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Home by Another Way: The Possibility of Reconstructing Spiritual Identity Within the Deconstruction of Millennial Exvangelical Faith

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HOME BY ANOTHER WAY:
THE POSSIBILITY OF RECONSTRUCTING SPIRITUAL IDENTITY WITHIN THE
DECONSTRUCTION OF MILLENNIAL EXVANGELICAL FAITH

BY
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A Written Project submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
DOCTOR OF MINISTRY

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DEDICATION

This project is dedicated to my former spiritual direction clients, pilgrimage participants, and Seekers Circle members who honor their sacred search by making time for meaningful conversation and engagement, asking courageous questions and listening for divine stirrings with a commitment to follow them wherever they lead.

ABSTRACT

HOME BY ANOTHER WAY:

THE POSSIBILITY OF RECONSTRUCTING SPIRITUAL IDENTITY WITHIN THE DECONSTRUCTION OF MILLENNIAL EXVANGELICAL FAITH

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This doctoral project addresses the phenomenon of faith deconstruction and explores the experiences of millennials in the United States who have left the evangelical church and have found a new spiritual home in alternative forms of spiritual belief and expression, whether inside or outside of Christianity. This phenomenological study seeks to identify the qualities, perspectives, and experiences shared by millennials who have left their evangelical faith of origin and have found new spiritual homes and identities. To support this research, the philosophical concept of deconstruction as introduced by Jacques Derrida is used as a framework along with spiritual development theory from Richard Rohr, psychological development theory from Carl Jung, and mystical and process theological perspectives. Data were collected through interviews and the reading of memoirs as artifacts of this phenomenon and this study's focus within it to reveal central themes identifiable in the shared experiences of research subjects. Once data collection was complete, the role of reconstruction within deconstruction was then explored and discernible guideposts for reconstructing spiritual identity and beliefs were identified. This research is conducted for the benefit of spiritual directors and companions offering soul care to seekers in faith deconstruction as well individuals navigating this experience independently in order to cultivate an imagination for the

many ways seekers who desire continued spiritual engagement experience the Divine and find new meaning after leaving the evangelical church.

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“THE MAP YOU MAKE YOURSELF”

by Jan Richardson (2015, 77–78)
reprinted with permission

You have looked
at so many doors
with longing,
wondering if your life
lay on the other side.

For today,
choose the door
that opens
to the inside.

Travel the most ancient way
of all:
the path that leads you
to the center
of your life.

No map
but the one
you make yourself.

No provision
but what you already carry
and the grace that comes
to those who walk
the pilgrim’s way.

Speak this blessing
as you set out
and watch how
your rhythm slows,
the cadence of the road drawing you
into the pace that is your own.

Eat when hungry.
Rest when tired.
Listen to your dreaming.
Welcome detours
as doors deeper in.

Pray for protection.
Ask for the guidance you need.
Offer gladness
for the gifts that come
and then
let them go.

Do not expect
to return
by the same road.
Home is always
by another way
and you will know it
not by the light
that waits for you

but by the star
that blazes inside you
telling you
where you are
is holy
and you are welcome
here.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Introduction

I sit across her virtually during our Zoom interview that sunny summer day in July, the screen between us seeming to fade away as I listen to her share her spiritual journey—her presence, gentle pace, and self-awareness reflective of her vocation as a therapist. Recounting her experience growing up in the evangelical church, I am surprised to hear so much fondness in her voice. It seems much more common for those who have left their faith of origin behind to be filled with animosity. Still, her fondness was not strong enough to mask the internal dissonance that began to rise in her college years. By the time she was in graduate school, she felt entirely “disconnected” from the spiritual tradition that had informed so much of her life thus far. “I remember having a breakdown just, like, sobbing because it was this moment of recognizing [that] this isn’t where I’m finding life anymore,” she shares.

This began a multiyear process of slowly stepping away from her Christian faith—first from evangelicalism, then from attending church, and finally from Christianity entirely. Her spiritual yearning and curiosity did not diminish in this period, however. Instead, she began to find resonance in archetypal psychology, eventually finding a new spiritual home in paganism, identifying now as something that once frightened her (and, she understands, feels threatening to many)—a witch. Elaborating on her newfound spiritual identity, she tells me, “I see the Earth as holding consciousness that I can access through contact with my body. When I’m in deep contact with my body,

I can make contact with the consciousness of the Earth, and I can use her power to heal myself and to access wisdom and to heal others.” I smile at her sense of vibrancy, trusting the authenticity of her experience, and am left to wonder what was at play that allowed her to ultimately find such deep meaning.

Today, large numbers of millennials are leaving the Christian Church in the United States, with only 49 percent currently identifying as Christian—a 16 percent drop from ten years prior (Pew Research Center 2019, 8). This is in stark contrast to their parents’ generations, with 69 percent of generation X and 76 percent of baby boomers still identifying as Christian (Pew Research Center 2019, 8). Like the interview participant mentioned previously, many leaving the Christian Church, or specific traditions within it, describe their experience as a “deconstruction” of their faith of origin—a term borrowed from philosopher Jacques Derrida and currently popularized in Christian circles by those critiquing and often, ultimately, exiting their faith tradition (Karris 2020, 18).¹ This phenomenon of millennial faith deconstruction is no surprise. Although seekers of many generations are undergoing shifts in spiritual identity, given their experience and exposure, millennials as a generation are ripe for deconstruction (McLaren 2021, xiv). Born between in 1981 and 1996, millennials in America grew up alongside the rise of the religious right, witnessing the corruption possible when church

¹ To provide an example of the prominence of this specific use of the term “deconstruction,” as of October 4, 2022, over 14,000 Instagram posts used the hashtag “#faithdeconstruction,” with over 338,000 using the hashtag “#deconstruction.” While the large number of Instagram posts using the tag “#deconstruction” might not be referring to faith deconstruction specifically, most top posts displayed on the date in reference clearly applied this term to issues of faith.

mingles with state (Dimock 2019).² Equally, millennials matured alongside the burgeoning Internet Age and the birth of social media, allowing them easier access to a variety of worldviews beyond their inherited perspectives than any generation before.

This is especially visible within the evangelical church. To further emphasize this phenomenon, in recent years the term *exvangelical* has risen in conjunction with this trend. This term was coined by millennial Blake Chastain in 2016, alongside the near-unwavering evangelical support for then presidential candidate Donald Trump, in an appropriately millennial fashion—a Twitter hashtag (Onishi 2019). Although the term is not used by all who have left the evangelical church and may not be known by some who are featured in this research, it is used in this project because it serves as an apt descriptor for the population studied and articulates some of the many reasons millennials are leaving evangelicalism. Describing those with a shared history who have definitively left the evangelical church, the term *exvangelical* addresses a departure from white evangelicalism in particular, referencing the hegemony of US evangelical culture at large (Chastain 2019). Included in this rejection of evangelicalism is a repudiation of religious exclusivism, homophobia, patriarchy, and the imposition of purity culture that impacted so many of this generation (Chastain 2019; Onishi 2019).

Some *exvangelicals* continue to identify as Christian, often migrating to more progressive denominations within the church, such as the Episcopal Church and the United Church of Christ; others have deconverted from Christianity entirely (Onishi

² While 1981 has become the official starting date of the millennial generation by reputable sources such as Pew Research Center, with those born in 1980 designated as “generation x,” an online search will prove that many consider those born in 1980 to be millennials. This is true of memoir author Christena Cleveland, who was born in 1980 and identifies as a millennial, which is why she was included in this study even though she was born prior to 1981.

2019). Either way, one thing is certain; the subsequent transition of the hashtag #exvangelical into an accepted term and identifier by many is evidence that faith deconstruction has become more than a concept. Today, many books, podcasts, websites, and social media accounts are devoted to this phenomenon.³ Self-proclaimed experts on the subject are even marketing themselves as “deconstruction coaches,” offering online courses and consultations (Farley 2022). With so many hanging their hats on the phenomenon of faith deconstruction, a question arises—has deconstruction become more of a destination than a vehicle for transformation?

Statement of the Problem

Herein lies the problem with the current trend of faith deconstruction, particularly among exvangelicals. There is no doubt many millennials who have left the evangelical church are attracted to the term exvangelical because it signifies a shared history, an alternative worldview, and a common stance. I am among them. For many, the embrace of such a term lays the groundwork for the possibility of a spiritual identity beyond evangelicalism. However, although the term is intentionally antithetical, as an identity it is inherently negating because it binds one’s identity to what one is not. In doing so, it potentially paints one’s departure as reactionary while, at the same time, inadvertently omitting the possibility of a spiritual identity that is not bound up in evangelicalism.⁴ This

³ See examples in Appendix A.

⁴ Chastain does acknowledge the limitations of the term, writing, “I understand that it is inherently negative, in that it describes a former relationship. It also describes a *formative* relationship of incredible significance. As a term, as an identity marker, it is at once a recognition and renunciation of a certain type of belief and belonging. That is significant in and of itself. But it is a denial without a prescribed affirmation. What one chooses to affirm is up to them” (Chastain 2022).

raises another question—when people identify chiefly as what they are not, where is there room for active engagement with what they are becoming?

Authentic deconstruction, according to Derrida’s original intent, naturally includes reconstruction (Rollins 2021). Rather than promoting a stance of opposition, Derridean deconstruction emphasizes possibility; by identifying what is absent, a clearing is established, cultivating an openness to what could be (Rollins 2021). Pastor and poet Jan Richardson alludes to this alternative possibility in her blessing, “The Map You Make Yourself” (Richardson 2015, 77–78). Inspired by the journey of the Magi, Richardson (2015, 78) writes for all of us on the journey of becoming, declaring, “Do not expect/ to return/ home by the same road./ Home is always/ by another way. . . .” The possibility of reconstruction in relation to faith deconstruction is this “home by another way.”

Purpose and Significance of the Study

In this doctoral project, I explore the possibility of reconstructing spiritual identity within the deconstruction of millennial exvangelical faith by highlighting the experiences of millennial exvangelicals in the United States who now feel at home in alternative spiritual traditions or forms of spiritual expression inside or outside of Christianity. Although it may be of interest, this research is not intended for the benefit of evangelicals who are looking to understand why people are leaving the evangelical church in order to find ways to keep them in the fold. Rather, I conducted this research on behalf of those who have left the evangelical church as a testament to the possibilities of belief beyond its confines to affirm the experiences of those who have found new spiritual “homes” and offer encouragement and hope for those still searching for their “home by another way.”

In the same vein, this research focuses less on the phenomenon of faith deconstruction itself, including the many ways it is instigated, and more on the potential for the reconstruction of spiritual identity within it. Faith deconstruction has become a hot button issue in the evangelical world and beyond, and it will continue to be a trending topic.⁵ This project turns the spotlight toward the possibility of reconstructing spiritual identity as part of the experience of faith deconstruction. There are many who have left evangelicalism who do not wish for spiritual re-engagement, and this study does not intend to convey the focus of this research as the ideal path. In addition, there are many in the evangelical tradition who cherish their faith, and this study does not aim to discredit them. Instead, its aim is to bring attention to and cultivate an imagination for the many ways seekers who desire continued spiritual engagement experience the Divine and find new meaning after leaving the evangelical church.

Still, it is important to note that, in researching millennial exvangelicals who feel at home in alternative spiritual traditions and forms of spiritual expression, I am not simply seeking to highlight the differing spiritual identities of exvangelicals. Instead, in using the metaphor of “home” and following with its theme, I intended to specifically investigate those who feel a profound sense of resonance and belonging within their newfound spiritual identity and are honoring of all stages of their spiritual journey, alluding to the maturity and capacity for integration that comes with an experience of deconstruction that includes reconstruction within it—what philosopher Ken Wilber refers to as the ability to “transcend and include” previous ways of being (Wilber 1996,

⁵ *Christianity Today*, a popular evangelical publication, has published articles about faith deconstruction many times over the past few years and featured the topic in the cover story of their March 2022 edition.

27). It is my hope that the conclusions drawn from this study will benefit both exvangelicals who feel siloed in deconstruction—presenting the possibility of finding a spiritual “home” beyond what they have previously known—and spiritual directors like myself who often accompany seekers in this process, offering insight into the role of reconstruction and the possibility of meaningful spiritual engagement in the future.

Research Questions

One primary research question guided this study:

- What are the qualities, perspectives, and experiences shared by US millennials who have left their evangelical faith of origin and now feel at home in alternative spiritual traditions and forms of spiritual expression?

Two secondary questions were also explored:

- How is the reconstruction of spiritual identity part of a holistic experience of faith deconstruction?
- What discernible guideposts for reconstructing spiritual identity and beliefs did the data suggest?

Existing and Related Research

Much has been reported on faith deconstruction and “faith shifts” in recent years, including in prominent evangelical publications such as *Christianity Today* and a documentary produced by CBS entitled *Deconstructing My Religion* (Escobar 2014, 3; CBS News 2022).⁶ Often, these explorations are written from the perspective of deconversion from faith altogether or from a more conservative approach, which asserts

⁶ See additional examples in Appendix A.

that deconstruction must be done within the safety of one's own tradition. Theologians and former evangelical pastors David P. Gushee (2020) and Brian McLaren (2021) offer a way forward for those who wish to remain within the Christian tradition but choose to leave evangelicalism behind in their respective works, *After Evangelicalism* and *Faith after Doubt*. Conversely, research on the spirituality of "nones" (those with no distinct religious affiliation) does exist, with Elizabeth Drescher (2016, 54) exploring their process of "unaffiliation" from religion in pursuit of more authentic spiritual experience in her book, *Choosing Our Religion*. Discussions are also taking place about the spiritual, emotional, and psychological harm experienced by many who are exiting the church at large.⁷ Although such religious trauma is not the focus of this study, it is a necessary area of further exploration and a topic that still arises regularly in the data.

Because this topic has in many ways become the zeitgeist of the landscape of faith today, numerous books continue to be published on faith deconstruction. *Do I Stay Christian?*, a recent release from McLaren (2022), wrestles with the question faced by many undergoing faith deconstruction who find themselves at the edges of Christianity. In addition, forthcoming works include *Holy Runaways* by Matthias Roberts and *Exvangelical and Beyond* by Blake Chastain. The continued prevalence of the topic of faith deconstruction in public spaces only further confirms the value of this study in our current postmodern and burgeoning postevangelical (and, in many ways, post-Christian) era. Still, news outlet Axios reports that no research currently exists to quantify the size and demographics of this phenomenon (Kight 2021).

⁷ Examples of these publications can be found in Appendix A.

Joining with the publications previously mentioned and the additional resources exploring faith deconstruction that are too large in number to be named in full, this study pushes the conversation a step further. Highlighting the ways in which deconstruction and reconstruction are inherently interconnected, this study places Derridean deconstruction alongside today's popular concept of faith deconstruction in ways that have yet to be seen. In addition to bridging the gap between Derridean deconstruction and faith deconstruction as it is commonly known, this project endeavors to bridge the gap between publications and resources whose intended audience is Christians who remain in the broader church and those who cater to seekers who come to align with spiritual identities outside it, aiming to emphasize the distinctives of reconstructing spiritual identity as a whole rather than the particularities of beliefs themselves.

On Deconstruction

In using the term *deconstruction*, I draw on both the philosophical perspective introduced by Jacques Derrida and the popular usage of the word within Christian circles today as I investigate the ways in which the notion of exvangelical deconstruction both reflects and strays from Derrida's original intention. An idea associated with postmodern philosophy, clear definitions of Derridean deconstruction are hard to find, with Derrida (2001, 28) himself greatly resisting any simplification of the term. It is not, as often misinterpreted, "a 'method' that can be 'applied' to something," writes Derridean scholar Lucy Niall (2004, 11). Rather, deconstruction is often described as an "event" or a "calling forth" that is inherent within a word, text, or concept (Caputo 2007, 59). To sum it up, "Whatever is constructed is deconstructable," philosopher, theologian, and Derrida collaborator John Caputo states (2007, 35).

To offer an example of deconstruction in action, Derrida (1997, 16) often spoke of justice. In this examination, the word *justice* is lacking, never fully embodying the ideal to which it alludes. This is because in a world in which the concept of justice exists, justice is never fully realized. Deconstruction, then, could be said to point out the absence in what is present (Rollins 2021). Many who think they understand deconstruction end here, treating deconstruction as nihilism. Derrida's intent, however, is the opposite. Also built within justice is an energy that points beyond it, continually drawing its proponents toward action (Derrida 1997, 16). Derrida (1997, 22–23) readily correlates deconstruction with the messianic, referencing how the very act of negation within deconstruction can clear the way for possibilities beyond what has been known. For this reason, the hyphenated term *im-possible* is used to describe the essence of deconstruction, with the prefix *im* meaning both “not” and “in”—opposites, which, when viewed through the lens of deconstruction do not contradict one another, as it would seem, but instead ignite unrealized potential (Derrida 2001, 12–32).

It is here that Derridean deconstruction and the faith deconstruction referenced in some Christian circles today intersect. Many who speak of faith deconstruction use the term in a more systematic way, referring to the taking apart of specific beliefs in order to analyze them, reorder them, and perhaps even leave many (or all) behind (Hübner 2020, 20). Some reference the Derridean perspective of deconstruction, but often only in passing; little effort is made to connect the two. However, a nuanced understanding of Derridean deconstruction through a theological lens reveals that the two interpretations have much in common.

Philosopher and theologian Peter Rollins (2008) writes of this potential for convergence without ever discussing Derridean deconstruction directly in *The Fidelity of Betrayal*. “The deepest way in which we can demonstrate our fidelity to Christianity is to engage in a betrayal of it,” he dares to declare (Rollins 2008, 6-7). In other words, in order to remain faithful to the essence of something we hold dear, we must be willing to identify and reject what falsely stands in its place. For those who now find themselves beyond the Christian tradition, the word “Christianity” might be replaced with “God,” “spiritual identity,” or even “Ultimate Reality.” Still, the radical notion remains the same—abandoning a certain belief or belief system might not actually be a mark of faithlessness (the negation within Derridean deconstruction); instead, it just might be the most faithful thing to do (the affirmation within Derridean deconstruction’s messianic vision). Ultimately, faith deconstruction is not a question of the existence of faith, but, rather, an inquiry into where faith rightfully lies. As Rollins’ peer Caputo (2007, 68) writes, “To ‘deconstruct’ is . . . to feel about for what is living and stirring within a thing . . . in order to release it, to set it free, to give it a new life, a new being, a future.” For the purposes of this study, we might add to this list “a new home.”

Background and Role of Researcher

My interest in the current phenomenon of faith deconstruction, particularly among millennial exvangelicals who through the deconstruction of their faith of origin have found a new spiritual identity, is shaped by my own personal experience. Raised in the Southern Baptist tradition in America’s Bible Belt in the late 1980s through the mid 2000s, my childhood was so immersed in the evangelical worldview that I had little exposure to alternative perspectives. Upon leaving home after high school graduation, my

world and experience broadened through travel and higher education, including seminary. This exposure led to the deconstruction and reimagining of my faith.

I now find myself at home in the contemplative tradition, still under the umbrella of the Christian religion yet distinct from evangelical faith in an environment that instead celebrates mystery, welcomes questions, values experience, and recognizes the presence of God beyond the confines of Christianity, which has historically limited authentic experience of the Divine to a specific set of beliefs. I, as Richardson expresses in the blessing previously referenced, have found “home by another way.” Although many of my evangelical peers appear to be stuck in their interpretation of faith deconstruction and discouraged by faith altogether, others, myself included, have found resonance and belonging within alternative spiritual traditions or forms of spiritual expression, either within or outside Christianity. It seems their newfound spiritual identity has offered far more “good news” than evangelicalism ever did, and it is their experiences I want to probe and their stories I want to share.

It is my own experience of faith deconstruction that led me to the work of spiritual direction. My role as a spiritual director informs not only my engagement with participants but also the very topic of faith deconstruction. In many ways, the work of spiritual direction *is* the work of deconstruction. Conversations in spiritual direction extend beyond the confines of religious tradition and are exploratory in nature, fueled by the curiosity and longing that often serve as the impetus for transformation. Oftentimes, if a directee does not initiate conversation with a specific topic, I begin by asking, “What is stirring within you?” This prompt is reminiscent of Caputo’s (2007) description of deconstruction in his book, *What Would Jesus Deconstruct?* “In a deconstruction,” he

writes, “things are made to tremble by their own inner impulse, by a force that will give them no rest, that keeps forcing itself to the surface, forcing itself out, making the thing restless” (Caputo 2007, 29). It is this very inner impulse—this driving force—that I seek to interact with in my work as a spiritual director and that I endeavored to uncover through my research. I believe that when this inner impulse is located, the movement of God is also made known. Equally, just as Derridean deconstruction includes reconstruction within it, I believe this inner impulse is not the signal of the end of faith. On the contrary, it is the herald of something new.

Overview of Methods

Through this research, I worked with a small sample of US millennial exvangelicals who have been attentive to this herald, finding a new spiritual identity or new forms of spiritual expression through the deconstruction of their evangelical faith of origin. To document a variety of spiritual experience, this sample was diversified according to current spiritual identity, with secondary diversification in the categories of race and gender. Approaching this study through a phenomenological lens, I selected six personal accounts to explore—three memoirs referencing faith deconstruction and three interview participants. Accounts were then themed to find “clusters of meaning” that were visible throughout (Creswell and Poth 2018, 74). Following this exercise, I wrote a “composite description” to reveal the perceived essence of the identified phenomenon and this project’s particular focus within it.

Limitations and Delimitations

Delimitations of this study include focusing my research exclusively on millennials in the United States. In addition, although there are a growing number of

millennials leaving Christianity altogether beyond those leaving evangelicalism, I centered my research on those who have left the evangelical church, because it is a phenomenon that is continuing to unfold and one with which I am personally familiar because of my own experience. Limitations include my choice of memoir as a data source. Because I did not converse directly with the authors, I was not able to ask for clarification and thus relied on my own interpretation of the text. Another limitation involves theological engagement with the data. Because I chose to include participants outside the Christian tradition within my sample, I was limited to theological frameworks that are just as inclusive (or, rather, expansive) as I sought to be in my research. The number of research subjects used in this study is also a limitation. Although the number of subjects falls within the typical range required for a phenomenological study, because only six accounts were considered, this study is by no means reflective of all who share the experience explored. A final limitation in this study is my own privilege as a white, affluent, and highly educated woman, which influences my own experience and perception of the focus of this study and my interpretation of the data procured.

Definition of Terms

Key terms associated with this project include the following:

Deconstruction is a philosophical approach developed by Jacques Derrida.

Deconstruction highlights what is inherently absent or left unsaid in a concept or idea in order to invite new possibilities (Rollins 2021). In reference to faith, its current usage co-opts this term to denote the dismantling of religious beliefs sparked by a re-examination of faith, resulting in a re-evaluation of belief systems and spiritual identity (Mudge 2021).

Evangelicalism is a Christian belief system spanning multiple denominations which affirms and prioritizes biblical authority, evangelism, substitutionary atonement, and exclusive salvation (NAE/LifeWay Research 2015).⁸

Exvangelical is a person who has left the evangelical church and the corresponding dominant evangelical culture, a term often used to connect those with a shared history (Onishi 2019; Chastain 2019).

Faith of origin is a person's first faith tradition.

Home, in this study, is a term used as a metaphor to represent a profound sense of resonance and belonging within a spiritual tradition or form of spiritual expression alongside an appreciation for all stages of one's spiritual journey, alluding to a capacity to "transcend and include" previous ways of being.

Millennial refers to a person born between 1981 and 1996 (Dimock 2019).

Reconstruction, in reference to faith, is the reestablishment of spiritual belief and identity initiated by faith deconstruction, often resulting in alignment with a spiritual tradition apart from an individual's faith of origin.

Spirituality is personal engagement with that which is beyond oneself, often but not limited to a divine presence, offering a sense of greater connection and meaning in everyday life.

Spiritual identity refers to the spiritual beliefs, practices, and experiences by which people define themselves. This encompasses both "spiritual tradition" and "forms

⁸ Although this definition may not fully represent every self-identifying evangelical, particularly those who are more progressive, this definition comes from the National Association of Evangelicals, representing thousands of evangelical communities and organizations, in partnership with LifeWay, the publication division of the Southern Baptist Convention (the organizing body of the Southern Baptist Church, which is the largest evangelical denomination in the United States).

of spiritual expression,” the latter meant to honor the spiritual identities of those who are spiritually engaged through intention and practice but do not align with a specific tradition.

Theology, traditionally, is the study of the nature of God. The theology of a religious institution or an individual is reflective of their experiences and perspectives of God. In this study, theology is not limited to a Christian theological perspective, moving beyond “God” language to encompass experiences of the Divine apart from the norm.

Summary

Large numbers of millennials are leaving the Christian church in the United States. Many are using the term “deconstruction” to describe their experience of leaving their faith of origin, a term borrowed from philosopher Jacques Derrida. This study focuses on those in this group who have found an alternative spiritual identity within or beyond the Christian tradition after exiting evangelicalism in particular, examining their experiences through the lens of Derridean deconstruction. In chapter 2, after briefly addressing evangelicalism and the making of the exvangelical movement, I introduce two theologies in alignment with Derridean deconstruction and its application to spiritual formation—negative theology and process theology. I will also address two theories of formation that inform my own theological perspective and engagement with this study. Moving on to subject research, in chapter 3, I outline the methodology used for this study, and, in chapter 4, I report the findings based on the data collected. In chapter 5, I bring these findings into conversation with the frameworks explored in this study to identify areas of resonance, respond to the remaining research questions posed, and

consider what areas of further inquiry remain regarding the identified phenomenon and this project's particular focus within it.

CHAPTER 2
THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION

Introduction

Thirteenth century Christian mystic Meister Eckhart (1941a, 91) said, “I pray to God that he [*sic.*] may make me free of ‘God.’” Far before Derrida spoke of deconstruction, this is Derridean deconstruction at work. The very name and idea of God limits God, an acknowledgement of an absence within what is present, and thus an incompleteness (Rollins 2021). This is the experience of the millennial exvangelicals I studied. Having examined their faith of origin and found it wanting, they left the evangelical tradition behind in pursuit of a possibility of the Divine beyond the limitations to which they—and God—were once confined. This is particularly true for memoir author Christena Cleveland, who will be introduced further in the following chapters. In her memoir, *God Is a Black Woman*, Cleveland (2022a) writes about an expression of the Divine that is liberating and life-affirming, but this could only be experienced by first leaving behind the images of God (whom she refers to as “whitemalegod”) that she was previously given.

This orientation toward unknowing is present in many theistic and nontheistic contemplative traditions alike, including Zen Buddhism, which seeks to continually deny the ego in order to cultivate a “beginner’s mind” (Williams 2019, 149). Matthew Fox (1983, 50–51), an Eckhart scholar, alludes to the possibilities of this “beginner’s mind” in his contemporary translation of the same text quoted at the beginning of this chapter: “I pray God to rid me of God. The highest and loftiest thing that one can let go of is to let go of God for the sake of God. God’s exit is her entrance.” Just as this adaptation states,

“God’s exit is her entrance,” so it is with newfound spiritual identity, a “home by another way” divine encounter by an alternative path (Fox 1983, 51).

On Evangelicalism and the Making of an Exvangelical Movement

Before we begin to explore theologies and theories of formation that can serve as guiding lights on such alternative paths, it is important to make note of the background, beliefs, and positions of the home exvangelicals leave behind—the evangelical tradition. Evangelism, stemming from the Greek word *evangelion* in the New Testament, meaning “gospel” and “good news,” has been a central Christian practice since the time of Jesus and the apostles who followed in his footsteps (Gushee 2020, 17). Although such evangelism might have been well-meaning for early Christians who were a minority and often threatened group, once Constantine made Christianity the official religion of the Roman Empire in the fourth century, marrying the Christian faith with a power-hungry institution, evangelism also became bound with domination through colonization. With this, the “good news” spread was often an imperially tinged vision of faith rather than Christ’s provocative message of self-sacrifice and love for the “least of these” (Matt. 25:44–45 [New Revised Standard Version]).

Evangelicalism, as it is known today, was birthed in the United States in the 1940s. Described by religion scholar and former evangelical David P. Gushee (2020, 17) as “the purposeful creation of a new religious identity and community,” the leaders of this movement sought to distinguish themselves from the growing liberalism within the Protestant church in the United States through evangelism and the affirmation of conservative theological perspectives such as biblical authority, substitutionary atonement, and exclusive salvation (NAE/LifeWay Research 2015). At the same time, the

United States had just entered the second world war, adding to a desire for a return to an orthodox Christian faith that would offer salvation and hope in an era of global chaos. Along with what Gushee (2020, 20, 23) refers to as attempts to “defeat Protestant liberalism” and “recover true orthodoxy”—including ideas such as biblical inerrancy and gender complementarianism—these evangelical reformers endeavored to “take leadership of American Christianity for evangelistic and missionary purposes.”

In the decades that followed, a distinctly evangelical theology and worldview based on these beliefs began to take shape. This included the hippie-led Jesus Movement of the late 1960s. Anthropologist T. M. Lurhmann, who studied US evangelicals for a decade, elaborates. “It was this movement that pushed American evangelical Christianity into the mainstream,” she writes, concluding, “The hippies changed what it meant to be Christian in America” (Lurhmann 2013). This included the concept of a personal and intimate relationship with Jesus, “a discovery process in which you are trying to decide who God is and what he [*sic.*] wants from you,” Lurhmann (2013) continues.

In the early 1970s, however, what in previous decades had been a largely apolitical return to gospel teachings—whether through orthodox living or charismatic encounters with Jesus—became a politically active culture that remains highly influential in US politics today. What once was intended to be a focus solely on evangelism had by this time shifted to include politics with the beginnings of what is now known as the religious right, a movement of conservative Christians that includes most evangelicals.

Offering insight into this shift, Lurhmann (2013) writes, “Evangelical Christians are always imagining themselves as who God *wants them to be*, not as they are. Faith becomes a matter of aspiration, not acceptance.” This orientation toward aspiration over

acceptance is reflected not only in the way evangelicals aim to live but also in the way most evangelicals vote, seeking to shape the country as informed by their distinct religious values. With their appearance on the political scene, evangelicalism became more and more homogenous ideologically and socially.

Kristin Kobes du Mez (2022), author of the *New York Times* bestseller, *Jesus and John Wayne: How White Evangelicals Corrupted a Faith and Fractured a Nation*, goes a step further, calling the evangelical movement of today a “consumer culture” and describing its adherents as “a people united and shaped by the products they consume.” This consumerism includes outlets in which conservative faith mingles with conservative politics. Gushee (2020, 24–25) notes that this new era of evangelicalism resulted in an “identity fusion between ‘white evangelical’ and ‘Republican,’” one most keenly visible in the 2016 presidential election, in which 81 percent of evangelicals voted for Republican presidential candidate Donald Trump, a polarizing figure whose character is in no way reflective of the gospel from which evangelicals get their name.⁹

Although many were leaving evangelicalism before 2016 because of their experience of dogmatic beliefs and dominating culture, including millennials such as myself and some if not all the subjects in this study, this is when the *exvangelical* movement makes its debut. As mentioned in chapter 1, the term *exvangelical* originated as a Twitter hashtag that quickly turned into a cultural movement (Onishi 2019). Other

⁹ It is worth noting that these statistics indicate that nearly one in five evangelicals did not support Donald Trump. In addition, while individuals have experienced significant harm within the evangelical tradition, some of which is referenced in this report, this is not unique to the evangelical church. Much good has come of the evangelical movement as well, including from some evangelical humanitarian organizations. Equally, there are undoubtedly evangelicals who espouse more progressive beliefs, such as egalitarianism and the affirmation of LGBTQ+ persons, that conflict with the beliefs of the vocal majority of evangelicals.

hashtags that gained prominence around the same time were “#emptythepews,” encouraging progressive evangelicals to leave the evangelical church for good after the election of Donald Trump, and “#churchtoo,” a hashtag inspired by the “#metoo movement,” that exposes experiences of sexual abuse and mistreatment of women within the church (Onishi 2019; Smith and Meyer 2022). In addition, with growing fervor around LGBTQ+ rights and increasingly visible acts of racial violence that often remain unaddressed from white evangelical pulpits, it is no wonder many are beginning to question the largely insular faith they once held so dear. With this questioning of faith another question naturally arises: What, then, of God?

Theologies in Shift: Negative Theology and Process Theology

Deconstruction, both in its Derridean and popular interpretations, compels us to ask elemental questions of faith: Who is God? What is God? Where is God? How is God? Why is God? Or, rather, why the name “God” at all? Some of the research subjects in this study have left the name of God behind along with their evangelical faith. That doesn’t mean they no longer participate with the Divine. Instead, they are simply not bound by the traditional name. By liberating the name of God, it could be argued that experience of God is liberated as well. Equally, by liberating experience of God, perhaps the name of God, too, is liberated. Such broad possibilities require inclusive theological frameworks which make room for shifting faith, valuing mystery, celebrating diversity, and honoring subjectivity. Two such theologies that I draw from to support this project are negative theology and process theology.

Negative Theology: A Spirituality of Deconstruction

Although the popular usage of the term *deconstruction* as previously explored depends on a more systematic and analytical definition when applied to faith, representing the taking apart or “de-constructing” of one’s faith for the purposes of examination and re-evaluation, Derridean deconstruction is inherently mystical. Commonly associated with the *via negativa*, Latin for the “negative way,” mysticism emphasizes apophatic spirituality, *apo* meaning “beyond” and *phasis* meaning “speech” in Greek (Williams 2019, xvii). Apophatic spirituality is a spirituality of negation, in line with Derridean deconstruction’s attention to absence, through its claims that God is ineffable and can only be known through a continued commitment to unsaying.

Even though the approach to deconstruction might differ, the origins of the Christian apophatic movement are not unlike the exodus of millennials leaving the evangelical church today, who, through their departure and corresponding negation of prominent evangelical beliefs and stances previously outlined, are resisting what has in many ways become an empire of US evangelicalism. Although they remained within their faith tradition, the desert mothers and fathers who introduced mysticism to the church left the confines of empire behind for the desert, claiming their own “home by another way” in the process (Lane 1998, 64). Inspired by the mystical posture of the desert mothers and fathers, fifth and sixth century theologian and philosopher Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite (2020) cemented the way of negation within Christian thought through his famed work, *The Mystical Theology* (Soelle 2001, 66). Of Pseudo-Dionysius’ perspective on apophatic thought, Christian mysticism scholar Dorothee Soelle (2001, 66) highlights, “in connection with the Divine, negations (apophaseis) are true and

affirmations (kataphaseis) insufficient.” This radical approach to language, Soelle (2001, 67) goes on to say in *The Silent Cry: Mysticism and Resistance*, “creates an unusual dynamic that forever seeks new concepts, words, and images and then discards them as inadequate.” This makes the apophatic approach a fitting theological lens through which to explore the questions of this project, particularly regarding the ways faith deconstruction might instigate a departure from evangelicalism through its rejection of certainties and absolutes.

Indeed, Derridean deconstruction and negative theology have commonly been associated with one another despite Derrida’s early resistance. Of this connection, David Newheiser, author of *Hope in a Secular Age: Deconstruction, Negative Theology, and the Future of faith*, writes,

Derrida and Dionysius independently develop a form of critique that is not corrosive. Both authors believe that people are tempted to project themselves onto that which is different, and they both worry that this forecloses the unexpected. To resist this tendency, they both insist upon practices that open the individual to that which is beyond themselves. (Newheiser 2019, 63)

This insight correlates with the insistence that Derridean deconstruction (and, in turn, negative theology) is not *destruction*, as the term is sometimes treated today in its co-opted form (McLaren 2021, 86). Rather, as previously stated, theologian and philosopher Peter Rollins insists that Derridean deconstruction necessitates possibility—what some might refer to as *reconstruction*—by its very nature (Rollins 2021). “Deconstruction says yes, affirming what negative theology affirms whenever it says no,” asserts John Caputo (1997, 3). “Deconstruction desires what negative theology desires and it shares the passion of negative theology—for the impossible,” he continues (Caputo 1997, 3). It is toward this *im-possible*, as previously referenced in the introduction, that negative

theology invites its proponents: toward the unsayable, toward the unknowable—a continued stripping of projections until the Divine is encountered in ways that would not have been possible otherwise.

Here, negative theology guides the budding mystic on two seemingly divergent-yet-intertwining paths—the God within and the God beyond. In his writings and sermons, Meister Eckhart (1941b) gives us glimpses of both. Benedictine monk and Eckhart scholar Cyprian Smith expounds on Eckhart’s perspective in *The Way of Paradox: Spiritual Life as Taught by Meister Eckhart*, describing the two-fold descent and ascent (or deconstruction and reconstruction) of the mystical path:

The first prerequisite is to find God in the deepest core of ourselves, and this is done by detachment, by letting go of all in us that is not God, until a spark of awareness awakens in us, which Eckhart calls “the Birth of God in the soul.” There is nothing final or definitive about it; it is only a start. There remains the ascent, the gradual exploring of all that was previously neglected. As this process goes on, the spark of consciousness steadily grows until it gradually illuminates the whole mind. It is the work of a lifetime. This is the path of apophatic mysticism. (Smith 2004, 13)

This, too, is the path followed by the millennial exvangelicals, whose accounts I explore in the chapters to follow. Their detachment or descent is a form of *dissent*—from restricting beliefs to US evangelical culture at large.

Caputo (1997, 27) speaks of the power of this dissent in his own reflections on the intersections of negative theology and Derridean deconstruction: “Negative theology . . . like deconstruction itself, is a deeply affirmative irruption, ‘from the depths’ . . . a passion for the impossible, for trespassing and transgression.” The object of such dissent and transgression is not the Divine itself but the idols that have been erected in its place. Elaborating further, Smith (2004, 41) writes, “What they are smashing is not God, but an idol, and their anger is a sacred anger.” Peter Rollins (2008) addresses the significance of

this “sacred anger” in combatting idolatry in the reference previously shared in the introduction, excerpted from his provocative book, *The Fidelity of Betrayal*. Here betrayal (or *negation* as apophatic language would say) can in fact be an act of deep and abiding faith—one that is much larger than the projections we place on God and the limitations to which the subjects of this study once espoused. Through this act, what once was an idol is dislodged and replaced instead with an icon—not a concrete image, but rather a “window to the Divine” and a portal to (im)possibility (Ellman 2014, 54).

“I pray God to rid me of God,” Fox’s (1983, 50) rendering of Eckhart’s admonition of idolatry echoes in memory. “The highest and loftiest thing that one can let go of is to let go of God for the sake of God. God’s exit is her entrance,” he contends (Fox 1983, 50–51). For many, even this gendering of God using the female pronoun is a deconstruction in itself, becoming an icon of sorts which points the seeker to images beyond those to which they were originally confined. Here, Caputo (1987, 66) writes, “meaning is generated through the tension between the saying and the unsaying”—an invitation to name what is absent and instead imagine a God beyond our knowing. A possibility is presented that once seemed impossible, and with each new possibility a transformation occurs—a transformation of self, and, consequently, an ever-expanding image of God. “Apophasis keeps the individual in motion, open to a transcendence that incites improvisational affirmation,” states Newheiser (2019, 59). It could also be said, then, that apophasis keeps the individual in process, and it is here where negative theology sets us up for possibility that we turn to the second theological framework guiding this study that is rooted in improvisation—process theology.

Process Theology: The Messianic Nature of Becoming

Although Derrida remained characteristically critical of religion throughout his career, in his musings on deconstruction he always included a concept alluded to in the introduction and borrowed from his Jewish heritage—the Messiah. In his explorations, Derrida (1997, 23) is not referring to the coming of the Christ, as Judeo-Christians might, but instead the “messianic structure” itself, which he is careful to distinguish from messianism. Unlike messianism, which is particular to certain religious traditions, Derrida (1997, 22) claims that “the messianic structure is a universal structure.” “As soon as you address the other, as soon as you are open to the future, of waiting for someone to come: that is the opening of experience,” he declares (Derrida 1997, 22). The future is filled with possibility, in other words, and that possibility propels us forward through our own experience as agents of that possibility. Derrida’s *messianicity* is thus a vehicle of becoming, aligning Derridean deconstruction with another theological perspective: process theology.

Originating from a philosophical perspective known as *process thought*, process theology asserts that everything in existence is always in an ongoing process of becoming (McDaniel 2021, 95). This includes humanity, the natural world, and even God. Because change occurs through relationship to others and the world around us, process theology affirms the interconnectedness of all things (McDaniel 2021, 95). Because of this, process theology insists that all living things hold inherent value (McDaniel 2021, 25). A process perspective looks at the lived experiences highlighted in this project and sees them not as a departure from faith, but rather a progression in the unfolding of both human and divine. Contrary to traditional theological thought, process theology asserts

that God is neither immutable (unchanging) nor omniscient (all-knowing) (Cobb 2003, 31; Bowman 2006, 21). With an undetermined future and a fully relational God, at once primordial (eternal) and becoming (consequential), God cannot be contained within the walls of an institution or the bounds of an ideology; instead, God, too, is open to continuous expansion simply by nature of being in relationship with all in existence (Bowman and McDaniel 2006, 6–7).

Similarly, because of process theology’s emphasis on agency and imagination, process theology is a theology of possibility, aligning it with the necessity of possibility built within Derridean deconstruction. Creation is not simply an act of God at the beginning of time but a reality each moment as new awareness and opportunities come into being (Artson 2016, 24). Here we become co-creators and even “co-revealers” with the Divine, helping to bring future possibility into present reality (Artson 2016, 46). This, in part, is initiated by what process theology refers to as *divine lure*—guidance originating from a God whose power is persuasive rather than coercive and meant to guide participants toward hope and “ever increasing beauty” (McDaniel 2021, 109). This “lure,” which is intuitive in nature, is present in each account shared in this study, revealing parallel sacred threads that connect participants’ departure from their faith of origin to the spiritual identity they each claim today (Artson 2016, 18).

The central theme of process theology—that all in existence is always in a process of becoming—can be seen in the following description of a woman crossing a river offered by process theologian Jay McDaniel. Not only is the river itself different than it was just a moment prior because of the nature of flowing water, so, too, the woman crossing the river is also different at the end of the day than she was at the beginning:

If she crosses the river once in the morning and then crosses it again in the afternoon, the one who returns is not exactly the same as the woman who crossed in the morning. Even if she feels like the same person, she carries within her a new memory, namely, that of crossing the river earlier that morning. Her life is a process of experiencing and responding to the world, and as soon as one experience occurs, it becomes part of the past, to be followed by other experiences in the stream of experiences. (McDaniel 2021, 4)

This reintroduces to the conversation Ken Wilber's (1996, 27) notion of "transcend and include." "Each of us contains in ourselves everything that has led to us," Rabbi Bradley Artson (2016, 10) writes in *God of Becoming and Relationship: The Dynamic Nature of Process Theology*. Just like the woman crossing the river, with each new experience those featured in this study include what has happened before and expand to make room for their present reality as they reorient themselves not to the past, but toward a future filled with previously unnamed possibility.

It is no surprise then that exvangelicals have moved beyond what Artson (2016, 39) refers to as "the primacy of being over becoming, of abstract and timeless truth over actual lives and real experience"—"being" and "timeless truth" so central to the evangelical theology that they now reject. Instead, in leaning into the nature of becoming, the subjects of this study confirm that, as McDaniel (2021, 40–41) notes, "A human life unfolds over time, moment by moment, and . . . in every moment a new self emerges that did not exist beforehand." Along with the emergence of this new self, it could be argued, emerge new images and experiences of God, continuously informed by life's unfolding. In fact, process theology would view this emergence of both the self and God-experience not just as happenstance but as divinely led. "Process theologians . . . speak of God's drawing us toward new contrasts that involve the sacrifice of earlier assurances. To follow God is to repeatedly die to what we have been in order to rise to what is now

possible,” writes pioneer process theologian John Cobb (2003, 23). Here Derridean deconstruction and negative theology join process theology in harmony as previous notions of self and God are surrendered having been found wanting, making a clearing for inspiration and divine lure to lead the subject forward in creativity and hope—a nod to the messianic structure referenced previously.

Such a continuous process of unfolding that is unique to the experience and engagement of the individual can naturally result in individuals with similar paths who end up encountering the Divine in varying ways. This study’s focus on reconstructing spiritual identity indicates the subjects of this research who feel at home in new spiritual traditions or alternative forms of spiritual expression remain faithful to a power that is beyond themselves. Process theology not only opens the door to new possibilities, then, but also to religious plurality. This religious plurality is supported by process theologian Marjorie Suchocki (2003) in her book, *Divinity and Diversity: A Christian Affirmation of Religious Pluralism*. “If God works through call and response, and if human freedom introduces variety into the response, then shouldn’t we expect to find different stories, rituals, orders of social structure, and sense of the sacred, but all tending toward creating the good within human forms of community?” she argues (Suchocki 2003, 35).

Suchocki’s assertion aligns with my experience working with clients as a spiritual director. I meet with clients of multiple spiritual orientations, both within and outside the Christian faith. Some of these clients still feel at home in the evangelical tradition, while others continue to carry deep wounds from it. My work as a spiritual director is not to forge my clients’ views into a single shared perspective but rather to hold space for their varied stories and experiences and to attune to their unique “sense of the sacred” so that

they might better locate the sacred—or *divine lure*, as process theology might say—in their everyday lives.

Theories of Formation: The Wisdom Pattern and Individuation

One thing that remains consistent among my spiritual direction clients no matter their spiritual tradition or form of spiritual expression is that our work together is the work of spiritual formation.¹⁰ Directees come to spiritual direction fueled by a desire to actively tend to their own spiritual formation, whether they come to me in a season of faith crisis or divine inspiration. As we participate in the work of spiritual formation together, our central aim is to listen for the movement of the Divine in the directee's everyday life (or the perceived lack thereof), paying attention to any new insight and following invitations as they arise. As I hold space for the unique experiences of my directees and the subjects of this research, two perspectives that deeply influence my own interpretation of spiritual and psychological formation are those of Franciscan priest Richard Rohr and the late pioneer of psychoanalysis Carl Jung. Two thought-leaders who are frequently referenced by those on journeys of self-discovery and shifting faith, Rohr and Jung emphasize postures of ongoing holistic transformation rather than a rigid and linear course of formation, making them ideal conversation partners with deconstruction as conceived by both Derrida and modern exvangelicals. In addition, Rohr's

¹⁰ In stating this, it is also important to note that over the course of my seven years offering spiritual direction, the majority of my directees have been white, middle class, heterosexual, cisgendered Christians, with a small number perhaps finding their way out of Christianity and a few committed Unitarian Universalists. Though each story is different, the largely shared social location of my clientele might very well inform any commonalities in experience and spiritual engagement. The greatest diversity in my clientele is in age, spanning roughly fifty years, from mid-twenties to mid-seventies.

psychologically informed spirituality and Jung’s spiritually informed psychology make their perspectives especially appropriate for an investigation that prioritizes integration.

The Wisdom Pattern

Drawing on the patterns of growth found in many of the world’s wisdom traditions and philosophies, Rohr (2020a, xv) identifies what he calls “a universal path of reality” known as “the wisdom pattern.” This pattern echoes the continued “dying to what has been in order to rise to what can be” of process theology and consists of three stages: *order*, *disorder*, and *reorder* (Rohr 2020a, xiii). On *order*, Rohr (2020a, xiii) writes, “Order, by itself, normally wants to eliminate any disorder and diversity, creating a narrow and cognitive rigidity in both people and systems.” In the language of deconstruction, this is akin to construction, or systems as they are in existence. In spiritual formation, this is the faith of origin, often inherited in childhood from one’s family or culture, as is the case with research participants. Continuing, Rohr (2020a, xiii) asserts, “Disorder, by itself, closes us off from any primal union, meaning, and eventually even sanity in both people and systems.” This *disorder* aligns with deconstruction, revealing the potential outcomes of such a process should reorder be absent. On the contrary, “Reorder, or transformation of people and systems, happens when both are seen to work together,” states Rohr (2020a, xiii). Here he speaks to the possibility of reconstruction, referencing the integrative work necessary for authentic transformation.

The importance of this integrative work—which Rohr (2020b, 21) aligns with the capacity to “include and transcend” (inverting words borrowed from Ken Wilber, as previously mentioned)—is reminiscent of mythologist Joseph Campbell’s monomyth or *hero’s journey*, also referenced by Rohr (2011, 17). Outlining a universal cycle found in

cultural mythology around the globe, Campbell's stages of *separation, initiation, and return* are parallel to Rohr's *order, disorder, and reorder* and to *construction, deconstruction, and reconstruction*, as explored in this study (Campbell 2008, 23). This correlation adds another layer of significance to Rohr's wisdom pattern because it posits that it is not only consistent among varying experiences of transformation, it is potentially cyclical and thus necessary for continued spiritual growth. Rohr (2020b, 22) agrees: "Reorder moves us forward in a positive way, but then sets the stage for the pattern to continue all over again. . . . The need for humility and creativity"—or, for our purposes, *deconstruction*—"never stops," he writes. Equally, the association between Rohr's wisdom pattern and Campbell's hero's journey as a synthesis of the patterns found in world mythology suggests this cycle of *order, disorder, reorder* and, consequently, *construction, deconstruction, reconstruction* is somehow intrinsic to the human experience.

Individuation

Carl Jung, the twentieth-century founder of analytical psychology and the forefather of archetypal psychology—referenced by Rohr frequently in his work—would likely agree. The developmental theory Jung (1961, 209) considered to be the "central concept" of his psychology is *individuation*. Jung (1961, 395) describes individuation as the process of "coming to selfhood" or "self-actualization" that is not contained within a season but is instead a lifelong journey toward self-awareness and wholeness (Stevens 1994, 38). Furthermore, Calvin S. Hall and Vernon J. Nordby (1973, 83) articulate in *A Primer in Jungian Psychology* that "individuation is an autonomous, inborn process." Hall and Nordby continue: "The personality of an individual is destined to individuate

just as surely as the body is destined to grow” (Hall and Nordby 1973, 83). As the cycles of *order, disorder, reorder* or *construction, deconstruction, reconstruction* are intrinsic to the human experience of growth and transformation, so, too, is individuation—an aim for which the journey, like the cycles mentioned, is a spiral inviting integration at every turn (Mahaffey 2014, 17). The aforementioned theme arises here again with each iteration: *transcend and include, transcend and include*.

Although the concept of individuation comes from the world of psychology, it is not far from the realm of spiritual formation. In Jung’s view, individuation is aligned with spiritual formation in many ways. Expounding on Jung’s theory, Jungian analyst Bud Harris (2016, ix) refers to individuation as “the search for Self and the search for God,” further equating these two categories within the human impulse. For Jung, who viewed the Divine through the lens of psychological experience, this search for God is expressed through what Jung calls the “God-image” (Mahaffey 2014, 12). “As the highest value and supreme dominant in the psychic hierarchy, the God-image is immediately related to, or identical with, the Self,” writes Jung (1959, 82). Reflecting less the nature of God and more the interpretations of the God-seeker, it is this God-image (among other constructions) that is deconstructed over and again throughout the ongoing quest for wholeness and individuation on the journey of faith. After all, “the meaning of ‘whole’ or ‘wholeness’ is to make holy or to heal,” reminds Jung (1950, 144). “The descent into the depths will bring healing,” he continues (Jung 1950, 144). This descent *is* the work of deconstruction, reexamining incongruities on behalf of the vision of the whole. In this sense, faith deconstruction, as it is explored in this study, can be seen as not only a spiritual act, but as a psychological act as well, the ability to identify and thoughtfully

evaluate areas of attachment and dissonance—the “descent,” as Jung would say—necessary for any healing and reconstruction of identity to take place.

It is this very act that allows those who have left evangelicalism to begin to imagine the possibility of a more holistic spirituality beyond its confines. In fact, Patrick J. Mahaffey (2014, 14), author of *Evolving God-Images*, asserts that, like those in this study who have embraced spiritual identities and forms of spiritual expression beyond evangelicalism, “the courage to find one’s own way is the path of individuation.” Mahaffey (2014, 14) goes on to describe individuation as “a form of postmodern spirituality,” confirming its relevance to deconstruction, considered to be the banner concept of the postmodern philosophical era, as well as its significance to the spiritual journey in its entirety.

Theological Application

These theologies and theories are used as frameworks throughout this project in my efforts to faithfully tend to the spiritual journeys of my research participants. They functioned as scaffolding in the unfolding of this study, influencing my work as I formed research questions, determined a suitable methodology, conducted research, analyzed data, and drew conclusions. The explorations in this chapter alone indicate the web of connection is already present between these sources and will only be further revealed in the following chapters. Ultimately, at the center of the web—and this project—is the conviction that our experience of the Divine is just as dynamic as our ever-shifting lives, always inviting us toward new encounters if we allow it and choose to tend to its unfolding. Cyprian Smith, referenced previously for his work on Meister Eckhart, articulates this point further, proclaiming,

Genuine spiritual growth means that our concepts of God will be undergoing continual change and transformation throughout life; we shall not rest content with any one of them, but always be prepared to move on when we are ready, recognizing that in the final analysis no concept of God is adequate to the Reality, and the Reality will only dawn in its fullness when our life has run its entire course. (Smith 2004, 39)

In response, I am simply left with the words often used across multiple spiritual traditions to close a prayer—in the lives of my directees, the subjects of my research, and in my own unfolding—“Amen. May it be so.”

Summary

After briefly addressing evangelicalism and the making of the exvangelical movement, in this chapter, I considered the connections between Derridean deconstruction and the experience of faith deconstruction through the lens of negative theology, which emphasizes letting go of previously held images of the Divine and embracing what is unknown, and process theology, which asserts that both humans and the Divine are continually becoming. These two theological perspectives are applicable to this study because they are congruent with my research subjects’ experience of leaving a spiritual tradition that no longer resonates and finding a new home beyond its bounds in alternative spiritual traditions or forms of spiritual expression. These two theological perspectives are also established fields both within the Christian tradition and outside of it, a necessary pluralism to fully honor the experiences of those who may or may not identify as Christian. Additional frameworks considered in connection with Derridean deconstruction and the experience of faith deconstruction include Richard Rohr’s wisdom pattern and Carl Jung’s theory of individuation. These two frameworks address the formative nature of deconstruction from both spiritual and psychological perspectives, supporting a more holistic exploration of the phenomenon researched and this study’s

particular focus within it. The theologies and theories shared in this chapter shape my own theological perspective in my work as a spiritual director as well as in my engagement with the subject of this project and the research methods and findings shared in the chapters to follow.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

Introduction

As a spiritual director, I meet frequently with individuals experiencing faith deconstruction who are actively engaged in reconstructing their spiritual identity. Although ethics precluded me working with clientele for this project, my experience as a spiritual director no doubt prepared me for this research. In *Spiritual Direction 101: The Basics of Spiritual Guidance*, author and spiritual direction educator Teresa Blythe (2018, 2) defines spiritual direction as “the exploration of a person’s spiritual path with someone trained in listening, deep reflection, and discernment.” Although the research process did not directly involve spiritual direction, this definition of spiritual direction serves as an apt summary of my research plan in both implementation and evaluation. In conducting this study exploring the spiritual paths of others, I sought to listen to experiences, reflect deeply over what was shared, and discern what the data suggested in service to the purpose of my project and the corresponding research questions.

Overview of Purpose and Research Questions

To review, this study was conducted on behalf of those who left the evangelical church as a testament to the possibilities of belief beyond its confines. My aim is to bring attention to and cultivate an imagination for the many ways seekers who desire continued spiritual engagement experience the Divine and find new meaning after leaving the evangelical church. It is my hope that the conclusions drawn from this study will benefit both exvangelicals—who feel siloed in deconstruction by presenting the possibility of finding a spiritual “home” beyond what they have previously known—and spiritual

directors, like myself, who often accompany seekers in this process by offering insight into the role of reconstruction and the possibility of future meaningful spiritual engagement.

To achieve this purpose, the following primary research question guided this study:

- What are the qualities, perspectives, and experiences shared by US millennials who have left their evangelical faith of origin and now feel at home in alternative spiritual traditions and forms of spiritual expression?

Secondary research questions include:

- How is the reconstruction of spiritual identity part of a holistic experience of faith deconstruction?
- What discernible guideposts for reconstructing spiritual identity and beliefs did the data suggest?

Research Method

I chose to address these questions through phenomenology, a research methodology that seeks to identify the collective “essence” of phenomenological experience (Creswell and Poth 2018, 13). In other words, what is at the core of a shared experience of a particular phenomenon? Phenomenologists assert the best way to identify this essence is through an exploration of common experience. This focus on common experience makes phenomenology the ideal method for this study because I sought to discern the qualities, perspectives, and experiences shared by US millennials who have left their evangelical faith of origin and now feel at home in alternative spiritual traditions and forms of spiritual expression.

In addition to this emphasis, qualitative research experts John Creswell and Cheryl Poth (2018, 58) highlight three philosophical assumptions of the phenomenological approach: (a) phenomenology is “the study of the lived experiences of persons;” (b) phenomenology holds “the view that these experiences are conscious ones;” and (c) the aim of phenomenology is to develop “descriptions of the essences of these experiences, not explanations or analyses.” In my pursuit of the essence, or “common core,” of shared experience, it can be assumed, although those featured in this study might have a deep awareness of their experience, there are always elements of experience that remain unconscious. Equally, although I attempted a thorough exploration of the topic at hand through my data collection, the limitations of this study, such as time and a lack of familiarity with data sources beyond the scope of this project, prohibited any experiences shared from being fully named and known.

The specific phenomenological approach I have taken is known as *existential phenomenology*, a perspective first introduced by philosopher Martin Heidegger, who greatly influenced Derrida (Usher and Jackson 2017, 184). As opposed to *transcendental phenomenology*, which seeks to focus exclusively on descriptions of experience, existential phenomenology (also known as *hermeneutical phenomenology*) is interpretive in nature (Creswell and Poth 2018, 78; Usher and Jackson 2017, 184). Accepting the researcher’s experience of a particular phenomenon rather than suspending it, existential phenomenology uses the researcher’s insight as an interpretive tool in the formation of a description of shared experience when extrapolating meaning and themes of significance from the data collected (Usher and Jackson 2017, 184). This makes existential phenomenology an appropriate phenomenological approach for this project, as my

interpretation of the data is no doubt influenced by my own experience with the phenomenon and my understanding of the philosophies, theories, and theologies that serve as conversation partners and frameworks in this project, including Derridean deconstruction, Rohr's wisdom pattern theory, Jung's theory of individuation, and negative and process theologies.

Seeking to uncover the essence of a phenomenon, as phenomenology prompts, no doubt raises a methodological challenge. Although I share the experience explored in this study—a fact that certainly aided in my interpretation of the data—my personal experience and privilege still naturally limit my lens. Because of this, a true “essence”—a term and aim used across multiple approaches to phenomenological research—is, in a way, impossible to come by. As existential anthropologist Michael Jackson (2012, 4) rightfully questions, “Could language and thought ever fully capture, cover, or contain the wealth of human experience, or hope to mirror the thing-in-itself?” Indeed, perhaps a deconstruction of phenomenology's notion of “essence” is called for if the term is left wanting, unable to be fully realized.

Still, as a spiritual director who is always asking “Where is God?” in both spiritual direction sessions and in life, I understand phenomenology's concentration on essence and its attempts to find something of meaning. And yet, I also understand the value of walking with mystery—something that arose in the findings, too. In spiritual research, spirituality scholar and research supervisor Bernadette Flanagan insists that researchers must “look beyond the topic, questions, methods and conclusions to the Spirit at work” (Flanagan 2014, 126). The heart of my research inquiry is not so different from spiritual direction's wonderings of where God is found or Flanagan's prompt to identify

where the Spirit is at work. In discerning the common core of my research subjects' shared experience, I was ultimately seeking to uncover common occurrences of divine stirring—a glimpse of mystery making itself known. In doing so, the advice of negative theology must be heeded as a reminder that any essence identified—just as with any notion of God—can never be fully known.

Research Design

Phenomenological research begins with the identification of a phenomenon to be studied. In this project, I evaluated the phenomenon of millennial exvangelical faith deconstruction with a focus on individuals who have experienced a reconstruction of spiritual identity. Traditionally, it is also important for the researcher to begin with reflexivity when conducting phenomenological research. According to philosopher Edward Husserl, considered to be the founding father of the phenomenological movement, such reflexivity is important in an original approach to phenomenology to allow for *bracketing*, a practice researchers employ in Husserl's transcendental phenomenology to ensure they leave behind any preconceived notions of a phenomenon studied (Usher and Jackson 2017, 186). Husserl, who was Heidegger's teacher, insisted this was required to allow the researcher to accurately depict a subject's experience of the phenomenon studied, which is the raw material of phenomenological research (Usher and Jackson 2017, 183).

However, the existential phenomenological approach I followed strays from this view. Instead, Heidegger and his peers accepted that the researcher can never fully set aside prior experiences, as previously mentioned (Usher and Jackson 2017, 185). Existential phenomenologists recognize interpretation will always be informed by the

researcher's experience in some way. What the researcher must do, as the primary instrument in the research process, is acknowledge any personal connections to the phenomenon to be examined and identify how these connections might inform or hinder engagement (Usher and Jackson 2017, 185). For me, this meant naming my own experience as an exvangelical millennial who found possibility through the reconstruction of spiritual identity, as I described in chapter 1. This ability to identify personal experience and differentiate it from the experiences of others is a required skill in the work of spiritual direction and is one that was necessary to employ throughout the data collection and evaluation processes to ensure the lived experiences of my research participants were accurately portrayed—an essential task to existential phenomenological research.

To adhere to the phenomenon being explored and my particular focus within it, I worked exclusively with US millennials who left the evangelical church and now feel at home in alternative spiritual traditions or forms of spiritual expression, whether inside or outside of Christianity. In pursuit of the essence of this phenomenon, particularly when it comes to the possibility of reconstructing spiritual identity, I intentionally sought out experiences which emulate this process and illustrate what it means to find “home by another way.”

To ensure triangulation, I required that data sources vary in spiritual identity to diversify the data collected (Sensing 2011, 73). Diversifying sources in this way helps ensure that any themes identified are connected to the phenomenon and population in question rather than participants' current spiritual traditions. My research is also triangulated by the two methods of data collection I used—memoirs and interviews.

Memoirs serve as both valuable artifacts and data sources in this research project for two reasons: (a) memoirs are written in the author's own words, offering insight well beyond the scope of an interview; and (b) as published works, memoirs are widely accessible to the public, making them not only accounts of this phenomenon but also resources for those undergoing similar experiences.

To avoid confusion between interview participants and memoir authors, I refer to my data sources collectively as *informants* in this report. In this project, I examined the experiences of six informants, a number that falls within the standard sample size of phenomenological research projects, which typically involve three to ten participants (Creswell and Creswell 2018, 186). Of these informants, three are interview participants, and three are memoir authors, providing the two data sources with equal weight.

Because of the specific requirements of this inquiry, informants were primarily selected using criterion sampling, which necessitates that all participants meet certain criteria (Creswell and Poth 2018, 127). The criteria for this project required that informants be US millennials raised in the evangelical church who now feel at home in alternative spiritual traditions or forms of spiritual expression, whether inside or outside of Christianity. Secondary identifiers considered in the selection of informants included gender and race. Pursuing racial and gender diversity within the sample allowed for consideration of the role of social location in experiences of faith deconstruction and the reconstruction of spiritual identity. In addition to criterion sampling as outlined previously, sampling strategies for selecting interview participants and memoir authors included convenience sampling, using sources with whom I was familiar, and snowball

sampling, identifying informants connected to those within my network (Sensing 2011, 84).

Sample

In selecting interview participants, it was my hope that taking part in this research project would provide participants a safe and supportive space to review and explore their spiritual journeys, normalize their experience, and honor their newfound spiritual identities by allowing them to retell their stories, ultimately putting them into conversation with the stories of others who have traveled a similar path. Following are brief introductions to the three interview participants, referred to as participant 1, participant 2, and participant 3 to protect confidentiality.

Participant 1, a white female, has an evangelical background in Lutheran (Missouri Synod) and charismatic traditions. She is a psychotherapist and a somatic practitioner who considers herself to be a healer and now identifies as a pagan mystic and witch. Participant 2, a white female, has an evangelical background in the Presbyterian Church of America (PCA) and the Evangelical Methodist Church. She is now an Episcopal priest devoted to working toward social change in her parish. Participant 3, a white male, has an evangelical background in nondenominational and charismatic churches, including the International House of Prayer. His evangelical background also includes international work as a missionary. He is now a member of the Catholic Church and a spiritual director who resonates deeply with the contemplative tradition.

Selected memoirs include *God is a Black Woman* by Christena Cleveland (2022a), *Native: Identity, Belonging, and Rediscovering God* by Kaitlin Curtice (2020), and *Bad Theology Kills: Undoing Toxic Beliefs and Reclaiming Your Spiritual Authority*

by Kevin Garcia (2020). Cleveland, a black woman, has an evangelical background in Pentecostal and charismatic churches, including the Church of God in Christ and the Vineyard Church, as well as extensive experience in academic and professional evangelical settings. As a self-proclaimed “budding womanist,” her current spiritual identity can be described as mystical theism with a devotion to the Sacred Black Feminine (Cleveland 2022a, 74). Curtice, a biracial woman of white and indigenous descent, has an evangelical background in the Southern Baptist Church. Although she still identifies as Christian, her current spiritual identity is inclusive of traditional Potawatomi beliefs and practices. Garcia, a white person who is both gay and nonbinary, has an evangelical background in fundamentalist and charismatic churches which included attempts at reparative therapy. They continue to identify as a Christ-follower, attending an American Baptist Church, though they do not consider themselves to be bound to the label “Christian.” They describe themselves as “a digital pastor, a mystical theologian and practitioner, and intuitive soul coach” (Garcia 2022).

Setting

After I selected the informants, I read the memoirs independently before conducting interviews. Interviews took place virtually using the Zoom video conferencing platform. Although interviews were strictly research-oriented and not in any way a form of spiritual direction, I honored the sacred nature of the conversation at hand through the lighting of a candle at the beginning of the interview to acknowledge the presence of the Divine, a practice that is common in the spiritual direction setting. I also spent time in silence before and after each interview to nurture my own capacity for hospitality and holy listening. This unstructured time allowed me to notice my own

thoughts and emotions, bracket any intrusions that were not conducive to the phenomenological process, and cultivate the ability to hold space for the stories and experiences that were shared.

Data Collection

Interviews ranged from 75–90 minutes in length, allowing plenty of time for participants to share their spiritual journey in relation to the questions at their own pace, with remaining time used for clarifications. After I received verbal confirmation of consent and lit the candle, I offered a brief description of the project and the purpose of the interview. Participants then had the opportunity to ask any questions about the project and the interview process.

After all questions were answered, the interview began with an open invitation for participants to share their spiritual journey from their beginnings in the evangelical church to where they are today. This provided participants with a unique opportunity to reflect on their experience as a whole and share their story in their own words, with the invitation to connect each stage in one sitting seeming especially significant. These reports ranged from 30-50 minutes in length. Although participants were not explicitly queried on their experience of the interview, each participant was gracious in their sharing and appeared grateful for the opportunity to reflect on their spiritual journey, with all participants expressing interest in the project itself and curiosity around the final report. Of the process, one participant specifically said, “It’s very healing for me to have someone listen to all of this at once.” Still, it was apparent that several of the wounds suffered and complexities of experience along the way remain tender many years later,

with one participant tearing up multiple times and another vocally discerning during the interview what they felt able and unable to share.

As I listened, I was specifically looking for responses to three questions: (a) What is your background with the evangelical church? (b) When did you leave the evangelical church, what initiated that process, and what was that process like for you? and (c) What, then, led you to the spiritual tradition and identity you align with today? Together, these three questions correspond with Richard Rohr's wisdom pattern of *order, disorder, reorder* and invite an exploration of experiences of faith deconstruction and reconstruction, allowing participants to pinpoint specific moments and influences significant to their faith shift.

These questions also get to the heart of the two main inquiries of phenomenological research: (a) What happened? and (b) How did it occur (Creswell and Poth 2018, 61)? Because I was aware some of the participants' experiences might be parallel to my own, as I listened, I made an intentional effort not to interrupt participants' sharing of their stories in any way, knowing that any interjections might add my own influence and thus impact the purity of their accounts. Instead, I saved any clarifying questions for the end of the interview.

To further articulate the differences between participants' evangelical faith of origin and their spiritual identities today, I then asked participants the following questions: (a) How is your spiritual identity and engagement different now? and (b) What are the central beliefs and/or practices that ground you in your new spiritual identity? In reference to Ken Wilber's assertion that evolutionary growth both includes and transcends previous ways of being, I also asked participants to identify which parts of

their previous experience they included as being integral to their spiritual journey and the ways in which their current beliefs transcend their faith of origin. Finally, I ended interviews by reading Jan Richardson's poem "The Map You Make Yourself," asking participants if and how the poem resonated with their own experience and what it means for them to feel spiritually "at home," as it was explored in this context.¹¹

I used recordings of interviews to create automated transcripts, which I then edited for accuracy. Although I did not conduct interviews with the memoir authors who also served as informants in this project, I read their work with the same questions in mind. I highlighted words, phrases, or entire sections of writing that seemed to serve as a response to the questions posed and recorded them in separate documents to be used alongside interview transcripts for coding and evaluation.

Data Evaluation

After interview transcriptions were complete, I placed transcriptions and memoir excerpts alongside one another for a process called *horizontalization*, in which words and comments that specifically speak to participants' lived experience of the phenomenon and the focus at hand are identified, creating "clusters of meaning" (Creswell and Poth 2018, 74). Unlike traditional coding in qualitative research, this "themeing the data" allowed me to focus on an "extended thematic statement rather than a shorter code," as Johnny Saldaña (2009, 140) describes in *Coding Manual for Qualitative Research*. A theme, Saldaña (2009, 140) writes, is "a phrase or sentence that identifies what a unit is

¹¹ A full list of interview questions can be found in Appendix B. The full text of the poem referenced can be found at the beginning of this document.

about and/or what it means.” These themes can be manifest or latent. What is most important is that they are continually edited during the themeing process so they accurately highlight what is essential rather than incidental in the lived experience, as is congruent with the goal of phenomenological research (Saldaña 2009, 140–41). These themes are identified and discussed in the following chapter.

Taking these themes into account, along with my own description of the informants’ combined experience and the contextual elements of such, I wrote a composite description to reveal the sought-out essence of the phenomenon being studied, which can also be found in chapter 4 (Creswell and Poth 2018, 80). This composite description identifies commonalities among participants’ reports and addresses my primary research question: What are the qualities, perspectives, and experiences shared by US millennials who have left their evangelical faith of origin and now feel at home in alternative spiritual traditions and forms of spiritual expression?

Ultimately, the purpose of the composite description in phenomenological research is to leave the reader with a better understanding of what it is like to experience the phenomenon explored (Creswell and Poth 2018, 62). The narrowed focus of this project adds to that purpose, illuminating not simply the essence of the phenomenon of millennial exvangelical faith deconstruction but, more specifically, the shared experience of those who have experienced a subsequent reconstruction of spiritual identity.

Interpretation continues in the concluding chapter of this project, in which I place findings of this phenomenological study in conversation with the guiding concepts, theories, and theologies highlighted in chapters 1 and 4. I address my secondary research questions, identifying, based on the findings, how the reconstruction of spiritual identity

is part of a holistic experience of faith deconstruction and what, if any, discernible guideposts for reconstructing spiritual identity and beliefs are revealed.

Summary of Procedures

To conduct this research, I wrote a research proposal that was approved by the project committee and submitted to Seattle University's institutional review board (IRB). Once the IRB deemed this project exempt from further approval, granting permission for research to commence, I invited interview participants to participate in the study. I sent invitations via email with a brief explanation of the study and a description of the interview process.¹² After interview participants agreed to be interviewed, I scheduled interviews and emailed participants links for private Zoom meetings, a summary of questions to be explored, and informed consent information sheets. I received confirmation of informed consent verbally at the beginning of each interview as recommended by the IRB and recorded each interview with the permission of interview participants. I then used recordings to create automated transcripts of the interview to be used for data review. Although I conducted interviews, I also read selected memoirs, allowing for the triangulation of data via multiple data sources. I then reviewed, themed, and summarized the data in congruence with the phenomenological approach as outlined previously and share the findings and conclusions in subsequent chapters.

Ethical Considerations

To ensure ethical conduct during the research process, I restricted the selection of informants to people with whom I do not share a professional relationship in which

¹² An example of this email can be found in Appendix C.

power structures are present, including, but not limited to, spiritual direction clientele (Creswell and Creswell 2018, 94). As stated previously, before being interviewed, I sent participants an informed consent information sheet via email (Creswell and Creswell 2018, 91).¹³ This form (a) identified the purpose of the study, listing myself as researcher and Seattle University as the sponsoring institution; (b) described any benefits of participating in the study; and (c) identified the nature of participant involvement (Creswell and Creswell 2018, 92). The form also (a) informed interview participants of any potential risks connected to their voluntary participation, (b) outlined the steps taken to ensure participant confidentiality, (c) noted that participants have the right to remove themselves from the research process, and (d) included my contact information as the sole researcher should they have any questions (Creswell and Creswell 2018, 92).

Because I conducted this research outside of any institution, no permissions were required for the research to take place apart from “exempt” status granted by Seattle University’s IRB and participant consent (Creswell and Creswell 2018, 92). I used memoirs widely available to the public as a data source in this study alongside interviews with human subjects, so IRB permission was needed only for the interview portion of the project. Due to the nature of the research method, additional ethical considerations included interview site and participant privacy (Creswell and Creswell 2018, 92, 95). To maintain consistency while ensuring comfort, interviews were conducted securely via Zoom, which allowed conversations to be recorded and transcribed easily and enabled participants to be interviewed in the comfort of their home. To honor confidentiality, I do not report the names of interview participants. As memoirs are publicly available, there

¹³ This information sheet can be found in Appendix D.

are no ethical concerns in using them as data sources. Because of this, the identity of the authors is reported in the project.

Finally, as discussed previously, the very proposition that an essence of shared experience can be identified raises ethical concerns. Although informants' accounts might appear to be parallel, making their experience, in a sense, shared, their circumstances are not the same. Although an effort was made to further diversify the sample in the categories of race and gender, the implications of these categories on the phenomenon studied cannot be fully realized by me or the reader. Other categories of social location, such as class or education, were not considered and bear equal significance to the nature of the experience explored. As existential anthropologist Michael Jackson (2012, 9) reminds us, "Calls for sinking our differences and fostering universal equality are utopian ideals. . . . The realization of universality as a permanent and unitary state can only be accomplished through the violent ironing out of differences." In reviewing the findings, it should be acknowledged, then, that, although commonalities in informant accounts are presented, identified and unidentified differences in experience remain—a reminder to both researcher and reader that findings can rarely offer a complete picture; there is always more to be explored.

Summary

To convey the experiences of my informants effectively and address the research questions posed, this study was phenomenological in nature. Using both participant interviews to uncover first-hand experiences and the examination of memoirs as artifacts of the phenomenon studied, I collected data and themed it to reveal the essence of informants' experiences of millennial exvangelical faith deconstruction with a focus on

reconstructing spiritual identity. In the following chapters, I share research findings and analyze them in relation with the stated research questions to (a) identify the distinctives of any common experiences of research informants, (b) determine how the reconstruction of spiritual identity is part of a holistic experience of faith deconstruction, and (c) verify what, if any, discernible guideposts for reconstructing spiritual identity and beliefs the data suggests.

CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

Introduction

In this doctoral project, I explored the possibility of reconstructing spiritual identity within the deconstruction of millennial exvangelical faith by highlighting the experiences of millennial exvangelicals in the United States who now feel at home in alternative spiritual traditions or forms of spiritual expression inside or outside of Christianity. A primary research question guided this study: What are the qualities, perspectives, and experiences shared by US millennials who have left their evangelical faith of origin and now feel at home in alternative spiritual traditions and forms of spiritual expression? This question is intentionally multifaceted in nature to elicit a more holistic understanding of what might contribute to the possibility of reconstructing spiritual identity within the deconstruction of millennial exvangelical faith (e.g., inherent or cultivated traits, specific worldviews, or life occurrences). Two secondary research questions include the following: (a) How is the reconstruction of spiritual identity part of a holistic experience of faith deconstruction? and (b) What discernible guideposts for the reconstruction of spiritual identity and beliefs do the data suggest?

As is designated by the primary research question, I limited the population studied for this inquiry to US millennials who left their evangelical faith of origin and now feel at home in alternative spiritual traditions and forms of spiritual expression. Within these limitations, I further diversified informants primarily by current spiritual identity, with secondary diversification in the categories of gender and race. I used two types of data sources to triangulate the findings—interviews and memoirs—with a combined total of

six accounts evaluated. Although the experiences highlighted in these accounts are parallel to my own—as someone who has reconstructed my spiritual identity after leaving evangelicalism—given my minimal engagement with informants beyond the data collected, I recognize that these findings are by no means reflective of informants’ experiences in full. Bearing this in mind, in this chapter, I explore the findings in relation to the primary research question, addressing the central concerns of phenomenology, with possible responses to secondary research questions addressed in the conclusion.

Although I explored the phenomenon of US millennial exvangelical faith deconstruction, it is important to note that the focus of this study is not on US millennial exvangelical faith deconstruction as a whole, but, rather, on a limited sector of this population who now feel at home in alternative spiritual traditions and forms of spiritual expression. Because of this, any findings from data collection related solely to faith deconstruction will only be addressed briefly, with the bulk of the identified themes focused on the theological shifts that aided in the reconstruction of spiritual identity. Additional themes include “sacred threads” that connect informants’ early spiritual experiences in the evangelical church to their experiences of spiritual expression and engagement today, a topic that will be explored further in the latter half of this chapter. Finally, as is customary with phenomenological research, after themes are shared a composite description of informants’ experience will be offered, with the aim of highlighting the essence of informants’ shared experience of the topic explored.

Experiences of Deconstruction

Before turning to the theological shifts identified in the data, I first address commonalities in informants’ experiences of faith deconstruction and their departure

from the evangelical faith. These themes, although identifiable, are frequently shared by those experiencing faith deconstruction beyond the scope of this project and are consequently already named in many publications on the subject, such as *Religious Refugees: Deconstructing Toward Spiritual and Emotional Healing* by Mark Gregory Karris (2020), *Faith Shift: Finding Your Way Forward When Everything You Believe is Coming Apart* by Kathy Escobar (2014), and *Faith After Doubt: Why Your Beliefs Stopped Working and What to Do About It* by Brian McLaren (2021).¹⁴ In this study, shared experiences of faith deconstruction can be organized into two categories: *initiations* and *implications*.

Initiations

The first category, initiations, addresses what initiated shifts in spiritual identity. Within this category, three themes were identified as common among informants' experiences: (a) questions and doubts, (b) influential relationships and environments, and (c) inciting events. Questions and doubts ranged from inquiries about doctrine to the treatment of others within and outside of a church community (e.g., those on the margins, including LGBTQ+ persons). Doubts included uncertainty about fundamental teachings of the evangelical church (e.g., exclusivism and biblical inerrancy), although other doubts centered on the existence of God entirely, at least as portrayed in the evangelical tradition. Memoir source Christena Cleveland (2022a, 48) expresses this plainly when she writes, "When I began to take seriously the truth that God is not either white or male, I was swept away under a whirlwind of uncertainty as questions I thought I had airtight

¹⁴ Some of these titles were mentioned in the introduction under Existing and Related Research. Others can be found in Appendix A.

answers to . . . simply led to more troubling questions.” Oftentimes, these questions and doubts are either caused or encouraged by influential relationships and environments. Participant 1 described a relationship with a young man from her college years who, through his own questioning, invited her to reconsider many of the certainties she inherited from her faith of origin. Eventually, this young man became her husband. Inciting events also serve as an initiation for faith deconstruction. Participant 3 described an event that occurred while he and his wife were missionaries in Southeast Asia that made them both begin to rethink what they had originally been taught regarding salvation.

Implications

The second category, implications, addresses how shifts in spiritual identity impacted faith and everyday life. Within this category, two themes were identified as common among informants’ experiences: (a) loss and (b) exploration and growth. Along with the loss of a faith tradition, these losses include a loss of identity, community, status, and relationships. Memoir source Kevin Garcia (2020, 2) describes the potential devastation of such loss, writing, “The church raised us to be codependent on it. . . . Now that we are out of survival mode, we barely know how to function in the real world.” Although memoir source Kaitlin Curtice (2020, 82) remains a Christian, she still finds it challenging to hold the leadership roles she once had, writing, “As I’ve grown older and started the work of deconstructing and decolonizing, I find that church leadership is more difficult, because I do not fit as easily into the mold made for me at a young age.” Despite these losses, it seems that experiences of faith deconstruction often open the door for exploration and growth. Participant 2 described being unsatisfied with the doctrine taught

in her college classes while still maintaining a sense of the sacred. This led her to explore spiritual traditions beyond what she was exposed to within the evangelical church, saying, “Whatever I could find that was like, this feels different, but you’re still compelled by . . . a vision of something bigger than us.”

Theological Shifts

Having identified themes frequently shared by those experiencing faith deconstruction as a whole, I now move to the theological shifts identified within this specific subset of US millennial exvangelicals that appear to have aided in the reconstruction of their spiritual identity after leaving the evangelical church. Here, it is important to note, in using the term *theological*, I am not specifically referring a Christian theological perspective, as that is not an identity that all the informants in this study currently share. Instead, I am referring to experiences and perspectives of God that are not limited to the bounds of a single tradition, as is consistent with the varied theological perspectives of project informants. Because of this pluralism, the definition of theological must also be expanded not only to include experiences and perspectives of “God” but also other names for the Divine, such as Life Source, Ground of All Being, or Ultimate Reality. After reviewing and themeing the data, I identified five theological shifts consistent within informants’ experiences of faith deconstruction and the corresponding reconstruction of their spiritual identity: (a) from *domination* to *liberation*, (b) from *dogma* to *experience*, (c) from *transcendence* to *immanence*, (d) from *certainty* to *mystery*, and (e) from a *fixed faith* to a *spirituality in process*.

From Domination to Liberation

The first identified theological shift is one from domination to liberation.

Informants came to experience their evangelical faith of origin as dominating in one way or another. This dominance is one of “power over” through systems (e.g., imperialism, colonialism, patriarchy, white supremacy, and hetero- and gender-normativity) that can be seen not only within a tradition itself but often in that tradition’s image of God. This experience varied for informants based on their social location.

Kaitlin Curtice (2020 25, 103), who is of indigenous and European descent, writes often of “settler colonialism” within the church, asserting, “The white evangelical church in America has told us again and again that we must assimilate, that if we place our own ‘savage’ identity alongside our faith, we are disgracing the gospel with our sin, we are idolaters who have no place in the church.” Speaking from her intersectional experience as a Black woman, Christina Cleveland (2022a, 42) writes, “The god of America is a whitemalegod whose identity lies at the fatal intersection of white supremacy and toxic masculinity. . . . Whitemalegod is nowhere to be found because he was never designed to be with us, among us, on our side.” Conversely, Kevin Garcia’s (2020, 13) experience of domination within the evangelical church centers on their sexual orientation, noting the anti-gay messaging of the evangelical church and the years they spent attending “ex-gay men’s meetings and ex-gay conferences” to submit to the demands of that dominating force.

Of the interview participants, participant 3, a white male, noted, “From my view, from one being in . . . the evangelical church, I would say, is the imperial religion of today.” He went on to recognize, “I was at the front lines of that, of a colonial expression,

or at least how I would look at it now.” Participant 2, a white female and member of the clergy, cited the impact the often-patriarchal structure of the evangelical tradition had on her sense of calling: “You go twenty years being told that you’re not as good as somebody else or not as beloved or not as spoken to or not as capable because of your gender, because of something that’s beyond your control, because of a script that you’re failing.” Participant 1, also a white female, drew attention to the ways the evangelical church seeks to dominate bodily autonomy as well. This was keenly experienced by US millennial exvangelicals through the “purity movement” of the 1990s and early 2000s. Of this movement within the evangelical church and its implications, participant 1 reflected, “The place where I hold the most rage towards the church is the ways that my good sexuality was disowned.”

The theological shift from dominance to liberation occurs when those reconstructing spiritual identity declare to dominant structures and images, “You do not have power over me and my spiritual journey.” Unsurprisingly, this liberation looks different across informant accounts based on experience, but it is no doubt present, ranging from liberation from oppressive systems to renewed spiritual vitality. Kevin Garcia (2020, 55) states, “My life has only gotten better since I chose to follow Jesus out of the closet and out of those environments that would stop me from becoming all of who I am.” Kaitlin Curtice (2020, 154), who emphasizes the need for decolonization as a tool for liberation throughout her memoir, writes, “I discover that in decolonizing, I am healing every single day.” Christena Cleveland (2022a, 62), who found liberation from what she calls “whitemalegod” through the Sacred Black Feminine, shares, “I needed an

experience of the Sacred Black Feminine that ushered me past the gates of fear and into the empowering world of mysticism, love, and hope.”

Participant 1 also experienced a shift from fear to love when she exited the evangelical church. “I would say that 70 percent of how I showed up was a performance for other people, and I’m just done with that; I’m just deeply uninterested in giving other people a version of me that is going to make them feel comfortable because that doesn’t do anything for me,” she declared. Although participant 1 deconverted from Christianity entirely, participants 2 and 3, who remain in the Christian tradition, experienced liberation from oppressive structures within the evangelical church through new ways of engaging their Christian faith. “To find that these stories are still alive for me, to find that the idea of a Holy Spirit within me, or God who has a vision of healing and wholeness for the world, that the kingdom of God is very near; it’s all still possible, but it looks really different and it’s not that radically different,” participant 2 said. Emphasizing resistance as the work of liberation, participant 3 noted, “I think my reading of the Gospels after . . . deconstruction has been just so profound because I think that so much of what the Gospels are about, as well as Paul, . . . is resistance against empire, which is exactly what our central symbol is—someone on the tool of death—empire, right—on a cross.”

From Dogma to Experience

The second theological shift is one from dogma to experience. Dogma that guides the evangelical church includes central beliefs (e.g., biblical inerrancy, substitutionary atonement, and exclusive salvation). According to informants’ experiences, this dogma translates to preoccupation with right belief and corresponding expectations that stem from external authority, with little consideration for alternative experiences.

The inner conflict caused by such strict adherence to dogma is clear in Kevin Garcia's (2020, 90) reflections on church teachings regarding homosexuality: "It didn't matter why I was the way that I was. . . . It was made clear to me that God didn't tolerate sins, and that when we lived outside of God's will for our lives, we lived outside of grace and protection." Christena Cleveland discloses that the burden to live according to her faith of origin's rigid standards led to a harmful perception of self. "The self-loathing kept me caged in whitemalegod's abusive torment and also prevented me from connecting with my inner moral compass," she reveals (Cleveland 2022a, 189). Kaitlin Curtice (2020, 35) mourns the fact that the image of Jesus she was presented with in her youth was tainted by the settler colonial orientation of the evangelical church, writing, "We are taught about who Jesus is, but in Western Christianity we are taught a diluted, whitewashed version."

Participant 1 internalized evangelical culture's value for right living from an early age, referring frequently to the expectation that she be "capital 'G' good." Participant 2 discovered the risks of questioning evangelical beliefs in the church while at college, sharing, "I was asking questions that weren't allowed; I was also the kid who would, like, show up in my professor's office during office hours and be, like, you just told me that the Trinity was made up—what else is made up?" Participant 3 also recalled when he began to doubt "fundamental" evangelical beliefs. As questions surfaced regarding evangelical dogma he inherited, he remembered thinking, "I based my life on this book, the Bible, but I really don't know how it came to be."

The theological shift from *dogma* to *experience* occurs when those reconstructing spiritual identity begin to challenge inherited beliefs by asserting, "That's not true; my

experience tells me something different.” Of this shift, which could also be considered a shift from prioritizing external authority to valuing internal authority, Kaitlin Curtice (2020, 16) recognizes, “In living a holistic life, I engage in a holistic faith in which I cannot compartmentalize or separate the various parts of who I am or what I believe, which means journeying must include all of me.” Emphasizing the importance of lived experience in the spiritual journey, Kevin Garcia (2020, 100) suggests, “For us to move into a faith that is dynamic and informed by our actual lived experiences, we must actually include our lived experiences, seeing them as a holy text.” When seeking to embrace an alternative divine presence that was not restricted by her faith of origin but was, instead, reflective of her lived experience, Christena Cleveland (2022a, 154) reveals, “I realized I could choose anything because I don’t need other people to validate my choices. . . . I could choose what I believe rather than simply accepting what I had been taught.”

Describing when she resolved to fully embrace her expanding experience of the Divine and her burgeoning pagan identity, participant 1 remembered a conversation with a friend and mentor who had similar beliefs. “That threw the door open to the excitement of it; this doesn’t mean that I am definitely bad and wrong; there could be other people that are making sense of the world the same way,” she recalled thinking with relief. Speaking to the ways experience can initiate theological shifts away from dogma, participant 2 describes what she calls another “timeline mark” on her spiritual journey when a friend came out to her in college, remembering, “She was like, ‘Do you think God still loves me?’ And I’m like, ‘I don’t know, I think so, because that doesn’t make sense.’ And all of a sudden, both of us were just like, ‘I guess the Jenga tower is falling

down, isn't it?" Commenting on the influence of mysticism on his spiritual journey, participant 3 shared how mystical perspectives and encounters helped center his unique experience throughout the reconstructing of his spiritual identity.

From Transcendence to Immanence

The third theological shift is a shift from transcendence to immanence. Although it is true that evangelical teaching emphasizes intimacy with God, the data clearly presented a focus on a God who often seemed separate and inaccessible rather than present in everyday life, especially when it came to hardships. This results in a faith that is often oriented "out there" (i.e., toward salvation and the afterlife) rather than "right here" (i.e., toward daily life and service). This emphasis on transcendence is also placed on believers, who are expected to be set apart in holiness and transcend desires of the "flesh" to be accepted.

Christena Cleveland (2022a, 89) addresses this emphasis directly, writing, "Many of us have received a similar message: in order to be considered worthy of love, value, and safety in whitemalegod's world, we must overcome whatever obstacles are in our way without displaying any need." Kevin Garcia notes the pain experienced when the gap between the Divine and their perceived "sin" seemed too wide. "If I could just open up my heart wider, maybe then God would pour out healing," they felt; "If I just stayed in the Presence long enough, perhaps I could touch the hem of His garment and be restored" (Garcia 2020, 52). Kaitlin Curtice (2020, 45) sensed a similar chasm, reflecting, "What I learned in my church growing up was how to be a devout evangelical, but I was also being taught that for my identity to matter, I must assimilate and take on the US dream as

best I could. My life became about pleasing an Americanized God who really cannot be pleased.”

Participant 1 described the ways her lifestyle choices in her youth were an attempt at obtaining a sense of holiness that would please a transcendent God. “By dressing modestly, by not drinking, by not doing drugs, by not being sexual, by not dancing inappropriately—those were all ways that I was signaling to the people around me that I’m set apart,” she recalls. A member of a charismatic youth group during her teenage years, participant 2 reflected on the emphasis placed on speaking in tongues and her sense of disconnection when she never received the prized spiritual gift. There is also a pressure to facilitate transcendent experiences. As a worship leader, participant 3 admitted, “I was so burned out on kind of feeling like I had to kind of hold people’s emotions.”

The theological shift from transcendence to immanence occurs when those reconstructing spiritual identity begin to embrace divine immanence and profess, “Everything is sacred.” “Our identity is transformed when we reject the distant fatherskygod and begin to see ourselves in close proximity to the Divine,” testifies Christena Cleveland (2022a, 71). For Kevin Garcia, this experience of divine immanence is one of embodiment. “The more I learned to trust my own body, to listen to Her desire, to give voice to His desire, to hold Them in their fear, the more I hear the voice of God, the more I understand God’s desire for the world, the more I am comforted by God,” they proclaim (Garcia 2020, 101). For Kaitlin Curtice, divine immanence extends to the earth. “If we can learn to believe not just that people are sacred but also that the earth is sacred,

that she is our teacher, that the creatures around us are sacred, maybe our children will be able to pave the way for a better future for all of us,” she writes (Curtice 2020, 176).

Interview participants shared this experience of divine immanence experienced through nature, including participant 1. “I see the earth as holding consciousness that I can access through contact with my body—when I’m in deep contact with my body, I can make contact with the consciousness of the earth, and I can use her power to heal myself and to access wisdom and to heal others,” she elaborates. Participant 2 emphasized the ways divine immanence is played out in our everyday lives, musing, “How do we use the church as a place to try on being the beloved community when we’re here in this building, in this space with each other, so that then when we go back out and we’re living our daily lives . . . we’ve had some practice trying this on, and we can try it on again out there?” Participant 3’s theological shift from an emphasis on God’s transcendence to an embrace of God’s immanence can be seen in his emerging view of the Incarnation, a perspective no longer limited to “God coming from heaven” but, instead, one that reflects “God within all things.”

From Certainty to Mystery

The fourth theological shift is a shift from certainty to mystery. Right belief and right living are dependent on certainty. A commitment to certainty can also be seen in common evangelical teachings such as biblical inerrancy and exclusive salvation. Such positions are viewed as absolute truths in most evangelical communities. It is an environment where there is little room for doubt, and doubt is often mistakenly viewed as faith’s opposite. Consequently, the questioning of absolutes—a behavior common for those in faith deconstruction—is often considered dangerous.

Like many in such environments, Kaitlin Curtice simply fell in line. “I followed the rules and didn’t ask questions,” she writes (Curtice 2020, 32). Christena Cleveland shows that questions can be welcomed in a world of certainty, but they must be the right ones. “As a social psychologist, theologian, and professor at Duke University’s Divinity School, I had mastered the masculine ways of knowing and could easily defend my journey toward the Sacred Black Feminine,” she shares, alluding to the value of intellectualism in communities which prize certainty and its inherent patriarchal structure (Cleveland 2022a, 55). Reflecting on their own experience in a faith of origin that considered many core beliefs to be absolute truths, Kevin Garcia addresses the perils of holding tightly to such one-sided views. “When we do theology from only one perspective, we fail to see the vastness of who God is, making the Divine into the idolatrous image of the mythical norm,” they warn (Garcia 2020, 79).

Participant 2 attended a youth group that instilled certainty in her from the start, telling youth they were members of “God’s elect generation.” Participant 1 was also raised in an environment that prioritized certainty, but she discovered certainty had no solid foundation when her positions were challenged. Reflecting on difficult conversations she had early on with her now-husband, she remembers, “I would just dissolve into just sobbing tears because he was really forcing me to turn towards how I didn’t have any words to back up what I believed to be so fervently true that there was one God who was the Judeo-Christian God.” Participant 3 describes a similar feeling of dissonance when he lived in an intentional evangelical community and began asking questions internally that seemed at odds with the messaging he was surrounded with. “I was in such an intense community that I felt so . . . alienated from. . . I think it was kind

of probably one of the darkest times in my life,” he reveals, going on to say that he even became suicidal during this period.

The theological shift from certainty to mystery occurs when those reconstructing spiritual identity come to cherish curiosity, value exploration, and welcome the unknown, affirming, “God can also be found in mystery.” Offering hope for a meaningful spirituality amid all that is unknown, Kevin Garcia (2020, 56) shares, “I’ve experienced God out here in this wilderness of faith, in the spaces where I’ve felt unmoored and floating with more questions than answers. There is an excellent possibility in a faith that is still wrapped up in wonder, mystery, curiosity, and trust.” Christena Cleveland also alludes to the richness of a faith fueled by mystery. “When we sail toward the unknown, we don’t fall off. Instead, we come full circle—stronger, wiser, and more connected to unconditional Love than ever,” she writes (Cleveland 2022a, 175–176). Kaitlin Curtice has even come to refer to the Divine as “Mystery,” among other names. “We believe that God is one of a kind, but beyond that we can’t name what or who God is exactly,” she muses, leaning into the unknown rather than running from it (Curtice 2020, 23). She later asks, “What does it look like to return, again and again, to the voice of Mystery in our lives?” (Curtice 2020, 166).

In her shift from certainty to mystery, participant 1 learned to embrace uncertainty with open arms, proclaiming without trepidation, “I don’t feel . . . so sure that I’m right in the way that I did when I was an evangelical.” Instead, participant 1 allows mystery to guide her, sharing, “By following my internal ‘yes’ and ‘no’ and trusting the images that arrive, I feel like I’m on a breadcrumb trail toward the version of myself that I like the most.” For participant 3, the contemplative tradition and the work of Thomas Merton

expanded his capacity for mystery and what remains unknown. Referring to Thomas Merton's mystical notion that God is most readily found in the "Palace of Nowhere," otherwise known as the self, participant 3 described, "Because it's 'nowhere,' I can really encounter my own emptiness of all my longing for home and realize that home is in the present moment, that my own presence is enough." For participant 2, the sacraments have become an essential way to encounter the mystery of faith. An openness to uncertainty can also be seen in her acceptance of imperfection. Remarking that many of her former church communities seemed dependent on perfection, she is grateful to "now be called to a community ... [with] the trait of grace and good humor, not if, but when, things go wrong. There's some space to kind of laugh at ourselves and give thanks to the grace that fills in the gaps," she said.

From a Fixed Faith to a Spirituality in Process

The final theological shift is one from a fixed faith to a spirituality in process. Because of beliefs such as substitutionary atonement and exclusive salvation, evangelical faith often centers on a one-time event—*salvation*—oriented toward a predetermined goal—*eternal life*. Evangelism, then, becomes spreading this message in order to "save souls." Those who challenge strongly held evangelical beliefs and, ultimately, leave the tradition are at risk of losing their salvation and facing eternal damnation.

These claims are illustrated in Kaitlin Curtice's own experience of evangelism in her youth. "My desire to care for people and build community became wrapped up in my identity as someone who led others in the Christian faith, which later turned into a shame-based legalism aimed at securing everyone's souls for an eternity in heaven and shaming myself when I felt I'd failed," she confesses (Curtice 2020, 32). Recalling an Easter

service at the Pentecostal church she attended as a child, Christena Cleveland comments how the notion of a fixed faith seemed dissonant with her reality even at a young age. “Throughout the entire service, preachers-turned-cheerleaders exhorted us to energetically praise this God who had *once and for all* defeated death, sickness, and evil,” she recounts, noting that she was suffering from the chicken pox at the time (Cleveland 2022a, 87). For Kevin Garcia, the idea of a fixed faith ultimately excluded them from salvation. “I was told my entire life that God loved me and hated sin, and that being gay was very, very sinful. . . . That’s where I got hung up,” they write (Garcia 2020, 36).

Like Kaitlin Curtice, participant 3 took the task of evangelism very seriously in his youth. “I was very passionate about saving everybody and, at school, leading Bible studies at my public school and all that stuff,” he remembers, also mentioning that he later became heavily influenced by a conservative theology of the end times. Participant 2 alludes to the weight of this end-times messaging with both humor and sarcasm when sharing about her decision to study theology at her evangelical college, saying, “I knew I wanted to study religion and Christianity because I had this sense of God’s calling me to be a repair of the breach for such a time as this. What could be more important? Jesus might be back on Thursday, and I’ve got to be a good minister and missionary.” For participant 1, the idea of a secure place in the kingdom of God was a great comfort. “My experience was that I felt like a daughter of God; I felt like I was in,” she stated.

The theological shift from a fixed faith to a spirituality in process occurs when those reconstructing spiritual identity maintain, “My spirituality isn’t based on a one-time

event but an ever-unfolding journey.”¹⁵ This recognition makes space for continued exploration and growth on the spiritual journey. It also acknowledges seasons of wrestling and affirms that such struggle doesn’t detract from the spiritual journey but is, instead, part of its fabric. It also invites a differentiation between spiritual identity and affiliation. Although all informants seemed to feel at home in their spiritual identity—specifically regarding forms of spiritual expression and connection—some feel unmoored when it comes to affiliation, as is evident in the following descriptions.

For Kaitlin Curtis, a spirituality in process is one that embraces the journey. “Because being human and discovering the constant layering of identity is a journey, so too religion is about journeying,” she writes (Curtice 2020, 16). In her life, this journey continues to be one that asks “what it looks like to be Potawatomi and a Christian” (Curtice 2020, 32). Kevin Garcia is also in process, but that doesn’t detract from their convictions. “It is curious to me that even as I type these words, I wonder if I am a Christian. . . . In fact, since I stopped trying to be a Christian, I’ve been more connected to God than I ever thought possible,” they confess (Garcia 2020, 8). For Christena Cleveland, devotion to the Sacred Black Feminine was just the beginning. “I knew that my journey toward the Sacred would require that I bravely seek out the very deities Christianity has vilified. . . . Even more, I was beginning to suspect that my continued liberation would involve the end of many more unhealthy relationships so that life-giving ones could be born,” she reveals (Cleveland 2022a, 247).

¹⁵ I use the word *spirituality* here instead of *faith* to support those who do not adhere to a particular faith system because the word *faith* is so often associated exclusively with religious belief.

For participant 1, the notion of a spirituality in process is freeing. “I hold my identity as a pagan really loosely—I don’t feel like so sure that I have it figured out, it’s just the way of engaging my spiritual self that is most fun to me,” she shared. Participant 2 expressed caution at the idea of an “arrival point” on the spiritual journey. “I think when I became a priest, I did it with a deep interior affirmation that I had to give myself permission for this also not to be arrival,” she said. When asked about his own spiritual identity, participant 3 replied, “Yeah, I’m Catholic, but it’s hard to fully identify sometimes with that.” Although the vision of Catholicism he was originally drawn to feels like home, he admitted that this vision is far from realized in his experience of the Catholic Church. He currently remains Catholic, but acknowledges how that is a journey, too. “I have to really deal with disappointment in order to be able to stay,” he recognized.

Sacred Threads

In addition to theological shifts, three themes arose from the data that I categorize as “sacred threads.” These sacred threads are not unlike the thread in William Stafford’s poem, “The Way It Is” (Stafford 1998, 42). In it, Stafford (1998, 42) writes, “There’s a thread you follow. It goes among/ things that change. But it doesn’t change. . . ./ While you hold it you can’t get lost.” In the context of this study, sacred threads refer to a divine connection that runs through informants’ lives, beginning in their faith of origin and continuing to their spiritual identity today. Three themes that serve as evidence of sacred threads are informants’ *early signs of devotion, influential relationships, and vocational engagement.*

Early Signs of Devotion

The data clearly revealed that informants not only were actively involved in their faith of origin in church and ministerial settings, but they also had early experiences of spiritual connection that they consider to be authentic—even though they now hold views that are different than the theology they were given. For Christena Cleveland, this realization came only after she began to separate herself from her evangelical roots. “I was remembering a time when I used to trust that God cared about my need. I was remembering a time when I still frantically ran in search of Her,” she recalls, connecting her experience of the Divine then and now by intentionally using the female pronoun (Cleveland 2022a, 105–106). Kevin Garcia (2020, 9) identifies an altar call while attending summer camp as a nine-year-old as the first moment they knew God was real, adding, “It was the first moment I realized that what I was experiencing of God was different than the people around me.” Early signs of authentic devotion for Kaitlin Curtis connected to her spiritual experience today are visible in her experiences living in Native reservations as a child. Although she doesn’t describe specific spiritual experiences, she references a deep sense of belonging—one that no doubt called her back to her Potawatomi heritage in a profoundly spiritual way when she began the work of deconstructing and decolonizing her faith as a young adult (Curtice 2020, 30).

For participant 3, intimacy with God was threaded throughout his experience in the evangelical church. “I just fell in love with Jesus; I really fell in love with Jesus,” he remarked, going on to describe “intense experiences with intimacy with God just alone in my room playing my guitar.” Participant 1 and participant 2 both recounted “touchstone” experiences that occurred in their evangelical days and again in their experiences of faith

deconstruction, confirming for them that the Divine was with them on their path. “I remember when someone first asked me to start, like, describing my relationship to God. The thing I said was, ‘I know that God is near when I can feel my nose tickling,’” participant 1 said, adding that this experience recurred when she began to encounter the sacred beyond scripture. Participant 2, who remains in the Christian tradition, describes her own sense of connection as the guidance of the Holy Spirit appearing during significant moments of discernment on her journey.

Influential Relationships

Just as influential relationships often initiated experiences of deconstruction, the impact of relationships on informants’ spiritual journeys wove throughout their accounts as a sacred thread that continues to remain significant to this day. From a process theological perspective, this is no surprise. Remembering that process thought asserts that all that is in existence is in relationship and thus impacted by relationship, it is clear that relationships are key to any shift in perspective. Oftentimes, these relationships are positive, offering life-giving alternatives, as is the case in many of the accounts explored here. Still, it is important to note that harmful relationships can be just as influential, alerting us to potentially destructive paths. Whether affirming or restricting, one thing is certain—influential relationships on the spiritual journey can be mapped out like stars on the night sky, illuminating the darkness as they reveal pivotal moments along the way.

For Kaitlin Curtice’s faith deconstruction and departure from the evangelical church, the late Rachel Held Evans entered her life just at the write time. Evans, a prominent progressive Christian writer, whose work served as a guiding light for many questioning their experience in the evangelical church, wrote about her own experiences

of shifting faith in her books, including the *New York Times* bestseller *Searching for Sunday: Loving, Leaving, and Finding the Church* (Evans 2015). “I met Rachel . . . at a critical time in my life when church and community were difficult to come by. . . . [She] took my hand and led me to a Christianity that I did not know existed, one that included all the questions I had and the ones I didn’t even know were coming yet,” writes Curtice (2020, 126). Kevin Garcia, who experienced great harm in the evangelical church as a member of the LGBTQ+ community, now finds themselves in a progressive and affirming church, remaining deeply influenced by the broader Christian Church at large. “I personally need the community that the Church provides for me. . . . The Church holds me accountable to my best self and to the things I profess to believe in,” they share (Garcia 2020, 30). They offer an equally influential community to their thousands of social media followers where they provide insight and resources on the process of spiritual recovery. Although Christena Cleveland (2022a, 61, 176) had positive relational influences along the way, including a friend who guided her to the healing practice of mindfulness meditation, relationships with oppressive evangelical and conservative Christian environments—which she likens to “the plantation”—finally led her to leave such communities and institutions as she reclaimed her own spiritual and vocational paths.

It has already been mentioned how valuable participant 1’s relationship with her college boyfriend—now her husband—was in her experience of faith deconstruction. Even though they do not share the same spiritual identity, he is deeply supportive of her current path. She finds additional support on her spiritual journey from a community of other women referenced previously as her “coven.” “The intimacy that I formed with

these women is one of the most beautiful parts of my life. . . . Every time that it's time for a moon circle . . . I'm so ready for my cup to be filled," she expresses as a look of joy spread across her face.

Relationships with partners also play a significant role in the spiritual journeys of participants 2 and 3. Participant 2, who met her future husband during her time in seminary, was surprised to discover that he was both an active member of a church and an agnostic, opening her eyes to an even broader experience and expression of faith. Participant 3's journey out of the evangelical church and into the Catholic church ran parallel with his wife's, with them participating in the Catholic Church's RCIA (Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults) course for those interested in membership together and deciding to join the Catholic Church as a family. Other relationships that appeared significant on the path of reconstructing spiritual identity include an Episcopal priest from participant 2's college town who invited her to return as she discerned her call to the priesthood and an Anglican minister who invited participant 3 and his young family to a new house church, which participant 3 identified as a "coming back" to liturgy that was reminiscent of one of his primary guides, the Trappist monk Thomas Merton.

Vocational Engagement

One final theme of note is the ways informants' spiritual identity informs their vocational calling. All of the informants' lines of work are deeply infused with their spirituality. This, of course, is not surprising to discover in those who publish books about their spiritual journeys. Christena Cleveland (2022b), who has previously worked in both ministerial and seminary settings as a consultant and academic, now offers online courses and resources for those seeking to dethrone "whitemalegod" and encounter the

Sacred Black Feminine. An author, poet, and frequent speaker, Kaitlin Curtice (2022) considers herself an “inter-spiritual advocate” and serves as a prophetic voice on the topic of decolonizing faith. Through social media, a podcast, and one-on-one coaching, Kevin Garcia (2020, 24) seeks to help people through “the reconstruction of their faith,” as they share in their book. “My work is centered around folks picking up the pieces of their faith that they still have left and making a pilgrimage across their River Jordan,” they write (Garcia 2020, 24).

Participant 1 is a therapist by trade, but she sees her vocation as that of healer, a calling that is no doubt informed by her spiritual engagement. “These practices that I’ve discovered really assist me in being able to heal deep psychological, spiritual wounding,” she reported. Participant 2 is an Episcopal priest—a pastoral vocation she would not have been able to fully realize in many conservative evangelical settings. She is also a spiritual director. Participant 3 is a spiritual director as well, a role that allows them to accompany many through religious trauma, offering directees a compassionate presence that is not always available in religious settings.

Because interview participants were selected using a combination of purposive and snowball sampling—allowing me to access people within my own network—this theme might be more reflective of my own niche network as a spiritual director and less indicative of an experience shared by the population studied. However, this commonality among interview participants (and memoir authors) is still intriguing to mention and is worthy of further investigation to explore if there is, indeed, a connection between faith reconstruction and vocational path.

The Possibility of Reconstruction: A Bird's Eye View

After reviewing the individual accounts of each informant and the common themes to distill the essence of the experiences explored, I now zoom out for a bird's eye view and composite description of the phenomenon of millennial exvangelical deconstruction with a specific focus on the possibility of reconstructing spiritual identity within this faith shift. The US millennials featured in this study consider evangelicalism to be their faith of origin, whether it was inherited at birth or introduced in childhood. Informants in this study—a group representing a subset of US millennial exvangelicals who have reconstructed their spiritual identity since leaving the evangelical church—were actively engaged in their evangelical faith from a young age, exhibiting signs of devotion both in their church through community involvement and in their personal lives through authentic spiritual encounter. Informants also identified experiences in the evangelical church that included: (a) an environment of domination influenced by both covert and overt forces such as white supremacy, patriarchy, and/or homophobia; (b) a heavy adherence to dogma centered on right belief and behavior; (c) an orientation toward transcendence; (d) an attachment to certainty with a dependence on absolute truth; and (e) a perspective of faith as fixed with a primary focus on salvation.

In various stages of young adulthood, specific events, relationships, and environments led informants to questions or doubts regarding their faith of origin, initiating a period of transition that some informants specifically referred to as deconstruction. These questions or doubts resulted in experiences of loss—including loss of identity and community—and exploration and growth. Through this exploration and growth, informants began to embrace a reconstructed spiritual identity marked by (a) a

feeling of liberation and renewed theological vision; (b) a prioritization of experience as a spiritual authority; (c) a reorientation toward divine immanence; (d) an openness to mystery with a posture of curiosity; and (e) an acknowledgement of the spiritual path as a lifelong journey of unfolding. Although informants' spiritual identities have profoundly shifted since their evangelical upbringing, informants recognize they remain in process, noting their spiritual identity has the potential to shift in the future.

Summary

I reviewed the accounts of six representative informants simultaneously to identify shared experiences of the phenomenon explored and the specific focus within it. I then used these findings to address the primary research question of this project: What are the qualities, perspectives, and experiences shared by US millennials who have left their evangelical faith of origin and now feel at home in alternative spiritual traditions and forms of spiritual expression? Apart from commonalities regarding experiences of faith deconstruction, themeing of the data suggested five specific theological shifts consistent among informants' experiences that aided in the reconstruction of spiritual identity. I also named three "sacred threads" that connect informants' early spiritual experiences to their spiritual identities today. I then used these themes to create a composite description of informants' experiences of the phenomenon, and this study's particular focus within it, to reveal the essence of the possibility of reconstructing spiritual identity within the deconstruction of millennial exvangelical faith.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

Introduction

Referring to the “home by another way” that inspired this project’s title, the final lines of Jan Richardson’s poem, “The Map You Make Yourself,” end with words of blessing and welcome (Richardson 2015, 77–78). She writes:

and you will know it not by the light
that waits for you

but by the star
that blazes inside you telling you
where you are
is holy
and you are welcome here. (Richardson 2015, 78)

Having left their faith of origin on a journey of deconstruction, the informants in this study have not returned by the same road, nor to the same destination. Instead, they have discovered a new spiritual home by another way—one that affirms their experience and calls it sacred. The purpose of this project and the reasoning behind it have been explored throughout this study, but in the end, the primary aim is this—to honor the experiences of those who have sought to “make the map themselves” and to inspire others to do the same. As I bring this paper to a close, it is time to review where this journey has taken us to determine where it now leads.

In chapter 4, I addressed the qualities, perspectives, and experiences shared by US millennials who have left their evangelical faith of origin and now feel at home in alternative spiritual traditions and forms of spiritual expression. Through a phenomenological process of themeing the data and producing a composite description, I was able to reveal the essence of the phenomenon explored and the focus group within it.

In this concluding chapter, I consider the findings in conversation with the frameworks discussed in chapter 2. By revisiting the first of two secondary research questions, I then speak to the ways the reconstruction of spiritual identity is part of a holistic experience of faith deconstruction. Following this discussion, I present discernible guideposts for the reconstruction of spiritual identity and beliefs in congruence with the findings and address the final research question. I end this chapter with suggestions for areas of further research to bolster this study and extend its application.

In Conversation: Alignment of Findings with Frameworks Explored

Along with Derridean deconstruction as presented in chapter 1 and revisited throughout this text, guiding frameworks for this study include negative theology, process theology, Richard Rohr's wisdom pattern, and Carl Jung's theory of individuation, each outlined in chapter 2. These frameworks inform my own theology as a spiritual director and consequently shaped my interpretation of the findings previously discussed. Now, at the conclusion of this study, it is vital to discern if they are indeed in alignment with informants' experience of the identified phenomenon and this study's niche within it and, if so, how these frameworks might offer wisdom for those seeking to reconstruct their own spiritual identity—a clue, of sorts.

The word *clue*, in fact, is a variation of *clew*—a ball of thread or yarn—a term deriving from the thread that Ariadne gave to Theseus in ancient Greek mythology (Cousineau 1998, 128). In the myth, to win the hand of Ariadne, Theseus is required to slay the Minotaur at the center of a dark and winding labyrinth. To assist him in this task, Ariadne gives Theseus a gold thread to help him find his way back to her once the Minotaur is slain. In many ways, this task is archetypal of the experiences of the

informants featured in this study. Clinging to what was identified earlier as a “sacred thread,” informants left their faith of origin behind and set out on a labyrinthine path into the unknown. When it was time to make their return journey—to reconstruct their spiritual identity, it could be said—they had their sacred thread to guide them, offering clues along the path as they made their way out of the labyrinth to their newfound home. Like the thread Ariadne offered to Theseus, how do this study’s guiding frameworks align with the experiences of informants as identified in the findings, and what specific “clues” do they offer those who undertake similar journeys?

Negative Theology: “The Fidelity of Betrayal”

Negative theology plays a notable role in many experiences of faith deconstruction, as is evident in each of the accounts of the six informants in this study. Essential to negative theology’s apophatic approach is the “unnaming” of God in order to detach concepts of the Divine from any projections. This is particularly apparent in the account of Christena Cleveland, who frequently speaks against “whitemalegod” throughout her memoir (Cleveland 2022a). In participating in this act of negative theology and identifying this projection as an idol of dominant culture, Cleveland exemplifies what Rollins (2008) describes as “the fidelity of betrayal,” betraying (or in apophatic language, negating) what is false in order to create an opening for what is true (which for Cleveland is whitemalegod’s opposite—the Sacred Black Feminine). Here, the clue to guide the seeker on a similar path is in the negation itself, each act of unsaying a releasing that opens the seeker up to an expanded spiritual journey and experience of the Divine.

Process Theology: Joining the Divine in Co-Creation and Co-Revelation

To be open to the possibility of an experience of the Divine and a spiritual identity beyond the bounds of their faith of origin, each of the informants in this study had to surrender to a spirituality in process—a dynamic and evolving spirituality that is continuously reshaped by relationship. With this surrender, they are invited to join the Divine in co-creation and co-revelation, becoming agents of their own spiritual journeys. This is especially resonant with Kevin Garcia’s (2000) account, in which they explore what it is like to have one foot planted in the Christian tradition as a follower of Christ and another stationed outside of it, attuned to their own unique experience of the sacred and willing to follow divine lure wherever it may lead. Here, the offered clue is this concept of divine lure—persuasive nudges from the Divine beckoning us toward alternative visions and new possibilities on the ever-unfolding path of becoming.

Spiritual Development: Cycles of the Wisdom Pattern

The wisdom pattern claims that these movements of negation and creation do not simply happen a single time, but instead form an ongoing pattern on the spiritual journey. This cycle of *order*, *disorder*, and *reorder* is clearly identified in the accounts of both participant 2 and participant 3. Participant 2 talked about her spiritual journey in stages similar to those outlined by Rohr, while simultaneously acknowledging that, at times, the cycle can be layered, with some stages—such as *disorder* and *reorder*—happening concurrently. She also affirmed that *reorder* is not the end of the journey when she discussed making lifelong vows at her ordination. As quoted previously in chapter 4, participant 2 reflected, “I had to give myself permission for this also not to be arrival,” alluding to the likelihood of Rohr’s wisdom cycle continuing as her life and ministry

unfold. For participant 3, there is no question that another season of *disorder* has begun, at least when it comes to religious affiliation. Although joining the Catholic Church played a significant role in his experience of *reorder* after leaving evangelicalism, he now finds himself in conflict with some of his experiences within Catholic Church as noted in the findings, his religious affiliation no longer in full harmony with his spiritual identity and experience of God. The clue presented by the wisdom pattern is the cycle itself, with each stage identifying where the seeker has been and offering indications of where the journey may lead.

Psychological Development: Individuation Versus Individualization

Even Jung's psychological theory of individuation—not theological, per se—is in alignment with informants' experiences of faith deconstruction and the reconstruction of spiritual identity. In fact, within it lies an important distinction that has the potential to highlight the differences in experience between those who reconstruct spiritual identity, as in this study, and those who instead view faith deconstruction as the destruction of it. These two divergent experiences of faith deconstruction reflect the stark differences between individuation and individualization. Although individuation requires separation, it is not the end goal, as it is with individualization. Rather, the aim of individuation is wholeness, and wholeness requires an embrace of all parts of the Self. Such an embrace can be seen in the accounts of Kaitlin Curtice and participant 1. Understanding the value of open dialogue in a holistic life, both informants actively seek to remain in conversation with communities and perspectives from their past, trusting that healing, rather than further harm, will be the ultimate fruit of such endeavors. Here, individuation offers the clue of what Jung (1961, 398–99) called the “shadow,” inviting the seeker to become

aware of the temptation to reject parts of themselves and their previous experience and, instead, encouraging them to allow such complex elements to remain in the light as valuable sources of insight and indispensable parts of the whole.

Indications on the Role of Reconstruction Within Deconstruction

When these perspectives are viewed through the lens of deconstruction, the role of reconstruction within deconstruction is made clear, addressing the first of two secondary research questions: How is the reconstruction of spiritual identity part of a holistic experience of faith deconstruction? The cycles of the wisdom pattern require reconstruction for continued growth and indicate that deconstruction is not an event that occurs once in a lifetime but is rather an ongoing posture on the ever-expanding journey of faith. Individuation as a lifelong process operates as a parallel to this cycle, with each differentiation a form of deconstruction and each integration the holistic reconstruction within it. In negative theology, specific ideas, images, and names of God are released for the purpose of creating an opening so that the Divine can be experienced beyond our own limitations. In process theology, deconstruction is expected as a natural byproduct of existing in relationship; during such shifts, the divine lure draws the seeker forward toward alternative paths only conceivable through a willingness to entertain new possibilities.

This concept of divine lure is reflective of the reconstructive nature of Derridean deconstruction, echoing the messianic of which Derrida often spoke—that force within deconstruction that forever calls us forward with its promise of the “im-possible.” Caputo (2007, 135) again highlights this reconstructive predisposition inherent within deconstruction, explaining, “When something is deconstructed, it is not razed but

reconfigured and transformed in response to inner and uncontainable impulses.”

Returning to Wilber’s (1996, 27) concept of “transcend and include,” this reconstructive deconstruction can also be seen in the capacity to move beyond previous ways of being without the need for fragmentation. In fact, Wilber would argue that evolution—or for our purposes, growth or expansion—requires integration. Describing this phenomenon in scientific terms, Wilber (1996, 27) states, “The cell transcends—or goes beyond—its molecular components, but also includes them.” Molecules could not exist apart from atoms, which they transcend and include, just as atoms could not exist without particles. In the same way, deconstruction misappropriated as destruction only results in fragmentation; the expansion that comes with reconstructive deconstruction requires integration of the whole.

This is visible in the integrative experiences of the informants in this study. We have already seen the ways in which they have moved beyond their previous ways of being through the identified theological shifts; here we turn to the ways in which they also include them, shedding beliefs and perspectives that no longer served them while at the same time valuing the unfolding nature of their unique spiritual journeys without needing to disown parts of them. For the memoir authors, this was made possible through love. “I saw that my search for the whitemalegod in me had been, above all, an act of self-love,” concedes Christena Cleveland (2022a, 50). Referencing how they are able to remain a Christ-follower, Kevin Garcia (2020, 129) shares, “I see and love all the good in it. I see how the story of Jesus . . . reveal[s] that separation from Love only existed in our minds.” For Kaitlin Curtice, who also remains Christian, the capacity to both transcend and include requires an open heart. “Even in an era of the white, American, evangelical

church struggling to know itself and face its demons, we hold these institutions accountable for the harm they inflict—and we keep our own hearts soft in the process,” she professes (Curtice 2020, 134).

Each of the interview participants also shared a common perspective—apparent in their discussion of spiritual practices fostered by their faith of origin that they bring with them into their spiritual engagement today—despite their differences. This is true even of participant 1, who no longer identifies as a Christian. “In our coven gatherings or even just with times with my dear close friends when we need support, I don’t call it praying anymore, I call it blessing, but it’s the same thing,” she explained. Here we see shimmers of the sacred thread once again, connecting informants’ past spiritual experiences with their reconstructed spiritual identities today. Even in their deconstruction, authenticity remains, hinting that divine lure has been guiding them all along.

Invitations for Seekers and Spiritual Directors

I move now to the final secondary question for this research project: What discernible guideposts for the reconstruction of spiritual identity and beliefs will the data suggest? It only seems fitting to answer this question with more questions. Distinct theological shifts arose from the data that could no doubt aid in charting a discernible path. Holistic faith deconstruction embraces questions as tools for the journey, and evidence from the data indicates these very questions help facilitate the deconstruction and reconstruction process. It seems clear, then, that the most supportive companion should not provide answers but, as the oft-quoted poet and mystic Rainer Maria Rilke (2000, 35) suggested, encourage others to “live the question[s].” Phil Cousineau (1998, 24), author of *The Art of Pilgrimage*, elaborates further on the role of questions in any

meaningful journey, writing, “Questions tune the soul. The purpose behind the questions is to initiate the quest.” This idea is not foreign to spiritual directors and companions, who are trained not to provide answers but to instead offer open-ended questions befitting an open-ended quest.

Although the title “spiritual director” might appear to describe a person who functions as a mentor, a spiritual director is more of a lamp-bearer, coming alongside directees on their spiritual journey to help light the path—a path that does not belong to the director but is instead the directee’s own, one just as unique as the six accounts explored in this project. The open-ended questions offered by the spiritual director function as this light, helping illuminate what was previously unknown. In asking the directee questions—and in making space for a directee’s own questions—a new quest is initiated and, through it, a potential path revealed.

Inspired by this orientation and the theological shifts identified from the data—and instead of discernible guideposts for the reconstruction of spiritual identity and beliefs—I offer the following potential questions as guiding lights on the journey:

- What brings you life?
- Where do you find meaning?
- What’s stirring within you?
- How are you encountering the Divine in new ways?
- What new invitations are emerging?

When posed, these questions—each aligned with a theological shift explored in chapter 4—have the potential to tune the soul and invite a quest, shining a light on a path that can

lead to a liberated faith, a valuing of experience, an orientation toward divine immanence, an embrace of mystery, and an appreciation for a spirituality in process.

Liberation, experience, immanence, mystery, process—for a divine figure who can never be fully comprehended, as negative theology tells us, these are no doubt echoes of Sacred Encounter. This divine figure is known by many names: (a) to some as Love who frees us from oppression and fear; (b) to a portion as the Ground of All Being, who meets us in our everyday lives; (c) to others as Source of Life, who is as close to us as the earth beneath our feet; (d) to several as the Ultimate Reality who reminds us there is beauty beyond comprehension; and (e) even to others, like Christena Cleveland, as the Sacred Black Feminine who is made manifest in the particularity of our journeys of becoming.

One thing that remains consistent, however, about these echoes of divine encounter and the varied God-images is that they are each accessible through a single posture—presence. “When you are present, you will know the Real Presence,” assures Rohr (2018, 31). Such presence, seventeenth-century Carmelite monk Brother Lawrence (1983) tells us in his spiritual classic, *The Practice of the Presence of God*, is an intentional orientation. It is an active stance of attunement, of engagement, and of openness to what, in the mystical tradition, could be called “the naked now,” trusting that meaning can be found there (Rohr 2013). Through practicing his Carmelite vow of silence, Brother Lawrence learned to *live* the presence of God in the same way Rilke urges we “lives the questions,” inviting us to let go of previous attachments to faith-based prescriptions and rest in the awareness that the Divine joins us as we are, wherever we are, on our path of unfolding.

Areas of Further Research

Because this project is limited in scope, it naturally presents many opportunities for areas of further research. Although the phenomenon of faith deconstruction is no doubt pronounced among evangelicals, it is by no means limited to millennials. Seekers of multiple generations are experiencing faith shifts, from generation Z to baby boomers and beyond. Equally, although it is an obvious trend in the evangelical church, those raised in mainline protestant and Catholic traditions are also undergoing faith deconstruction as they seek more authentic forms of spiritual engagement. This is true in the United States and locations around the world. Research that would be of benefit regarding experiences of faith deconstruction beyond the United States could examine how such experiences are similar to and differ from those in the United States, such as the process outlined in this study. Another potential area of further research, both in the United States and around the world, could explore if and how experiences of faith deconstruction impact broader aspects of social life beyond spiritual identity.

Although the proliferation of church harm is present among many accounts of faith deconstruction, because this subject was not the focus of this study, it was not substantially addressed. When analyzing the phenomenon of faith deconstruction as a whole, however, it is important that such experiences are not overlooked. These experiences have even led to diagnostic labels, such as “Post-Traumatic Church Syndrome” and “Religious Trauma Syndrome,” by various experts (Karris 2020, 50). Multiple publications now highlight the trauma resulting from purity culture alone—an evangelical-led abstinence movement in the 1990s and 2000s that directly affected the

generation featured in this study.¹⁶ Future studies of interest could investigate experiences of religious trauma and how they impact the reconstruction of spiritual identity. As some individuals might work through such experiences in counseling or spiritual direction, a further area of inquiry could investigate experiences of faith deconstruction and the corresponding reconstruction of spiritual identity when facilitated in such therapeutic settings.

As noted previously, absent from the criteria for my sample was a consideration of class. Although socioeconomic status was not considered when selecting informants, finances were occasionally referenced either explicitly or implicitly in some of the accounts. Participant 2 indicated that part of the reason she chose to attend her conservative evangelical university was because she received a scholarship. Kaitlin Curtice mentioned experiencing poverty in early childhood while living on a Native American reservation. Christena Cleveland wrote about a summer of attending multiple vacation bible schools in her community as a stand-in for childcare and later receiving a scholarship to attend a prestigious boarding school. Still, none of the informants made any direct connection to class and their experience of the phenomenon explored in this study, nor was this asked of them. An exploration on the intersection of class and experiences of deconstruction—especially through the lens of marginalized communities—would offer insight into what roles religious communities play in the lives of those of varying socioeconomic status and the cost (financial and otherwise) of leaving them.

¹⁶ See Linda Kay Klein's 2019 book, *Pure: Inside the Evangelical Movement that Shamed a Generation of Young Women and How I Broke Free*, and Matthias Roberts' 2020 book, *Beyond Shame: Creating a Healthy Sex Life on Your Own Terms*.

With this speculation on the intersection of class and deconstruction, I am aware, too, that to deconstruct one's faith of origin and search for a more resonant spiritual identity can be perceived as an act of privilege. I know that my own privilege as a white, financially secure individual raised in a largely white evangelical faith provided me with access to resources and conversations that eventually led me to question my faith of origin and gave me the confidence to chart my own course. However, so many people in the world do not have the same privilege. The United Nations (2022, 8) projects that 657–676 million people in the world live in poverty today. With Maslow's hierarchy of basic needs placing physiological and safety needs at the bottom of the pyramid as the most essential, this idea of finding a new spiritual "home" as a metaphor can appear to be inaccessible to so many when their material needs and requirement for a physical place to call home cannot be met (Harper and Guilbault 2008, 635).

Still, whether the Divine is referred to as God, Source of Life, or even the Sacred Black Feminine, most spiritual seekers would posit that spiritual experience is meant to be accessible to all. Many theologies even assert that the Divine is on the side of the oppressed. There is no doubt a necessity for a deep sense of belonging to oneself among those in need when belonging (a word used in this study's definition of "home") is hard to come by elsewhere. This merits a study that highlights the ways the conversation on spiritual formation at large, along with this exploration of faith deconstruction and the reconstruction of spiritual identity, in particular, must change to include those for whom a material home is not yet a reality.

Pathways of Connection and Healing: Ministry as a Bridge

The Doctor of Ministry degree is one pursued on behalf of the church. Although I am not a minister in the church—at least in the clerical sense—I do have a ministry. Through this ministry, I serve those inside the church, those outside it, and especially those at its edges. In many ways, I see my work as a bridge, particularly for those with a complex history in the church, as with the informants in this study. As I come alongside seekers in the work of exploration and integration, I aim to help them make connections and uncover new paths. This bridge is reminiscent of St. Brigid, one of the patron saints of Ireland. A Celtic goddess to pagan Ireland and a saint to Christian Ireland, she bridges the divide between old and new, between two ways of being, between alternative ways of seeing (Paintner 2016, 85). My hope is that this project functions as a bridge, too—a bridge for the church, inviting a more expansive view of the Divine that is not limited to a single perspective; a bridge for those in faith deconstruction, cultivating an imagination for spiritual engagement beyond the traditions they leave behind; and, finally, a bridge for those whose experiences appear in this study, healing old wounds as they connect the dots and fill in the gaps.

Such a bridge would provide new possibilities where there previously were none. It would encourage a posture of continued evolution and growth. It could even allow for deeper appreciation and respect for the Other, beginning with spiritual differences and potentially rippling out to include other areas of diversity, including ideology, culture, race, and class. These bridges are built when the space between two ways of being is honored as a pathway for connection and a location for rich conversation and exploration, both within an individual and between persons and communities of difference.

In the context of faith deconstruction and the reconstruction of spiritual identity, this looks like sharing the ministry of spiritual direction with a wide audience and making it more readily available to people who might not have access to such offerings otherwise. It looks like offering group spiritual direction, like my friend Fiona Koefoed-Jespersen in Denmark who holds space for those undergoing faith shifts, providing a community of loving support no matter where they are on the journey. It might look like participating in events such as the annual Evolving Faith Conference—an environment where attendees understand the old cliché, “the journey is the destination,” trusting that a bridge is not simply a path between two ways of being but a meaningful place in which to dwell. It could even look like offering workshops through organizations such as Spiritual Directors International, educating other spiritual companions on this study’s findings and identifying what faith deconstruction and the reconstruction spiritual identity has looked like in their own work with spiritual seekers, creating a wellspring of insight and a network of bridges.

This project also served as a bridge for me. In receiving the accounts of each of the informants in this study, my theological perspective broadened, offering new insights into the spiritual journey and challenging limited views so often defined by my own experience. One example of this can be found in Christena Cleveland’s divine image of the Sacred Black Feminine, mentioned throughout this text. As a spiritual director in a multifaith society, I seek to honor individual’s unique experiences of the Divine. Even in this study, I feel comfortable with multiple perspectives of the Divine, making it easy for me to say, “This is who God is for Kaitlin Curtice,” “This is who God is for participant 1,” and so on. I trust that although their language and engagement might be different, in

many ways they are talking about the same thing. However, Christena Cleveland disputes this. “As long as the Sacred Black Feminine is just a belief, the white supremacist structure remains intact and whitemalegod remains the god of white women,” she writes (Cleveland 2020a, 219). In other words, the claim “God is a Black woman” cannot just be a divine image for some—it must be a reality for all. Here, the ignorance of my white privilege and the sociopolitical shortcomings of my spiritual perspective are exposed, and I am left with a sense of conviction that continues to give me pause.

Equally, in revisiting the evangelical tradition through my own research and the accounts of my informants, I’ve crossed a bridge to my past, noting areas of struggle as well as great joy and spiritual connection. Like the church, I, too, am called to a more expansive view of God—one that not only draws me forward toward new spiritual encounters and engagement, but invites me back, encouraging me to engage my faith of origin and those within it with a greater generosity of spirit. In my own life and work, this is particularly true as I considered my evangelical peers who will engage this study. Just as I look at the informants featured in this project and trust the authenticity of their spiritual identity, am I not called to also look at my evangelical peers and do the same? How can the findings in this study not be a villainization of evangelicalism, as so many exevangelical and faith deconstruction spaces on social media seem to be, but instead an invitation for all those who seek divine connection to continually deconstruct and reconstruct our spiritual identities and images of God as prompted by divine lure in the service of healing and making whole?

The spiritual journey continues in process—for me, for the informants in this study, for those experiencing faith shifts, and for those rooted in their spiritual identity

within the church and beyond. Through it all we find new ways to encounter the Divine and release old ones, cycling through stages and seasons as we engage in the life-long pursuit of meaningful connection with that which makes life holy—that which makes life whole. Far from being divisive, as it is so often viewed, deconstruction can in fact be the work of healing, of making whole. To experience deconstruction as whole-making, however, we must be willing to engage it with open minds and open hearts and allow others to do the same. Instead of resisting questions, we must *live* them, as Rilke reminds us (Rilke 2000, 35). We must let them play out, trusting their power to initiate quests that will lead us to new discoveries. “Have patience with everything that remains unsolved in your heart. Try to love the questions themselves. . . . Perhaps you will gradually, without even noticing it, find yourself experiencing the answer, some distant day,” writes Rilke (2000, 35). It is true of the informants in this study who dared to lean into their own questions and found a new spiritual “home by another way” in the process, and it holds the potential to offer a path forward for many who appear siloed in faith deconstruction today. *This* is the possibility of reconstructing spiritual identity inherent within deconstruction. Once again, I say, “Amen. May it be so.”

Summary

In conclusion, I considered each of the guiding frameworks introduced in this study alongside the findings to identify ways in which they were in alignment with the findings. I then explored the role of reconstruction within deconstruction as identified in informant accounts. Addressing the discernible guideposts for reconstructing spiritual identity and beliefs revealed by the data, I proposed five questions for consideration by seekers and spiritual directors in congruence with the five theological shifts identified in

the findings. Areas of further research include broadening the scope of this project to include: (a) an examination of faith deconstruction and the reconstruction of spiritual identity for different generations, faiths of origin, and nationalities; (b) an acute focus on religious trauma and the impact it has on the possibility of reconstructing spiritual identity within faith deconstruction; and (c) the intersection of class and faith deconstruction and the role material condition plays in accessibility to concepts explored in this study.

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APPENDIX A

Faith Deconstruction in Popular Culture

A sample of resources addressing the phenomenon of faith deconstruction either explicitly or implicitly from various angles are listed in the following table.

| | |
|----------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Social Media Accounts and Hashtags on Instagram and/or Twitter | @jamieleefinch; @sara.billups; @scotthepainter; @unfitchristian; @thatloudeconstructingone; @deconstructingpurityculture; @deconstruct_everything; @eve_wasframed; @nakedpastor; @joyvetterlein; @heyamandawaldron; @thekevingarcia; @exfundamentalist; @micahjmurray; @deconstructiongirl; @thenewevangelicals; @growingupevangelical; @deconstructing_engineer #deconstruction; #exvangelical; #emptythepews; #churchhurt |
| Websites | sophiasociety.org; thedeconstructionnetwork.com; chrisitanitytoday.com; relevantmagazine.com; thegospelcoalition.com; religionandpolitics.com; deconstructingfaithsummit.com; newrepublic.com; Deconstruction “coaches” such as angelajharrington.com, kurtisvanderpool.com, micahjmurray.com, heyamandawaldron.com |
| Podcasts | The Deconstructionists; Deconstruct; Exvangelical; The Liturgists; Nomad Podcast; Deconstructing Mamas; The Phil Drysdale Show; Holy Heretics Podcast; Dirty Rotten Church Kids; Evangelicalish; The Life After Podcast; Evolving Faith; God is Grey; A Tiny Revolution; Deconstruct.pod; Reclaiming My Theology; In Doubt; Holypost; Existential Happy Hour |
| Books | <i>After Doubt: How to Question Your Faith Without Losing It</i> , by A. J. Swodoba; <i>Empty the Pews: Stories of Leaving the Church</i> by Chrissy Stroop and Lauren O’Neal; <i>The Shift: Surviving and Thriving after Moving from Conservative to Progressive Christianity</i> by Colby Martin; <i>You Are Your Own: A Reckoning with the Religious Trauma of Evangelical Christianity</i> by Jamie Lee Finch; <i>Fractured Faith: Finding Your Way Back to God in an Age of Deconstruction</i> by Lina AbuJamra; <i>Into the Gray: The Mental and Emotional Aftermath of Spiritual Deconstruction</i> by Michelle Collins; <i>The Deconstructionists Playbook</i> by Crystal Cheatham and Theresa Ta; <i>Before You Lose Your Faith: Deconstructing Doubt in the Church</i> by Trevin Wax and Ian Harber; <i>Gaslighted by God: Reconstructing a Disillusioned Faith</i> by Tiffany Yecke Brooks; <i>Out of Sorts: Making Peace with an Evolving Faith</i> by Sarah Bessey |

APPENDIX B

Interview Questions

Each interview began with a brief introduction to the study to provide context, followed by an open invitation for participants to share their spiritual journey from their beginnings in the evangelical church to where they are today. This allowed participants to first share their experience in their own words and time and offers the opportunity to see where conversations lead without much direct guidance. As participants shared their experience, along with verbal responses I will also made note of affect and physical expressions.

Throughout the conversation, I was specifically looking for responses to the following questions. If these areas were not addressed in the natural flow of the conversation, I then asked one or more of these questions explicitly to illicit further explanation necessary to the study:

- 1) Briefly describe your spiritual background with the evangelical church.
- 2) When did you leave the evangelical church? What initiated that process? What was that process like for you?
- 3) What, then, led you to the spiritual tradition and identity you align with today?
- 4) How is your spiritual identity and engagement different now? What are the central beliefs and/or practices that ground you in your new spiritual identity?
- 5) Richard Rohr talks about mature spirituality being able to both include and transcend previous experiences. Does this resonate with your spiritual journey? Which parts of your previous experience do you include as being integral to your spiritual journey? In what ways have your current beliefs transcended your faith of origin?

I ended each interview by reading Jan Richardson's blessing, "The Map You Make Yourself," which inspired this project's title, "Home by Another Way." Making a connection between this quotation and their new spiritual identity, I asked participants if and how this blessing resonates with their personal experience. At the close of each conversation, I invited participants into an exploration of the word "home" as it is used in this context, asking what it looks and/or feels like for them to be spiritually "at home."

APPENDIX C
SAMPLE EMAIL INVITATION

Hello,

My name is Lacy Ellman and I'm a Doctor of Ministry Student at Seattle University. I am currently beginning research for my doctoral project and am seeking interview participants. My study will investigate the current phenomenon of US millennials leaving the evangelical church through an experience popularly referred to as "faith deconstruction" and will focus individuals who have found new homes in alternative spiritual traditions or forms of spiritual expression, having "reconstructed" their spiritual identity through the deconstruction of their evangelical faith of origin. Would you be willing to contribute to this study by participating in an interview with me? Interviews will be 60-90 minutes via Zoom and will cover your evangelical background, your decision to leave the evangelical church, and your newfound spiritual tradition and identity. Although interviews will be recorded to produce accurate transcripts for analysis, your participation will remain confidential, with participant names excluded from final reporting.

It is my desire that your participation in this study will provide a safe and supportive space for you to review and explore your spiritual journey, normalizing your experience and honoring your new-found spiritual identity by allowing you to retell your story and put it into conversation with the stories of others who have traveled a similar path. In addition, I hope the results of this study will benefit spiritual directors and companions who seek to accompany others who are deconstructing their faith of origin as

well as seekers navigating faith deconstruction on their own through the revelation of shared experience of the phenomenon to be explored.

I will be conducting interviews for this study over the summer months. Please let me know if you are interested in participating this study. If so, I will schedule a Zoom call and send you the questions to be explored for personal review before the interview as well as an Informed Consent Form for you to read and sign before the interview takes place.

Sincerely,

Lacy Ellman, DMin Student, Seattle University

APPENDIX D
INFORMED CONSENT INFORMATION SHEET



CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH

TITLE: “Home by Another Way: The Possibility of Reconstructing Spiritual Identity Within the Deconstruction of Millennial Exvangelical Faith”

INVESTIGATOR: Lacy Ellman, Doctor of Ministry student in the School of Theology and Ministry at Seattle University

ADVISOR: Rt. Rev. Edward Donalson III, DMin, Director of Doctor of Ministry, Assistant Clinical Professor, School of Theology and Ministry, Seattle University
email address: donalso1@seattleu.edu; phone number: (206) 296-6357

PURPOSE: You are being asked to participate in a research project that seeks to investigate the experiences of millennials who have left the evangelical church and found a new home in an alternative spiritual tradition or form of spiritual expression within or beyond Christianity. You will be asked to complete a 60-90 minute interview via Zoom that will be recorded.

SOURCE OF SUPPORT: This study is being performed as partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Doctor of Ministry degree at Seattle University.

RISKS: There are no known risks associated with this study. The topics covered will be familiar to participants and are reflective of their everyday lives and values. Questions will be provided in advance to allow participants to consider how they might want to respond before the interview begins. Participants will only be encouraged to only provide information that they feel comfortable sharing within the context of the study.

BENEFITS: Participation in this research project will provide a safe and supportive space to review and explore your spiritual journey, normalizing your experience and honoring your new-found spiritual identity by retelling your story and putting it into conversation with the stories of others who have traveled a similar path. In addition, the results of this study will benefit spiritual directors and companions who seek to accompany others who are deconstructing their faith of origin as well as seekers navigating faith deconstruction on their own through the revelation of shared experience of the phenomenon to be explored.

INCENTIVES: You will receive no gifts/incentives for this study. Participation in the project will require no monetary cost to you.

CONFIDENTIALITY: Your name will not be recorded with the data. Any other identifying information collected will be provided under your own discretion and will be omitted from the report if requested at the time of the interview. Your name will never be used in any public dissemination of these data (publications, presentations, etc.). All files related to this study, including interview recordings and signed informed consent forms, will be stored in an encrypted folder on a password-protected computer that will be regularly backed up to an external hard drive and Back Blaze, a cloud-based backup site. Human subjects research regulations require that data be kept for a minimum of three (3) years. When the research study ends, any identifying information will be removed from the data, or it will be destroyed. All the information you provide will be kept confidential.

RIGHT TO WITHDRAW: Your participation in this study is *voluntary*. You may withdraw your consent to participate at any time without penalty. Your withdrawal will not influence any other services to which you may be otherwise entitled.

SUMMARY OF RESULTS: A summary of the results of this research will be supplied to you, at no cost, upon request, and will be made available upon request after the research is completed and submitted in December 2022. Requests to receive final research documents can be made to Lacy Ellman via email at ellmanlacy@seattleu.edu or over the phone at (417) 327-9580.

VOLUNTARY CONSENT: I have read the above statements and understand what is being asked of me. I also understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw my consent at any time, for any reason, without penalty. On these terms, I certify that I am willing to participate in this research project.

I understand that should I have any concerns about my participation in this study, I may call Lacy Ellman, who is asking me to participate, at (417) 327-9580. If I have any concerns that my rights are being violated, I may contact Dr. Michael Spinetta, Chair of the Seattle University Institutional Review Board at (206) 296-2585.

Note: Confirmation of consent was received verbally at the time of interview and is included in interview recordings.