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Biblical Literalism And Implications For Learning

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BIBLICAL LITERALISM AND IMPLICATIONS FOR LEARNING

Abstract

Given that everything we learn is scaffolded onto prior knowledge, how and what we learn is infinitely complex. There are many factors influencing learning, including environment, social and institutional attitudes, access, conditioning and biases. Among the social and environmental factors, religious affiliation is a powerful force which can either encourage educational pursuit, or discourage and demonize it.

This study used Mezirow’s Transformative Learning Theory (2003) to examine the lived experiences of individuals who were raised in biblical literalist faith traditions. The researcher conducted loosely structured interviews with each participant to learn about their educational and spiritual journeys as they left the religion of their childhood in search of a more integrated approach to knowledge and spirituality. The study culminated in recommendations for educators teaching students from such a background.
University of New England
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To my two eldest children, Troy and Danae, I hope I make you proud and inspire you to chase your dreams. To my two youngest children, Jayden and Mallory, I hope that I have shown you that you can accomplish anything you put your mind to. Imagine what you can do with your whole life ahead of you!

To my extended family who has stood by me always, in good times and bad, you have made me who I am today. Thank you for always being there for me.
DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to the memory of my beloved mother, whom we lost five years ago to cancer. Your six-year battle showed me strength and perseverance beyond comprehension. Knowing that such strength was within you, helped me to find it within myself.
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CHAPTER ONE
INTRODUCTION

Just as the human brain is infinitely complex, learning is a complex process driven and influenced by external and internal factors. Learning does not occur in a vacuum. Everything humans learn is scaffolded on prior learning and experience. Information is received and then contextualized based on the learner’s existing knowledge and beliefs. How learners interpret information can differ based on culture, religion, socioeconomic status, geography and other factors. These factors collectively contribute to an individual’s belief system. Students arrive in the classroom bringing with them their experiences and beliefs, and teachers must understand how those inherent biases influence learning readiness.

The purpose of this study was to investigate, through the collection of first-person narratives, how the embrace of biblical literalism can influence the ability of learners to suspend preconceived notions and biases and accept new knowledge. This study explored how biblical literalists employ techniques of motivated reasoning and selective perception to combat feelings of cognitive dissonance.

Many of these organizations are immersive, in that followers are highly involved in church activities multiple times a week and are often educated either by a church-sponsored school or are homeschooled. Learners in these faith traditions are actively discouraged from questioning foundational doctrine and are taught to ignore their doubts. As a consequence, the ability to question their own beliefs, biases and habits of mind is hampered. Open questioning is heavily influenced by the threat of internal and external consequences. It could cause the believer to be shunned by their social group as an external consequence, or could spend eternity in hell as
an internal consequence. These threats are effective and prove compelling for individuals, sparking fear and further entrenching them within the belief system. By instilling this fear of eternal and earthly consequences, the church provides sufficient motivation for the believer to self-regulate such doubts.

This unyielding inflexibility regarding the literal interpretation of the Bible is not without good reason, as Will Gervais and Ara Norenzayan found in their 2012 study. They found that the promotion of analytical or critical thinking tended to reduce belief in God. They concluded that an increase in critical thinking ability reduced the learner’s reliance on pseudoscientific or magical thinking. Thus, for the church it is a question of survival. In order for the church to survive, believers must continue to believe, even in the face of overwhelming contradiction.

Problem Statement

Data-resistant beliefs are understandings which prevail in the face of contrary evidence. The proliferation of data-resistant beliefs has become a prominent issue in American public life. Such terms as “fake news” and “alternative facts” have emerged, revealing a troubling trend towards ideologically-motivated disinformation as a vehicle for reinforcing belief systems which then become barriers to learning.

The Union of Concerned Scientists (UCS) is an organization dedicated to, among other things, combatting the spread of misinformation. The UCS recognizes that “Not all misinformation about science results from agenda-driven deceptions. Sometimes a scientifically unsound idea will gain a cultural foothold and persist in the face of clear evidence to the contrary” (“Union of Concerned Scientists”, 2017, Para. 6). Thus, the problem of addressing disinformation extends beyond political machinations and special interests. The problem of
disinformation just as often lies in human nature and the process by which humans discern truth from lies.

Compounding this issue is the ubiquity of both credible and not credible information via the Internet. The Internet has become the primary, if not exclusive, source of information for many people, and yet many people have not been taught how to discern the value and credibility of the information they find (Vydiswaran, Zhai, Roth, & Pirolli, 2015). Internet browsing is often a solitary activity, so users also tend to favor information which affirms their existing beliefs and viewpoints, gravitating toward communities of like-minded individuals, effectively creating a self-sustaining echo chamber.

This phenomenological study sought to understand the role of biblical literalism in the development of data-resistant belief systems by exploring the lived experiences of current or past adherents. This study reveals some prescriptive courses of action to assist educators in identifying, understanding and helping such students to succeed.

**Statement of Purpose**

The purpose of this phenomenological study is to understand the impact of biblical literalism on learning. Socialization is a key factor in learning readiness. Social groups that promote the pursuit of higher education tend to have better educational outcomes compared to groups who do not place value in secular education. Religious groups are very influential, given the centrality of religion to the learner’s self-concept and identity.

Biblical literalist faith groups employ methods of isolation, control and strong emotions to retain followers and prevent the proliferation of doctrinal challenges by followers. These religious groups are generally immersive, in that children raised within these groups have little
exposure to people outside of the group, or to ideas and knowledge outside of the teachings of the church. Biblical literalism also presents unique challenges for learners, as belief in the Bible as unerring and infallible requires the learner to suspend disbelief and reject secular teachings about science and even history. Children within these traditions are taught that evolution is a lie from the devil, and that they must fight back against any assertions that seem to contradict the Bible. In so doing, the church inhibits the ability to these learners to accurately assess the validity of new information.

In order to effectively study these experiences, research questions were developed.

**Research Questions**

The questions that were explored with this study include:

- How does biblical literalism impact the willingness of a learner to embrace new information contradicting their previous beliefs?
- How do religious leaders promoting biblical literalism reinforce these beliefs and by what methods do these communities stifle or discourage dissenting views?
- How can believers integrate biblical and secular teachings?
- What was helpful during the process of integration or deconversion? What role did friends, family, or educators play in that process?

**Overview of Methodology**

This study will be conducted by way of a phenomenological methodology. The research will consist of interviews of individuals who are currently, or have been, members of a religious community which promoted a doctrine of biblical literalism. This research will examine:

- Lived experiences of biblical literalists
• Methods used to reinforce biblical literalism and insulate it from scientific inquiry
• Impacts of biblical literalism on learning

Rationale and Significance

Technology has altered human learning and behavior. Access to information both real and fabricated has become ubiquitous with smartphones and tablets. If one has questions about the wisdom of vaccinating your child, within minutes one can find a vast number of sources passionately advocating for or against it. The Union of Concerned Scientists stated that despite overwhelming research-based evidence supporting the use of vaccinations, “information contamination” hinders public health efforts and continues to result in outbreaks of easily prevented diseases such as HPV and whooping cough. ("Union of Concerned Scientists", 2017)

The question then becomes, what does one do if two different answers are found for the same query? How can a reader determine what is real and what is not? There are means available to check the sources of information and evaluate them based on credibility and reputation, but there is more to be done. There are other factors which influence how we view information in the world around us.

Role of the Researcher

The researcher conducted interviews with individuals who have had the experience of belonging to a religious organization which espouses a doctrine of biblical literalism. Research participants were interviewed via phone or teleconference.

Discernment Statement

The researcher has a personal background in a biblical literalist faith organization. The researcher’s background in Pentecostalism, coupled with the emergence of problematic cognitive
biases writ large in the public discourse, led the researcher to investigate the phenomena of biblical literalism and its impacts on learning.

**Definitions of Key Terminology**

**Belief**

Belief indicates a degree of confidence that an idea, concept or being is deserving of a measure of merit. The amount of merit attributed can be low, medium or high. Once 100% confidence is reached, the belief becomes knowledge. (Eddy, 2004)

**Belief Bias**

A belief bias occurs when an individual’s pre-existing beliefs serve as a barrier to learning new information, particularly if that information contradicts existing beliefs. (Alleydog, 2017)

**Belief System**

Belief systems are a collection of personal assumptions and beliefs about the world. Belief systems then becomes the lens through which we see the world around us, and all new knowledge scaffolds to this system. (Johnson, 2011)

**Biblical Inerrancy (see also, biblical literalism)**

Biblical inerrancy refers to the view that the Bible is “free from all falsehood, fraud, or deceit” (Andrew, 2002, p. 3).

**Biblical Literalism (see also, biblical inerrancy)**

Biblical literalism is a belief that the Bible should be taken, word for word, literally. (Jelen, 1989)
Cognition

Cognition refers to all activities related to learning, remembering and recalling information and/or stimuli. (Alleydog, 2017)

Cognitive Bias

Cognitive Bias refers to inaccuracies in how an individual perceives and processes information, based on their inherent biases. (Alleydog, 2017)

Confirmation Bias

Confirmation bias refers to an individual’s propensity for easily accepting information consistent with their existing beliefs. This is also known as selective exposure…any information contrary to current viewpoints or beliefs is avoided.

Conversion

Conversion is the act of letting go of an existing belief system in favor of a new belief system.

Critical Thinking

According to Franco, Costa, Butler, and Almeida (2017), “[c]ritical thinking is a kind of ‘good’ thinking that integrates a set of cognitive skills and dispositions to use those skills with knowledge to increase the chances of success in academic settings, job market, and daily life” (p. 707).

Deconversion

Deconversion is the process by which a believer rejects an existing belief system and does not immediately replace it with another.
Disconfirmation Bias

Disconfirmation bias refers to an individual’s efforts to discredit information that is contrary to their current beliefs.

Cognitive Dissonance

Cognitive Dissonance refers to a state in which an individual is struggling with two opposing cognitive states, causing a state of disequilibrium.

Fowler’s Faith Stage Theory

Fowler’s Faith Stage Theory is a framework depicting the stages of religious faith, beginning with Intuitive-Projective and culminating in Universalizing Faith. (N.A. Psychology Charts, 2017)

Indoctrination

Indoctrination is information conveyed in ways deliberately intended to promote "uncritical acceptance of doctrine without regard to evidence" (Sears & Hughes, 2006, p. 1).

Organization of the Dissertation

This study began with a literature review analyzing human learning and the factors influencing cognition, examining what researchers know about human learning and the role of belief systems in learning readiness. The study will then evaluate the theories and constructs that play a role in the development and self-perpetuating nature of biblical literalism. The narrative research focused on individuals with a background in biblical literalist faith traditions, in an effort to better understand those lived experiences. Finally, the study concludes with an analysis of those experiences and a look forward to practical applications for what has been learned about learners from biblical literalist faith traditions.
CHAPTER TWO
LITERATURE REVIEW

This literature review investigates the learning process and the impacts of biblical literalism on learning readiness. The review also presents Fowler’s Stages of Faith Development, Mezirow’s Transformational Learning Theory, and problematic cognitive biases.

Reaching consensus on a definition for learning has proven difficult. Whereas traditional thinking focused on learning as a *product*, more current research leans toward a definition of learning as a *process*, evidenced by altered behavior (Dandy & Bendersky, 2014). Ambrose, Bridges, DiPietro, Lovett, & Norman (2010) defined learning as “a process that leads to change, which occurs as a result of experience and increases the potential for improved performance and future learning” (p. 3). A study conducted by Dandy and Bendersky (2014), surveyed both students and faculty to discover how they defined learning and found that both groups defined learning as “the comprehension and use of knowledge” (p. 363). Students take in information, construct an understanding based on their existing knowledge, and then *use* that knowledge in the real world (Mezirow, 2000). Thus, the implications for how knowledge fits into the existing belief systems and social environment of a student cannot be ignored.

**Conditions needed for readiness to learn**

A student’s presence in class does not guarantee that they are ready to learn. “Adults’ readiness to learn and barriers preventing it…can be understood in terms of societal processes and structure, institutional processes and structure and individual consciousness and activity” (Rubenson, 1998, p. 3-4).
Socialization

The impacts of the social environment of students cannot be denied. The social environment of a student can include their family, friends, community, neighborhood, religious affiliation, and colleagues. If a student’s social environment is one in which learning and knowledge are both sought and valued, the student is likely to see the value in seeking knowledge and to have the support needed in the environment to succeed.

It is important for educators to remember that students are not always socialized in a pro-learning environment. Some students may have been conditioned to be skeptical of science and to favor religious teachings over secular teachings. In fact, for some students, believing in evolution is a personally revolutionary act, as it flies in the face of all their existing belief systems and those of their social network, and can even result in their rejection by that social network (Moscovici, 1980).

Individual Consciousness

The existing knowledge and worldview embraced by students create the lens through which they see the world, and the filter through which they decide what information to keep, and what to discard. Some belief systems can become barriers to learning readiness, particularly if those belief systems are deliberately designed to be data-resistant.

Learners with low personal investment in a topic may employ the “heuristic rule, [in which] consensus implies correctness, and thus agree with a majority position” (Wood, 2000, p. 551). In this situation, the learner is more likely to embrace the viewpoint of their social group rather than explore the issue independently. As such, contradictory information, regardless of
validity, is filtered out, preventing the learner from benefiting from a variety of viewpoints and worldviews.

Bourdieu’s Theory of Habitus provides insight into the engrained nature of human habits, as “a system of dispositions that allows and governs how a person acts, thinks and orients him/herself in the social world” (Rubenson, 1998, p. 3). Deep-seated and closely-held traditions, whether social, cultural, religious or circumstantial, impact a student’s ability and willingness to accept new information. Not all cognitive habits have a negative effect. For example, students who are raised in environments in which learning is embraced and promoted tend to experience greater success in school. Conversely, a student who has been taught to view education as the domain of “elites” may reject new knowledge simply to avoid being painted in an unflattering light by those in their social environment. In such an environment, the pursuit or acquisition of expertise is derided as elitist.

**Institutional Processes**

To learn, one must transcend one’s culture, biases, values, ego, past experience and sense of self in order to see things as they really are. Learning is said to have occurred when this view elicits a transformation of consciousness that leads to a greater nurturing of self, others, and the environment. From this perspective, a school’s fundamental purpose is the creation of better human beings which occurs through self-actualization and self-transcendence. (Johnson, 2011, p. 12)

The approach of educators can help and/or hinder the learning process. Considering the implications of social environment and consciousness on an individual’s readiness to learn will help educators to employ more effective teaching practices. The purpose of this study is to better
understand the impacts of rigid religious ideologies on critical thinking to empower educators to equip students with the tools to recognize and overcome their own learning barriers.

“The purpose of schools is to help students construct knowledge and develop the skills they will need to successfully live in their worlds. Teaching is a matter of creating conditions whereby students are able to transact with knowledge” (Johnson, 2011, p. 11). Indeed, teaching learners how to engage in critical thinking and discussion free of bias and the influence of preconception and ideology is a foundational goal of adult education (Mezirow, 2000).

**Role of Prior Beliefs and Knowledge**

Learning occurs as a “result of how students interpret and respond to their experiences” (Ambrose, et al, 2010, p. 3). In essence, everything students learn is received and understood through the lens of their lived experiences. Students view the world within the context of their social, emotional, physical, and cognitive backgrounds. That context will influence their value systems, and likewise those value systems will impact their readiness to learn.

Mezirow (2002) described four means of learning: alteration of existing frames of reference, acquisition of new frames of reference, changes to viewpoint and evolution of habits of mind (p. 18). In each of these methods, the new knowledge is either placed into the context of the learners’ experience and existing knowledge, or the new information creates a transformation in those constructs, allowing a paradigm shift.

“Research has continued to document how recipients’ motives (i.e. to defend self, maintain desired relations with others, have accurate judgments) instigate and direct…processing” (Wood, 2000, p. 554).
Beliefs and Learning Readiness

A belief, as defined by Schwitzgebel (2011, para. 2), is a state in which an individual regards certain propositions as true. A belief system, then, is a compilation of propositions which help us make sense of the world around us and acts as a “filter to eliminate data that does not correlate with our constructs” (Johnson, 2011, p. 8). Thus, a belief system can serve as a barrier to learning, particularly if the information presented seems to contradict previously held beliefs. For example, a study by Leiserowitz, Maibach, Roser-Renouf and Hmielowski (2011) found that those who reject the science of climate change were also very likely to believe that they had a high level of understanding about the topic. By that logic, in their estimation, they had no more to learn about the topic. By comparison, those who professed to be ignorant about the topic were more receptive to learning about it. As such, knowing what one doesn’t know can play a role in learning readiness.

For all humans, the process of learning involves taking in new information and then scaffolding it based on prior knowledge, life experiences, biases and preconceptions. As a consequence, the same information can be interpreted differently based on the belief system of the person consuming the information. Indeed, “…some have speculated that bias emerges when people rely on their (presumably predominantly attitude-supportive) personal beliefs and knowledge to evaluate an issue” (Wood, 2000, p. 554).

While belief systems have the potential to become barriers to acceptance what is generally understood as factual information, a belief system can also manifest as a willingness to accept non-factual information if that information is consistent with that individual’s existing belief system. Belief systems give rise to biases which can be difficult to dislodge. The truth is,
“many of our false beliefs stem from mundane reasoning errors and biases which are inherent in the way the human mind processes information” (Boudry & Braeckman, 2012, p. 343).

Levels of Belief Systems

Johnson (2011) identified three different categories of belief systems, each with varying degrees of resistance or openness to learning new information.

1. The first level is knowledge. This level includes all the information that we have absorbed through our schooling. The knowledge level includes our most basic understanding of the world around us, and is, of the three levels, the least restrictive and easily adaptable to new information.

2. The next level encompasses cultural understanding. This level gets to the heart of how we see the world, and includes our basic philosophical, cultural and religious schema. New information that is inconsistent with existing beliefs is likely to be rejected or will be difficult to scaffold without reconciling or revising old understandings.

3. The final level is metaphysical. This level of belief system is the most resistant to learning because it deals with our most closely held beliefs about the physical, spiritual and supernatural world. Metaphysical belief systems are very difficult to infiltrate, and require deliberate revision and restructuring of deeply-held mental paradigms.

This level includes “our fundamental assumptions about both the phenomenal reality of space, time and matter; as well as the trans-phenomenal or transcendental reality described by mystics, shamans, prophets, poets, and quantum physicists…our most essential religious or
spiritual beliefs, [which are] …extremely resistant to change” (Johnson, p. 8-9, 2011). It is here that religion asserts its power over learning. When secular education is categorized as deviant by an individual’s religious group, which comprises of the majority of their social circle, the impacts can be far-reaching, leading to problems with cognitive bias and requiring selective perception and motivated reasoning to stave off dissonance.

**Impact of Religion on Learning**

There are thousands of religions in the world today. These religions have in common a belief in a single, or multiple higher power(s), and a prescriptive set of values and principles. The higher powers and the prescriptive values may differ, as may the traditions and practices, but most religions have common features. Religion differs from belief in that belief refers to privately-held understandings, and religion is the public and communal expression of those understandings. Some religions immerse their followers in a doctrine of biblical literalism that is resistant to contradictory insights.

Organized religion plays a pivotal role in the social environment of students. “Anthropological studies indicating that perceptions of self, others, and the environment are highly influenced by the culture in which one is immersed (Harman, 1967, p. 7).” Glenn and Hyland (1997), found that religion and its impact on the lives of adherents is “the most viable topic of debate in the sociology of religion in the United States (p.73). Duncan and Featherman (1973) concurred, citing studies finding that religion’s impacts on lifestyle were significant in the area of education. Indeed, organized religions have a vested interest in education, given “the centrality of education for the transmission of cultural values” (Darnell & Sherkat, 1997, p. 307).
In fact, the goals of a religious organization may be antithetical to the goals of secular education, since many religious teachings, taken literally, sit in direct contradiction of principles of scientific inquiry. Seeking truth or tangible confirmation of biblical assertions is viewed as an attempt to discredit the Bible, and by extension, the entire belief system. Indeed, “for many conservative Protestants, education serves to undermine both secular and divine authority by promoting ‘humanism’ and denigrating faith” (Darnell & Sherkat, 1997, p. 307). Giberson and Johnson (2002) found in a case study evaluating the teaching of evolution in public schools, that the fiercest opposition to the teaching of evolution in the classroom was predicated on the opinion that the teaching of evolution “undermines morality and values in general” (p. 242) and was a contributing factor to delinquency and deviance. In their estimation, “teaching evolution thus leads to such broadly diverse social phenomena as atheism, communism, socialism, Nazism, inflation, homosexuality, women’s liberation, sex education, teenage sex, abortion, pornography, family breakdown, school shootings, crime, alcoholism, and drug addiction, to name a few” (Johnson & Giberson, 2002, p. 242).

As such, some religious individuals may be actively suspicious, dismissive or disdainful of secular education, even to the extent of considering science to be a conspiracy against religion (Johnson & Giberson, 2002). Science’s greatest sin has been its inability to confirm the existence of a higher power. If science says there is no higher power, science then becomes antagonistic to that core belief. From there, rejection of scientific findings related to climate change or the origins of life becomes quite instinctive. Science becomes the enemy of belief, and religious organizations foster that adversarial bias in order to insulate their doctrine from scrutiny and/or skepticism.
**Biblical Literalism**

A key factor determining the impact fundamentalist Christian traditions have on learning lies in the degree to which the believer accepts the infallibility of the Bible. There are degrees of biblical belief, from a belief in the general, but not literal, applicability of biblical precepts of morality; to inerrancy, which asserts that the Bible, if properly interpreted, is completely true (Andrew, 2002); to literalism, which holds the view that the Bible should be taken literally in all things. Objection to secular education increases based on the extent to which the adherent believes that the religious text is completely infallible and the only truth (Ellison & Musick, 1995). Darnell and Sherkat (1997) found that “both conservative denominations and parents’ beliefs in Biblical inerrancy have substantial, statistically significant indirect effects on educational attainment through their impact on youth’s beliefs and curriculum choice” (p. 312). They went on to assert that while it is easy to view this position as ignorant, the judgment is one of value. The value of promoting the continued survival of the belief system is viewed as more compelling than that of secular education, leading to “significantly lower educational aspirations” (p. 310).

Biblical literalism can impact learning in a variety of ways. In the United States, religion figures prominently into the national dialogue. Climate change, stem cell research, women’s reproductive rights and other issues informed by the scientific community face great resistance from some religious leaders.

In those cases, learning is impeded by the existing belief systems of those who ascribe to those religions. Because the most basic and foundational aspects of biblical literalism directly and irrevocably contradict data presented by scientists and experts, believers are forced to choose
between the two. Given a choice of believing in climate change and being rejected by their social group, versus rejecting science and clinging to their existing belief systems, learners can find it very difficult to choose alienation.

Even the use of structured reasoning about source credibility can be thwarted by those embedded beliefs. In order to be open to learning new ideas, learners must employ *epoche*, a term which references a learner’s ability to temporarily suspend their previous understandings in order to engage in more critical inquiry (Mezirow, 2000). As it pertains to source credibility, it is incumbent on the learner to be able to set aside their preconceptions about the validity of a source to be able to make an accurate assessment. Determining the credibility of a source is integral to the appropriate consumption and understanding of information, and yet, if a religious organization espouses an anti-science bias in favor of spiritual tomes, the individual is likely to deem the peer-reviewed work of a renowned scientist with greater suspicion than the work of a known faith leader. This can even be true if the faith leader is speaking about concepts with which they do not have expertise. The centrality of the religious belief system in the individual’s worldview will crowd out conflicting voices.

That is not to say, however, that all religious belief systems impede learning. A religion which utilizes its social capital to promote learning will yield higher levels of attainment. Paul Burstein, as cited in a study by the Pew Research Center (2016), found that Jewish beliefs and religious practices actually improved learning outcomes due to their embrace and promotion of secular education. Religions, with their community and social aspects, as well as the fundamental role of belief in human cognition, can have far-reaching impacts on educational attainment by virtue of their embrace or rejection of secular education and scholarship. Thus, religious
affiliation does not alone serve as an indicator of positive vs negative attitudes and outcomes for learning. The specific values espoused, the degree to which the bible is viewed as infallible or inerrant, and the extent to which the religious community promotes or suppresses secular education prove the true differentiators.

Educators, then, must take into consideration the religious backgrounds of students, and if they fail to do so, they will not be able to effectively instruct them (Johnson & Giberson, 2002).

**Anatomy of Data-Resistant Beliefs**

Biblical literalism, in order to create and maintain status quo, situates itself in an adversarial role against secularism by promoting data-resistant beliefs. Instilling data-resistant beliefs involves the use of methods designed to create a self-perpetuating cycle of confirmation. In other words, the learner believes x, because they have always believed x, and because their peers believe x. The learner will continue to believe x, as it protects their way of life and their standing within their social group.

“Basic attitudes and beliefs (self-and world-views), conscious and unconscious, tend to be self-fulfilling” (Harman, 1967, p. 5). Thus, religions that espouse a viewpoint of biblical literalism must create an environment in which the religious belief system is foundational in the individuals’ concept of self, superseding all other aspects of moral and personal development. The belief system becomes a cognitive map that informs cognition and reasoning (Quackenbush, 2001). By becoming part of “who they are”, the belief system becomes an entity readily and fervently defended through the use of selective perception, motivated reasoning and other
cognitive machinations. This deep entrenchment occurs, and is maintained, through means of isolation, control, repetition, strong emotions, obedience, fear, and framing.

Isolation

Isolation is a key element for creating self-perpetuating beliefs. The isolation can be physical, as in religions in which adherents live together in a communal arrangement, or isolation can be ideological. Ideological isolation is achieved when you have removed outside influences. A contemporary example of this isolation is North Korea. Though not a religion in the traditional sense, in North Korea, citizens have a deeply-embedded hatred of Americans predicated by the consistent, persistent indoctrination of the government, further supported by lack of evidence to the contrary. This is achieved by limiting access to outside information, isolating the learner.

Indeed, “fundamentalist Protestant orientations are potent cultural attributes developed through intense early socialization, reinforced by strict parenting techniques and sustained in tightly-knit communities that promote particular interpretations of sacred texts” (Darnell & Sherkat, 1997, p. 307). By creating, in effect, an ideological bubble around followers, religious organizations of all types can exert better control.

Another form of isolation occurs by way of parallel culture. Evangelical organizations often fortify their belief system by branching out into other areas of instruction, creating academic materials conveying the version of science and history which best comports with their doctrine (Stephens & Giberson, 2011). In so doing, they overlay science with religious teachings, creating an understanding inconsistent with principles of scientific inquiry, but compatible with the goals and values of the belief system, as in the case of scientific creationism (Giberson, 2008). Among other concerns, this stance can create a false sense of security or an elevated sense
of expertise in a learner who has studied science in this way, which may manifest in overconfidence. The learner believes that they have received education in science, when what they have actually received is education in how their religious organization would like for them to view science.

Control

A characteristic frequently seen in biblical literalist religions is control. A religion can only isolate their followers by exercising control over what they see, read, hear and do. Some religions prohibit watching television and listening to secular music. By isolating congregants from the pop culture experiences of their peers, they create a divide which is difficult to overcome and reduces the learner’s ability to assimilate with the world around them. “…history teaches us that religions and political parties try to control private beliefs as well as public expression and that they succeed” (Moscovici, 1980, p. 236).

Repetition

A key element of traditional teaching and learning is repetition. Repetition is both a method of delivery and assessment. Thus, it is not hard to imagine how repetition also figures strongly into the development of data-resistant, fundamentalist beliefs. Biblically literalist religions employ repetition by adhering to, and never deviating from, a rigid worldview. These belief systems are reinforced unceasingly, in sermons, songs, and in the interactions of followers. Some fundamentalist religions even prohibit secular music and movies and in so doing, ensure that the religious belief system continues to be upheld, and the impact of external influences which may call into question those beliefs are nullified.
**Strong Emotions**

Communities of believers form very strong emotional bonds. They are bound by common values, interests and beliefs. For those religions which also employ methods of isolation and control, the community bond becomes a fundamental part of how the individual views the world and their role in it. As such, breaking free from that belief system can be very difficult, as it can result in the individual being cast out of the community. In those cases, the very act of learning and incorporating new knowledge is a revolutionary act of rebellion against everything they have been taught.

**Obedience**

Obedience is another fundamental tenet of religious doctrines promoting biblical literalism. To inspire obedience, followers are conditioned to believe that the consequences for failing to follow the rules are existential and compelling. For instance, believing in evolution, which is antithetical to creationism if the bible is taken literally, is a fast track to eternal damnation. Questioning the validity of creationism was a deviant, shameful act, best kept hidden from others in the religious community.

“Majority influence in combination with social control, even weak social control, leads to compliance, which is maximized when there is strong collective control and minimized when there is strong individual control” (Moscovici, 1980, p. 231).

**Fear**

Fear is another tool of control. Many Christian faiths spend significant time lecturing their followers on the consequences for sin. Depending on your religion, sin could be anything from adultery to wearing the wrong color. Fear is a consistent and pervasive method of
preventing deviation from religious belief systems. Fear of punishment by God and fear of alienation from one’s community, family, friends and peers can completely override the ability of an individual for critical thinking and reasoning. “The very idea of submitting religious truth claims to empirical investigation was sheer blasphemy (an excellent immunizing strategy if there ever was one)” (Boudry, Blancke & Pigliucci, 2015, p. 1190). Questioning becomes an act which could result in ostracization from the individual’s social group and community.

**Language and Framing**

Framing is a strategy that relies on placing an issue within the context of a community’s existing belief system and values. Framing evolution as an attempt to discredit the Bible, for instance, creates a barrier to learning about science because believing in science has been deemed to be dangerous to the belief system of the group.

The impact of framing cannot be ignored. Framing an issue in the context of an established belief system is a means of persuasion. For example, people are more favorable toward ‘affirmative action’ when others claim that it refers to equal opportunity rather than…reverse discrimination. Even subtle aspects of the way an issue is framed or represented in an appeal, such as the apparent location and time at which a proposal will take place, can affect recipient’s attitudes (Liberman & Chaiken 1996, as cited in Wood, 2000, p. 550).

Political and religious messaging can be reinforced by consistent repetition of key phrases, intended to evoke an emotional response, such as “America first” or “traditional values”. By framing isolationist rhetoric in patriotic terms, the influencer is able to assign a position or connotation to isolationism (patriotism), casting any opponents to that philosophy as unpatriotic. We have observed, over the last several years, how militant minorities and extremists
in political and cultural circles have affected our outlook, changed our manner of behaving, dressing, speaking, etc., without at the same time leading most of us to accept their positions or making us act as they would wish (Moscovici, 1980, p. 223).

In other words, by repeated exposure to even non-normative actions, attitudes, or beliefs, a minority position can become normalized. Historians will someday view this time in American history with keen interest as a case study for the use of messaging and propaganda, as it was weaponized against the American people by the Russian government. Indeed, “uncritical acceptance of political solutions and propaganda provided by a ruling elite occurs when citizens wish to assume a certain social identity (e.g. party allegiance)” (Wood, 2000, p. 560).

Many religious traditions also have very specific terms to describe those who leave the faith. Within that tradition, such individuals are spoken of in a negative light, so it is not surprising that adherents will employ great mental gymnastics to reduce any cognitive dissonance that could potentially lead them to straying from the ideological path. By casting former believers as backsliders, heathens, heretics, suppressive-persons or apostates, religions are able to exert control simply by suggesting that believers who stray will become other. By their use of language and by providing and reinforcing such negative depictions of dissidents, these religions cause their followers to regard such dissent as shameful.

Some religious leaders also frame ideologies into basic storylines such as right vs. wrong or good vs. bad, oversimplifying complex issues to make them more easily understood, at best, or to obscure the truth or perpetuate a lie, at worst (Narayanaswami, n.d.). This framing method was deployed in Germany in the 1930s and 1940s. The German government began prepping for the Holocaust by launching a targeted propaganda campaign. It took advantage of pre-existing
sentiments or biases, and weaponized them against anybody whom the German government wanted expunged – Jews, non-Aryan Germans, the disabled, and other ethnic and demographic minorities.

…The [propaganda] campaign’s only rationale was to blunt the sensibilities of the people regarding the campaign of persecution and murder which was being carried out.

(Narayanaswami, n.d., p. 2) (from Judgment of O. Dietrich, Trial of War criminals before the Nurember Military Tribunal Under Allied Control Council Law No. 10, October 1946-April 1949)

In short, because the nature of biblical literalism invariably hinges on unquestioning acceptance of a belief system and exists as a social construct providing a sense of meaning and purpose, as well as community and belonging, it leaves the door open for the possibility of problematic cognition. This potential for inhibition of learning readiness is exacerbated by the social/community aspect of organized religion. By tying learning-resistance to the overall sense of belonging, rejecting science becomes an act of community or tribalism. Voicing doubts or expressing a willingness to consider ideas which run contrary to religious teachings can lead to alienation from a community that is integral to the individual’s self-concept and social standing.

It is not difficult to imagine how such a change could be daunting.

**Thinking about Thinking**

Biblical literalism and rejection of secular education leave a learner vulnerable to a number of problematic cognitive approaches.
Motivated Reasoning. Motivated reasoning occurs when information received is manipulated by an individual to fit an existing belief or narrative, in an effort to reinforce and protect the belief system (Quackenbush, 2001). These efforts at self-propagandization serve to protect the unimpeachable veracity of the bible while also allowing the learner to inoculate the potential dangers posed by information in conflict with their existing beliefs.

Cognitive theory, with its focus on learners’ established patterns of thinking, implies that learners “actively reinforce…irrational ideation and maintain current belief systems through schema-consistent information processing” (Quackenbush, 2001, p. 323). Therefore, efforts to reduce or eliminate contradictions between new information and established assumptions can cause learners to insulate themselves within closed belief systems, further perpetuating the pervasiveness of their bubble.

Pseudoscientific Thinking as a Function of Biblical Literalism. Pseudoscientific thinking has existed as long as science has been a topic of study (Eve & Dunn, 1990). Opportunists have cashed in on the very basic human desire for cognitive expedience, whether it be snake oil salesmen or ill-intentioned, self-proclaimed gurus. When religious leaders tout the bible as a scientific text, their intention is for followers to accept a literal interpretation of the bible as an authority in all things. What results is an overly-simplified, rigid belief system resistant to new knowledge.

Biblical literalism intersects with pseudoscientific thinking in that the bible cannot be proven scientifically. Because the bible cannot be proven scientifically, some religious organizations espouse a pseudoscientific view, manifesting as a bastardization of science and
religious teaching which cherry picks scientific principles that fit neatly into biblical teachings, while discarding or discrediting the rest.

While belief in the inerrancy of the bible is maintained by self-propagandization, it is reinforced by social constructs. Similar to religion, the success of a pseudoscience relies on factors such as the charisma of the leader, the exploitation of outrage cycles in the political and social environment, and is fed by social media and tribalism (Boudry, Blancke & Pigliucci, 2015). Pseudoscience, as well as many forms of religion, has sacrificed intellectual integrity for intuitive appeal…Researchers in the tradition of motivated reasoning have shown that irrational biases are held in check by how much bigotry, special pleading, and obstinancy we think we can get away with…we act like lawyers in defense of our own cognitive sanity (Boudry, Blancke & Pigliucci, 2015, p. 1188)

Thus, it is human nature to defend most vigorously our most fundamental beliefs in order to maintain our self-image and our sense of our own morality and personal ethics. This self-image, foundational to our most basic sense of self, becomes a justification for rejection of even the most widely accepted scientific truths.

Theoretical constructs/framework

Fowler’s Stages of Faith. James Fowler’s research into faith yielded a framework which has proven useful to scholars investigating the life cycle of faith in the human experience. His research resulted in a framework identifying six distinct stages of faith development. The first stage, Intuitive-Projective, can be viewed as child-like faith. This faith stage typically occurs in early childhood and is constructed of the fantasies and fables shared with us by adults. The next stage, Mythic-Literal, occurs in later childhood, and is the time when children attempt to connect
fantasies to reality by interpreting information in literal ways. The third stage, Synthetic-Conventional, is common in teenagers, and is an attempt to frame faith and belief within the context of complex social interactions and norms. The fourth stage, Individuative-Reflective, often occurs in young adulthood and represents a period of time in which learners are facing challenges to their worldview and are attempting to square inconsistencies in their belief systems, and leads to deconversion in many cases. The fifth and sixth stages are Conjunctive Faith and Universalizing Faith.

Both Conjunctive Faith and Universalizing Faith are rarely achieved, as they connote the achievement of balance between the physical and spiritual states, transcending religion and focusing on promoting wellness in self and others (Psychology Charts, 2017). Indeed, “researchers have speculated on the existence of a special mode of ‘magical thinking’, which is disconnected from normal reasoning faculties, or which constitutes a pre-rational stage in the development of the human mind” (Boudry & Braeckman, 2013, p. 343). This magical thinking, sometimes in the form of pseudoscientific analysis, proves a considerable obstacle for learners attempting to transition from a biblical literalist worldview to a more mature faith which integrates spiritualism and secularism.

**Belief System Theory.** Belief systems are not just for religious individuals. “Each of us has a vast network of belief systems that act as a scaffold to help us interpret and organize information and experiences” (Johnson, 2009, p. 8). Beliefs of all kinds, but most profoundly, religious and spiritual beliefs, play a pivotal role in personal development, manifesting in an individual’s sense of self, social identity, and the biases that act as gatekeeper to their understanding of the world around them (Heiphetz, Spelke, Harris, Banaji, 2013, p. 559). In this
way, “…degrees of belief, just like outright beliefs, can function as attitudes that we reason from and attitudes we reason to” (Staffel, 2013, p. 3537).

Rigid belief systems can give rise to a proclivity for cognitive economy, in which existing beliefs are not critically examined, and are in fact, rigorously fortified by a refusal to consider other viewpoints. In the case of biblical literalism, deeper examination of doctrinal issues is discouraged, and a heuristic approach becomes a practical matter of reducing uncomfortable dissonance and maintaining the status quo. As a result, the learner can consider themselves to be quite knowledgeable about a topic that they know absolutely nothing about. In this case, because the original premise was false, and all further learning endeavored to reinforce the false premise, the result is a faulty understanding of the topic. It becomes too much work, then, to wrestle with the dissonance which ensues, so it is avoided altogether by use of motivated reasoning and other cognitive machinations.

Social Identity Theory. Regardless of religious affiliation, or lack thereof, humans tend to self-select into social and community groups reflective of their values. Wendy Wood (2000), of the Texas A&M Department of Psychology, asserted that, “agreement from others as similar to self enhances one’s subjective certainty and suggests that the shared attitudes reflect external reality…” (p. 557). Thus, begins a self-perpetuating cycle of confirmation of a pre-existing worldview. Individuals select their social group based on their beliefs and then believe as their social group believes. Within the social group, “shared beliefs and knowledge provide[d] social validation for…members’ views” (Kameda, 1997, p. 300). Continued membership in the social group is dependent on members ongoing motivation to align with the identified group values and belief system.
Cognitive Dissonance Theory. Cognitive dissonance refers to feelings of discomfort caused by inconsistencies in thought. Dissonance can arise when new information is presented which contradicts previously held beliefs or if new information is contrary to the accepted norms and beliefs of the individual’s social group. Dissonance can also be felt when one’s actions do not comport with their public belief systems.

“…[I]nformation that is incongruent with our beliefs make us feel threatened, engendering feelings of anxiety and promoting closer analysis of such evidence…” (Thibodeau, P., Peebles, M., Grodner, D., and Durgin, F., 2015, p. 431). Humans have mechanisms for alleviating cognitive dissonance, ranging from rejection of the new information, filtering out the disruptive noise, or even by privately adopting the counter position, while hiding the shift from others in their social circle (Wood, 2000) for fear of alienation.

According to Steele’s self-affirmation theory, “dissonance arises from the violation of general self-integrity. […] negative consequences are powerful inducers of dissonance because it is inconsistent with most people’s self-views to act in a way that results in foreseeable aversive consequences” (Wood, 1988, p. 546). In this way, religious groups are able to exert control of an individual’s behavior by reinforcing the negative consequences, hell and damnation, brought to bear on those who are non-compliant.

The tendency to adopt a private vs. public belief system is more prevalent in individuals with a high level of concern for the social consequences of their behavior (Quackenbush, 2001). As learners, they are able to analyze and internalize the new knowledge, integrating it into their knowledge base, but feel compelled to keep the paradigmatic shift secret for fear of being labelled or ostracized by their social group.
“Researchers have shown that humans are remarkably creative in inventing such ad hoc explanations for events and in explain away adverse evidence to rescue cherished beliefs from refutation” (Boudry & Braeckman, 2012, p. 345).

**Confirmation Bias.** Confirmation bias represents another means of dealing with cognitive dissonance. To reduce feelings of uncertainty, learners will seek out information which reinforces their existing beliefs. In so doing, they may find it necessary to reject scientific evidence, the guidance of experts in the field, and even knowledge widely considered to be factual. Someone seeking to defend their decision to not vaccinate their child, for instance, will seek out sources validating their beliefs, and reject any sources espousing a different view. To an extent, reducing cognitive dissonance becomes a nearly hedonistic endeavor, helping the individual to feel secure in their belief and value systems.

**Selective Perception**

A closer look at the structure of weird belief systems reveals that believers are in fact well-prepared to withstand [questioning]. Once believers accept the central premises of the belief system in question, they have ample explanatory resources at their disposal to reason their way through apparent disconfirmation. (Boudry & Braeckman, p. 344, 2012).

Thus, we see what we want to see and ignore information that contradicts our existing beliefs.
**Semmelweis Reflex.** “‘Semmelweis reflex’ is a phrase…that refers to our reflex-like tendency to reject new evidence or new knowledge because it contradicts our established norms” (Watve, 2017, p. 528). This reflex is often a subconscious mechanism, which makes it more difficult to overcome. The learner may not even know why they are rejecting the information.

**Breaking Away**

How then, does a religious learner break away from their self-imposed cognitive biases? Some learners are able to integrate their understanding of the spiritual and natural worlds through a maturation of faith, as described in Fowler’s Stages of Faith. Others choose to undergo a deconversion, in which they abandon their religious beliefs.

**Integration.** The integration of religious belief and scientific knowledge occurs in the fifth and sixth stages of faith, Conjunctive Faith and Universalizing Faith, as described by Fowler’s Faith stages, previously discussed.

Subhani, Hasan, Osman and Ayaz (2011) asserted that conjunctive faith requires a frank assessment of one’s one conscious and subconscious biases and mythologies and an understanding of how those factors are influenced by socialization. In other words, the learner must assess what they “know” and why they “know” it. Many evangelicals are conditioned within a parallel culture, creating an “isolationism bordering on xenophobia” (Stephens & Giberson, 2011, p.181), in which secular teachings are regarded with fear, distrust and suspicion. This bubble is so jealously guarded that the learner may have very little exposure to scientific knowledge that non-evangelicals take for granted. Sunday schools, Christian K-12 education, and evangelical, non-accredited “colleges” provide alternative education principally based on biblical teachings, providing safe educational passage for religious learners, removed from the
contradictions presented by “worldly” natural and social science curricula (Stephens & Giberson, 2011).

The problem and the cause of the problem in this practice are one and the same: the writing of the bible predates science as a discipline, and therefore should not be, and was never meant to be, read as a scientific text (Giberson and Collins, 2011). Treating the bible as a literal, scientific text misappropriates its intended purpose, and unnecessarily creates an adversarial relationship between faith and knowledge. By reading the bible as a science textbook, we overlap issues of morality and ethics with principles of science in a way that was never intended by its author(s).

Integration then, occurs when the learner realizes that science explains questions unanswerable by religion, and vice versa, and that by integrating their understandings of the spiritual and natural world, they are able to reach a more mature faith, as seen in Fowler’s sixth stage, Universalizing Faith. In this somewhat utopian, and altogether rare state, the learner has constructed a belief system which allows the larger themes and lessons of their religious beliefs (moral, ethical, spiritual) to co-exist with secular disciplines (sciences, mathematics), affording them the needed cognitive flexibility to continue to assimilate knowledge while maintaining belief in the broader themes within the bible.

**Deconversion.** Some people choose not to integrate their religious and secular worldviews, choosing instead to deconvert. Deconversion, as defined by Streib (2012), “is an intense biographical change that includes individual and social aspects” (p. 2). The authors also describe “a change process in which a person gives up one ordered view of the world and one philosophical perspective for another” (Zimbardo, Ebbesen & Maslach, 1977, p.182).
Considering the social and community aspects of religion, and the centrality of our relationships with others in the construction of our individual and collective self-concept, it is not difficult to imagine that breaking away from a religious group can be life-altering. In addition, the very nature of most religions relies on feelings of belonging and a sense of common purpose. Thus, by leaving the religion, for many, it is an uncoupling. The individual leaving the religion can express deep feelings of loss - of self, community, identity and purpose. It is a process fraught with painful emotions and necessitates the individual to reassess their core values and beliefs, redefine the meaning and purpose of their life, and often, to reassemble their social environment.

“Conversion is complicated by fear. A member of the group, [having] changed his habits or beliefs…conceals this fact for fear of being categorized as a deviant… It takes an act of courage or special circumstances to have it revealed…” (Moscovici, 1980, p. 211).

The impetus for leaving a religious affiliation varies from person to person. Most commonly, Streib found in his 1991 study, deconversion results from “intellectual doubt and moral criticism and, to a lesser degree, the loss or religious experiences” (p. 5). In other words, deconversion is driven by an individual’s efforts to reconcile feelings of dissonance caused by perceived inconsistencies between their evolving worldview and the worldview promoted by their religious or social group. Cognitive dissonance can result from conflict between different opinions, or, as Moscovici (1980) asserted from conflict between opinions or views publicly vs. privately held.

Another frequent catalyst for disaffiliation from a religious group is a paradigmatic shift arising from crisis. A crisis, as defined by Erikson (1968), is an event which cannot be integrated
into the established narrative or worldview of an individual, necessitating a choice. One choice is to find a way to assimilate the new situation into the existing narrative, and the other is to adjust the narrative to fit the new situation. No matter how the person handles the situation, the crisis has altered the individual’s perception of self by forcing a period of reflection and necessitating a difficult choice.

Viewed through the lens of Fowler’s Stages of Faith, this dissonance typically emerges during the Individuative-Reflective phase. During this phase, typically occurring during young adulthood, individuals begin to critically examine their belief systems (Psychology Charts, 2017). This period represents a critical opportunity for educators, as it is most often during young adulthood that learners are in a transitional period, uncoupling from their parents, their peer groups and communities, and setting out on a path of self-actualization and discovery.

**Conclusion**

Our belief systems are the culmination of our life experiences, and the product of a host of factors such as our culture, religion, upbringing, socioeconomic status, geography, race, sexuality and exposure. Those belief systems become, in turn, the lens through which we view the world. As students, we take in information and process it through those belief systems, which gives meaning and relevance to what we have learned.

The next chapter will describe the structure of this phenomenological study, as well as the rationale for the phenomenological narrative approach.
CHAPTER THREE

METHODODOLOGY

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to examine the experiences of biblical literalists with anti-science biases, in order to evaluate the impact of those rigid belief systems on critical thinking. It is hoped that, with an understanding of how fundamentalist belief systems influence learner behavior, educators can be better prepared to recognize limiting belief systems and assist students with strategies to improve their critical thinking and reasoning skills. This phenomenological study focused on the following research questions:

- How does biblical literalism impact the willingness of a learner to embrace new information contradicting their previous beliefs?
- How do religious leaders promoting biblical literalism reinforce these beliefs and by what methods do these communities stifle or discourage dissenting views?
- How can believers integrate biblical and secular teachings?
- What was helpful during the process of integration or deconversion? What role did friends, family, or educators play in that process?

This chapter introduces the methods used in this study, and is comprised of the following sections: Setting, Participants/Sample, Data, Analysis, Participant Rights, and Potential Limitations/Delimitations of the Study.

Qualitative Methodology

This study employed a qualitative method of analysis. Qualitative research methodologies have their roots in a multidisciplinary approach that includes psychology, sociology, education, medicine, and many other fields (Merriam, 2009).
Per Creswell (2012), a qualitative study “is best suited to address a research problem in which you do not know the variables and need to explore” (p. 16). Bloomberg and Volpe indicated that qualitative research is ideal for “promoting a deep understanding of a social setting or activity as viewed from the perspective of the research participants” (p. 27). For this particular research problem, exploring the personal experiences of study participants is foundational, and the knowledge to be derived from a qualitative approach cannot be gleaned from current literature. The qualitative approach, as applied to a phenomenological study such as this, situates the researcher as the tool by which the data is collected and analyzed, resulting in inductive analysis grounded in a multidisciplinary framework (Merriam, 2009). By conducting interviews and examining the lived experiences of current and former biblical literalists, this study will provide a better understanding of the underpinnings of belief and the effects of belief on learning readiness and an individual’s ability to think and evaluate information critically.

Creswell (2012) identified five steps to a qualitative study. In the first step, the researcher must identify the participants and employ a strategic sampling method to yield a sample best representing a cross-section of religious backgrounds, age, gender and educational level. Next, all participants were provided with informed consent forms and all information pertinent to the study, including risks and how the data will be used. Then, decisions must be made about what data should be collected to address the research questions. Once the type of data to be collected has been identified, the researcher determined how the collected data was to be stored, processed and interpreted. Finally, steps were undertaken to ensure that the collection method(s) used followed ethical standards of practice, ensuring that all risks were minimized.
Phenomenological Approaches

According to Bloomberg and Volpe (2012), a phenomenological study is intended to “investigate the meaning of the lived experience of people to identify the core essence of human experience…” (p. 32). The phenomenological study explores an issue of relevance and concern and attempts to examine a phenomenon through the narratives of people who experienced it.

Every attempt was made to appropriately bracket the researcher’s own experiences so as to contextualize inherent biases and to promote accountability in the analysis of the reported experiences of participants.

The analysis of data in a phenomenological study requires the development of a system for analyzing the narratives presented by participants. Narratives can be stripped down to reveal underlying themes and key points, allowing the researcher to evaluate the collected data for points of convergence and divergence.

Setting

This study was conducted via video conference interviews. A diverse demographic sample was yielded by opening the search to qualified participants from across the country. Participants did not have a personal relationship with the investigator. The investigator did not recruit participants with a familial or another type of relationship, and sought to include individuals from different religious backgrounds.

Participants/Sample

This study employed purposeful sampling. Purposeful sampling is a method by which researchers select study participants who meet very specific criteria (Creswell 2012). The participants for this study were recruited through online message boards and forums related to
biblical literalism. The researcher developed a representative sample of 10 individuals from diverse religious, cultural, and demographic backgrounds. Selection for the study was contingent on meeting criteria such as a background in a biblical literalist faith tradition, as well as other criteria intended to capture key elements sought for examination, including history of biblical literalist views with anti-science biases, as well as experiences with uncoupling from that belief system and the impacts on receptiveness to new learning.

Prospective participants were recruited via Facebook, and the researcher qualified them with questions regarding the nature of their religious experiences. Every effort was made to develop a pool representing a variety of protestant backgrounds. By compiling diverse experiences, the researcher sought to provide a compelling analysis of the universalities present in diverse forms of biblical literalism, as it relates to learning readiness.

Data

The data collected was in the form of structured, narrative interviews, conducted by phone or teleconference. All interviews were recorded for transcription and analysis. Interviews were conducted over a one-week period. Transcription of interviews began during that period and continued into the month after they concluded. Once the transcription was complete, the investigator commenced analysis of the data and identified themes in order to provide the structure needed to understand it.

The narratives produced through the interview process were examined through the lens of Fowler’s Stages of Faith, Mezirow’s Transformational Learning Theory and various cognitive theories such as cognitive dissonance and belief system theories.
The investigator was responsible for all aspects of data collection, transcription and analysis. Demographic information was collected as part of the sampling process, to ensure that all participants had the relevant background and experience to substantively contribute to the study. Names, contact information, and other personally identifiable information were obtained as part of the sampling process, but are not associated with data collected.

Consent forms were signed by every participant and kept in a password-protected folder on the researcher’s personal computer to protect the names and personal information of participants. These consent forms were assigned numbers identifying individual participants in the absence of personal identifiers, protecting confidentiality.

**Analysis**

Collected narratives were transcribed in their entirety, and the investigator examined the collected data holistically to identify points of intersection and divergence, as well as common themes and keywords. That data was examined first on its own merits, and then in context with the reported demographic data. All demographic data included in the study was sufficiently general as to protect the identity of participants, focusing on age, religious background, current religious standing, and gender.

Participant narratives were also situated within the framework of Fowler’s Stages of Faith, and viewed through the lens of Mezirow’s Transformational Learning Theory. An interview guide (Appendix C) was created and forwarded to participants prior to the interview to in order to prepare them for the questions being asked.
Participant Rights

Participants did not have personal identifiers attached to their transcribed interviews. Participants were assigned pseudonyms or other alternate identifiers for purposes of clarity and differentiation, but these do not in any way suggest the identity of the participant. There was a remote chance of the re-emergence of strong emotions in the process of sharing their stories. Care was taken to be sensitive to possible triggers and to avoid causing harm. Participants were also advised that they could choose to discontinue and/or withdraw from the study at any time.

Potential Limitations of the Study

The researcher has personal experience with biblical literalism, as described previously, which informs some early hypotheses to be explored in this study. She is aware that personal experience with this phenomenon will differ widely from person to person, necessitating the sampling of a population from diverse backgrounds. In so doing, the researcher sought to identify points of intersectionality among those narratives.

Potential Delimitations of the Study

The researcher chose to examine biblical literalism outside of denominational constraints. The purpose for this is to highlight the impact biblical literalism can have on learning readiness, as well as to illustrate that such prevalent and ubiquitous faiths as Catholicism, Protestantism, Mormonism can promote data-resistant beliefs that impede learning, and that this phenomenon is not restricted to extreme belief systems or cults.
CHAPTER FOUR

RESULTS

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to explore the experiences of people who were raised in biblical literalist faith traditions in an effort to better understand how adherence to such belief systems may or may not present an obstacle for the development of critical thinking skills needed later in life.

Belief systems, as previously mentioned, arise from many sources – environment, socio-economic background, culture, race, religion and others. When one considers how religious belief systems may impact the development of independent thinking skills, extreme examples may come to mind, such as the Branch Davidians, Westboro Baptist Church, Jonestown, or others. As described by the participants in this study, many common, or “mainstream”, religions can have the same impacts on adherents, depending on their interpretation of the Bible and whether they utilize an authoritarian approach, or a less regimented approach.

In this chapter, the researcher examines the recruitment and data collection process, and then provide an analysis based on Mezirow’s Transformative Learning Theory. The 40-60 minute interviews were conducted over three days and were later transcribed for analysis.

Data Collection Overview

Interviews were collected via video teleconferencing and recorded for later transcription. The interviews ranged from forty minutes to over an hour. The researcher conducted the interview in a loose, question and answer format, insofar as it was required to collect key data, but otherwise was unstructured enough to allow subjects to speak freely about their experiences. Participants were provided a list of interview questions prior to the interview to allow them time
to consider the questions and to be prepared to discuss them. The four research questions under examination in this study are:

- How does biblical literalism impact the willingness of a learner to embrace new information contradicting their previous beliefs?
- How do religious leaders promoting biblical literalism reinforce these beliefs and by what methods do these communities stifle or discourage dissenting views?
- How can believers integrate biblical and secular teachings?
- What was helpful during the process of integration or deconversion? What role did friends, family, or educators play in that process?

**Description of the Population and Sample**

This study included interviews with ten individuals with a history in biblical literalist faith traditions. The participants were five men, four women and one transgender. They represented diverse faith backgrounds. Four participants indicated they had grown up a variant of Baptist, two Evangelical, two Nondenominational, one Charismatic, one Mennonite, and one Assemblies of God/Pentecostal. Of the ten participants, six have come to see themselves as atheist or agnostic, four have found another, less literalist faith tradition, and one identifies as Pagan. Important to note that with many of the participants, their religious identity still remains very much fluid, as they are still working on reshaping and redefining their views and beliefs.
Table 4.1: *Gender, religion, current identity*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Religion of Origin</th>
<th>Current Religious Identity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Baptist</td>
<td>Universalist/Free-Range Christian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Evangelical UCC</td>
<td>Atheist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Nondenominational</td>
<td>Agnostic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Evangelical Christian</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Transgender Female</td>
<td>Nondenominational</td>
<td>Still questioning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Christian</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Assemblies of God/Pentecostal</td>
<td>Pagan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Baptist</td>
<td>Agnostic/Questioning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Fundamentalist Baptist</td>
<td>Atheist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Mennonite</td>
<td>Christian but still questioning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Charismatic</td>
<td>Agnostic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Baptist</td>
<td>Agnostic</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Participant Profiles

Participant 1 was a male who grew up in a fundamentalist Baptist church. He was heavily involved in his church community as he was growing up. He was in church “every time the doors were open” and attended public school. After high school, he attended a secular university, which, as he says, made him a “pariah”. His journey through questioning led him from fundamentalism to charismaticism, and now he identifies as a free-range Christian, no longer attached to a biblical literalist belief system.

Participant 2 was a male who grew up in an evangelical UCC church. His family was very heavily involved in the church. His father was the sixth in a line of first sons who were all pastors. His family led the national charge to leave the UCC after the UCC began ordaining gays. They then joined the Evangelical Free Church of America. He attended private Christian schools and indicated he was at church or participating in church activities “all the time.” He now identifies as atheist.

Participant 3 was a female who grew up in a nondenominational evangelical church. She attended a public school with the understanding that it was to be her “mission field”. She now identifies as agnostic.

Participant 4 was a transgender female who grew up in a non-denominational church. She was homeschooled and had parents who encouraged her education. She considers herself “still questioning” and hasn’t found a specific faith yet.

Participant 5 was a female who was raised in an Assemblies of God/Pentecostal Church. She was very active in church (“seven days a week”) and was a Bible Quizzzer. Bible Quizzers learn entire books of the Bible by heart, word for word, and participate in competitions pitting
their knowledge against other teams. She attended a UPC-sponsored school and now identifies as pagan.

**Participant 6** was a male who attended a conservative Baptist church. He attended a church-sponsored school located on the same campus as the church. He was there 6-7 days a week. He eventually went on to attend a Christian college. He now identifies as agnostic.

**Participant 7** was a male who attended Calvary Chapel, a “hippie” Baptist denomination. He was homeschooled from kindergarten through Grade 12 and attended a Baptist college. He was very heavily involved in the church and in religious hermeneutics and now identifies as atheist.

**Participant 8** was a male who was raised in a Mennonite church. His father was a pastor and his extended family was heavily involved in the church. His experience was deeply immersive and he encountered very few people outside of his faith until his teenage years. He attended a church-sponsored school and then later, a secular university. He now identifies as “still questioning”.

**Participant 9** was a female who was raised in a charismatic church. She was adopted by a military family and spent her childhood in Japan and other places. She was educated in a private Christian school and now identifies as agnostic.

**Participant 10** was a female who was raised in a Baptist Church. She attended public school in the Bible Belt, so the curriculum was very sensitive to not challenging Christian values or beliefs. After surveying the current political and spiritual landscape, she now identifies as agnostic.
Participant recruitment was conducted via Facebook. The researcher reached out to a vocal advocate for former Evangelicals to discuss avenues through which participants might be recruited. Recruitment messages were posted on the group’s closed Facebook page, asking for individuals who had a history in biblical literalist faith traditions to participate in a study about their experiences and their education. Although representing a variety of faith traditions, each participant was raised to believe in a literal interpretation of the Bible.

Once data collection was complete, the data was analyzed to identify commonalities and differences between individual experiences.

**Analysis of Data Using Mezirow’s Transformational Learning Theory**

During the course of data collection and analysis, a number of themes emerged. Mezirow’s Transformational Learning Theory was used to provide a framework for interpreting the data, via the following structure, as described by Susan Imel (1998):

1. Disorienting dilemma
2. Self-examination
3. Sense of alienation
4. Relating discontent to others
5. Explaining options of new behavior
6. Building confidence in new ways
7. (and 8.) Planning a course of action and knowledge to implement plans
8. Experimenting with new roles

Each of these themes will be examined in turn, with an eye towards how they relate to the research questions. This study explores the impacts of biblical literalism on learning, and
throughout these interviews, commonalities emerged such as institutionalized suppression of questioning and dissent. In the interest of understanding how best to support and assist members of these communities, the participants were also asked to relate examples of individuals who have provided them with support and assistance, which will be touched on in Chapter 4 and discussed in greater depth in Chapter 5.

**Participant Experiences Contextualized Via Mezirow’s Model**

**Disorienting dilemma.** In Mezirow’s Transformational Learning Theory, the disorienting dilemma is a crisis which sparks a process of transformation. This crisis can be marked by a singular event or can result from cumulative pressure over time (Imel, 1998). Mezirow’s initial definition of a disorienting dilemma centered on abrupt, unexpected crises, but his later work expanded that definition to include more gradual processes, such as a realization that current frames of references and habits of mind no longer make sense and are unsustainable (Clark, 1993). In either definition, the disorienting dilemma sparks a cognitive dissonance so compelling that it resulted in a life-changing transformation.

Among the participants of this study, the precipitating event which initiated the paradigmatic shift ranged from incidents of sexual abuse within the church, the suicide of other known Christians, struggles with internalized guilt and shame over years, and ever-increasing dissonance which forced deeper reflection on their closely held beliefs.

Participant 8 felt a sense of dissonance as he witnessed an incident in which he felt that the biblical standard of conduct, as promoted and required by the church, seemed heavily skewed against questioning as opposed to much more serious infractions, based on who you were or who you knew.
[A member of my church] went to prison for sexually molesting children. When he got out, he's welcomed back because he repented. It was so weird to me. If I just question things too much I'm not welcome, but if you raped someone, and you're sorry enough, then it's OK.

Sexual abuse within the church created a crisis for other participants as well. In each case, it was the church’s lack of due diligence and propensity for sweeping it under the rug that raised some very serious questions for the adherents.

Participant 5 was molested by a leader in her church for two years and after reporting it, found that not only had her abuser escaped unpunished, but had gone on to pastor elsewhere. “And no one ever talked to me about it. No one ever gave me any support or counseling. It was just not something to be talked about. But after that they treated me like the church harlot which was awful.” This event, and seeing how it was handled, made her begin to question the adults around her.

Participant 4’s disorienting dilemma involved her gender identity. She began to feel conflicted as an adolescent. Faced with escalating feelings of disorientation, she began to have broader questions regarding elements of her beliefs.

I was in denial for a really long time. As a kid I didn't understand what I was feeling. I didn't know why I wanted be a woman so bad. All I did was what I was told. The Bible said, ‘take every thought captive’. I suppressed everything.

For this participant, suppressing the questions only served to prolong and exacerbate her feelings of uncertainty and discomfort.
For other participants, it was a much more gradual process, which did not arise from an abrupt crisis, but manifested as a creeping sense of unease about religious teachings.

Participant 6 had some deeper questions about the actual morality of God, which arose from his study of the Bible. He struggled with the contradictions inherent between the Old Testament and New Testament’s portrayal of God. “They say, ‘If you've seen me, you've seen the father’. But that didn't make sense because Jesus seemed to be a really chill guy, but God in the Old Testament basically is ok with slaughtering people. I just couldn't square that.”

For the participants of this study, the nature of the disorienting dilemmas varied widely, but for all, the dilemma sparked within them a desire to further examine their belief systems and their frames of reference to evaluate their continued usefulness and relevance.

**Self-examination.** The disorienting dilemma is followed, or occurs in parallel with, a period of self-examination, in which participants embarked on a journey marked by deep reflection on their beliefs, unpacking the conscious and subconscious influences foundational to their understanding of the world around them. This self-examination eventually leads to a state of self-actualization, but there remain obstacles to overcome.

Actualization is constrained through the presence of coercive forces or factors within our personal and socio-cultural contexts. These forces limit or shape the ways in which we come to understand who we are as persons…constrain[ing] the degree to which we can be who or what we are. (Dirkx, 1998, p. 8)

Because their religious community and spiritual experiences were so immersive, to reach a place of self-actualization required a painful process of reinvention and to an extent, rebirth. Many of the participants compared the process of revealing their questioning to family and
friends as a “coming-out”, a term which connotes a sense of having to hide that period of self-examination for fear of alienation from their social group.

In this way, the self-examination theme relates to the first research question, which asks how biblical literalism impacts the willingness of learners to embrace new information which contradicts their previous beliefs. The participants in this study were so afraid of rejection by their family and friends that they sought at first to quiet or dismiss their own questions, and then, when they had embraced them or abandoned their faith altogether, they remained “closeted” and struggled to find the space and courage to be open about their abandoned or altered faith.

For many of the participants, the self-examination process consisted of not just a process of discarding their beliefs, but also a concerted effort to attempt to justify them by putting greater effort into their involvement with the church and by deepening their study of scripture. Participant 10 sought to examine her beliefs by conducting further investigation and more deeply immersing herself into her religious community. “I tried to compensate for the doubts by doing more. I knew that I wanted something different. I knew that I felt worse after I left church than I did before I went in and I couldn't verbalize why or what that was.”

At the age of 15, Participant 2 emerged from a period of severe depression which caused him to begin evaluating his beliefs. “I used all my biblical knowledge that I had been gaining from years and years of intense, deep, study and I started going verse by verse, deconstructing everything. Finding all the contradictions, finding all the things that don't make sense.

Participant 1 began to struggle with the seeming arbitrariness of the restrictions placed on his activities and entertainment while still in high school.
In the church we did not allow drums at all. I had a backing track one time that I sang special music to and it had a drum and there was a scandal. And after that everybody had to get their backing tracks approve beforehand. It was absolutely ridiculous.

He also had a band teacher who got in trouble because he had played Dungeons and Dragons with the students, causing Participant 1’s father to file a complaint. This was very upsetting for him and caused him to begin examining other aspects of his belief system.

For some of the participants, there were very specific religious teachings that needed to be examined and discarded as part of this process. Participant 3 began looking at her beliefs as she began to learn more about the natural world. “So when I say that I believe in truth and I want to know what's real, at some point - if I'm not going be a total hypocrite - I have to accept that there are truths that are provable that don't align with what I was taught.”

Participant 1 was taught to view homosexuality is immoral and evil. “Number One: Gays were all about sex. Number Two: God's judgment on that was AIDS, which just horrifies me now to think about.” This understanding was challenged as he began to encounter more people outside of religious community. He was compelled to then examine his frames of reference regarding LGBTQ individuals, as well as other aspects of his beliefs.

Self-actualization, in the context of this transformative learning experience, is the process by which the learner deconstructs their prescribed beliefs in favor of autonomous thinking. Due to the prescriptive nature of biblical literalist faith traditions, this journey was often a lonely one. The process begins with a close look at the individual’s existing frames of references and habits of mind, which form the foundation on which further understandings develop.
Sense of alienation. All participants in the study related feelings of isolation during the process of questioning. The social constructs inherent in their faith traditions served to both isolate the individual from the world at large, and to discourage dissent or questioning regarding foundational doctrinal precepts. This theme, and the one to follow (Relating Discontent to Others) relate closely with the second research question, which investigate how leaders in biblical literalist faith traditions reinforce those beliefs and stifle dissenting views. This aim is achieved by means of isolation of control. Most of the participants felt completely alone during their questioning journey, in large part due to the institutionally ingrained sense of shame and very real fear of eternal consequences and the risk of alienation by their social group.

For most participants, the church represented the majority of their social safety net. For some participants, the isolation was virtually complete, as they were involved in church events and attended either a church-sponsored school or were homeschooled. Participant 2 stated, “I can see how my parents made lots of explicit choices to keep me from ever even encountering someone who wasn't a Christian.”

Another important element adding to the sense of alienation among participation was the cultural disconnect which acted as a barrier between them and their non-Christian peers. For most of the participants, there were restrictions placed on them as to what types of music, movies or activities in which they could partake. Common restrictions were: no secular music, no tv or movies, no pants or hair-cutting for women, absolutely no sex before marriage. Given the centrality of pop culture and fashion trends to adolescent and young adult culture, the absence of those shared experiences made finding common ground difficult outside of their church group.
Participant 7 said, “I wasn't allowed to go to public school. It wasn't even a question. I couldn’t go to school where they would indoctrinate me or where kids are doing drugs and having sex.”

Many of the participants, particularly those who had been homeschooled or attended a private Christian school, felt very much like cultural immigrants – unsure of how to navigate a world in which they had no knowledge of cultural and societal norms. This created significant barriers for them as they had to learn to navigate a world very different from the one in which they were raised.

Participant 8 described his first experience working for a restaurant outside of his religious community as stressful at first. As soon as he was outside of his community,

I had to constantly be on guard against drugs, alcohol, sex, and bad language, believing that these people are going to try to take me away from God. If you go into a relationship with that kind of mentality, how are you ever going to really connect with people?

Participants reported various attitudes regarding the questioning of doctrine by their churches. The degree of isolation experienced by those questioning the faith was closely correlated to how negatively questioning was perceived by the church.

Participant 4 felt very isolated during her questioning period. “Problems were kept behind closed doors and dealt with in private. Everyone has problems - that's not weird - but if you do have problems you should try and solve them yourself. You should keep it within the group so that you don't shame the group.”

Shame was a common theme among participants as they navigated doctrine and institutional attitudes designed to stifle questioning and isolate doubters. Participant 5 said, “I
learned pretty powerfully as a kid that my questions were really not welcomed and so I stopped asking questions.”

For some, guilt was a powerful motivator. Participant 3 was admonished to not openly question because she might negatively impact somebody else’s faith.

What if there was somebody in that class who wasn't a Christian or they were kind of borderline, and your question caused them to stumble? It would be your fault that they went to hell. For somebody who believed in literal hell that's kind of terrifying.

In addition, most participants attended churches that had very specific ways of talking about questioning which would serve as a deterrent for their followers. References to witchcraft, backsliding, falling away, seduction by the world, giving in to Satan, and fallen morality served as powerful reminders that open questioning was discouraged.

The negative connotations assigned to open questioning, coupled with the fear of a loss of their social safety net and possible rejection by their closest circle of friends and family, created an environment in which questioners felt compelled to keep their questions to themselves. Because questioning was viewed as a product of surrendering to temptation or weak faith, many of the participants were unable to connect with others within their own communities facing similar challenges, and did not have access to these external support systems until early adulthood. In many cases, people who questioned just “disappeared”, meaning, they simply stopped attending church and were quickly cast aside and forgotten by the church community. Participant 2 said in his experience, when people had doubts, “They stopped coming. Then basically the way that they were talked about in the church was that they've fallen away, they've left the fold they've given in to the lies of Satan, or they've been seduced by the world.” These
powerful characterizations served as a warning to others and prevented individuals within the community from sharing their struggles with faith with each other.

For the participants, the sense of alienation was two-fold. It was a product of years of indoctrination which convinced them that, outside of church-sanctioned apologetics and performative challenges of non-foundational precepts, questioning their beliefs was shameful and a sign of weak faith or succumbing to sin. Most participants isolated themselves and hid their questions in order to protect themselves from possible rejection by their religious community.

The second manifestation of this alienation was the result of cultural disconnect. Most of the participants were shielded from secular music, movies, television, activities and even friends. The participants who grew up with these restrictions had a difficult time adapting to an unfamiliar world, further hindering the process of self-actualization.

**Relating discontent to others.** In this stage of transformational learning, individuals become aware that others are undergoing comparable paradigm shifts, and then begin to reach out to those around them to share their experiences and provide mutual support. This process, which was most commonly reported to have begun during adolescence or early adulthood, gradually emerged as the social circles and life experiences of participants broadened.

As previously discussed, many of the participants did not have even one friend outside of their religious group until their late teens or early adulthood. For them, the process of leaving home and adjusting to a new sense of independence allowed for some testing of their belief system. Even outside of that environment, the questioning of their belief system was frightening and risked the alienation of their social group.
For this reason, an important element of this shift was the level of emotional support available. For Participant 2, “it was just knowing that she [his wife] understood me and she accepted me for who I was, because I really just felt like if I stopped believing in God that no one would love me anymore.”

When Participant 5 left the church and began interacting with people outside of her faith for the first time, and found support among people who valued her intellect and praised her inquisitive spirit and articulate voice. “No one had ever told me that in my whole life. All of the things that I had been shamed for were suddenly things that were valued. These people made me feel that I’m not inherently bad for wondering whatever I wonder about the world.” For the first time, she had found others with whom she could freely share her thoughts, doubts, questions and ideas.

The discovery of other people with questions or who held different beliefs offered a new safety net outside of the religion. That knowledge not only gave the participants space to begin exploring their questions, but also a sense of security, knowing that there were others who would still love and care for them even if they were struggling with their beliefs. Participant 3 abandoned her faith entirely within a year of getting married, and credits her husband’s support for giving her the security she needed to make those changes.

For other participants, meeting people outside of their faith provided them an opportunity to test out new ideas and ways of seeing the world. For Participant 4, this came during her time in the Army, “When I said that the army was the best choice I would never make again, a very large part of it was because it gave me the space and the freedom to question.” She also began to
see a therapist, who may not have been able to specifically relate to what she was going through, but provided a safe space for these doubts, fears and questions to be aired.

The impact of having peers or others with whom questions could be shared cannot be overstated. For those participants who encountered such assistance, it was pivotal. For those who did not and had to struggle alone for many years, it caused tremendous pain and unnecessary suffering.

**Explaining options of new behavior.** Participants in this study reflected on the pivotal realization that it was okay to think for themselves, a new idea that required a major shift in thinking about the world and their role in it.

Participant 10 described the realization that doubting and questioning weren’t bad as transformative. “It was a radical idea to me that doubting wasn’t a bad thing. I had always believed, [if you were questioning], you were not right with God and you needed to get reconfirmed.”

Participant 7 had already been examining his beliefs for some time when he encountered a professor who offered a different viewpoint on the interpretation of the Bible. This professor claimed that liberal Christians had been interpreting the Bible wrong years and just the idea that there could be disparity between interpretations was very striking. “It blew my mind because he was saying these things and I was like, does anybody else realize that this changes everything?” Even though this professor was deeply dogmatic and unlikely to support questioning of foundational elements of doctrine, he presented the possibility of new interpretations which opened up opportunities for challenging and questioning.

For Participant 6, this letting go of a literal interpretation of the Bible was a paradigm
Going through that process of continually interpreting things also sort of opened me up to the idea that there isn’t this one consuming truth about God or spirituality... it doesn't have to be a strict “you have to believe like an all or nothing thing.

Knowing that there was nuance and room for interpretation within her belief system freed her to begin seeing the world in new ways.

Many of the participants related stories in which teachers were the ones to open this gateway. Those teachers provided a safe space to allow critical evaluation of their long-held beliefs. The participants with teachers or mentors who didn’t attempt to aggressively push their viewpoints, choosing instead to encourage autonomous thinking, reported this support as useful, instructive, and in many ways, transformative.

Other participants did not have the benefit of understanding teachers, but did find support among peers. One barrier to peer and teacher support centered around how well the individual could relate to the participants. Many of the participants felt that it was hard to find people with a similar background who could understand what they were really going through.
Building confidence in new ways. This step in the transformational learning process was often difficult for the participants in this study. Conditioned to believe that questioning or challenging their belief system could have immediate social consequences and terrifying eternal consequences, participants needed support from those outside of their social circles to build a new understanding of their own thought processes and how to critically evaluate information through a new lens.

For Participant 6, the epiphany came as he was considering how his beliefs were impacting his relationships with others.

As I was questioning and thinking…I just got to the point where it's like I just don't care. You know, if it's right or wrong that’s between them and God, but I don't want to have it affect how I relate to people.

For him, surrendering his literal interpretation of scripture enabled him to begin interacting with people around him from a place of acceptance, creating a new paradigm.

Participant 2 went through a life-altering battle with depression as a teenager that nearly caused him to take his own life. After battling severe depression for years, he accepted that God made me this way and he wouldn't have made a mistake. That was a very spiritually transformative moment in my life. This depression just melted away, and I was finally able to re-engage with life and my friends in a meaningful and exciting way.

As Participant 9 entered adolescence, she began to question her beliefs, and reflected on how the doctrine of biblical literalism she had been raised with was problematic. “Now I know that words change, interpretation changes and I realized that it is just a book written by people like every other book written by people. I think that's crazy powerful.” Once she was able to
reconcile the fact that the Bible has been translated over and over again through the years, and that its interpretation could not then be considered wholly infallible, she was able to evaluate her frames of reference from a position of greater confidence.

For some participants, even the act of building confidence was controversial. These individuals were conditioned to believe that trusting in one’s own abilities rather than God’s was a form of arrogance. It was considered prideful to claim any sort of talent or ability. All glory for such things was God’s alone. Thus, even the process of claiming any sort of confidence or faith in one’s abilities could be enough to cause guilt and shame. Participant 1 shared,

I didn't know it was OK to question and it was OK to really think about some of these things. It really would have...it may have turned my direction far earlier and put me on a far different path if I had even thought that it was OK to question some of these things.

Participant 4 found the works of C.S. Lewis to be helpful, in that he had a “way of saying it's OK to question these kinds of things. You can still question this and be a Christian.”

Once these individuals were secure in their belief that having these questions did not make them bad people or weak Christians, they were able to look ahead to how they were going to employ this knowledge in their lives and chart a new path for their future.

Many of the participants languished between this stage and the next for several years. Lack of support was frequently mentioned as the reason for lack of progression. They knew that they wanted to make changes but didn’t know how or even, what kind of changes they wished to make.
Planning a course of action/knowledge to implement plans. These two themes have been combined as these stages tended to overlap with the participants in this study. To move through a state of cognitive dissonance, a number of approaches were undertaken by participants. Some engaged in multi-year courses of intense hermeneutical study and deconstruction of their understandings of faith and the role of biblical literalism in the contextualization of self and knowledge of the world around them. Others withdrew from their religious communities to assess their beliefs outside of the influence of their social safety nets.

Participant 8 “got to the point where the Bible isn't a science book but there's still a lot of great stuff in there that we should try to live by.” Whether the process of transformation occurred over a brief time, or several years, each participant had to make difficult decisions regarding the choice to alter their existing belief frameworks or discard them.

Participant 1 indicated,

It was a really gradual process to realize you can rethink some of these things - like six-day creation. Why does it have to be a literal six days? It could be eons instead. And there were a lot of things that kind of fell along the way.

He was able, by opening up to new ways of seeing things, to explore and experiment with different expressions of faith.

By determining a path forward, participants were able to make the first tentative steps towards redefining their personal belief systems. For many of them, the process continues today, as they still wrestle with residual beliefs and examine them with new eyes. Each participant approached the path forward in different ways. Some delved deeply into hermeneutics and
biblical scholarship to unpack some of their beliefs and understandings. Some abandoned their churches in order to clear their heads and evaluate their beliefs from an arms-length.

**Experimenting with new roles.** While some participants chose to leave faith, and others found a less-restrictive faith community, each has had to adjust to new ways of seeing the world. The shift from believing a literal interpretation of the Bible to a belief that there may not be a God at all required a radical restructuring of self.

Some participants were able to integrate their faith by embracing a less-rigid interpretation of the Bible. For Participant 1, “really the crux of it is respecting the Bible and revering the Bible and seeing it more as an allegory instead of taking things literally. Biblical literalism is a huge part, and when that fell for me it really opened things up.”

Others ended up on a different path. As Participant 6 described it, “deconstructing was in a sense, like dying, because this is just who I was for so long.” The process was a painful metamorphosis that required a shedding of their old beliefs and necessitated a personal examination of their own values. This stage of grieving for loss of self is described by Robert Boyd as “the most critical phase[…]takes place when an individual realizes that old patterns or ways of perceiving are no longer relevant” (Boyd and Myers, 1988, p.277). Such a shift creates a temporary but stubborn sense of disorientation that, once, confronted, allows the individual to finally integrate and reach a place of equilibrium.

Regardless of reaching a place of deconversion or integration, nearly all participants expressed some feelings of regret or a sense of lost opportunity or wasted potential, due to the years spent wrestling with cognitive dissonance and feelings of disorientation.
Participant 5 facilitates a survivor’s group for women who have left her childhood church. “In my survivor group all of the women talk about that. We all talk about how we feel like we were robbed of our potential. I wonder about it all the time, and to be honest, I consider it the great tragedy of my life.” For these individuals, the time spent evaluating and rebuilding their frames of reference amounted to significant barriers to their educational and vocational attainment, impeding their future prospects.

Some of the participants are still questioning. They are seeking a place of spiritual comfort outside of biblical literalism. This is reflective of the highest stages of Fowler’s Stages of Faith, in which individuals are able to integrate their secular and spiritual understandings by letting go of a need to interpret the Bible as a literal guidebook. For these individuals, there is still comfort to be found in the spiritual, but they have found ways to keep those teachings separated from the physical world, keeping their minds open to learning new things.

Summary

Many of the themes which emerged during this study were present in the literature, including feelings about questioning and isolation, as well as the impacts of the belief systems on self-actualization. The introduction of the sense of lost opportunity was not anticipated, but seemed to be a common sentiment among the participants.

Mezirow’s Theory of Transformational Learning proved a useful theoretical framework, as it provided a structure for contextualizing the lived experiences of participants as they moved from their childhood and adolescent belief systems, through self-evaluation and questioning, and emerged with a better understanding of the underpinnings of their most closely held beliefs.
Fowler’s Stages of Faith are in evidence here as well, as most, if not all, participants entered the third stage, Synethetic-Conventional, between early and late adolescence. During this time, they were combating feelings of dissonance.

Participant 7 describes visiting a public school for the first time: “Nobody ever told me what a public school was like. I thought it was a place of oppression. I’m probably going to see people doing drugs. I had never thought about it but I had that subconscious [perception].”

In the fourth stage, Individuative-Reflective, participants began to challenge their previous beliefs and in many cases, began deconverting.

Participant 6 faced opposition to his questioning that was so impactful that it served as the catalyst to his eventual deconversion. “I know Christianity has affected me in different ways, but nothing makes me angrier than that moment of being outright dismissed, like, are you an idiot? Why are you thinking like that?” This disillusioning dilemma caused him to rethink everything he had been taught.

Some participants were able to transition to the final stage, Conjunctive Faith and Universalizing Faith, in which they have been able to reach a place of understanding the Bible as something other than a literal guidebook, allowing for broader understandings of the world at large. Participant 1 was able to reconcile his spiritual and secular understandings by letting go of a need to see the Bible as 100 percent literal.

As discussed in Chapter Two, Mezirow (2002) also described four means of learning: alteration of existing frames of reference, acquisition of new frames of reference, changes to viewpoint and evolution of habits of mind (p. 18). The deconversion and integration processes described in the lived experiences of the participants exemplify these stages.
The social environment of biblical literalist faith traditions and the accompanying social and internal pressures substantially hampered this process. Shame, guilt and fear proved to be significant barriers to overcome. For each participant, the teachings of their churches regarding critical reflection on doctrine, with the implicit and explicit temporal and eternal consequences for doubt and weak faith, significantly hindered the believer’s ability to develop autonomous thinking skills. Those participants unable to be open about their doubts and questions faced significant dissonance trying to integrate their private and public feelings.

The next chapter presents conclusions and interpretations. The researcher considers the practical applications for educators as derived from the lived experiences of the participants, in hopes of developing some potential methods for alleviating the stresses of this process for future students. Also included within the final chapter will be the expressed wishes of the participants, in regard to how they believe that individuals in their situation could be helped or better supported.
CHAPTER FIVE

DISCUSSION

In the words of Jack Mezirow (2003), transformative learning “transforms problematic frames of reference – sets of fixed assumptions and expectations…to make them more inclusive, discriminating, open, reflective, and emotionally able to change” (p. 58). Those fixed assumptions and expectations arise from, among other things, environment and social conditioning.

As previously discussed, learning involves the construction of meaning based on previous experience, knowledge and social conditioning. Social conditioning can include upbringing, friend- and family values, and religion. Religion has a powerful influence on the development of values and beliefs, particularly for those raised in immersive religious communities.

Within those communities, institutional attitudes towards education can be deeply impactful for learners. This impact can take various forms. For homeschooled and/or religiously educated individuals, exposure to unbiased or unfiltered education can be very limited. Christian curriculum such as Accelerated Christian Education (ACE) presents a customized approach to history and science which discounts knowledge that contradicts scripture or Biblical values, or frames the learning in terms of a Biblical perspective. For Participant 6, “history textbooks were Christian. They leave out all the stuff that we did to the Native Americans and slavery was very lightly touched upon. It was very much from a very conservative Christian point of view.” Students taught this curriculum would feel that they were knowledgeable about topics, when what they had been taught was completely inaccurate. Participant 5 found that “there were huge
gaps in my history education and things that I had to search out and learn on my own once I was an adult, because I realized that everyone else had this but I didn't.”

**Institutional Attitudes Regarding Education**

Institutional attitudes can also impact the quality of education members receive. Participant 5 indicated, “Education was not valued, so they didn't put a lot of work into their school.” In her school, teachers were not certified or trained to be teachers, and in fact, were sent to the school as a form of “hazing”. Some participants reported inadequate college preparation in areas of geography, mathematics and sex education. Participant 8 was admitted to the University of Delaware and had to take an entire year of foundational courses before he could even be accepted into the engineering program. “I'm taking college physics... I’d never had physics at all. I was completely lost for the first time in my life. I just did not understand what was going on.”

**Ability to Question**

Another critical element of the institutional impacts religious groups have on learning lies in the ability of believers to question their beliefs and to evaluate and integrate new knowledge. Membership within these organizations requires uncompromising adherence to the values and beliefs of the group. For biblical literalist religious communities, this standard requires unquestioned acceptance of the Bible as the one and only truth. Failure to conform to this standard can have consequences ranging from shunning by the group to eternal damnation.

As the believer matures into adolescence, opportunities arise for moving outside of the social group, and with it, exposure to new information and points of view. As the adolescent begins testing the boundaries of their faith, internal and external pressures begin to manifest, hampering the desire and ability to continue to challenge doctrinal beliefs.
Research Questions

Question 1:

How does biblical literalism impact the willingness of a learner to embrace new information contradicting their previous beliefs?

Biblical literalist faith traditions impact the willingness of a learner to embrace new information contradicting their previous beliefs by way of immersion. Maintenance of these traditions rely on strict interpretation of scripture and active discouragement of any discussion which might erode or call into question these interpretations.

Many of the participants in this study attended only church-run schools or were homeschooled. They had very little exposure to people outside of their religious communities. As a result, the prospect of rejecting any of the teachings of the church could very realistically result in the loss of the individual’s entire social safety net. As children, this was an impossible proposition, but even as adults, it was difficult.

Thus, by protecting the existing frames of reference and beliefs, the follower was protecting their own status quo. Failure to do so could result in shunning by the only community they have ever known. In this way, rejection of contradictory knowledge was not ignorance for its own sake. It was an act of self-preservation, deeply rooted in a desire to protect the status quo and the individual’s social standing.

In addition, the very act of determining subjective truth relies on an understanding of how to determine the credibility of source materials (Vydiswaran, et al, 2015). Such determination becomes complicated when religious organizations promote some individuals or organizations as
more credible than others, especially when the determining factor is how well the source supports doctrinal teachings.

**Question 2:**

*How do religious leaders promoting biblical literalism reinforce these beliefs and by what methods do these communities stifle or discourage dissenting views?*

Religious leaders promoting biblical literalism reinforce these beliefs by isolating followers from the secular world, ensuring that church members have little exposure to ideas contradicting the church’s doctrine. The majority of participants in this study were taught to distrust secular education. Public schools were described as cesspools of sex, drugs and sinfulness. Believers live, worship, and attend school within a bubble. Their social interactions comprise nearly exclusively of church, church school or homeschooling, and church activities. Many had very little contact with people outside of the church. A consequence of this immersion was that the church’s doctrine and the church community became a central defining characteristic for the individual. It became a part of who they were.

Questioning or challenging the church’s doctrine is discouraged or forbidden, either by threats of eternal damnation or by visible demonstration of the church’s willingness to shun those who do not comply. Such pressures compel followers to ignore their doubts and questions in order to avoid endangering their way of life and their existing frames of reference.

The church described believers who left the church as backsliders, reprobates, heretics, sinners, and other similar terms. For the believers who remained, this exclusion was powerful. They did not wish to be characterized in this way, or to lose their social standing within a group that was central to their self-concept. By demonizing believers who left the church, the church
ensured that those who were questioning would likely keep those questions to themselves. This made the process of deconstruction very painful and lonely.

Indeed, these pressures have motivated many former believers to continue to maintain both public and private viewpoints. In public, they continue to profess adherence to the belief system, even when in private, they no longer hold these views (Quackenbush, 2000).

One of the most compelling motivators for maintaining the status quo was avoiding hell. Hell, as described by these churches, was a place of eternal suffering and torture. If you transgressed against God, you would be tormented in a lake of fire for all eternity. Describing questioning as sinful or transgressive ensured that believers would associate questioning with hell. Framing compliance with doctrinal teachings as a means of avoiding hell evokes strong emotions, which further reinforce ongoing obedience.

Facing hell is a heavy burden for a child to carry, particularly when they are adolescents and are beginning to develop more autonomous thought. If a follower believes in a literal hell, they will do anything necessary to avoid it. If the church teaches that you must hate gay people to avoid hell, then believers must hate gay people. If the church teaches that believing in evolution is believing a lie from Satan, which is sin, then true believers must reject evolution out of hand without even really considering it. Thus, these learners miss out on learning how to critically evaluate information. They believe what they are told to believe to avoid hell and to avoid alienation and isolation by their social group. Once the motivations are in place, human nature takes over, allowing for selective perception, the Semmelweis Reflex, and other cognitive biases. These biases create an environment in which the status quo remains very much protected from outside influence.
Question 3:

How can believers integrate biblical and secular teachings?

Integration of biblical and secular teachings falls within Fowler’s Stages of Faith within the Conjunctive and Universalizing Faith stages. In these stages, the individual begins to recognize that the Bible was never intended to serve as a science textbook, and that treating it as such was a misappropriation of the authors’ intent. The Bible was written prior to the conception of science as a discipline and was intended to provide ethical and moral teachings as opposed to academic instruction (Giberson and Collins, 2011).

For believers to integrate biblical and secular teachings, they must be able to let go of a literal interpretation of the Bible. For some, it was reaching a place of seeing the Bible as allegory or as a series of fables which have moral implications. Others were compelled to reject the Bible altogether, preferring instead to forge their own moral identity.

A key factor determining whether the individual was able to retain their faith or deconverted was if the individual was able to find a supportive, less-literalistic church. If the individual was able to find a church that supported them through their questions and offered a safe space free of judgment, then the individual was better able to integrate.

Question 4:

What was helpful during the process of integration or deconversion? What role did friends, family, or educators play in that process?

Participants reported that finding others going through the same questioning process was helpful, though, due to the church’s stance on questioning, it often took years to find anyone with whom they could to relate these feelings.
The participants in this study faced a difficult process of evaluating and reconstructing their beliefs and habits of mind. During this process, some participants had support from like-minded friends or compassionate teachers.

Friends provided needed support by creating an environment free of judgment where doubts and questions could be expressed freely. Some gently pushed back and challenged some of the individual’s beliefs without attempting to advance their own agenda. In so doing, they called attention to some problematic biases and assumptions, causing the individuals to begin to re-examine their beliefs.

Some participants were helped by educators who encouraged them, for the very first time, to think for themselves. “Educators and professors are influential sources of guidance and modeling in many students’ lives because they possess considerable symbolic capital and occupy cultural positions of legitimacy and authority” (Stroope, 2011).

The teacher in these cases presented the individual with a challenging idea or concept and didn’t prescribe a particular interpretation. They simply encouraged the learner to transcend their existing biases and really think about it and draw their own conclusions.

Generally speaking, the participants did not receive much family support. As they were raised in the literalist faith tradition, most family members were more likely to take an adversarial position to questioning.

To provide the support needed, individuals within their support system must first understand the strong emotional bonds tying them to their belief system. In Darnell and Sherkat’s 1997 study, they found that the beliefs of parents and family members had very significant impacts on the ability of individuals to have the cognitive flexibility needed to
critically assess new information. The isolationism inherent in biblical literalist faith traditions effectively cut off believers from exposure to new ideas. This obstacle, coupled with the very real emotional bonds that exist between family members, made deconversion or integration very difficult. Once the participants in this study found a space safe for their questions and feelings, they were able to begin the process of deconstructing their beliefs and make room for new understandings.

**Findings**

The findings of this research study are well-supported by the literature. The literature revealed cognitive biases which, even as an inherent part of human nature, can have negative impacts on learning if leveraged improperly. Selective perception, confirmation bias and the heuristic rule all can be, and often are, utilized to protect and promote problematic reasoning.

The literature showed that biblical literalist faith traditions rely on the suppression of doubts and stubborn adherence to doctrine. Framing of doubts and questions as sinful or a lack of faith motivated believers to self-regulate these feelings. Any dissonance that was experienced was quickly stifled, and any ongoing feelings of dissonance resulted in increasing feelings of discomfort, eventually leading to Mezirow’s disorienting dilemma.

These organizations make use of isolation and control to prevent followers from questioning or doubting their faith in the doctrine. The participants in this study experienced isolation by way of immersion. Most were in church or participating in church activities or attending church schools seven days a week. They had few non-Christian friends and were often educated by church-sponsored schools or were homeschooled. Restrictions placed on their
music, movies, dress and activities served not only to protect them from ungodly influences but also to create vast divides between them and their peers.

The literature also showed the relevance of Social Identity Theory. Social Identity Theory suggests that even when after considering all other factors at play in human cognition, it is human nature to still have biases towards the assumptions and beliefs held by one’s social group. In this way, the immersive nature of biblical literalist faith traditions are well-reinforced. The questioning process was fraught with stress and emotional angst, in part due to the institutional characterizations of such doubts. Participants were made to believe that abandoning their faith, or even challenging it, could cause them to go to hell, a terrifying prospect. Even if hell was decades away, they still had to confront the reality of alienation from their family and friends. Many of the participants witnessed other people within their church going through this shunning process. Watching this happen proved to be a powerful deterrent.

In such an environment, the participants found it difficult to break with their faith traditions. Some did so during their teenage years but remained secretive about their shift in personal values, for fear of being castigated or abandoned by their families. For a teenager, unable to support themselves, this is a powerful motivator to remain silent. Even as young adults, many of the participants were unable to break free until they had married or were able to support themselves. Some still keep their status secret to this day.

Implications and Recommendations for Action

At the conclusion of each interview, the participants were asked to reflect on any recommendations that they would make for someone who wished to provide support to an
individual going through a religious deconstruction process. From these responses, some common themes emerged:

1. Provide a safe space to voice thoughts and ideas.

   “I think just letting people naturally go through whatever thought process they're going through without shutting them down.”

2. Do not attempt to impose your own beliefs.

   “I always say the same thing which is that first of all I'm not trying to deconvert you. I'm not trying to tip the scales.” (Participant 2)

3. Gently challenge cognitive biases or problematic logic.

   “[I was] lucky enough to encounter a group of people who were actually willing to listen to me and didn't judge the fact that I was Christian. They were patient with me. They explained why I was wrong, and that really helped.” (Participant 4)

4. Encourage autonomous thought.

   “I think the most important thing is to encourage that person to have their own thoughts. Encourage them and let them know that it's okay to ask questions. It's okay to be an individual. That you're not inherently bad for wondering whatever you wonder about the world.” (Participant 5)

5. Empathize and leave room for emotional responses.

   “Let them question and let them get emotional about it. That's what's going to allow them to dig in a little bit.” (Participant 3)

“Letting them air their doubts in a safe place where they don't feel like they're stupid for sharing it.” (Participant 6)

7. Structured support.

“Some kind of group therapy or anything for meeting people and getting to share your story. And then, simple things like how to order a drink at a bar. For post evangelicals we need integrating help like we are integrating immigrants.” (Participant 7)

Recommendations for Future Study

There are multiple opportunities for future study revealed by this research. One avenue for future research would be in evaluating the correlations between college readiness and homeschooled or private, Christian-schooled students. Many of the participants expressed that they felt ill-prepared for college academically and socially. Others expressed a wish that they had known how to access support systems to assist them with selecting and getting into college, a process which was very foreign and intimidating for them.

Another study could focus on intersections between anti-science doctrinal positions and the eventual vocational or educational choices of children raised in these traditions. This area was touched on lightly within this study, but more inquiry could be done into the long-term impacts of educational or career prospects for these children.

A longitudinal study examining the critical thinking skills of adolescents in immersive religious communities utilizing a psychometric such as the Critical Thinking Disposition Scale or the California Critical Thinking Skills Test could be interesting, especially if the study evaluated those same participants as they reached adulthood.
In addition, a more in-depth study of the themes of lost opportunity or wasted potential could be compelling.

**Conclusion**

This study began with the premise that biblical literalist faith traditions may have an impact on the ability of followers to be open to accepting knowledge which challenges their beliefs. The findings suggest that for these participants, the ability to be open to accepting new knowledge is hampered by internal and external forces.

These forces are promoted and nurtured by doctrinal teachings, and reinforced within the group. The external forces are related to the social construct and the degree to which the learner is isolated from other belief systems. For the participants in this study, isolation was a significant factor.

The church groups often created a bubble in which learners rarely even encountered non-Christians. Homeschool and Christian school curriculum was reported to be revisionist in their approaches to history and science. Elements of science which contradicted biblical positions were refuted or ignored entirely. History textbooks tended to skip over tough aspects of history, such as slavery and the treatment of Native Americans. Some textbooks overlaid notions of divine providence or God’s will at work to provide context to world events. Some of the participants related feeling disoriented when encountering secular education as a result.

Internal forces were also at play for participants. Many of them had been taught all of their lives that they needed to trust God implicitly. If you were confused about something, trust God. If something didn’t quite make sense, trust God. Failure to do so was just that, failure. Participants were taught that those who abandoned their faith were never really Christians, or
had been seduced by Satan. They were taught to combat their dissonance with apologetics, and when that failed, they must simply surrender to the idea that God must know what he is doing.

Taught that doubts and questions were signs of weakness, many participants policed themselves. The internalized feelings of guilt and shame served the intended purpose. In addition, many of their churches espoused a view that you must never trust in yourself, you must trust in God only. To trust yourself more than God was the height of vanity and arrogance, which God hated.

The result of these internal and external pressures was a systemic stifling of autonomous thought. Autonomous thought is a critical element of personal growth, and is a skill most often developed during adolescence. For many of the participants, this suppression stunted their educational and professional growth, and created disadvantages for them as they sought to enter the workforce or pursue higher education.

The goal of this study was to investigate the lived experiences of people who grew up in biblical literalist faith traditions to determine how that upbringing may have impacted their learning. Many of the participants detailed life-altering interactions with faculty or teachers who opened up their world view by challenging their assumptions and having the patience to do so without attempting to force agreement. These teachers urged them to think for themselves, and for some, this was the first time they had been encouraged to do so.

Educators have a unique opportunity to help such students. Even without the benefit of coming from a similar background, if educators can learn to recognize these students and respond in supportive, non-judgmental ways, they have the ability to change the lives of students who come from biblical literalist backgrounds.
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APPENDIX A

PARTICIPANT OUTREACH RECRUITMENT STATEMENT

Dear (Name Here): I am studying the impacts of biblical literalism on educational attainment for my doctoral dissertation. I want to hear about the lived experiences of people who belonged to fundamentalist faiths...how did it shape your worldview? What were your educational options/goals? Were you taught to reject science and secular education? Did you transition to another, less restrictive faith, or leave religion altogether? What was that process like? What was the catalyst? Did you face opposition...from whom? What was that like?

Among other things, I’m trying to address these questions to help educators know how to identify when a student is grappling with these issues, and perhaps by sharing what helped you, we can help teachers better help their students.

I would like to speak with a diverse pool of people from different faith backgrounds. I expect to be conducting interviews in February. The interviews will likely take a half hour to an hour via Skype. (I have some specific information I need to gather, but I’d like to keep it informal and conversational.) I will record the interviews for later transcription, but your identity will not be attached to it, in any way. My subjects will be identified demographically only. (Former Pentecostal, for example). I know that this can be a highly personal conversation for some people, but it also represents an opportunity to make a meaningful difference by educating others on pathways through biblical literalism to an integration of religious and secular knowledge, or a rejection of religion in favor of secular knowledge.

Please message me if you are interested. I really appreciate your help.
Dear Potential Study Participant:

I am a doctoral student completing her dissertation study through the University of New England, I am inviting you to participate in an interview discussing your experiences with biblical literalism and integrating spiritual and secular knowledge. This study focuses primarily on how you handled inconsistencies between spiritual and secular teachings, and the obstacles you faced. By participating, you are providing a valuable contribution to our collective body of knowledge about the impacts of biblical literalism.

**Research Questions:**

- What are the lived experiences of individuals from biblical literalist religions, as they attempt to integrate their spiritual and secular knowledge?
- How do biblical literalist religions insulate their doctrine from questioning?
- What obstacles or barriers do biblical literalists face when questioning their faith?
- Who (or what) supported you as you sought to either deconvert from your religious faith, or to integrate your religious and spiritual understandings? What did you find helpful during this time?

**Study’s Purpose:** The purpose of this qualitative, phenomenological study is to collect narratives from individuals with a background in biblical literalist religious traditions, and to examine their experience questioning their faith. The findings will inform and educate teachers, to prepare them to provide support to students from biblical literalist religious backgrounds.
**Procedures:** Your participation in this research study is completely voluntary. The study includes an interview and possible follow-up questions as needed. The study will run from February 2018 to April 2018, with results/findings published by May 2018. Upon your request, I can send you a copy of your individual completed interview notes, as well as a copy of the completed dissertation. I do not foresee this study presenting any risks or hardship on you, other than the time to invest in it. However, your time invested will contribute to the immense anticipated benefits of collecting this data to better understand biblical literalism.

**Confidentiality:** Your identity will be protected throughout the study and thereafter. Only I, the researcher, will have access to your information. Follow-up verbal/signed and written reports and discussions will identify you only as a number (i.e. Participant #2). Your name and school location will not be shared with anyone else. Your confidentiality will be protected in compliance with the University of New England’s research with human participants’ policies and procedures.

**Compensation:** No monetary or non-monetary compensation will be provided for your input or time.

**Questions:** If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and your participation, you may contact me, the researcher, via e-mail at sandrews5@une.edu or sara.austin@csuglobal.edu or via my home phone personal line at 207-666-1128. You also may
contact Dr. Michelle Collay at the University of New England at mcollay@une.edu or by phone at 207-602-2010.

Thank you for your valuable insights and willingness to participate in this research study. Your contribution not only supports my dissertation study, but also supports a deeper understanding of biblical literalism and its impacts on learning.

Sincerely,

Sara Austin, Doctoral Student

University of New England’s Educational Leadership Program
APPENDIX C
INTERVIEW GUIDE

Introduction: I am a doctoral student through the University of New England. I am studying how biblical literalism impacts learning. Your input will be valuable for improving education practices for religious individuals throughout the United States. These are the questions I am exploring for my dissertation. My goal is to allow these questions to be covered organically through the telling of your story. I may need to ask some of these questions specifically, but will endeavor to do so while preserving your voice, and the aspects of your story which are most important to you.

Demographic information (if not already collected prior to interview; otherwise, verify responses to warm-up the conversation.):

What is your name? (will be kept anonymous)

Email?

What religions have you belonged to, or were raised in?

What is your religious status now? Christian (another Christian faith, atheist, agnostic, humanist, etc)

What is your gender? ___ Female ___ Male ____Other

The interview will address the following questions, based on the subject’s involvement in a biblical literalist church group.

• Describe your religious background.

• Were all of your family members active in the organization?

• Were you raised in the faith, or converted?
• Did your church hold the view that the Bible should be taken literally?

• How many times per week did you attend church?

• Were you discouraged from having non-Christian friends? Was there peer pressure from non-Christian peers to become more secular?

• What other restrictions were placed on you (music, dress, movies/TV, activities, or other)?

• Did your church promote a particular political viewpoint?

• How did your church view:
  ➢ Secular education
  ➢ Science (climate change, evolution, etc.)
  ➢ Education for women
  ➢ Higher education (secular vs. religious)
  ➢ LGBTQ

• Growing up in the church, were any options withheld from you for your education or livelihood after high school?

• Were any options withheld, discouraged, or denied to you?

• When did you begin having questions about your faith?

• How did your church handle questioning? How did they describe questioning?

• What were the consequences of questioning, both threatened and in reality?

• Did you witness any member of your church facing consequences for questioning? If so, what were they and how did it make you feel?
• Do you feel that the discouragement of questioning had any impact on the development of your critical thinking skills? What was that impact?

• Have you been able to integrate your spiritual and secular knowledge? If so, describe that process.

• If not, why, and how did you handle it?

• What opposition or obstacles did you face as you attempted to integrate or deconvert?

• Who helped you through this process? Was there a friend or mentor who supported you through this process?

• What did they do to support you?

Thank you for your time and for sharing with me about your experiences. This information contributes to the understanding of current practices and how we can improve them for the future. Feel free to contact me at any time with any questions or comments. You are welcome to review the dissertation before and after its completed submission.
Dear Participant:

You may choose to voluntarily participate in this study or decline/withdraw from the study at any time. Do not hesitate to ask questions or present concerns throughout the research study process. Your personal identifying information will not be reported with the findings. Only the researcher will know your identifying information. Your responses will remain anonymous. At any time during the study, you may request access to your own individual data, and in May 2018, you may request access to the study’s results reported in a manner that protects the confidentiality of all participants.

The purpose of the survey and possible follow-up interview and data collection is to collect a wide range of information on the impacts of biblical literalism on learning. After completing the survey, you may be contacted to provide more information and/or complete a short follow-up interview and data collection process. Not all participants will be asked to participate in the follow-up interview and data collection process. After all of the surveys are compiled and reviewed, a select smaller group of individuals will be asked to participate in the follow-up interview and data collection to verify and clarify the survey results.

This study will not present any known risks throughout the process, other than inconveniencing you for your time to complete the survey (approximately 20 minutes). The expected benefit of
your participation is to allow other service providers to see how they can serve their hearing families.

Please sign/agree to this consent form with full knowledge of the purpose and procedures of the study, its survey, and possible follow-up interview and data collection. A copy of the consent form will be emailed/given to you.

I, (participant’s name) ___________________, agree to participate in this study, titled

_Biblical Literalism and Implications for Learning._

Electronic Signature: ______________________

Date: 3/3/2018