1: Religious Socialization

Research Question 1 asked: How do participants recall the religious socialization process? Participants spoke primarily on the family members, church organizations, and activities that were responsible for their Christian affiliation. Three major themes emerged regarding participants' religious socialization. They are *female role model and religious socialization*, *frequency of involvement with church organizations*, and *non-church organizations and activities*. Refer to Table 2.

Table 2

#### *African Americans and Religious Socialization*

Theme	Definition	Sub-Theme
Female role model and religious socialization	Discusses the role of female family members in religious upbringing and church organization attendance	Grandmothers Mothers Members of clergy In-Home and out-of-home
Frequency of involvement with church organizations	Denotes frequency in church attendance	Frequent involvement Hoppers None
Non-church organizations and activities	Religious socialization through organizations that are not churches and personal activities	School Camp Prayer Bible-based books Bible study

**The female role model and religious socialization.** Major theme one discussed female role models responsible for religious socialization. Participants identified female family

members, including grandmothers, mothers, and aunts, as primarily responsible for their socialization to Christianity. Participants recalled such topics as attending church with these family members, familial ties to Christianity, and the purpose of attending church for their mentioned family members. Four sub-themes emerged: grandmothers, mothers, members of clergy, and family members living in-home and out-of-home.

First, grandmothers were most frequently mentioned as role models responsible for their Christian upbringing. For example, Brianna discussed staying with her grandmother on weekends as a child so that she could attend church. When recalling her grandmother's role in her religious upbringing and described her as her "biggest link to Christianity." She stated:

My grandmother was the model of a Christian woman as far as I'm concerned. She went to church every Sunday, she went to Bible school, she had prayer meetings and got on the prayer [telephone] line, she helped people even out on the street. She was always charitable and loving and kind.

Also, Xavier discussed living with multiple adults but his grandmother being the only family member to attend multiple church services, including Bible Study and Sunday service, every week. He said that he would attend with her but he would make excuses not to go. Renita also recalled religious socialization through her grandmother who she described as having "heavy Christian slave ties" and due to being raised by her, there was a "heavy air" of Christianity around her. These examples, of multiple, describe participants perception of their grandmothers' dedication to the Christian faith and them serving as role models.

Second, mothers were also described as responsible for religious socialization. Natalia expressed that she had been exposed to Christianity throughout childhood, but did not become an "avid church-goer" until the age of 13. She said that her mom became religious while

incarcerated, so once she was released they went to church every weekend. Darrien also recalled going to a church all throughout childhood with his mother. He mentioned their attendance throughout the church's growth. The church first started in a home and they later moved to a building. As a child he would attend youth services separate from where the adults were, then from age 8 and beyond he sat with the adults in the sanctuary.

Third, participants identified family members as members of the clergy when describing their socialization to Christianity. For example, Renita said that her mother is an assistant minister at a Presbyterian church. Patrick described himself as a "PK" or preacher's kid. Both his mother and grandmother were ministers and he said this caused, "a lot of instant pressure on me to feel ways about God, the Bible, and church in particular. I was told that you have to go to church every Sunday, you repent for your sins".

In addition to mentioning family members responsible for religious socialization, participants identified a mix of attending church with in-home and out-of-home family members. That is, when discussing religious socialization, participants mentioned cases in which family members that were responsible for their socialization to Christianity stayed outside of their family's home. For example, Alicia said that she would go to her grandmother's home on weekends to attend church. Another example is Patrick, who said that he would spend summers with his grandmother growing up, who was described as a religious role model, in addition to his mom, whom he stayed with normally. In some cases, out-of-home family members were described explicitly as being more involved in the church than their in-home family members. Karen first began attending church with her aunt around 8 or 9-years-old and stayed over her house on weekends to attend church. She said her mother would attend occasionally, stating that she "wasn't that heavy into church," but after Karen was baptized at age 12 her mother started

going to church more. Alicia said, “I was raised, not really in the church, but going to church every Sunday. My parents worked so I was with my grandmother a lot on weekends and she went to church every Sunday so if we were there, we went to church”. Brianna went to church with her mother occasionally but would more so stay with her grandmother on weekends to attend. Patrick and Unique, discussed going to church with in-home and out-of-home family members but did not mention any difference in levels of attendance of Christian affiliation. Talisa and Renita represent participants that attended church with family members that lived outside of the home only. Talisa said that her parents were Christian but did not attend church so she and her siblings would attend with their aunt that lived next door to them. Renita lived with her father whom she described as non-religious and non-Christian but would attend church with her grandmother on weekends.

Adult male family members were rarely mentioned and do not appear to have been instrumental in the sample’s Christian upbringing. Lamar sometimes went to church with his family which included his step-father, Xavier’s grandfather lived in-home but he did not attend church, and Unique made mention of going to church with different parental dyads (parents, foster parents, adoptive parents). Renita mentioned that her father was not Christian and she had to “sneak” to get baptized against his wishes. Additionally, brothers and sisters were not mentioned by participants when recalling their Christian socialization. This data suggests that although the sample had male adults present in their home, their dedication to Christianity was less salient and had little to no impact on religious practices.

**Frequency of involvement with church organizations.** Major theme two addressed the frequency of involvement with church activities. Participants represented various levels of organizational involvement, or church attendance, while growing up. Three sub-themes

emerged: frequent, hoppers, and none. First, some participants reported frequent church attendance and involvement. This included attending Sunday church services every weekend and services on weeknights including Bible Study and prayer meetings. Darrien went to a church with his mom throughout his childhood moving with them from holding services in a home to having a physical church building. Simone recalled attending, “multiple times a week, Sunday school, Miracle Night, and Bible Study”. Unique said she went to church every Wednesday and Sunday and described her home as being “strict” and her having to “learn the Bible”. Additionally, some were involved in church activities. Patrick and Unique were in the church choir. Natalia and Renita were members of the praise dance team at their respective churches. Patrick also played the drums for his church and explained that his enjoyment in the activity prolonged his involvement with the church. For some individuals, Christian affiliation was described as being linked to formally having heavy ties with churches.

Other participants, as coined by James, were “hoppers” with occasional or intermittent church attendance throughout childhood. James said he and his family went to church occasionally, elaborating, “I think it was a social thing for my mom. We would always go to her friends’ church. I don’t remember us having a church home ... we were hoppers”. Other participants also attended church occasionally or intermittently throughout childhood. For example, Karen recalled going to church with her mom and aunt at various frequencies while growing up. Alicia said that her parents didn’t go to church but if she was with her grandmother on weekends she would go. Brianna also attended church with her mother and grandmother. She described her attendance as “off-and-on”. She stated, “There were spurts where we might not go for a couple of months, then we would go. Sometimes we would go every Sunday and go to Bible Study and Sunday school, all of the works. Then, after a while it would dwindle down”.

She further concluded, “As an adult, I think those were times when my mom may have had things going on and felt like she needed to be in church”. This suggests that Christian affiliation is not always constituted through heavy organizational involvement.

Finally, Marcus and Cortez, recalled having little to no involvement with churches. Marcus said, “I don’t remember stepping foot in a physical church but it was kind of assumed you had some type of affiliation with God and or/Jesus Christ, but nobody around me was devout enough to go to church”. Cortez remembered going to church only once or twice. These participants further expressed that while they weren’t socialized to Christianity by means of church organizations, there is was an assumed Christian affiliation that was maintained. This suggests that Christian identities can additionally be formed without any organizational involvement.

**Non-church organizations and activities.** Major theme three addressed religious socialization through organizations and activities outside of the church. While a majority of participants recalled church organizations being involved in their religious socialization, other participants mentioned non-church organizations when asked to recall their religious upbringing. Five sub-themes emerged: school, camp, prayer, Bible study, and Bible-based books. First, some participants were socialized to Christianity through the church as well as other organizations. James went to a Baptist school as a young child and Unique went to a private school that had Christian values. James elaborated that he went to the Baptist school up until the second grade. He said that he doesn’t remember much due to being young but he sang in choir. When addressing how the school attempted to instill Christian values into the students he said, “The only way they could get through to us I feel like was with music. We sang a lot of the hymnals out of the Bible and stuff. Well, that’s how I remember for me, religious values were



instilled through the songs”. When discussing attending private school, Unique remembered having church service on Thursday at school and a religion class in which they, “only learned about Jesus”.

Other participants discussed other examples. For example, Marcus and Cortez were the only two participants that had little to no involvement with church organizations while growing up. Despite this, they did recall an after school Bible class and Christian camp, respectively, during the interviews. Marcus said he went to the after school Bible class up until the age of six with his cousins and other children from the neighborhood but couldn’t recall what they did other than “trying to memorize names [of Biblical figures]”. Cortez recalled going to a Christian camp one summer where he was, “exposed to God being loving” and noted that, “they didn’t talk about sin”. Participants also addressed activities when recalling their Christian upbringing. Unique stated that her household was “strict” and she was made to learn the Bible. Renita discussed family prayer in the household. James remembered having Bible influenced children’s books and his family going to see Christmas plays. Natalia said that she participated in private scripture reading.

### **RQ2: Catalysts for Christian Disaffiliation**

Research Question 2 asked: What are some catalysts for African Americans disaffiliating from their former Christian denominations? Five major themes were found regarding this research question. These include *new contrarian information*, *problematic issues with Christian ideologies*, *problematic issues with organizational members*, *life course factors*, and *lack of role models*. Refer to Table 3.

Table 3

*Catalysts for African American Christian Disaffiliation*

Theme	Definition	Sub-Theme
New contrarian information	Learning new information that drives disaffiliation	Self-sourced
		From others Popular culture
Problematic issues with Christian ideologies	Dissonance amongst Christian teachings, beliefs, and values and individual beliefs and values	Against homosexuality No dissent
		Disagreement with rules and norms Have faith without action Nature of sin and punishment
Problematic issues with organizational members	Problematic issues surrounding church members and leadership that led to disaffiliation	Pastors Hypocrisy/scandals Called-out
Life course factors	Catalysts for disaffiliation dealing with life events	Moved out of parents' home College experiences Romantic relationships
Lack of role models	Discusses lack of role models with active Christian involvement	Parental influence Death of family member

**New contrarian information.** Major theme one discusses new information as a driver for disaffiliation from Christianity. The data identify channels of knowledge acquisition for new information. These sub-themes are: self-sourced, from others, and popular culture. First, participants discussed self-sourced information that they learned that aided in their decision to disaffiliate. For example, Renita discussed learning that her ancestors did not practice Christianity as information that assisted in her disaffiliation. Renita stated,

The kind of research I was finding was who were people praising or who were Africans praising before Christianity ... My first research or understanding came from ancient

Egypt. The research I read explained that, unlike what people have you to believe, that you're a witch or whatever because you're praising multiple Gods. Different gods and goddesses were different facets of one God, so they represented different things.

Natalia discussed her introduction into spirituality as a catalyst for exit and Lamar talked about research into the treatment of sin in other religions, specifying ancient Greek religion. Here, participants obtained new knowledge through self-learning that disagreed with what they were taught through Christianity.

Second, participants discussed the influence of others in providing new information in their disaffiliation from Christianity. For example, Karen recalled first being showed an anti-Christian documentary by a friend who exclaimed, "This whole Jesus/Christianity thing is fake". She discussed her reaction:

So I'm watching the documentary, I was sitting there totally flabbergasted about what I was seeing. It was totally mind-blowing. I chose to just blow it off and not accept it as anything valid, but the things I had seen stayed with me. I found myself just wanting to ask questions. I didn't quite know how to ask those questions, and felt more distant from the religion. It got to a point where my prayers didn't feel authentic anymore. That's when I knew it was a problem.

Renita discussed further down the line, her boyfriend providing her literature that encouraged her exit. These examples suggest that contrarian information provided by others may influence African-Americans in the disaffiliation decision-making process.

Third, popular culture was also described as a catalyst for developing concerns regarding Christianity. Participants discussed aspects of popular culture that was a catalyst to them acquiring knowledge that led to intellectual concerns. For example, Talisa discussed the

television show *Charmed*. She reflected on the show's influence as interpreted as an adult. She said:

I grew up watching *Charmed* and internalized it and it had me doing so much research on like the [Salem] Witch Trials, I just ... I didn't say that back then, like 'Oh, I want to be a witch, I don't want to be a Christian anymore,' I just feel like as I got older, maybe it was deep down that I was feeling like that. Like I said before, I feel like Christianity wasn't the whole story and I wanted to learn more.

Darrien discussed his reading of *Harry Potter* and sci-fi/fantasy books. He elaborated:

I was a big reader. I read a lot of fantasy and science fiction, magical books like *Harry Potter* and things like that. I started reading those around 11. At that time I started to read more into different types of religions. The religion I was brought up in said witchcraft was evil and the books I read said it was fun. So I started reading about Wicca and Buddhism

Unique talked about the *Blair Witch Project* movie. She stated, "About 3 years ago I was watching a movie, *Blair Witch Project 2* or *3*, and they were talking about Wicca, some of it resonated, they were being real about it. I told my dad about it. I learned about Wicca [...]".

These examples suggest that aspects of popular culture including film and literature can drive individuals to research information that proves to be contrarian to Christian beliefs.

**Problematic issues with Christian ideologies.** Major theme two discusses issues regarding Christian dogmas and teachings as catalysts for disaffiliation. Five sub-themes emerged: the church's stance against homosexuality, no dissent, disagreement with rules and norms, having faith without taking action, and disagreement with the nature sin and punishment.

First, the Christian church's stance against homosexuality was mentioned by participants. For example, Xavier said:

I thought about how I was against certain things and how certain things didn't fit with my identity [...] I guess coming out. Identifying with something that being taught when growing up was *so* not cool. It's like, I didn't make a choice to be this way, so if that's how the religion feels, maybe I shouldn't be a part of it.

Natalia clarified that the fact that she dates women didn't cause her to disaffiliate, but it led her to do more research. She stated:

I don't want to give you the impression that I changed my direction from Christianity due to my sexuality. Before that happened, I had a lot of questions [...] I questioned religion and turned away more mainly because I had to research scriptures, because people like to use those as an argument against homosexuality against me. People used it as a weapon against me often. So I had to prepare myself to deal with it over and over again. So that's why I was forced to do more research on it

Lamar said he feels the Christian church places more emphasis on some sins than others, specifically mentioning homosexuality. Cortez expressed, "The way black Christian men and Christians treat gay people, especially gay black men" as an aspect that pushed him away from Christianity. He discussed growing up and said, "Everybody has their interpretation in different households and denominations, but people would say God doesn't like gays [...] it was uncomfortable to learn [about Christianity] because it seemed like everybody that I was trying to learn from was trying to change me". These examples suggest that individuals may feel ostracized in Christianity due to aspects of their lifestyles such as their sexual preferences.

A second sub-theme that emerged regarding Christian ideologies and teachings is the idea of no dissent. For example, Brianna discussed her perception that questions were not to be asked. She said, “I remember asking questions and I remember being told as a kid, ‘You don’t question God, everything’s in God’s hands, Jesus makes everything work out how it’s supposed to’. [...] When I kept asking and inquiring, I would get angry rebuttals”. Similarly, the idea of dissent not being tolerated regarding church attendance and Christian affiliation. For example, Simone said she began thinking about disaffiliation when she realized she was “made to go to church”. Cortez stated, “It was like, you believe in God, you’re a Christian, that’s it”. These examples suggest that the expression of disagreement when it comes to church attendance and Christian affiliation is out of the question, especially for children.

Third, there was an expression of disagreement with Christian rules and norms. Darrien discussed discrepancies between how he was taught to act versus the nature of God. He explained:

I started to realize the rules of Christianity were duplicitous. The things it was wrong for people to be, it seemed like God was it. It was wrong to be jealous but God was jealous. It was wrong to be envious but God is envious, you know. It was wrong to kill but God will kill you. Things like that pushed me to think: What are y’all teaching? This thought process about who God really is ... I can’t say that I believe for you to say God is love, but then to say God is jealous.

Xavier discussed his disagreement with the Christian rules on “how we have to pray [...] or show appreciation to God” and church attendance. James discussed coming to the conclusion that he didn’t identify with Christianity for logical concerns. He recalled going to a church while living in New York that he enjoyed and said, “That’s when I was like this is a joke (laughs). I

started questioning myself like, I've done it so many times but I still don't get it so maybe ... I don't identify". This sub-theme provides examples of some logical concerns separate from the acquisition of contrarian information discussed previously. Here, intellectual concerns were ongoing through childhood, expressed as a different phenomenon than obtaining new information as addressed previously.

Fourth, participants suggested that in Christianity there is the notion of having faith without action, or that God and/or Jesus Christ will fix all troubles. Patrick elaborated:

I believe we are here for our individual purposes. We need to truly find out what it is we're meant to do in this world. Being in a cult, called Christianity, that won't happen because all we'll do is sit up and deal with church gossip, preach Jesus coming to save you for your sins, 'You'll be alright, just come to church every Sunday, and everything will be alright.' That's not the case. We have to get out here and work.

Brianna discussed a similar perception when recalling an emotional event. She said:

Well I experienced sexual abuse as a child and I remember feeling anger and not protected. I remember people telling me, 'Pray about this'. I remember praying that my uncle wouldn't come to my grandmother's house but he would show up. I remember praying that he would stop or somebody would make him stop doing this and it continued. That kind of stuck with me in my teen and adult years. When I got to be about 19 or 20, I got to the conclusion that sweet little baby Jesus was not going to come and save me. I remember not knowing what to do.

These examples show participants' disdain with the Christian church suggesting that prayer and belief in God alone will solve problems.

Finally, participants also expressed disagreements with the nature of sin and punishment as catalyst for Christian disaffiliation. Lamar recalled his interest in other religions, mentioning specifically, Greek traditions. He discussed noting the differences in the treatment of sin in other religions and Christianity and said, “They make it out to seem like one sin is greater than the other. Then tend to patronize one sin over another and I think it’s crazy because a lot of people sin on a daily routine and I don’t think they patronize the ones that people are more so prone to do ... when it comes to marriage and infidelity. When it comes to indulging, I think greed”. Unique recalled being discouraged when she discussed her belief in reincarnation. She said, “When I turned 15, I looked into it [reincarnation] a little more. I told my dad and he told me I was going to hell. Any religion that tells me I’m going to hell because I believe differently, I don’t want to be a part of. I didn’t want to go to hell either (laughs)”. Patrick similarly expressed, “I realized that since Christianity preaches and condemns people to hell and condemns their souls and all that, I had to separate myself from that”. These and other examples suggest that African American ex-Christians found issues with the idea that believe in ideas or engaging in activities frowned upon in Christianity would lead to their damnation to hell.

**Problematic issues with church organization.** Major theme three describes problematic issues regarding members of their former church organizations. Three sub-themes emerged: pastors, hypocrisy/scandals, being called-out. First, problematic issues with pastors, were addressed. Talisa expressed her disdain with church sermons and pastoral authority. She said:

I feel like I stopped going because y’all talk about the same shit every Sunday so ... I don’t feel the need to have to go every Sunday and then I felt like ... you know, as I got older, my relationship with God didn’t have anything to do with church. [...] It could be



50 people in the church at one time and there could be 50 different perspectives on the whole thing. I guess that's another reason why I stopped going to church, I didn't want the preacher just telling me what it was. I wanted to find out for myself.

Simone talked about a period of remaining Christian but not attending church. Once she started attending a new church, she didn't like the pastor's delivery of the message. She said:

But, about a year or two later I started going back to church, a different church from where my grandma went, it was the church my aunt went to, and at first I really, really liked them ... the people, the pastor, and everybody liked me. But, it was ... when I sat down and really listened to the way he was preaching and certain stuff he would say ... not saying I didn't like what was coming from the Bible, I didn't like his interpretation. So I was like, I'm not about to keep going to this. [...] He said (laughs) ... he was like, 'when you do stuff the way you want to do it's a problem. You're not supposed to do it on your time, you do it on His time. You're just supposed to do it', then he said the word nigga. I was like (she paused to express dismay) and everyone else was laughing and after that I wasn't interested. I was done with him.

These and other examples suggest that church leadership and enacted styles of preaching can provide motivation for disaffiliation for the specific church organization and/or the entire Christian religion itself.

Second, hypocrisy and scandals within the church were problematic issues for participants. Xavier recalled:

It was a lot of hypocrisy. I think that's what bothered me the most. So when it got in my head: I don't want to be a part of that. You guys are saying one thing but acting another way. It was a group standard. It wasn't just one person or two people, it was a practiced

behavior that's associated with the faith. [...] Yeah, you start going to these churches and all these scandals come about, then you have all these people saying they're God's prophet, and God spoke to them, and then you look at what they're doing, or things come about that they've done that are not politically correct. It's like, okay, what's going on? It's so much. There was a point in time where you would see stuff in the news constantly with somebody's pastor doing this.

Patrick expressed similar sentiments. He said he experienced such events first-hand as a "PK". He stated, "...you know other events we hear about, stealing money, the stereotypical, pastors sleeping with people in the church. All those things I experienced first-hand. I witnessed those things. The minister I was speaking of started sleeping with the pastor of another church and it was just a lot". It appears that the behaviors of organizational members appear to impact African Americans affinity to Christianity and church organizations.

Third, being called out within the church was a catalyst for the sample. For example, Patrick and Lamar, who discussed the church's views on sexuality, both described being confronted about their sexual preference by their pastors in front of other church members.

Patrick said:

I was 17. I didn't have the normal coming out story like most people. My mom stumbled across messages in my computer. You know church folks, they have a thing, they go to tell their church friends. One Sunday, one of my mom's good friends was teaching the sermon. One Sunday, before she preached, she did altar call and she was asking if anyone wanted to get prayed for. Nobody came up. She was like, 'I want to say a prayer for anybody dealing with prostitution or pimping'. She mentioned homosexuality and pointed to me, directly to me, and called for me to come to the altar. I

got up, walked the opposite way, and out the door. I cried so hard. I was embarrassed.

If you really feel strongly about what's going on with me ... first, the Lord didn't tell you to pray for me, my mama did, second, you don't call me up. You don't say what I'm doing and call me up in front of a church full of people. I'm only 17. I'm having a hard time dealing with what I'm dealing with. If you feel like you want to have a personal conversation with me, it should be personal. That was absolute step one.

Another example, Xavier was asked to sit at the back of the church since he did not want to pay tithes. He recalled, "I went to a church once and didn't want to pay the tithes and the lady told me I had to sit in the back because, 'this was the area for people who contributed to the church'. So I thought, why am I wasting my time here, the music isn't even that good"? As public embarrassment or confrontation served as a catalyst for disaffiliation, it is suggested that public confrontations are viewed as negative violations that won't be tolerated.

**Life course factors.** A fourth major theme, life course factors emerged. Life course factors include major life events. Here, three sub-themes emerged, moving out of parents' home, college experiences, and romantic relationships. First, moving out of parents' home was portrayed as a catalyst for exit. For example, Darrien discussed having reservations regarding his Christian disaffiliation throughout his teenage years, "That's when I decided if I am going to go church it's because I am a child and have to do what my mother says, not because it's somewhere that I want to be, that's actually giving me anything of value". He stated that his final step in exiting was the fact that he was out of his mothers' home and could "make his own decisions". This example and others suggest that some individuals thinking about disaffiliation or who have decided to disaffiliate may not be able to do so officially while living in their parents' household.

Participants also expressed their college experiences as influential in their decisions to disaffiliate. For example, Karen said that taking a philosophy course, “was the most enlightening, exhilarating experience” that she’s had spirituality and noted it, “brought me an abundance of solace during the time of just total confusion and feeling lost”. Another is example is Marcus, who said attending college exposed him to different perspectives. For example, Marcus elaborated:

I feel like I remember my eyes opening when a friend of mine from college was showing me different things ... that I was ignorant to, things that I honestly didn’t know. Her religion in particular ... how ignorant I was to outside perspectives on things. We had a conversation, I never even considered everyone doesn’t have ... or believe in some form of Jesus Christ. I feel like I’m pushing it, but I didn’t know any differently. I knew there were other religions, but ... being Jewish doesn’t acknowledge the fact that you know about Jesus Christ, actually you do, they don’t consider him a historical, biblical figure for real. He was just some guy. I thought, if they have this perspective, I can only imagine what everyone else has too, but that really made think about it.

The sample suggests that college campuses provide opportunities for new experiences and exposure to different cultures, which can influence the contemplation of religious disaffiliation.

Third, romantic relationships also served as catalysts for disaffiliation. For example, Natalia and Renita discussed their non-Christian partners as influential in aiding their disaffiliation. Examples included through providing information and/or support. This suggests that, as there are role models for religious socialization, individuals that have exited Christianity may serve as role models for those with similar sentiments.

**Lack of role models.** Finally, a lack of role models emerged as a major theme that encouraged disaffiliation. Two sub-themes emerged: lack of parental influence and death of a family member. First, the lack of parental influence was discussed. For example, Marcus talked about Christianity not being actively practiced around him in comparison to other religions. He said:

The more understanding I got about how societal pressure and stuff like that works, it was weird for us to not practice anything. People go to mosques and things like that, regularly. I have never seen my parents do that. But they always kind of talk about this conversation about having Jesus in your life, and faith, and things like that but I feel like outside of talking about it, they didn't really make any effort for me to not question it.

They know me. They know I question everything. Why would I not question something that y'all are saying but not doing?

This example and others suggests that participants aren't comfortable with associating with Christianity based off being told you are a Christian or being born in the tradition without active role models.

Second, the death of a Christian role mode was mentioned. For example, Brianna discussed her grandmother being her biggest link to Christianity and the absence of that link encouraged disaffiliation. She said:

When my grandma died. That sealed the deal for me. My grandma was the model of a Christian woman as far as I'm concerned. She went to church every Sunday, she went to Bible school, she had prayer meetings and got on the prayer line, she helped people, even out on the street. She was always charitable and loving and kind and my grandma was on life support for 39 days and she had kind of a painful death. They tried to keep her as

comfortable as possible. But for me to see her, *of all people*, go through all of this stuff with this so-called prayer for Jesus, I thought for sure he would ride in and save her. I guess he did, he just did leave her here to be saved. After she was gone, that was my biggest link to Christianity, with her not being here, I didn't have any motivation for it. I didn't have that motivation to seek out the wisdom of the word. If I felt I needed that, she was the person I went to. If I needed prayer or encouragement or something from the Bible, I would call her. I didn't have that anymore.

Data from the sample suggest that participants lost motivation for their Christian affiliation without the influence of adults who were highly involved Christians in terms of church attendance and practices.

### **RQ3: Communicative Practices and Christian Disaffiliation**

Research Question 3 asked: How does the Christian exit process unfold communicatively for African-Americans? The participants were asked to discuss the presence and/or absence of communication regarding Christian disaffiliation throughout the three stages of organizational exit (pre-exit, announcement of exit, and post-exit). All of the participants addressed not identifying as Christian as being a stigmatized identity either explicitly or implicitly. For example, Brianna said, "I wish there was not such a stigma attached to not being a Christian, especially being African American and an African American woman [...] If you don't believe in Jesus, you're a devil worshipper. I wish those stigmas were not attached to not having a specific religious practice". Xavier said, "I just don't believe in the stereotypes and stigmatism of how we have to pray to God or show our appreciation to God. I don't feel like if I don't go to church He's going to put me in a bad place". Natalia expressed, "Unfortunately, it's more convenient in this world to be a Christian and not a Christian. But still, I choose not to be like I've chosen to

not be in a heterosexual relationship”. Therefore, Meisenbach’s (2010) Stigma Management Communication Strategy Typology was used to develop themes regarding participants’ communication choices pertaining to their Christian disaffiliation as it “is intended to apply to a wide range of stigmas, including those studied by disability, family, health, and organizational scholars” (p. 278). These themes are *disclosure*, *bonding with stigmatized*, and *silence*. Refer to Table 4.

Table 4

*Communication Strategies Used During Christian Disaffiliation*

Theme	Definition	Sub-Theme
Disclosure	Disclosure of Christian disaffiliation to Christians throughout pre-exit, announcement of exit, and post-exit stages	Close confidants Strangers
Bond with stigmatized	Disclosure of Christian disaffiliation to non-Christians throughout pre-exit, announcement of exit, or post-exit stages	Non-Christian family Non-Christian friends
Silence	Absence of disclosure of Christian disaffiliation throughout pre-exit, announcement of exit, and post-exit	Conflict avoidance Difficulty Avoidance of judgment Privacy

**Disclosure.** Major theme one discusses moments of disclosure regarding the contemplation of or enacted Christian disaffiliation. Two sub-themes emerged: close confidants and strangers. First, close confidants were described as social actors in discussions regarding participants’ Christian disaffiliation. These include family members and friends. Karen

discussed talking with Christian family members and a friend throughout the stages of her disaffiliation. Regarding conversations with family, she said:

[...] Then once I became more, you know, I guess strong or rigid in my belief system I finally came out to my mother, which was a bit hard, considering the fact that some of my earliest introduction to the Christian ideology was from her. It was liberating for myself. Yeah, I definitely first spoke to my best friend, then my mother [...] I have another cousin who is a Jesus fanatic. It's kind of cool that we can have discussions. I think of all my Christian family members this is the one person that I can really be myself with.

Renita, Brianna, and Unique discussed talking to their Christian mothers about their interests in Hoodoo and Voodoo, Buddhism, and reincarnation, respectively. Renita also talked to her non-Christian father. Darrien discussed talking with his mother about his Christian disaffiliation and religious views. He said, "One day I came home drunk and we started a conversation and it led into our different opinions on religion and so in that conversation I was able to share with her my outlook on Christianity, who God was, and what He expected from us". Darrien also discussed talking with a Christian boyfriend in the past regarding his views on Christianity. He said, "I spoke with my boyfriend about it. I remember having conversations about church and him wanting to go to church and how we perceived church and what it meant to us. I would tell him, 'Sitting on the pew on Sunday doesn't make me feel closer to God...'" Patrick said he recently started having such conversations. He expressed, "At first, I was reluctant because I didn't want to lose friends or I didn't want certain family members to not rock [associate] with me anymore. What's the craziest about it is the people I've told understood where I was coming from ...". Xavier said, "I've kind of brought it up here and there, I've touched base on it lightly, but I've



never gone in depth” when asked if he discusses his post-Christian disaffiliation views with Christian friends.

Disclosure to strangers also emerged from the data. Natalia detailed a conversation that she recently had with members of a neighborhood church that came to her home doing outreach. She said:

It seemed like they were recruiting. They asked me about my relationship with God and it completely caught me off guard. I went through the process of explaining I don't believe in Christianity. They kept saying, “let us read you scriptures’. I didn't mind. It didn't bother me at all. They asked me, ‘Why don't you believe in Jesus, the holy spirit, however they say it, the holy trinity’ and I told them no. They just looked at me like I was crazy and I explained to them I don't. I don't believe in the blood of Christ.

Christians say Jesus died for our sins. They asked did I believe that, I told them no. I spent like 20 minutes on my porch in my pajamas explaining to these people why I don't believe in Christianity. Everything they asked was a Christian-based question.

These data suggest that ex-Christians may disclose their ex-affiliate status to individuals that may or may not be close to them or important in their lives.

**Bond with stigmatized.** Major theme two addresses the strategy of bonding with other non-Christians, who had also experienced feeling stigmatized. In some cases, participants initially engaged in disclosure, but were met with others revealing their stigmatized identity. These enacted moments of disclosure transformed to mutual bonding experiences through the revelation of shared sentiments regarding Christianity and disaffiliation. Two subthemes emerged: non-Christian family and non-Christian friends.

First, non-Christian family members were mentioned. Karen said, I recently spoke to my cousin who revealed he had the same beliefs as I and he was afraid to speak to his mother, which is the same aunt I was referring to earlier”. James indicated that his brother initiated a conversation regarding their non-Christian statuses. He said, “Actually he brought it up first to me. [...] he told me pretty much that he didn’t believe in God and just didn’t believe ... I was like, ‘I don’t think I do either’. He was like, ‘Thank God!’ (laughs)”. Xavier said his mother had similar beliefs. He recalled a conversation and said, “My mom was kind of on the same level as I am, being a more spiritual woman than religious woman, we kind of share the same views and opinions. I did have a conversation with her, it was more so letting her know where my head was and how I was feeling”.

Second, non-Christian friends were mentioned. For example, Alicia discussed conversing with only one friend. She said, “... she kind of was coming to that conclusion [Christian disaffiliation] around the time I was or before that. So she ... kind of helped me with any understanding of anything. We kind of talked it out with each other”. Patrick said he’s also spoken with some non-Christian friends that hold similar views. These examples suggest that initial disclosure experiences that transformed to bonding moments where the participant was first unaware of their disclosure partners’ ex-Christian status shows just how stigmatized this identity may be, as ex-Christian statuses were not disclosed previously.

**Silence.** Major theme three addresses participants’ moments of silence (passing) throughout one or more stages of the organizational exit process (pre-exit, announcement of exit, and post-exit). Participants also revealed motivations for utilizing the strategy of silence. Four sub-themes emerged: conflict avoidance, privacy, avoidance of judgment, and the difficulty of such conversations.

First, participants expressed the want to avoid conflict, arguments, or disagreements as reasons for silence regarding the Christian disaffiliation. Xavier discussed normally being silent when it comes to his views on religion, spirituality, and God. When discussing silence during the pre-exit stage, he explained, “It’s never been something I like to talk about because I feel people give unsolicited opinions and I don’t want to put myself in that predicament. A lot of the moments I’ve had were silent, it was something I knew I would do and rather or not anybody agreed with it, it was going to be done”. Renita, Darrien, and Brianna described such conversations with battle terms. Renita said, “I’ve really learned to not really converse, to pick my battles when it comes to speaking with family and friends who still identify with Christian”. Darrien said:

I choose not to argue with people, as part of my spiritual practice (laughs). I try to keep my flow of energy on the positive side and I notice religion is a trigger for a lot of people. I prefer to not engage in talks about religion or my views of religion with people because I don’t want anyone getting angry or making me angry about opinions. To me, that’s what religion really is, an opinion. [...].

Brianna said:

I have a firm belief: two things start wars, religion and politics. There are certain things I’m not going to discuss with a person if I know they’re closed-minded. They are my beliefs and if you want to argue me down on what I believe, it’s generally a joke to me and I won’t discuss it with you. I’ll change the subject or won’t have a conversation at all. There is nothing that you can say to me that will make me believe what you want me to believe.

Talisa said that if she chose to discuss her disaffiliation it would, “create more problems”.

Lamar said that he “didn’t want his parents to try to interfere” when he was in the process of disaffiliation, therefore he kept silent. Natalia discussed enacting silence regarding her disaffiliation specifically with her Christian mother and said:

So a lot of times my mom will speak on things that are Christian based, I can still agree with them without having to argue with her about religion. I don’t think it’s something we need to argue about. I understand religion is a core belief for people and when you start challenging core beliefs people get sensitive and it’s not something that I think is worth arguing over so I decide not to talk about it.

Unique described her frustration and motivation for silence. She said, “It’s kind alienating spiritually when I don’t have my family behind me, supporting me and if I say I’m this [Wiccan, a witch, or practitioner Yoruba religious tradition] I’ll kind of be shunned and they don’t want to talk to me”. These examples suggest that individuals are afraid that disclosure of their ex-Christian status may disrupt peace within relationships, therefore they have no interest in disclosure.

Second, It was suggested that conversations regarding their Christian disaffiliation are challenging, therefore they were silent about their disaffiliation. Karen said, “[it’s] not easily able to be discussed, challenging someone’s rigid beliefs is out of the question”. Similarly, Marcus said, “I feel like it’s not an impossible conversation to have but it’s very difficult. Because it that’s all you know, that’s all you know and if you’re not open to anything else that’s kind of beating something that’s dead”. Simone, Alicia, and Patrick said they simply felt there was no one to talk to. For example, Patrick said, “No, I didn’t really know who to talk to. I had my friends, but we didn’t know how serious the issue was. No one could relate to what I was

going through. I was the only PK in my group of friends so who else could I talk to outside of the church about it? I really didn't have an outlet for it". These examples show that although such conversations are described as difficult, if outlets were available for individuals contemplating Christian disaffiliation, they might be utilized.

Third, participants said that they chose silence throughout different stages of the Christian disaffiliation process because it was and is a private matter to them. Talisa said:

I think... that's when I started getting more private about everything, like ... I guess right now I'm realizing that I started to acquire the belief that your spirituality is something personal. Like, I would talk to God a lot, but I wouldn't tell anybody that or tell anybody the experiences I had feeling like it was God or angels around me or something like that, and I knew I couldn't tell anybody that was an avid Christian.

Likewise, Cortez said, "My relationship with God became my own thing". Xavier said, I've always been private with religion, and spirituality, and God". Lamar said, "I'm kind of private". These examples suggest that enacted silence may not be only due to societal influences and norms, but also because some participants may feel their spirituality is a private matter, regardless of if their spiritual beliefs are stigmatized or not.

Fourth, participants expressed not wanting to be judged as a motivation for enacted silence. Xavier talked about not discussing his Christian disaffiliation and spiritual views with Christians due to judgment. He said:

I feel like conversations with the non-Christian people are so real and straightforward, but it's not offensive. There are people that might have went through a similar situation and they've reached a place where they're comfortable with it. They kind of express to you where they're at, not where you need to be. When you are talking to "Christians,"

Baptist, Seventh Day, they have a certain type of judgment: I'm doing this so you should be doing this, too. It's not like that on the other hand with the spiritual folks.

Simone discussed her perception that children don't get the chance to explore their spiritual identity due to judgment. She said, "I don't feel a lot of people get that because of what their families believe ... kind of mothers and fathers will burn into them, 'What would you're grandmother think?' or the people that got you started, 'What would she think if she knew you left the church?'" James said he didn't think he could talk to his family regarding his reservations about Christianity while growing up, stating, "I didn't feel I could [talk with anyone] because they would all think I'm crazy". The idea that individuals may enact silence due to wanting to avoid judgment further highlights the stigma attached to ex-Christian identities as discussed by participants.

## CHAPTER 5 DISCUSSION

The purpose of the current study was to examine communication practices utilized by African Americans throughout the various stages of the Christian exit process, that is, disaffiliation from Christianity and church organizations. Popular culture articles and the Pew Research Center discuss the decline of religiosity amongst African Americans as well as the millennial generation, yet, there are limited studies focusing on these phenomenon in the scholarly literature. Few articles focus on Christian exit (Avance, 2013; Hinderaker, 2015; Hinderaker & O'Conner, 2015; Simmons, 2014; Uecker, Regnerus, and Vaalor, 2007; and Wright et al, 2011). Additionally, while these studies utilized qualitative methods, no research surfaced utilizing interviewing for data collection. Historically, African Americans are described as the most religious ethnic group and scholars have suggested the need for research to examine African American religious mobility, factors for religious decline, and individual spirituality (Ellison & Sherkat, 1990; Sherkat and Ellison, 1991; and Glenn, 1964).

Results from this study support and extend past findings on Christian exit. This study's sample described the importance of female role models in their religious socialization. Catalysts that motivated the exit process were identified. Additionally, the data suggest that the presence of communication during organizational exit may vary amongst ex-Christians based on former denominational affiliation. In the following is a discussion of the results in relation to existing research. This includes theoretical and practical implications, limitations of the present study, and areas for future research.

### Theoretical Implications

The data from the present study provide theoretical implications. The data suggest that religious socialization, catalysts for exit, and strategies for disclosing disaffiliate status are

communicative in nature, encompassing communication acts such as spoken, written, and audiovisual messages. Furthermore, factors of message content and message strategies emerged. This further suggests that topics regarding religion, spirituality, and disaffiliation are relevant to study through the lens of communication. The theoretical implications are discussed below.

**Family and religious socialization.** Participants expressed both immediate and extended family members as responsible for the development of their Christian identities through verbal and non-verbal communicative practices, provided through multiple channels. Voice served as a channel for the verbal expression of dedication to God through the Christian tradition. Non-verbal channels and content included the use of space through the utilization of the church as a relevant site to religiosity, the use of time through the display of time dedicated to religious practices such as church attendance and prayer, and the use of artifacts such as the Bible. Overwhelmingly, female role models, that is, grandmothers, mothers, and aunts were mentioned as individuals that took participants to church and displayed Christian values. These findings are relative to Gutierrez et al. (2014) who found that, “on average parents, grandparents, and siblings, positively influenced adults’ religious commitment and values” (p. 779). Furthermore, the authors measured four indices of religiosity and their attribution to family member influence and found that the importance of religion in their participants’ lives was influenced, from greatest to least, by their mothers, grandmothers, fathers, grandfathers, sisters, then brothers. While the present study did not account for different indices of religiosity, on the contrary, the sample suggests that grandmothers influenced participants’ religiosity more than mothers. Male adults (fathers and grandfathers) were rarely mentioned. Additionally, brothers and sisters were not mentioned as parties responsible for participants’ religious socialization. Results from both studies support the idea that African American women are more influential in religious



socialization than men. Similarly, The Pew Research Center (2015), found that, “African-American women also stand out for their high level of religious commitment” (para. 12).

In some cases, participants mentioned that extended family members living outside the home were more religious than their parents. Seven participants discussed attending church with both in-home and out-of-home family members and in three of the cases, participants expressed these out-of-home family members being more active in displaying Christian affiliation than their parents and/or other in-home family members. Recall that participants used language that suggests the stigmatized identity of being a non-Christian. Are parents that do not identify as Christian or display low levels of religious engagement allowing their children to be socialized to Christianity due to the perceived stigma attached to non-Christian identities?

In the current study, three participants discussed their sentiments regarding their own young children and Christianity. Marcus discussed his wife who he described as an “avid Christian” and conflict that arose regarding their daughter’s baptism. He said, “I didn’t really agree with it happening, she wanted to do it anyway, to satisfy her own ego and others. I don’t think it was fair for me. I’m not saying it never should’ve happened, but I think there’s a time and a place for everything. She [his daughter] shouldn’t be in this ceremony and not understand what’s going on”. Unique and Brianna expressed differing views regarding their kids’ exposure to Christianity. Unique said, “My son loves Jesus and prays to Jesus because that’s what he’s seen. He goes to church with his grandmother. They won’t tell him it’s [Christian doctrine] a definite though. When he gets older and cognitive ability to understand, I will tell him you have a choice, even if you’re 5-years-old. [...] Both of our families are Christian. How can I protect them [her children] from that? It doesn’t make sense”. On the contrary, Brianna, who described herself as generally silent when it comes to her relationship with spirituality since her Christian

disaffiliation, said when it comes to her son, she will speak up regarding her views towards Christianity. She said, “I only want to and I only will if I feel they are forcing their beliefs on me or trying to instill those religious beliefs in my child. That’s when I’m very verbal and aggressive about my beliefs. Other than that, I live and let live, just don’t expect me to do it”. Even though data regarding participants and their children is scarce, this difference in opinion is significant to report. These examples suggest that parents who have disaffiliated from Christianity or other formal religious organizations may utilize different communication practices in their children’s socialization or lack thereof with religious and spiritual values, practices, and organizational affiliation.

**Catalysts for exit and communicative implications.** Existing studies focusing on departure from Christianity have investigated reasons why individuals exited their former Christian denominations. Despite varying analysis schemes used in the studies, motivations for exit were similar across participant samples. Reasons for exit include being born into the faith, hypocrisy amongst Christians, obtaining new information (about other religions, ideologies discrepant with Christianity, etc.) disbelief in doctrine, and life course factors. (Simmons, 2014; Avance, 2013; Uecker, Regnerus, and Vaalor, 2007) This present study’s sample of African American ex-Christians, majority formerly of the Baptist denomination, provided similar motivations for exiting Christianity. Despite similar reasons in this study and others, here, the catalysts for disaffiliation were thematically categorized differently due to the nature of and frequency of data. The studies in this literature review that provided motivations for exit that were qualitative in nature did not utilize interviewing as a data collection method. This may also account for how themes emerged (in addition to the studies’ respective researchers serving as the instrument of analysis).

Themes regarding ex-Christians rationale for religious and organizational departure present connections to communication. For example, the theme new contrarian information was obtained by participants by means of verbal communication through knowledge acquired from others in conversation, written language in books, and through television media. Additionally, the themes of problematic issues with Christian ideologies and organization members related to the content of messages and language used by pastors and church members, discrepancies between Christian teachings and the actions of church members' within and outside of the church, and the language of the Bible. This suggests that not only does communication constitute religious practices and identities, but also plays a role in motivating ex-members' disaffiliation.

**Communication practices and organizational exit.** Participants described the presence and absence of communication regarding disaffiliation from Christianity. Research regarding organizational exit amongst ex-Mormons (Hinderaker, 2015; Hinderaker & O'Connor, 2015) discussed a common theme of silence amongst participants during the three stages of organizational exit. The participants of this study, majority former Baptist Christians, had some form of conversation throughout one or more stages of exit. This suggests that despite the general importance of religiosity and spirituality amongst African Americans, more commonly African American denominations, such as Baptist, may be less totalistic in nature than other Christian denominations such as the LDS community.

Hinderaker and O'Connor (2015) stated, "the public reaffirmation of organizational membership highlights departure from the communicative sensemaking of the exit decision described by both Jablin (2001) and Kramer (2010) and suggests that communicative cues may not be universal to all organizational relationships or role". While the participants of the present study discussed disaffiliation to family and friends, no participants recalled discussing their

disaffiliation with their respective church organizations. This is particularly surprising for participants that expressed high levels of organizational involvement and those that participated in church activities like choir and praise dance. Additionally, for these members that participated in church activities, no mention was made of organizational leadership (e.g. pastor, choir director) contacting their former constituents to question their absenteeism. Patrick did initiate a conversation with his former pastor regarding her disclosure of him being gay during church service, however, there was no mention of his disaffiliation from organization or Christianity itself. This further supports the implication of the effects of a denomination's totalistic qualities on an exiting members' formal announcement of exit. In the totalistic ex-Mormon populations, formal announcement of exit was often withheld from family, peers, and the organization. The sample of African Americans from the present study displayed communication regarding exit to peers and family members, but did not express these to their former church organizations.

While silence was a common theme amongst the current study's participants regarding their Christian disaffiliation throughout stages of organizational exit, only three participants described their enacted silence throughout all three stages of organizational exit. Lamar and Cortez both offered that their relationship with spirituality is a personal, private topic. Marcus suggested that conversations regarding such topics as "difficult" to have. (Marcus revealed that he had a conversation regarding his opposition of his daughter's baptism, but did discuss communicating his Christian disaffiliation). While data from this study in comparison to those on ex-Mormons suggest that silence is utilized at different levels and for different reasons amongst Christian denominations, silence appears to be the most utilized strategy. On the contrary, silence is not discussed as a common strategy in organizational exit from other types of voluntary membership organizations or exit from the paid workplace.

**Stigma management.** The data identified as communicative functions were thematically categorized with strategies from Meisenbach's (2010) SMC typology. Participants in the present study suggested that non-Christian identities are stigmatized through their motivations for silence regarding Christian disaffiliation and general statements. It is important to note that the idea of the status of ex-Christian being a stigmatized identity emerged without participants explicitly being prompted by the researcher to discuss stigma. While only one participant in the present study specifically mentioned fear of being shunned or excommunicated by her family due to breaking her ties with Christianity, studies regarding Christian exit specifically in ex-Mormon populations (Avance, 2013; Hinderaker, 2015; Hinderaker & O'Connor) discussed silence due to fear of excommunication by their families, peers, and communities as the most prevalent theme. This suggests that there may be a consensus amongst ex-Christians, regardless of former denomination, that their non-Christian identities are stigmatized. Therefore, strategies from the SMC typology utilized when the individual accepts that the stigma applies to self were used. They are the acceptance strategies of silent acceptance (passing), disclosure, and bonding with stigmatized. Only one participant, Patrick, utilized the a strategy in which he challenged the public's perception of the stigma, therefore, strategies in which the individual accepts the self-application of stigma but challenges the public's understanding of stigma did not emerge as themes with this participant sample.

In existing literature on ex-Mormons, disclosure, or the communication of organizational exit was overwhelmingly absent during the pre-exit and announcement of exit stages, and for the few participants that did disclose exit did so in the post-exit stage. However, some expressed that they tested their exit through non-verbal strategies such as declining to attend services and events. While this sample of ex-Christians, a majority former Baptist Christians, expressed

verbal disclosure of their contemplation of disaffiliation and actual disaffiliation through all stages of organizational exit, their sentiments were implied. As opposed to the usage of explicit language, such as, “I am no longer a Christian,” implied language strategies were more often used. These include the expression of dissonance with Christian ideologies and discussion of research into religions and practices that are stigmatized and disapproved by Christians and the Bible, including witchcraft, Buddhism, and Voodoo. Also, participants in the present study rarely used non-verbal strategies. A majority of participants expressed fluctuations or total departures from church organization involvement, but only three participants described their decision to stop attending church, a non-verbal act, as directly related to contemplation of or actual disaffiliation from Christianity. For others, where there was a stop in church organizational involvement, they still identified as believers of the Christian faith. Compared to former Mormons, this sample of African American ex-Christians utilized tell or don’t tell strategies as opposed to ex-Mormons who generally utilized silence and sometimes tested exit in non-verbal manners.

**Communicative practices of disaffiliation after withdrawal.** Participants in this study were asked to discuss their current relationship with religion and spirituality, post Christian disaffiliation. While only one participant, James, expressed that he is not an atheist but he questions his belief in a higher power, all other participants expressed a belief in god(s) or a higher power responsible for human existence and due to worship. Some participants expressed their spirituality as a learning phase. There was also consensus on the nature of spirituality being individual and intrapersonal in nature. In fact, 13 of 15 participants said that they had no institutional or organizational affiliations regarding their current spiritual beliefs, which can be described as limited group-level communication regarding current beliefs and practices. Darrien

and Renita served as those with organizational affiliations. Darrien described himself as an ordained minister through an organization with no specific religious affiliation or values. Renita said she meets weekly with a group of followers of Ma'at, an Egyptian goddess. While organizational affiliation and communication post-Christian exit was rare in the study, individuals expressed religions and ideologies that influence their current spiritual practices and beliefs. Participants discussed African religions such as Voodoo and Egyptian-centered religious teachings, Wicca, and Christian values. In those who expressed their belief in some values gained through Christianity, mentions included belief in the Christian ideals of love and moral living, with the abandonment of other beliefs such as, the Bible, sin, afterlife, Jesus Christ, and Christianity being the only acceptable and correct religion. In fact, one participant, Talisa, who described herself as a witch and a priestess, discussed her prior usage of the book *Power of the Psalms*, based on the Book of Psalms from the Bible, despite her departure from Christianity. Participants mentioned that current spiritual practices including prayer, meditation, yoga, fitness and self-care, and being in-tune with energy or vibrations. In addition the book mentioned by Talisa, other artifacts utilized by participants include tarot cards, crystals, and *Ma'at: Guiding Principles of World Living*. Participants also expressed their current sentiments towards Christianity and exhibited mixed feelings regarding Christianity since their disaffiliation. For example, Talisa said, "Some people need that shit [Christian affiliation]," while on the contrary, James and Brianna described Christianity, respectively, as "a mental scam" and "a joke". This sample suggests that African Americans that exit Christianity may generally not be interested in affiliating with a single religion or religious organizations despite belief in a higher power and maintenance of current spiritual practices. Additionally, conversations regarding their Christian disaffiliation and current spiritual practices are rare.

## Practical implications

The results from this study provide practical implications as well for religious organizations and other voluntary membership organizations. First, for religious organizations, participants identified their reasons for disaffiliating from Christianity, which for many, affiliations were linked to church organizational involvement. Discrepancies with the Christian religion and church organizations were discussed. Most frequent mentions included concerns about Christian ideology, with frequent mention of homosexuality, specific events, and the perception that Christianity is illogical. This information can be used by church organizations to counteract disaffiliation from the church itself and possibly Christianity, as well. For example, the Christian stance against homosexuality was frequently mentioned by participants. Religious organizations, churches, and more importantly, pastors who are responsible for the message delivery, could modify the way in which messages regarding the topic of homosexuality and sin are discussed and the language used. They could even limit or remove these messages from sermons completely. As Xavier said that although he didn't have a personal incident regarding his sexuality and the church, there is a general Christian attitude towards homosexuality, which made him feel as though he was not accepted. Additionally, Cortez said that when he was younger and interested in learning more about Christianity, the process was "uncomfortable" as homosexuality was frequently discussed and he felt as though "everyone [he] tried to learn from was trying to change him". This suggests that there may be a need for African American churches and pastors to alter their messages as the perceived attitude is turning some members away from the church and Christianity itself. Another implication is that there may be a benefit in churches holding sessions for individual that are contemplating disaffiliation. Brianna recalled as a child she had questions regarding Christianity and God, but was commonly met



with negative rebuttals. Some participants also stated that they felt they had no one to talk with during the stages of organizational exit and Darrien explicitly stated, “I didn’t receive any formal counseling,” when asked about conversations during his contemplation of exit. It may be instrumental for churches to offer sessions in which members, especially youth, can pose questions and have discussion regarding their thoughts of Christian disaffiliation. Participants discussed silence with peers and families being motivated by conflict avoidance. Therefore, churches would need to create an environment of no judgment and openness with a session leader that themselves may have contemplated disaffiliation before. Thus, as churches have been identified as catalysts for Christian disaffiliation, strategies should be employed to deter congregation members from leaving and address their concerns.

Second, there are implications for other voluntary membership organizations. Examples include allied organizations, charity organizations, and voluntary organizations within the paid workplace such as tasks forces and committees. For example, the themes regarding issues with ideologies and organizational members may be applicable to these types of voluntary organizations. Additionally, despite that being an ex-member of such an organization may or may not be a stigmatized identity, the communication practices throughout the stages of organizational exit may be applicable as well. For example, if a member of a charity organization that requires recurring donations due to policies or practices, how might they communicate their disaffiliation? Might they enact silence and ignore communications from the organization or might they disclose their exit to the organization and request that they be not contacted anymore? Similarly, in an allied organization, could disclosure be assumed as a necessary exit strategy as the exiting organization may want to be removed from marketing and branding materials?

A majority of participants here had no organizational affiliation regarding their spiritual beliefs. Three participants stated during interviews that they would enjoy or not discourage similar conversations regarding topics of religion and current spirituality. Post interviews, two participants thanked me for allowing their participation as they felt these conversations need to be had. This suggests that individuals that are contemplating Christian exit or have completed the process are not alone. Some participants said they didn't have anyone to talk to about these topics, therefore, groups of like-minded individuals may provide spaces for the exchange of ideas and support for those that may feel alone. Furthermore, formal counseling or discussion sessions outside of the church may be beneficial as sites of discussion for individuals contemplating disaffiliation or families in which a member is holding such sentiments.

### **Limitations and Directions for Future Research**

The present study has limitations that should be considered in conjunction with the results. Additionally, the results suggest areas for future research. The limitations of the study exist in the area of participants, data collection, and analysis.

First, the present study utilized a small sample of African Americans between 18 and 30-years-old that have disaffiliated from Christianity in the metro-Detroit area. The sample exhibited low variability in former Christian denominational affiliation, no participants in the outlying qualified age ranges (none under 22-years-old or over 28-years-old), and various levels of former organizational involvement. Despite noteworthy findings, the sample does not allow for generalizable results for the African American ex-Christian population. Thus, a larger sample size would allot diversity amongst participants. Also, six participants discussed Christianity's view of homosexuality as an ideological concern promoting their disaffiliation. Participants were not asked to identify their sexual orientations or relationship status. If obtained,

this demographic information could have potentially provided additional variables to consider in the analysis.

Second, interviewing was selected as the primary data collection method, as this method was not employed in qualitative studies on Christian exit. Post-interview, two participants expressed that the questions posed in the interview were thought provoking and pertained to issues that they haven't put deep thought to previously. This suggests that preparation for the interview beyond the outline of questions to be asked listed in the research information sheet may have better prepared participants to respond to prompts (refer to Appendix D). Post-hoc, the data also suggest that focus groups may have been useful to uncover more rigorous data regarding the research questions. As some participants expressed the want or neutrality to discussing spiritual concerns with peers, a focus group may have allowed for a deeper connection of data between participants to uncover additional and/or stronger themes.

Finally, the data were analyzed with an iterative approach, which entails the researcher's interpretation of the data in addition to consulting relevant literature. A trained independent coder assisted in the coding process, yet, the researcher-as-instrument analysis method presents bias in the results. A more objective representation of the results might have been obtained with additional analysis methods such as participant checks of the data or utilization of additional coders.

The present study suggests the need for additional research in the areas of organizational communication and interpersonal communication. Here, no participants discussed the contemplation of Christian and/or organization exit with pastors, including those with high levels of organizational involvement. Yet, studies suggest that some church members express disagreements within their respective church organizations (Garner, 2012; Garner & Wargo,

2009). Brianna said that when she posed questions regarding Christianity as a child, she was met with opposition described with messages such as, ‘You don’t question God and the Bible’. A cultural-centered research approach regarding the perception of dissent communication or communication that challenges organizational leaders within African American congregations could uncover data regarding in-church communication channels and potentially inform if and how the larger popular communicates sentiments regarding disaffiliation.

Participants identified conflict avoidance as the most common reason for utilizing silence regarding their disaffiliation from Christianity throughout the three stages of organizational exit. Additionally mentions were made of romantic relationships and conflict. When propositioned for final thoughts when closing the interviews, Karen and Unique discussed relationships. Karen talked about her attempt to date a Christian man and the relationship failing due to her non-identification as a Christian and refusal to “convert” back to Christianity. Yet, on the contrary, Unique discussed being taught that individuals need to be “equally yoked” religiously and spiritually in a relationship, especially when raising children. She further explained that she and her husband have always had different religious and spiritual views (while she identified as Christian and now that she practices witchcraft). She said that this has never caused any issues for them. A study exploring the relational dynamics amongst dyads in which one partner identifies as Christian and the other identifies with potentially stigmatized, non-Christian values could be beneficial to religious and interpersonal communication studies.

Finally, a number of participants discussed the influence of non-Christian religions in their Christian disaffiliation and/or current relationship with other religions. Examples include Voodoo and other African religions, Buddhism, and Scientology. As of 2009, the Pew Research Center reports that a total of less than 3% of African Americans in the United State belong to the

combined religions of Buddhism, Hinduism, other world religions, and other world faiths. Spiritual practices related to these systems were mentioned by participants. This informs the need for research on African Americans and other populations and their relationship with stigmatized religions. Participants in the present study suggested that these religions are attached to the stigma of devil-worship, disbelief in God or a higher power, and evil. Taking this into account, there may potentially be higher numbers of African American practitioners of these stigmatized faiths than represented by the Pew Research Center due to enacted silence. Such questions can be informed by additional research studies.


### **Conclusion**

It is argued that African Americans and millennial populations are becoming less religious over time. While scholarship exists on individuals denouncing their Christian identifications, limited attention has been given on the African American population. The current study seeks to extend existing research on Christian exit, specifically within the field of communication in an exploratory nature. The participant sample described their religious upbringing, a description of their disaffiliation process with emphasis on communication, and their current relationship with spirituality and religion. The results from this study suggest that African Americans may generally use mixed communication patterns (disclosure, bonding with stigmatized, and silence) throughout the stages of organizational exit (preannouncement, announcement of exit, and post-exit). The sample, majority formerly of the Baptist denomination, expressed a presence of communication throughout the Christian disaffiliation process, where as, literature on ex-Mormons discuss a primary theme of silence. On the other hand, the present sample discussed catalysts for their Christian disaffiliation that aligned with catalysts given by participants in other studies on Christian disaffiliation. Though the sample is

small such, data can be utilized by religious organizations to consider and address their role in members exiting their church organization and Christianity in general. Finally, this study can be used to inform future research on topics including Christian disaffiliation from the church perspective, comparative studies based on former denominational affiliation, and the development of relational conflict due to member's Christian exit and dyads with differing religious views.

## APPENDIX A

## IRB Approval

	IRB Administration Office 87 East Canfield, Second Floor Detroit, Michigan 48201 Phone: (313) 577-1628 FAX: (313) 993-7122 <a href="http://irb.wayne.edu">http://irb.wayne.edu</a>
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**CONCURRENCE OF EXEMPTION**

To: William Cooper  
Communication

From: Dr. Deborah Ellis *N. Nahan / 2.2*  
Chairperson, Behavioral Institutional Review Board (B3)

Date: August 18, 2016

RE: IRB #: 057616B3X  
 Protocol Title: African Americans and the Communication of Religious Exit  
 Sponsor:  
 Protocol #: 1606015059

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The above-referenced protocol has been reviewed and found to qualify for **Exemption** according to paragraph #2 of the Department of Health and Human Services Code of Federal Regulations [45 CFR 46.101(b)].

- Revised Protocol Summary Form (revision received in the IRB office 08/17/16)
- Revised Research Protocol (received in the IRB office 08/17/16)
- Medical records are not being accessed therefore HIPAA does not apply
- Research Information Sheet (revision dated 08/17/2016)
- Oral Script – Phone
- Study Flyers (2) - i) Tear-off flyer, ii) Internet flyer
- Data Collection Tools (2): i) Interview Guide (Script), ii) Survey (Demographics)

This proposal has not been evaluated for scientific merit, except to weigh the risk to the human subjects in relation to the potential benefits.

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- Exempt protocols do not require annual review by the IRB.
- All changes or amendments to the above-referenced protocol require review and approval by the IRB **BEFORE** implementation.
- Adverse Reactions/Unexpected Events (AR/UE) must be submitted on the appropriate form within the timeframe specified in the IRB Administration Office Policy (<http://irb.wayne.edu/policies-human-research.php>).

**NOTE:** Forms should be downloaded from the IRB Administration Office website <http://irb.wayne.edu> at each use.

Notify the IRB of any changes to the funding status of the above-referenced protocol.

## APPENDIX B

## Flyer and Online Message

## Research Participants Needed!

### “African Americans and the Communication of Religious Exit”

**Are you:**

- a Wayne State University student registered for Fall 2016 classes *and/or* a Metro-Detroit resident
- between 18-30 years old
- African American
- formerly a Christian and identified with a single denomination
- no longer a Christian

If you answered yes to **ALL OF** the above, you may be eligible to participate.

**Please note:** Participation includes 1 one-on-one interview session lasting 60-75 minutes. Your anonymity and/or confidentiality is **ASSURED** and participation is voluntary.

**For more information, or to sign up for this study, please contact  
William Cooper via Email:**

**[dy5940@wayne.edu](mailto:dy5940@wayne.edu)**



The following message was posted to social media sites as indicated in PSF along with the attached flyer:

I am seeking participants for a research study regarding African Americans and their exit from Christianity. Please see flyer for details.

## APPENDIX C

### Research Information Sheet

Title of Study: African Americans and the Communication of Religious Exit

Principal Investigator (PI): William Cooper  
Department of Communication  
(313) 459-8196

#### Purpose

You are being asked to be in a research study that examines how African-Americans, who have left a Christian denomination, make sense of this exit. This study is being conducted at Wayne State University. The estimated number of study participants to be enrolled at Wayne State University is about 15. **Please read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study.**

#### Study Procedures

If you agree to take part in this research study, you will be asked to:

Respond to questions regarding your former Christian denominational affiliation, the process of exiting Christianity, and how the religious disaffiliation was communicated to those around you.

Participation in this study will include informed consent (10 minutes), an audio-recorded one-on-one interview (45 – 60 minutes), and one demographic questionnaire (5 minutes). One visit, lasting 60 – 75 minutes, will be needed for individuals to participate in the study. Also, participants will be asked to provide information regarding the research study to friends or family members that fit the research criteria.

Recorded interviews will be deleted upon transcription. Additionally, no identifying data such as your name will be collected or transcribed.

#### Benefits

As a participant in this research study, there may be no direct benefit for you; however, information from this study may benefit other people now or in the future.

#### Risks

There are no known risks at this time to participation in this study.

### **Study Costs**

Participation in this study will be of no cost to you.

### **Compensation**

You will not be paid for taking part in this study.

### **Confidentiality**

All information collected about you during the study will be kept without identifiers.

When the results of this research are published in academic journals or discussed in research conferences, no information will be included that would reveal your identity.

Audiotaped recordings of you will be used for research, but your identity will be protected or disguised in the transcriptions. Recordings will be deleted after they are transcribed, and pseudonyms will be used thereafter in the transcription and all write-ups. The recordings and transcripts will be accessible only by the PI and his faculty advisor.

### **Voluntary Participation/Withdrawal**

Taking part in this study is voluntary. You have the right to choose not to take part in this study. You are free to only answer questions that you want to answer. You are free to withdraw from participation in this study at any time. Your decisions will not change any present or future relationship with Wayne State University or its affiliates, or other services you are entitled to receive.

### **Questions**

If you have any questions about this study now or in the future, you may contact William Cooper at the following phone number: (313) 459-8196. If you have questions or concerns about your rights as a research participant, the Chair of the Institutional Review Board can be contacted at (313) 577-1628. If you are unable to contact the research staff, or if you want to talk to someone other than the research staff, you may also call the Wayne State Research Subject Advocate at (313) 577-1628 to discuss problems, obtain information, or offer input.

### **Participation**

By completing the interview you are agreeing to participate in this study.

## APPENDIX D

### Interview Guide

#### Grand tour questions

Tell me about your religious upbringing?

*Who or what experiences influenced your religious practices? Which organizations influenced your religious practices?*

#### Preannouncement of exit

When did you first start thinking about leaving Christianity?

*Why? What contributed to these feelings?*

Did you discuss these feelings with anyone else?

*What did you say? What happened? What did they respond? How did you feel?*

#### Announcement of exit

Tell me when you finally decided to leave Christianity.

Who did you speak with about your decision to exit?

*What did you say? What did they say? How did you feel?*

Do you recall any other conversations regarding your decision to exit?

#### Post-exit

Tell me about your current relationship with religion/spirituality.

Are you currently affiliated with any institution or organization related to your current beliefs?

Do you discuss your current beliefs with your Christian family members/friends?

*Can you tell me about a conversation you remember?*

#### Closing questions

Is there anything else that you would like to share, regarding your exit from Christianity?

**APPENDIX E****Demographic Questionnaire**

AGE: \_\_\_\_\_ years

GENDER: M F Other: \_\_\_\_\_

HIGHEST ACADEMIC LEVEL COMPLETED (circle ONE):

HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATE/GED      ASSOCIATE'S DEGREE

BACHELOR'S DEGREE      GRADUATE DEGREE      PH.D

FORMER DENOMINATION YOU WERE AFFILIATED WITH FOR THE  
LONGEST DURATION (circle ONE):

CATHOLIC      BAPTIST      METHODIST      LUTHERAN

PENTECOSTAL      PRESBYTERIAN      CHURCH OF CHRIST

EPISCOPALIAN

OTHER: \_\_\_\_\_

For how long were you affiliated with this denomination? \_\_\_\_\_ (years and/or months)

How long has it been since you exited this denomination and Christianity? \_\_\_\_\_ (years  
and/or months)

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**ABSTRACT****AFRICAN AMERICANS AND THE COMMUNICATION OF RELIGIOUS EXIT**

by

**William P. Cooper****December 2016****Advisor:** Dr. Rahul Mitra**Major:** Communication (Communication Studies)**Degree:** Master of Arts

This exploratory study investigates Christian disaffiliation, or deconversion, in a sample of African American ex-Christians living in the metro-Detroit area. The data obtained from 15 interviews were used to address the following research questions: (1) How do participants recall the religious socialization process? (2) What are some catalysts for African Americans disaffiliating from their former Christian denominations? (3) How does the Christian disaffiliation process unfold communicatively for African-Americans? Specifically, did participants utilize any strategies of SMC in their communication of exit? Jablin's (2001) Model of Organizational Exit and Meisenbach's (2010) Stigma Management Communication Strategy Typology were used as theoretical frameworks. The interview transcripts were coded through multiple cycles and then were analyzed using an iterative approach. This included allowing them to emerge from the data as well as utilizing existing literature, models, etc. The results from this study suggest that female family members, especially grandmothers, are responsible for Christian socialization in the African American community; catalysts that drive disaffiliation include dissent with Christian teachings and organization members, the acquisition of new contrarian information, life course factors, and lack of role models; mixed communication

strategies are utilized by African Americans throughout the pre-exit, announcement of exit, and post-exit stages of disaffiliation including disclosure, bonding with other stigmatized individuals, and silence. Additionally, it appears that the former members of the Baptist denomination may openly disclose their thoughts of disaffiliation more openly than ex-Mormons. This study suggests the need for the extension of research regarding religious exit focusing on topics such as comparing and contrasting different denominations in communication practices during Christian exit and the how organizational leaders (pastors) respond to their members disaffiliation from the church or Christianity itself.

## **AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL STATEMENT**

William Cooper was born, raised, and educated in Detroit, MI. After graduating from the renowned Cass Technical High School, he obtained Bachelor's and Master's degrees in Communication at Wayne State University. His interests include organizational and interpersonal communication, individual-level spirituality, and qualitative research methods. His future goals include doctoral-level study and opening a business that caters to individual spiritual needs.