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The In-Between : Addressing the Gap in Identity Formation Modeling for Ex-Muslim Atheists

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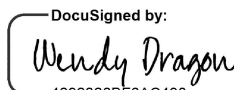
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THE IN-BETWEEN: ADDRESSING THE GAP IN IDENTITY FORMATION MODELING FOR EX-MUSLIM ATHEISTS

PROFESSIONAL DISSERTATION

SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY

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FATIMA SHAIK, PsyM

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Abstract

The transition between religiosity and disaffiliation has been under-represented in the literature. Furthermore, religious disaffiliation has thus far been studied in reference to religion broadly without further specification, except in the cases of Christianity and Catholicism, which have been studied far more often than other religions. Gaps in the research were identified and addressed using seven existing models of religious and non-religious identity development. The extant literature was reviewed, analyzed via critical interpretive synthesis, and organized into an identity development model for ex-Muslim atheists. The resulting model consisted of the following stages: (1) *religion as ascribed identity*, (1a) *socialization*, (1b) *anchors*, (2) *questioning theism*, (2a) *morality*, (2b) *consciousness*, (3) *rejection of theism*, and (4) *atheism as chosen identity*. Future directions for this topic should include empirical validation of the model and each of its stages so that healthcare providers may better understand and address the clinical needs of ex-Muslim atheists.

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Dedication

For Ammi and Ahmad, without whom I would have given up a hundred times over.

WE DID IT.

Chapter I

Statement of the Problem

Although psychological research exists on the topics of both religious (e.g., Altman et al., 2010; Dubow et al., 2000; King, 2003; Mohyuddin, 2020; Peek, 2005; Small, 2008) and atheist identity (e.g., Abbott & Mollen, 2018; Greksa, 2015; LeDrew, 2013; Siner, 2012; Smith, 2011), the transition between religiosity and disaffiliation is under-represented in the literature (Greksa, 2015; LeDrew, 2013; Siner, 2012; Smith, 2011). In addition, atheism is seldom studied in a clinical capacity (Brewster et al., 2014). According to a survey conducted by the Pew Research Center (2020), nearly 89% of Americans expressed belief in God to varying degrees of certainty in 2014. Despite the social perception that belief in God is a swiftly dwindling phenomenon, this number decreased by a mere 3% compared to survey results from 2007, indicating that atheists are still a minority in the religious landscape of America. Given the buffer to stress/psychological malaise that positive religiosity provides (Ano & Vasconcelles, 2005; Ward, 2010), these same benefits may become liabilities to new atheists as they lose their connection with religious communities of origin and have little guidance on how to form a new identity. I propose that such identity difficulties may be further compounded for individuals from collectivistic cultures who may experience ostracization by their cultural community – which is likely the same as their religious community – as a result of religious disaffiliation (Howard et al., 2021; Vliek, 2019). The clinical importance of this work lies in the potential need for reframing of self-esteem,

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identity, and belongingness; the experience of leaving one's religion and all its side effects are of importance to clinicians who may need to support new atheists in this re-evaluation.

Chapter II

Literature Review

The process involved in religious disaffiliation from Islam, both individual and group-based, are of interest to this project; thus, the following sections review studies describing religious/spiritual and secular identity. In addition, studies that identify/explore stigma associated with being Muslim or atheistic are also reviewed in this chapter. Also included are studies pertinent to apostasy (Brinkerhoff & Burke, 1980; Brinkerhoff & Mackie, 1993; Hunsberger, 1980; Hunsberger, 1983), which is defined as the act of disaffiliation from religion.

Identity and Its Formation

Identity is a highly central topic in the field of psychology because of its implications for self-esteem, self-efficacy, social relationships, and many more processes (Stets & Burke, 2000). As such, the concept of identity has been used in several ways by different research fields. Although this research has led to useful information, it has also resulted in the term identity being given various definitions and implications (Stryker & Burke, 2000). One usage referenced culture and was used interchangeably with ethnicity or race. Throughout this paper, the usage of "identity" will be referred to as racial identity or cultural identity, both of which have been defined as pride in one's background, racial and/or cultural, respectively (Wing & Sue, 1981). In the extant research, racial identity has been shown to impact attitudes about the self, others of the same racial background, others of different racial backgrounds, and those in the majority race (Poston, 1990).

According to Poston (1990) the concept of racial identity also has also been used to disprove the notion that all minority group members share the same identity.

One influential model of racial identity development for under-represented ethnic groups was the Minority Identity Development (MID) model (Atkinson et al., 1979). The model consisted of three stages: *conformity*, *resistance and immersion*, and *synergetic articulation and awareness*. In the *conformity* stage, the individual preferred values/behaviors of the majority group, which in the case of American minorities was White/European values and behaviors. In the *resistance and immersion* stage the individual rejected White/European values entirely and immersed themselves into values of their own ethnic group. The *synergetic articulation and awareness* stage was when the individual chose values or behaviors from both cultures depending on context. A later study (Morten & Atkinson, 1983) applied this model to clients' preference for their therapists' race. Although they were unable to recruit enough participants that identified with the *conformity* stage, they found significant relationships between MID stage and race preference for those who identified with the other two stages. As the authors predicted, Black individuals in the *resistance and immersion* stage endorsed a strong preference for a Black therapist. By comparison, individuals who were in the *synergetic articulation and awareness* stage stated no preference for their therapist's race. Morten and Atkinson's (1983) findings demonstrated differences between Black people depending on their unique racial identity as well as their attitudes towards others' races, both of which are major functions of racial identity (Poston, 1990).

Another way in which the term identity has been used is in reference to identification with a social category or group (Stryker & Burke, 2000). The term identity

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has been primarily used this way in social psychology and referred to those roles, group memberships, and self-categorizations that are considered relevant to the self (Stets & Burke, 2000). A social identity also has implications for self-perception and self-esteem. To achieve each of these outcomes, the individual must categorize oneself in relation to a group and also compare oneself to members of the group. For example, consider that Laila has joined her school tennis team, and begins to categorize herself as an athlete. By comparing herself to other players on the team, Laila can find similarities that strengthen her sense of belonging. Perhaps she likes to warm up before a match in the same way as another teammate or prefers the same snack after practice. In addition to similarities of a general nature, Laila may also seek similarities that mark the tennis team she belongs to – called the "in-group" – as good and positive. When the in-group is good and positive, so are all the members of the group, including Laila. In addition to attaching positive attributes to her in-group, Laila may attach negative attributes to tennis teams she does not belong to, referred to as "out-groups." If the rival school's tennis team is mean and bad at doubles matches, the in-group can be perceived as even more positive and good in comparison. Throughout this paper, such an identity will be referred to as a social identity, which can signal roles or groups to which an individual belongs (Stets & Burke, 2000).

The third way the term identity has been used – and the usage that is most relevant to the current paper – is composed of two parts. The first part is the roles that an individual holds in society, and the second part is the meaning that they attach to these roles. In combination, these elements form a sense of self or an identity (Stryker & Burke, 2000). In other words, the self is thought to both affect and be affected by society.

Further, each interaction of self and society is assigned a meaning or inner narrative that contributes to identity. For example, an individual's self-perception and how they think others see them are significantly related (Shrauger & Schoeneman, 1979). These findings suggested that in addition to an individual's sense of self, they also held ideas about how their self is perceived by those in their social circle. These ideas were the meanings and interpretations that the individual assigned to their social roles. Another finding was that there was no significant relationship between an individual's self-perception and how others really saw them. In other words, receiving feedback about their identity had no long-term impact on an individual's sense of self. This complicated network of findings suggested that the meaning assigned to a social role was resistant to feedback from others. Certainty about one's identity and identity salience, or how important an aspect of identity was to an individual, were theorized to be factors in this resistance to feedback. The more salient an aspect of identity was, the better developed an individual's knowledge of that aspect was. For example, if being a feminist was particularly important to someone, they were likely to seek out education about feminism and explore how well feminism fits with their existing identity. Furthermore, the more well-explored an aspect of identity was, the more certain an individual was that such an aspect was an accurate part of their identity (Shrauger & Schoeneman, 1979). For example, after seeking out education about feminism and testing their values against feminist values, an individual is likely to conclude without doubt that they are a feminist. They may believe that their feminism will be recognized by others because of outwardly feminist behaviors (Burke & Reitzes, 1981). However, when someone in their social circle provides feedback that a certain behavior of theirs is in opposition with feminism, the individual's self-perception

is unlikely to change because of the identity salience and certainty. Essentially a salient aspect of identity that an individual was certain about was resistant to feedback from others long-term (Shrauger & Schoeneman, 1979).

Another theory of identity was proposed by Marcia (1966) in reference to ego-identity status or the status of a persistent, recognizable self. In this theory, identity results from consolidation of an individual's life roles, how they respond to life events, and the internal standard of who they want to be (ego-ideal). This theory was referred to as ego-identity theory and encompassed the following four ego-identity states: identity achievement, identity diffusion, moratorium, and foreclosure. These ego-identity states were premised upon Erikson's (1968) theory of identity crisis as a psychosocial task necessary for identity development. Such a crisis entailed a choice between meaningful options for roles such as occupation, religion, or political identity. Marcia (1966) asserted that both crisis and commitment, which referred to personal investment in a choice, were necessary for identity achievement. An individual who has reached identity achievement has intentionally and seriously considered several options, re-evaluated past ideologies, and made a choice to which she is committed. Furthermore, this individual is unlikely to be easily swayed from her decision. An identity diffusion state, on the other hand, referred to a choice made without commitment and may or may not have involved crisis. An individual in this state is just as likely to choose one occupation as another and may shift ideologies based on his circumstances. Moratorium and foreclosure referred to conceptual midpoints between identity achievement and diffusion. An individual in the moratorium state is actively in crisis and although she may wish to make a commitment, she may make various vague commitments that are subject to change as the crisis period

changes. Additionally, moratorium entailed a struggle between societal expectations, abilities, and parental demands. An individual in the foreclosure state never experienced an identity crisis but still expressed commitment to a role or ideology. This state was further explained as one during which an individual likely takes on roles or ideologies assigned by their parents or society. Later life experiences reportedly served as confirmation of their existing beliefs. In situations that called these beliefs into question, the individual was likely to feel threatened. Importantly, individuals were able to move between ego-identity states in no particular order and were also able to settle on one state (Marcia, 1966).

Religion and Associated Factors

Much like a social identity, which can signify membership in a group or fulfillment of a role (Stets & Burke, 2000), a religious identity signifies association with a religious or spiritual faith (Lopez et al., 2011). Research suggested that religious identity changes over time (Elkind, 1964; Peek, 2005) and follows developmental stages (Elkind, 1964). For young children, religious identity begins with a global, vague recognition of their religious identity wherein religion, family name, ethnicity, and race are often confused for each other. At approximately the ages of 7 through 9, children associate a religious identity with concrete practices such as attending a certain church or synagogue. Abstraction increases with age such that children between the ages of 10 and 12 are able to recognize religion as an internal, intangible feature. Elkind (1964) asserted that this level of abstraction was on par with that of an adult.

In addition to changing over time in terms of understanding and abstraction (Elkind, 1964), many studies have demonstrated that religious identities also change over

time in terms of agency (LeDrew, 2013; Peek, 2005; Smith, 2011). In other words, young children often take on the religion to which their parents belong and may not further reflect on their religious beliefs (Peek, 2005). Elkind's (1964) findings and those of Peek (2005) concurred that religion at this early stage is no different from a last name in that it is simply given to children at birth. Adolescents and adults, on the other hand, were more reflective and demonstrated more agency by choosing to continue religious practices in the absence of parents requiring it of them (Peek, 2005). As identity building is a major task during adolescence (Erikson, 1968), adolescence and the beginning of college were described as moments when such agentic developments came about (Peek, 2005; Smith, 2011). Other research (Lopez et al., 2011) found that religious identity remained stable while an individual was in high school but their active participation in religious activities decreased. This decrease was reportedly due to increased autonomy and competing interests such as extracurricular activities and social activities. The authors also hypothesized that adolescents' social environments largely remained stable during high school years and that changes in religious identity typically occurred at greater points of transition such as college, new work, or moving away from home (Lopez et al., 2011).

A religious identity has also been described throughout the literature as a resource or asset due to the benefits associated with religiosity. One such work (Pargament et al., 2000) organized the ways in which religion can be used to cope with stress. The categories included meaning, control, comfort/spirituality, intimacy/spirituality, and life transformation. Meaning referred to the use of religion as a framework through which suffering and life experiences could be understood/interpreted. Religion was used as a means to mastery or control over life when faced with life events that were

uncontrollable. According to Pargament and colleagues (2000), spirituality was defined as a desire to connect with a higher power or "force that goes beyond the individual" (p. 521). Spirituality was also defined as a fundamental function of religion, as it interacted with one's desire for both comfort and intimacy with others. Spirituality was seen as the means used to reduce anxiety about living in a chaotic world and establish social solidarity/identity, typically with religious others, respectively. The life transformation method referred to using religion as an aid in making large life changes (e.g., seeking a new purpose in life or spiritual assistance to forgive someone; Pargament et al., 2000).

Association with religion, like any other social group, can come with benefits and detriments. For example, research has delineated certain approaches to religiosity that causes an increase in distress (Pargament et al., 2000). Specifically, such frameworks were defined as Punishing God Reappraisals (stressor as God's punishment), Demonic Reappraisals (stressor as the Devil's work), Spiritual Discontent (expression of dissatisfaction in relationship with God), Interpersonal Religious Discontent (expression of dissatisfaction in relationship with clergy/members), and Pleading for Direct Intercession (praying for miracle/divine intercession. The authors found that among a sample of college students, poorer physical and mental health outcomes were associated with the use of Punishing God Reappraisals, Reappraisals of God's Powers (reevaluating God's powers in stressful situations), and Spiritual Discontent. Although participants from two different samples (one hospital sample and one sample of college students) all tended to use these negative religious coping methods less often than positive ones, the use of negative religious coping methods was still associated with negative outcomes in adjustment levels (Pargament et al., 2000). This evidence was in line with early theories

of positive and negative religious coping which indicated that coping skills based upon a strong relationship with God and a trusting worldview were consistently associated with positive health outcomes whereas coping skills based upon a fearful worldview and spiritual struggle were associated with negative health outcomes (Pargament et al., 1998).

Some religious identities, such as Judaism, signal both religious belief and ethnic identity (Altman et al., 2010). Although many Jewish people are White, they are connected ethnically by a shared history, culture, and experiences with antisemitism, which means prejudice or hostility towards Jewish people. Findings of a study that analyzed components of a Jewish identity supported a view of religious faith in Judaism and cultural connection to Jewish people/values as components that need not be endorsed together. In fact, the data suggested that the sociocultural connection between Jewish folks was a stronger force than the religious aspects of the identity. Among other reported components was a bicultural identity that included both American and Jewish values, despite these values being in opposition at times. Many participants endorsed a connection to America and the American dream as well as a spiritual and physical attachment to Israel despite having never been to the country. Some participants described this connection as wanting to be upstanding American citizens to ensure America's political support of Israel. Passing down of Jewish traditions, maintenance of Jewish values, religious behaviors and traditions, cultural celebrations, and remembrance of Jewish persecution were all identified as significant components of Jewish identity, as well. In addition to components of Jewish identity, the study described situations in which participants had to deny their Jewish identity to "fit in" or avoid prejudice. Some

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participants reported that their Jewish identity did not have an impact on their daily lives or was overlooked by their peers (Altman et al., 2010).

On a more individualistic level, research has been conducted to determine religious identity's intersection with ego-identity states (Marcia, 1966). Fisherman (2002) found that one's healthy religious identity development was correlated with a thorough exploration of one's personal beliefs. This process generally entailed a reconciliation of one's beliefs and their outward behaviors, such that their faith became intrinsically motivated. Fisherman (2002) found that healthy religious identity as described above was significantly related to the moratorium and identity achievement stages (Marcia, 1966). Fisherman (2002) further defined unhealthy religious identity development as a process that does not involve introspection or exploration. Rather, those with an unhealthy religious identity parroted religious explanations that they did not fully understand or know to be true. This parroting was referred to as sloganeering (Fisherman, 2002) and was similar to a religious identity formed via identity diffusion (Marcia, 1966). Moratorium was an ego-identity stage that could lead to either healthy or unhealthy religious identity (Fisherman, 2002). Although an individual in moratorium explored their religious identity, they may have experimented with immorality and delayed the reconciliation of behaviors and beliefs necessary to reach identity achievement. An individual in foreclosure likely committed to their religion to attain social belonging by focusing on religious behaviors or rituals without true reflection. The last type of religious identity development set forth by Fisherman (2002) was dangerous religious identity development. Such an identity involved recognition of the need for reconciliation followed by avoidance. For example, a sloganeer who realizes they have been repeating

untrue religious sentiments may avoid the need to ask questions. By doing so, they have regressed to either foreclosure – by recommitting to the religion and to not engaging in doubt – or identity diffusion during which the individual feels hopeless about reconciliation. The latter situation sometimes led to antireligious attitudes, inconsistent religious beliefs/practices, or the use of alcohol or drugs. Identity diffusion of this type was predicted to be the most dangerous because hopelessness surrounding religious identity could lead to an inability to explore religion any further (Fisherman, 2002). Based upon the work of Marcia (1966) and Fisherman (2002), later research identified doubt as a vital part of religious identity development (Baltazar & Coffen, 2011).

Apostasy and Related Factors

Although researchers began studying apostasy as early as the 1970s, these studies either described secularization in the general society or captured characteristics of those who disaffiliate (e.g., education or political affiliation) rather than the process of disaffiliation (Brinkerhoff & Burke, 1980). Such research findings described disaffiliates as young, liberal, and highly educated with a small subset of older, more conservative disaffiliates that left religion solely because they lacked religious faith. By contrast, the younger apostates were said to disaffiliate because of differences in ideological beliefs on political matters such as reproductive rights, lesbian/gay/bisexual/transgender (LGBT+) rights, marijuana legalization, and separation of church and state in addition to changes in faith (Hadaway, 1989).

Interestingly, early theories about what sets religious and atheistic individuals apart included rebellion against parents as a major predictive factor (Caplovitz & Sherrow, 1977).[1] More specifically, evidence supported the concept of disaffiliation from

religion due to familial distress and distant relationships with parents. Later research findings did not support these assertions but rather found that none of the participants described their apostasy as rejection of their parents' teachings (Hunsberger, 1980). In fact, 18 of the 47 participants reported that they disaffiliated from religion because of issues they found with religious leaders as well as the church itself and its teachings. Additionally, ten participants reported that disaffiliation was a choice consistent with their parents' teachings. The two factors that explained the variance between apostates and the control group in this study were the following: parents did not place emphasis on religion or religious practices during their childhood or parental teachings about religion inspired doubt and other negative reactions rather than a desire to continue following those teachings. These findings were later replicated (Hunsberger, 1983) and extended to include other aspects of parent-child relationships that predicted apostasy. Mothers of religious participants rated their religious beliefs as more important to their lives when compared to mothers of disaffiliates. In addition, fathers of religious participants endorsed more agreement with religious teachings, more radical political beliefs, more traditional religious beliefs, and less personal happiness. As predicted, few participants in this study endorsed rebellion against parents as their reason for disaffiliation (9%) with higher endorsements for hypocrisy within religious communities (65%) and disagreement with religious teachings (61%; Hunsberger, 1983).

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[1] The evidence referenced here is from the book *The religious drop-outs: Apostasy among college graduates* by David Caplovitz and Fred Sherrow (1978). Although this text could not be obtained, information about this study's findings were discussed in various works (Brinkerhoff & Burke, 1980; Hunsberger, 1980; Hunsberger, 1983), all of which were reviewed by this author in order to present this important first discussion of apostasy accurately.

In addition to studying predictors of apostasy, it is important to consider the process of disaffiliation itself and how individual differences in faith may impact it. Researchers have attempted to understand these individual differences conceptually, based on the premise that religious belief includes both adherence to religious beliefs and the sense of belonging/community that comes from viewing the world according to the same principles (Brinkerhoff & Burke, 1980; Brinkerhoff & Mackie, 1993). Individuals who held both strong religious beliefs and secure connection to their religious community were referred to as Fervent Followers (Brinkerhoff & Burke, 1980). On the other hand, Ritualists rejected aspects of their religious beliefs but continued to participate in rituals and ceremonies due to their continued connection to their religious community. Members of this subset may have attended church on Christmas or donated to those in need during Ramadan but still rejected the religious underpinnings of the holidays. Individuals who have dissociated from their religious community despite holding strong religious beliefs were referred to as Outsiders and the authors hypothesized that factors such as interpersonal problems or inter-community marriage may have led to their dissociation. Apostate was the label given to those who completely disaffiliate from both their religious beliefs and their religious community. Brinkerhoff and Burke (1980) asserted that when individuals are grouped together despite crucial differences, those individuals begin to act in ways that fulfill the requirements of that label. This assimilation can lead to the formation of an ill-fitting identity, confirmation of others' negative beliefs, or even ostracization. Additionally, the authors describe the relational, interactive nature of these labels. That is, whereas an individual who leaves a strict religious community for a more liberal and solitary relationship with God may identify as an Outsider, their religious

community may view them as an Apostate. This difference in labeling demonstrates that it is important to not only understand the nuanced differences between each label but to encourage educated self-identification rather than ascribed labels when studying this population. Another purpose served by this system of labeling is to clarify the line between religious and non-religious people, which the authors argue is a matter of self-identification (Brinkerhoff & Burke, 1980). Therefore, any participant who denies religious beliefs (i.e., Apostates and Ritualists) will be referred to as an atheist, disaffiliate, or apostate throughout this study.

Stigma

Although it is widely known that atheists are disliked and outcasted in both public and private spheres (Doane & Elliott, 2015), the reason behind this dislike is varied and may be rooted in issues of morality. Researchers of one study found that a dislike of atheists may stem from distrust (Gervais et al., 2011); specifically, when participants read about an individual who commits crimes when no one is paying attention, they were more likely to associate the individual with an atheist or a rapist than with followers of any religion, feminists, or members of the LGBT+ community. The authors further explained that these results were mediated by the concept that people's actions are more morally sound when they feel God is watching/evaluating them. Based on these results – which were replicated in urban, liberal settings – people believe that those who do not believe in God have no reason to be moral. Another study showed that although attitudes have improved towards other religions and ethnic backgrounds, the distrust and dislike of atheists remains unchanged (Edgell et al., 2006). Edgell and colleagues (2006) theorized that this dislike is not due to personal experience with atheists but may be due to the

Atheist archetype – someone who is immoral and contrary to American values – becoming a symbol of cultural boundaries drawn between those who respect the historical importance of religion in America and those who do not.

The Rejection-Identification Model (RIM; Branscombe, Schmitt, & Harvey, 1999) suggests that when someone experiences discrimination and interprets it as being due to their membership in a certain group, they may identify more strongly with that group as a method of cognitive reframing; this compensation is an effort to decrease the negative effects that discrimination has on psychological and physical well-being (Clark et al., 1999; Pascoe & Richman, 2009; Weber et al., 2012). In relation to atheists, RIM would stipulate that because atheists are outcasts in American society, they may identify more strongly with other atheists, seek them out for support, and use their sense of belongingness in this group to offset any detrimental effects to their psychological well-being (Branscombe et al., 1999). Doane and Elliot (2015) were able to provide support for this hypothesis with a sample of atheists in the U.S. They added the caveat that their participants identified strongly as atheists and less publicly atheist individuals may not benefit as much from group identification.

A concealable stigmatized identity is an identity variable that encompasses the above literature in that it refers to an identity that is simultaneously stigmatized and hidden from others (Quinn & Earnshaw, 2013). The researchers who coined the term further specified that they conceptualize concealable stigmatized identities as consisting of valenced content and magnitude. Although valenced content refers to prior experiences (such as experienced stigma) or beliefs (such as anticipated stigma), it is most clearly defined as the affective factor of an identity and can either make one feel better about

themselves or worse. Magnitude refers to how central the identity is to one's self-concept and how salient it is in any given situation. When conceptualized in this way, it becomes apparent that it is an individual's experiences and beliefs coupled with situational factors that decide whether a stigmatized identity will be concealed rather than the possession of a stigmatized identity alone. The authors also suggested that concealment of an identity of negative valence content and more central/salient magnitude is likely to cause more psychological distress (Quinn & Earnshaw, 2013). Subsequent research on concealable stigmatized identities was conducted using participants from the LGBT+ community and demonstrated that those who concealed their identity also tended to report more social anxiety, lower quality of life, lower satisfaction with social support, and more sensitivity to being rejected for their sexual orientation (Meidlinger & Hope, 2014). Based on these constructs, a study was conducted using a sample of 1,024 atheists and the conclusions were consistent with research findings based on other populations. The authors found that more anticipated stigma was associated with less disclosure, more concealment, and lower levels of psychological/ physical well-being. However, those atheists who had more connection with other atheists and felt positively about their own identity as an atheist tended to endorse higher levels of well-being and were more likely to disclose rather than conceal their identity as an atheist (Abbott & Mollen, 2018).

Aims

The main purpose of this study is to propose a model of identity formation specific to ex-Muslim atheists and their deconversion process. More specifically, aims of this dissertation are to: (1) explore existing models of religious/atheistic identity formation (2) discern themes related to disaffiliation from Islam with specific focus on

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identity factors (3) discern themes related to new identity formation as an atheist and (4) propose an identity model that encompasses the preceding. One desired outcome is the discovery of common themes in existing identity models to propose a theory of identity formation that is grounded in existing, empirical research. Another desired outcome is to discover themes related to disaffiliation, exploring and accepting atheism, and situations/factors that contribute to adaptive/maladaptive identity formation. Better understanding of these themes could also contribute to better-tailored research, assessment, and intervention with this population in the future.

Chapter III

Methodology

In this study, an interpretive synthesis model (Schick-Makaroff et al., 2016) was implemented to gain insight into the identity formation process of previously Muslim atheists. Specifically, critical interpretive synthesis was used to review relevant literature in an iterative, flexible manner in order to develop a theory of identity formation. First developed by Dixon-Woods and colleagues (2006), critical interpretive synthesis is best used to integrate evidence from numerous studies of a phenomenon into a conceptual map or theoretical framework. Although a grounded formal theory model was also considered, the current project's aims were to study a more specific population (i.e., ex-Muslim atheists), whereas grounded formal theory models are best used to synthesize grounded theories into a more generalizable, broad theory. Additionally, a critical interpretive synthesis model allowed data collection from both qualitative and quantitative empirical studies as well as conceptual and theoretical works. Such flexibility was required in order to create a theoretical model with supporting evidence. According to the critical interpretive synthesis procedure, the research question was not to be formulated in advance but rather allowed to emerge from analysis of the relevant literature. Specifically, literature that illuminates different aspects of the target concept was to be reviewed so that related concepts/theories could be integrated. Thus, initial review of the literature was focused on identity models of both Muslim identity and atheist identity. This methodology was also chosen through consideration of the desired

study outcome, which was to create a theory of how ex-Muslim atheists form new atheist identities. The end-product of a critical interpretive synthesis is a synthesizing argument that identifies central concepts and delineates the relationships between them (Schick-Makaroff et al., 2016). Therefore, by using critical interpretive synthesis a synthetic theory of the connection between disaffiliation from Islam, identity formation, and becoming atheist could be created.

Cultural and/or religious differences in identity formation, disaffiliation process, and rejection of theism were of particular interest. An organic literature review was conducted with an emphasis on relevant topics. Any articles that mentioned atheists, atheist identity, Muslim identity, the disaffiliation process, outcomes/correlates of disaffiliation from Islam, outcomes/correlates of disaffiliation generally, religious identity, identity theory, social identity theory, and stigma were included initially. During this iterative process, the aim of the project was adjusted to developing an identity formation model for ex-Muslim atheists. Through multiple readings, a sample frame was developed, and seven studies were chosen. The most essential inclusion criterion was for the studies in the sample frame to include analysis of either Muslim or atheist identity formation. Models that used stages or presented major themes in the disaffiliation process were deemed the most useful as these provided empirical evidence to support each stage/theme. However, models that did not use stages/themes were included if they provided novel information about religious or non-religious identity. Any model of identity formation that spanned the gap between Islam and atheism would have been prioritized but no such studies were found during the literature review or are available to the best of this author's knowledge. The selected studies were then critiqued using

participant characteristics, data collection and analysis methods, major findings, and underlying assumptions. Relevance to the topic and participant quotes were prioritized. A combination of informal coding (i.e., highlighting text, denoting insights), reciprocal translational analysis, and lines-of-argument synthesis were used for data extraction (Dixon-Woods et al., 2006).

In this case, data was in the form of themes that may be fitting descriptors of the identity formation process. Reciprocal translational analysis (Dixon-Woods et al., 2006) was used to extract the most useful themes (See *Table 1*). Reciprocal translational analysis entails identification of similar concepts across different studies — often using different labels or created within different contexts — and combining them using whichever label is most fitting. Such a decision is made based on a thorough understanding of the concept itself. Reciprocal translational analysis also requires that any contradictions across studies be explained. For example, this paper discusses the concept of religious commitment. To understand this concept, various empirical studies were reviewed to understand the scope and variation of how this term was used in the extant literature. The terms *anchor* (King, 2003; Layton et al., 2011) and *reinforcers of Jewish identity* (Altman, et al., 2010) have been used to denote one's dedication to their religion/religious community. For the purposes of this paper, the term *anchor* was more appropriate because the term *anchor* (King, 2003) refers to behaviors that demonstrate religious commitment and can be displayed regardless of one's belief in God. For example, one can attend a Christian church because it is expected by family members, regardless of how devoted the individual is to Jesus. Church attendance is therefore an anchor, or an overt demonstration of religious commitment. In contrast, the term

reinforcer (Altman et al., 2010) would have implied that church attendance reinforces one's religious beliefs and may function as motivation to become more religious. This term implies both a demonstration of religious belief and an impact on one's religiosity in response to church attendance. As the current model is meant to be applicable across the various stages of disaffiliation, the term *anchor* (King, 2003) was chosen.

Lines-of-argument synthesis (Dixon-Woods et al., 2006) was also used when the combination of multiple labels was required to create a larger category (See *Table 1*). Evidence-based themes or categories set forth by multiple studies were used to form an overall interpretation of the target concept, which was then in turn used to select the most fitting theme/category/name. For example, religification (Kaviraj et al., 2010), discrimination or bullying (Ghaffar-Kucher, 2012; Mohyuddin, 2020), and messages about religious/racial/ethnic identity from parents or the community (Neblett et al., 2006) were all factors that incorporated a social process and its effect on an individual's identity. These concepts were not similar enough to be reciprocally translated into each other and therefore were subsumed under the broad category of *socialization* (See *Figure 8*, Point 1a). Chosen theme names were then organized into a model of identity formation for ex-Muslim atheists.

Chapter IV

Analysis & Synthesis

Atheists have been under-represented in the psychological literature in recent

years (Brewster et al., 2014) and theories of identity have been rarer still. Theories of

identity for atheists have been seen as being not specific to the religion that was rejected

(Greksa, 2015; LeDrew, 2013; Siner, 2012; Smith, 2011; Sumerau & Cragun, 2016).

Instead, these theories have served as a catchall for disaffiliates of any given religion.

However, the theories were often built on interview data from disaffiliates of

Christianity/Catholicism in higher numbers than other religions. Although generalizable

and empirically supported, such models excluded an intersectional (Crenshaw, 1989)

understanding of religious disaffiliation. This exclusion means that past models have

largely neglected how culture, gender, sexuality, geographical location, or political

context may impact the disaffiliation process. In contrast, existing models of Muslim

identity formation have provided a wealth of information about the intersection of various

identities. These models were used to better understand aspects of religious identity

formation that were unique to Muslims. As such, Mohyuddin's (2020) study of Muslim

identity formation in adolescents was consulted to better understand the underpinnings of

religious identity formation. Peek (2005) also proposed an identity development model

for Muslims that has stark similarities to Smith's (2011) model for atheist identity

formation in that both models discuss a "standard" trajectory to Islam and atheism,

respectively. Their models were both pared down to broad stages that allow for individual

variability. These similarities as well as their simple, stage-based format allowed greater comparison of individual concepts. In preparation for the presentation of an integrated model of atheist identity processes before, during, and after disaffiliation, the different models of both Muslim and atheist identity, as well as their respective limitations are discussed in detail in this paper. Through this discussion, I demonstrate how I was able to select appropriate themes from each model (See *Table 1*), thereby proposing a unified identity model (See *Figure 8*) that is specific to ex-Muslim atheists.

Becoming Muslim: The Development of a Religious Identity

Peek (2005) conducted a two-year study to develop a model of Muslim identity formation (See *Figure 1*). A total of 127 Muslim students, ranging from ages 18 to 33, were interviewed via both focus groups and individual interviews. Peek (2005) also observed participants during social events such as one-on-one coffee meetings, weddings, and student organization meetings. Interviews were conducted in both New York and Colorado. Interviews were between one and three hours long and were recorded, transcribed, and coded for thematic analysis. Based on observation, Peek (2005) suggested that the participants in this study could be considered highly religious.

This model consisted of three stages: *religion as ascribed identity*, *religion as chosen identity*, and *religion as declared identity* (Peek, 2005). During the first stage, individuals often identified as Muslim by virtue of being born into a Muslim family but did not report active consideration of religious beliefs or practices. Religious background was also described as less salient than more visible identities such as ethnicity. Socialization towards religion by family/community was included in this stage. Additionally, pressure to assimilate to American norms/values was higher in schools with

a higher proportion of White students. Some felt their religious identity was stigmatized and therefore they hid their religion in an attempt to assimilate. This tendency was reported by students who hid their religion in conjunction with little understanding of Islamic tenets (Peek, 2005), which is conceptually similar to a term coined by Kaviraj and colleagues (2010), thin religification. Thick religification is a religious identity that encompasses rituals, traditions, and beliefs whereas thin religification refers to religious identity that stems from political or nationalistic interests rather than religious tenets. Peek's (2005) findings supported the assertion that thin religification (Kaviraj et al., 2010) involves both internal and social processes. For example, in the case of the aforementioned students who hid their religion to assimilate, a social process occurred when students recognized the need to fit in with their peers. As religious dress or practices can be unique identity markers, hiding one's religion can have the effect of blending in. The internal process in this example was the students' internalization of their religion. If religious tenets and traditions were not self-relevant, the student experienced thin religification and may decide to hide their religion when social pressure is applied (Peek, 2005). In addition, Peek's (2005) findings suggested that thin religification, in combination with perceived stigma, may be associated with detachment from religion, at least in public settings such as school. This suggestion is supported by Krueger's (2013) deconversion model wherein atheists-to-be begin the disaffiliation process by feeling emotionally divested of their religious identity. This overlap is important – despite one model focusing on Islam and the other focusing on atheism – because it may serve as a theoretical bridge. If a student chose to hide his religion because of perceived stigma and emotional detachment, this example could serve as evidence of Muslim and atheist

identity models demonstrating concept reliability. The second stage, *religion as chosen identity*, described a shift in participants' views of religion (Peek, 2005). During this stage of development, the individual became more intentional about their identity and weighed the relative importance of behaviors they once engaged in passively. Many endorsed beginning college as the most impactful time for identity development as this was the first time they could make such choices independently. The individual must make many new choices at this stage such as what to make for dinner, how to structure study time, and whether religion is important to their life. Of note, participants identified access to Muslim peers and student organizations as a leading factor in their religious development. Greksa (2015) discussed a similar sub-theme (*friends*) among individuals who later identified as atheists, wherein atheists-to-be sought out non-religious others who could validate their disbelief and provide insider information about atheism. This connection is important as it may serve as another theoretical bridge. If having access to Muslim friends/peers is conducive to Muslim identity formation and access to atheist friends/peers is conducive to atheist identity formation, one may hypothesize that the absence of Muslim friends/peers may serve as a deterrent to Muslim identity formation. By extension, this may lead to emotional divestment and an entry to the deconversion process (Krueger, 2013). Once an individual reached the last stage, *religion as declared identity*, they were likely to describe their religious identity as strong or secure (Peek, 2005). Given that 117 of 127 participants were born into Islam and seemed to be actively participating throughout their lives, they did not have to declare themselves as Muslim to their family/friends/community. The declaration mentioned here is an internal one wherein the individual felt knowledgeable about Islam and described Islam as central to

Figure 1

Becoming Muslim: The Development of a Religious Identity
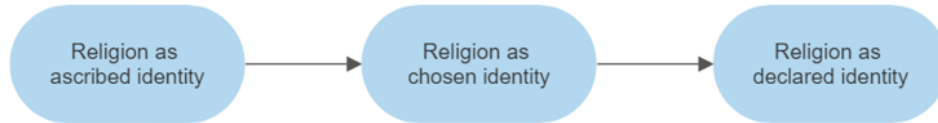
Note. A graphic representation of Peek's (2005) Muslim identity development model. As the original author did not provide a visual model, I created one based on Peek's (2005) narrative description.

their identity. One example of an outward declaration might be wearing the *hijab* or attending mosque services more frequently. However, the most common outward declaration for this sample involved those outside the faith when they had to respond to microaggressions or harassment. It should be noted that this study was conducted, in part, in New York during the aftermath of 9/11. As such, the Muslims included in this study endorsed being significantly impacted by the terrorist attack. Participants reported reading the Qur'an closely, attempting to embody Islam positively, and vocalizing pride in being Muslim more often in response to religiously-motivated harassment. For example, female participants who were asked to stop wearing their *hijab* refused to do so. They clarified that their personal relationship with Islam was no longer subject to their parents' wishes and that they felt strongly about using any harassment as opportunities to educate others about "true Islam" (Peek, 2005, p. 232).

Although this model (Peek, 2005) is focused on Muslim identity formation, it had significant similarities to Smith's (2011) model for atheist identity formation (discussed in detail below). Both models began with *religion as ascribed identity*, progressed to the

individual choosing a religious identity, and ended with a public declaration of identity. This agreement between models of two vastly different identities was evidence of concept validity, meaning that both concepts of ascribed identity and chosen identity were true and present in Peek's (2005) and Smith's (2011) samples (See *Table 1*). The final stage was not adopted into the current model (See *Figure 8*) due to conflicting evidence (Vliek, 2019), but *religion as ascribed identity* and *religion as chosen identity* (Peek, 2005) were both adopted into the current model. In Peek's (2005) Islamic identity model, *religion as declared identity* referred to a confirmation of explored and tested beliefs, much like achieved identity (Marcia, 1966). However, in a study exploring disaffiliation narratives in European ex-Muslims, findings indicated that stark differences existed in how open subjects were willing to be about their disbelief (Vliek, 2019). Some completely concealed their disaffiliation for fear of negative consequences from their immediate social surroundings. Others did not necessarily conceal their disbelief but rather lived their desired lifestyle without an explicit declaration. Such individuals reportedly had friends or relatives that also broke religious rules (e.g., drinking alcohol or not praying) thus allowing them to live how they pleased while also claiming to be Muslim. In fact, claiming Islam was not necessary as many ex-Muslims found that their religious identity was not questioned despite inconsistent religious practices. Numerous participants in Vliek's (2019) sample reported that an explicit declaration of disbelief in God would emphasize the differences between themselves and their friends/family, and that they avoided declarations to prevent such an outcome. In addition, some referred to an inextricable link between Islam and a shared culture/history (Vliek, 2019) much like the connection between religious and ethnic identity in Jewish society (Altman et al.,

2010). These participants did not necessarily fear ostracization from their community but rather believed that denying Islam would be perceived as a rejection of family ties and that declaring an atheist identity was "a step beyond" quietly living an atheist lifestyle (Vliek, 2019, p. 9). Thus, the current model proposes that *atheism as chosen identity* (*Figure 8*, Point 4) is a fitting endpoint for ex-Muslim atheist identity development and that declaration of said identity is an optional extra step that not every ex-Muslim atheist may take. As discussed above, the desire to avoid this extra step stemmed from a strong connection to the cultural aspects of Islam or to the individual's family. Therefore, an assumption of the current model is that those with weaker commitment (or fewer *anchors*; See *Figure 8*, Point 1b) to Muslim family/friends/community may be more likely to declare their atheist identity.

Understanding the Religious Identity Development of Muslim American Youths

In her professional dissertation, Mohyuddin (2020) conducted three studies exploring factors relevant to the religious identity development of Muslim American Youths (See *Figure 2*). The first study was conducted to better understand how Muslim youth understood/expressed their religious identities and what impact identity variables such as ethnicity or class had. The second study focused on the impact schools had on religious identity development. The third study explored how students experienced and responded to bullying or discrimination. Group interviews were conducted via focus groups and a short, written survey was used to validate interview responses. Of note, this model is dissimilar to others in the sample frame because it does not delineate stages of religious identity development. Instead, the aim of each study was to propose and provide evidence for the impact of a factor, such as supportive adults, on religious development.

Overall, Mohyuddin's (2020; *Figure 2*) work did not provide a stage-based identity model that could be used as part of the current proposed model (See *Figure 8*). However, it did provide a nuanced understanding of Muslim identity formation, which are discussed in some detail below.

Major findings of this work (Mohyuddin, 2020) can be described through four major themes including adolescents' awareness and endorsement of intersectional identities; the significant impact on identity building that the time spent in school has; the significant role in identity development that supportive adults play; and the need for more resilience-promoting spaces. Youths in this study reported that their ethnic identities were at times conflated with their religious identities. Various ethnic backgrounds, such as those of Kurdish or Pakistani origin, were mixed up with Islam in such a way that Muslim youths were often mislabeled as being Kurdish when they were actually Pakistani. Such mislabeling is an example of a microaggression and often required that these youths explain or perform their identities. In practice, this meant affiliating with religious groups over ethnic groups (or vice versa) or wearing ethnic/Islamic attire. Such conflations meant double the stereotypes for some adolescents and for some, their parents conflated ethnicity and religion such that the youths felt unable to create their own blend of the two identities. In addition, gender and economic class also impacted religious identity. The intersection of gender and religion, for example, meant that female Muslim youths were not allowed to date while their male counterparts were – so long as they dated a non-Muslim girl. The intersection of economic class and religion meant Muslim youths who were not financially stable were more vulnerable to discrimination such as being kicked out of an apartment. In this case, money provided a layer of protection such

that these youths could live in a more equitable environment or hire a lawyer to fight for their housing rights (Mohyuddin, 2020).

As time spent in school is significant for adolescents, how school context impacted religious identity was also explored (Mohyuddin, 2020). One negative interaction of school and religion was when school rules or expectations were in opposition with their religion. For example, the rule of wearing shorts and t-shirts in gym class was in opposition with the modest dress to which many Muslims adhere. Many youths also cited cafeteria food as a daily stressor because *halal* (i.e., religiously acceptable; Mohyuddin, 2020, p. 101) or pork-free options were not available, and some were even lied to about the contents of a meal such that they accidentally consumed pork. Comfortable prayer spaces were unavailable and when they were, teachers reportedly

Figure 2

Understanding the Religious Identity Development of Muslim American Youths
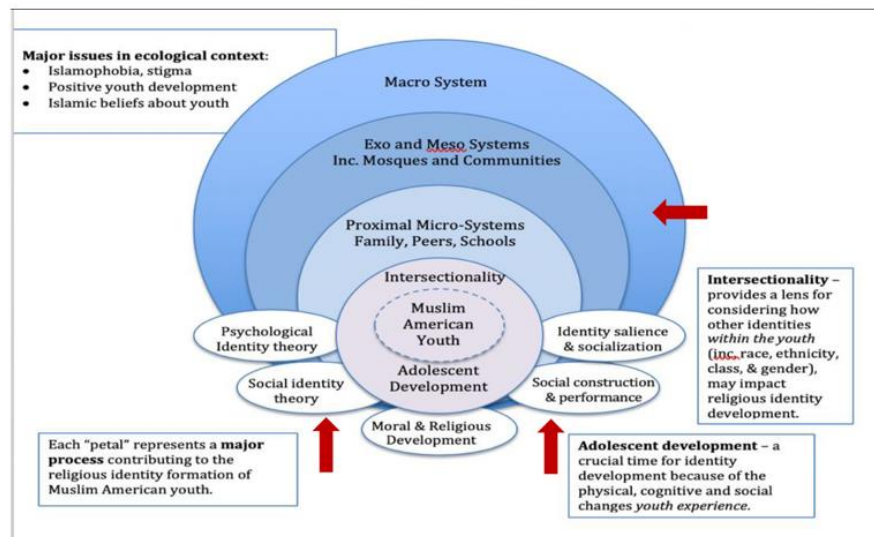
Note. Mohyuddin's (2020) conceptual model for Muslim identity development. Reprinted from "Understanding the Religious Identity Development of Muslim American Youths," by H. A. Mohyuddin, 2020, Doctoral dissertation, Vanderbilt University.

treated prayer time as skipping class. At a different school with a lower proportion of Muslim students, youths felt as if they could not ask for religious accommodations. Instead, they separated their school and religious lives such that religious holidays or needs (such as a place to pray) started to be perceived as inconveniences that Muslim youths did not want to place on their teachers/classmates. Students at this school did, however, feel more comfortable endorsing unique religious identities such as non-religious but attached to Muslim culture. The third study site was a school that was specifically for Muslim students and incorporated Islamic studies, prayer, and holidays. Students at this school reported feeling safe to explore and practice their religion as well as perceiving teachers as reliable sources of advice and education. Muslim youths at this school struggled more with the intersection of gender and religion. Due to the more traditional undertones to an Islamic school's environment, there were often gender-based struggles such as the boys claiming sole rights to masculine spaces such as the basketball court. Additionally, traditional gender roles were overly stressed by peers. Compared in this way, it is clear that different school environments can impact religious identity formation, and by extension, could help explain the varying ways youth understand their religious identity (Mohyuddin, 2020).

The very intersectional understanding the sample had of their religious identity and their strong ties to parents/community were pieces of evidence that supported the presence of *anchors* (See *Figure 8*, point 1b), *socialization* (point 1a), and *consciousness* (point 2b) in the final model. Parents and community members could compel atheists-to-be, whether explicitly done or not, to continue practicing religion to "fit in." Such an interpretation is also supported by the concept of *anchors* (King, 2003; Layton et al.,

2011) and the sub-theme *obligation by friends and family* (Greksa, 2015), both of which described the influence family expectations and social belonging needs had on identity (See *Table 1*). The participants' intersectional understanding of self indicated that they were socialized to be conscious of their ethnic/racial background (Mohyuddin, 2020). These youths sought out both their ethnic and religious communities as safe spaces in which to heal depending on their current needs, indicating a nuanced understanding of each identity's impact on the self.

A Theory of Atheist Student Identity Development

Siner (2012) proposed a model of identity development for the atheist college student premised upon their similarity to LGBTQ+ students (See *Figure 3*). The proposed similarities were the invisibility of being queer or atheist, their minority status in the United States, the high salience of their oppressed identities, and the development of their identities on both individual and group levels (Sanlo & Fassinger, 1998). Sanlo and Fassinger's (1998) findings about LGBTQ+ identity, Small's (2008) theory of identity for religious and spiritual college students, and Nash's (2003) work with atheist students were used to develop Siner's (2012) model. No empirical data was collected for this model but rather it was developed theoretically using data from the aforementioned studies. However, the methodology is unclear and does not describe how these models were combined. The resulting model consisted of two simultaneous processes, that of individual identity formation and group identity formation, in four stages. The stages included *awareness*, *exploration*, *deepening/commitment*, and *internalization/synthesis* (Siner, 2012).

In the first stage, the individual recognized that they began to doubt God's existence and that there were others who shared their doubt (Siner, 2012). The individual likely experienced a sense of otherness compared to their religious peers and needed to hide their lack of religiosity. In the second stage, the individual gained clarity about their lack of belief in the concept of God and began exploring their worldview. Often, the individual explored what they think about atheists and may have experimentally attended groups/meetings of atheists. In the *deepening/commitment* stage the individual became certain that they are an atheist and experienced self-fulfillment. They may have sought out like-minded others with whom they could engage in group activities or activism. They may have also chosen a new worldview that delineated values, moral positions, and life's purpose. This new worldview replaced religious ideas that the individual deemed inconsistent with their sense of self. Some examples of documented worldviews included secular humanism and scientific humanism (Nash, 2003), which are schools of thought that depend on individuality or science as the basis for living a satisfactory life, respectively. The final stage of *internalization/synthesis* (Siner, 2012) entailed acceptance of the atheist identity and signaled the individual's readiness to "come out" as atheist whenever they choose. They may have more fully participated in atheist groups/organizations and consciously identified as atheist, regardless of whether they declared it publicly. Siner (2012) does not discuss the decision-making process of declaring an atheist identity publicly, hence this was a point of interest when studying other atheist identity models.

One critique of Siner's (2012) model is that it excluded the process of rejecting theism explicitly, but rather framed it as an act of *awareness* and *exploration*. Due to the

Figure 3

A Theory of Atheist Student Identity Development

Individual Atheist Identity	Group Membership Identity
(Nonawareness)	
1. Awareness	
- of being different than other people regarding one's possible atheist beliefs	- of existence of others with atheist beliefs
2. Exploration	
- of lack of belief in God and what it means to be atheist	- of one's membership in and attitudes toward atheist community
3. Deepening/Commitment	
- to self-knowledge, self-fulfillment, and expression of choices about atheist beliefs	- to active participation in atheistic groups or communities and awareness of oppression
4. Internalization/Synthesis	
- of atheist beliefs into overall identity	- of identity as a member of a minority group, across contexts

Note. A graphic representation of the Atheist Student Identity Development (ASID; Siner, 2012). Reprinted from "A Theory of Atheist Student Identity Development," by S. Siner, 2012, *Journal of the Indiana University Student Personnel Association,* 14-21. (Retrieved from https://scholarworks.iu.edu/journals/index.php/jiuspa/article/view/1935).

detrimental social consequences of leaving Islam (Ashworth et al., 2020) it may be an oversimplification to claim a Muslim need only realize they do not believe in God and then accept it to achieve an atheist identity. In addition, the rejection of theism is seen as inherent to the definition of atheism (Edgell et al., 2006; Krueger, 2013; Smith, 2011), which underscores the importance of considering it in any disaffiliation model. Additionally, some considered their religious beliefs to be inseparable from their ethnic identity such as in the case of Black Christians and Jewish people (Altman et al., 2010; Howard et al., 2021). So strong was this connection that an individual who publicly disaffiliated from the religion may legitimately worry that they will be rejected or face identity denial from their ethnic community as well (Howard et al., 2021; Vliek, 2019).

Thus, it is essential that any model of disaffiliation from Islam include the process of rejecting theism and addressing social/familial deterrents to doing so.

One limitation set forth by Siner (2012) was the difference in experienced oppression for LGBTQ+ students and atheist students. As the stereotypes and struggles of both communities differ, so may their trajectories towards "coming out." Another factor that may have impacted the trajectory of atheist identity development was the setting. An atheist's journey to coming out may differ vastly at a public liberal university versus a conservative small town. For example, Siner's (2012) study was conducted in a liberal town that was generally accepting of the atheists in the study's sample. As demonstrated in Greksa's (2015) study, atheists are vigilant about others' attitudes toward atheists and cope with this perceived stigma by keeping information specific to their non-religious identity hidden. Therefore, atheists may choose to keep their identities concealed depending on how inclusive their local community is (Abbott & Mollen, 2018; Quinn & Earnshaw, 2013). Another limitation was the potential lack of atheist students/organizations at some universities that may have removed the opportunity to develop an atheist group identity.

Various aspects of Siner's (2012) model were incorporated into the current proposed model (See *Table 1*) although they were not placed in the same stage-wise points. For example, *awareness* and *exploration* were the first two stages in Siner's (2012) model but were reciprocally translated into *questioning theism* (See *Figure 8,* Point 2) because the two concepts, when combined, conveyed a sense of wrongness or inconsistency in identity combined with a search for consistency. These two concepts were not incorporated into *religion as ascribed identity* (See *Figure 8*, Point 1) because

some atheists-to-be are genuinely religious at certain points in their disaffiliation process whereas Siner's (2012) model appears to apply only to those who *"never really believed any of it"* as described by Greksa's (2015) sub-theme. *Awareness* (Siner, 2012) was also reciprocally translated into *consciousness* (See *Figure 8*, Point 2b) as the two concepts refer to how distinct parts of social influences and personal identity are integrated into a sense of self. *Deepening/commitment* and *internalization/synthesis* were subsumed under the stage of *atheism as chosen identity* (See *Figure 8,* Point 4) as all four concepts are components of forming or solidifying an identity.

Becoming an Atheist in America: Constructing Identity and Meaning from the Rejection of Theism

Smith (2011) observed members of three local atheist organizations during social interactions and conducted 40 interviews in order to create a model of atheist identity development. The proposed model (See *Figure 4*) consisted of four stages including (1) *the starting point: ubiquity of theism*, (2) *questioning theism*, (3) *rejecting theism*, and (4) *"coming out" atheist* (Smith, 2011, p. 219). A strength of this model was its empirical basis and the mixed sample of "active" atheists who chose to be in an atheist organization and unaffiliated atheists whom the author found via snowball sampling. In addition, 35 out of 40 participants previously endorsed religious beliefs and thus the model captured some aspect of religious disaffiliation. Verbatim quotes from participants were included that served as examples of individual variability within each stage (Smith, 2011).

The model's first stage, *the starting point: ubiquity of theism*, captured the cultural focus on God in the United States and the socialization that encouraged religiosity (Smith, 2011). This stage encompassed both passive and active religiosity and

Figure 4

Becoming an Atheist in America: Constructing Identity and Meaning from the Rejection of Theism
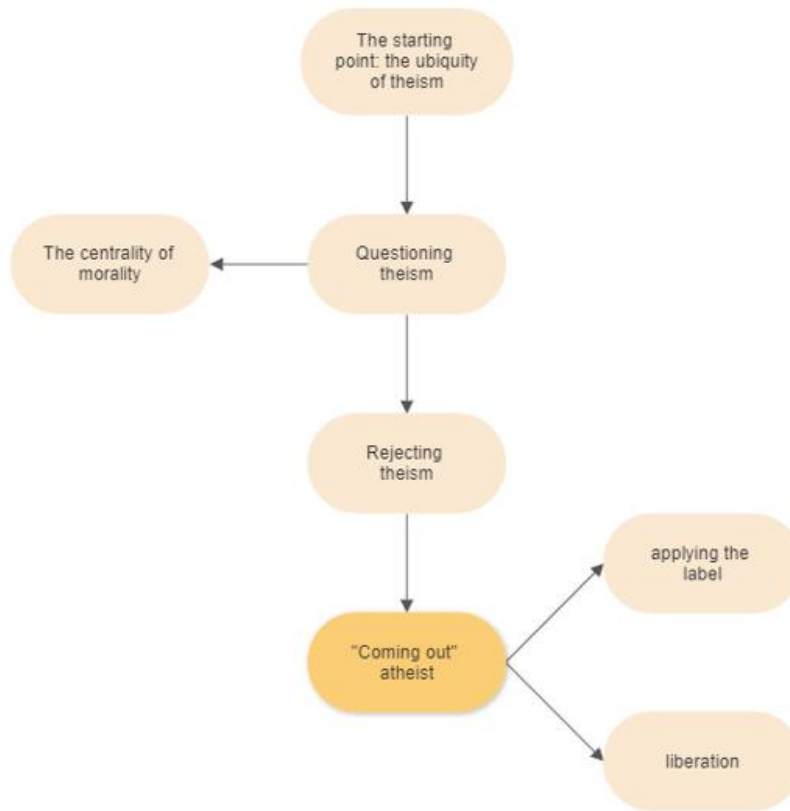
Note. A graphic representation of Smith's (2011) model of atheist identity formation. As the original author did not include a visual model, I created one based on Smith's (2011) narrative description.

thus captured a wide range of disaffiliation trajectories. The second stage, *questioning theism*, was developmentally placed during young adulthood when people typically begin college or leave home. Smith (2011) argued that changing social contexts may have motivated individuals to question their religious views and that important or valued others were a significant factor. This stage encompassed doubts based on inconsistencies

in religious teachings, impactful media that called religion into question, general

discontent with religion, skepticism based on scientific or secular views of natural

phenomena, and questions of morality. The third stage, *rejecting theism*, was proposed as

a rejection identity, or an identity based on something one does not endorse. The

interview data suggested that forming an atheist identity was not solely dependent on

disbelief in God but rather required an intentional rejection of God's existence.

Furthermore, the individual must then replace the concept of God with a more fitting

explanation of the world such as a scientific or secular viewpoint. Newly atheist

individuals may also have to make decisions about behaviors they do not engage in such

as dating/friendships with stout theists or superstitious behaviors (Smith, 2011). The last

stage of the model was *"coming out" atheist* or declaring one's new identity as a

nonbeliever (Smith, 2011). Smith (2011) argued that an identity does not take on social

significance or change one's self concept until it is claimed publicly. The latter assertion

is not supported by others such as LeDrew (2013) and Vliek (2019) who asserted that

self-concept change can be achieved without public declaration. Seminal research on

identity development (Fisherman, 2002; Marcia, 1966) also supported the possibility of

exclusively internal processes that lead to well-formed identities. Some participants in

Smith's (2011) study reported that they had a growing desire or "internal pressure" (p.

230) to declare their new identity while simultaneously shedding any connection to

religion. The interview data suggested that participants gained a sense of empowerment

and self after openly accepting the label of atheist. From the interview data, it may be fair

to categorize Smith's (2011) sample population as a subset of atheists who felt a powerful

desire to proclaim their identity. However, other subsets of atheists certainly exist who

Figure 5

The Atheist Experience: A Sociological Approach to Atheist Identity in College
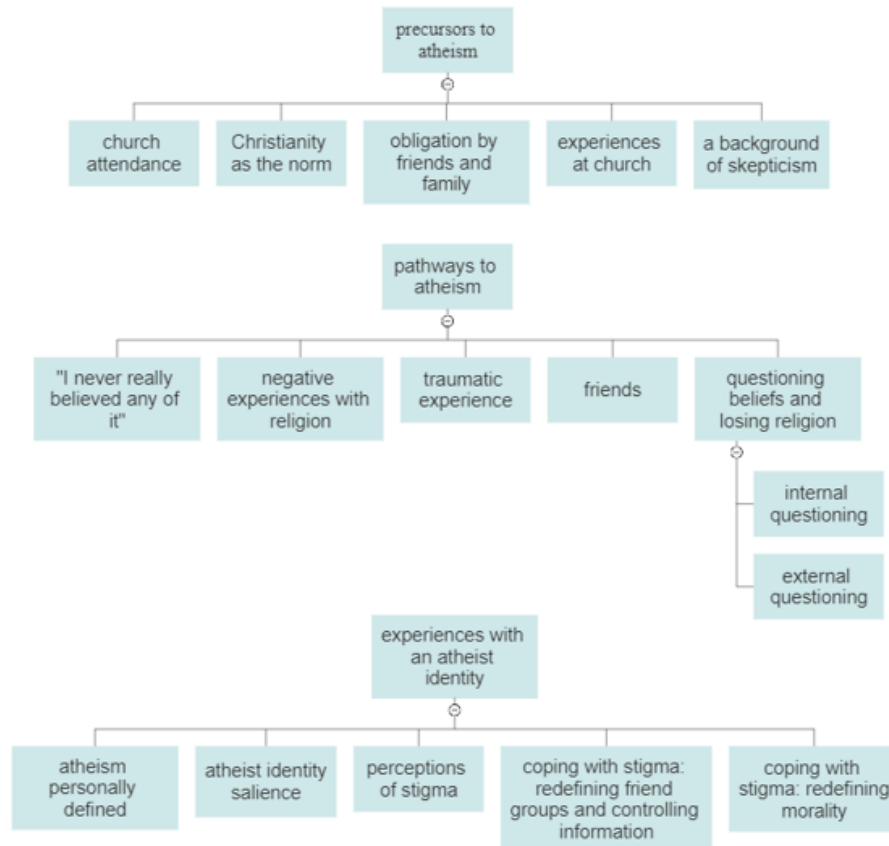
Students

Note. A visual representation of Greksa's (2015) model of atheist identity formation.

As the original author did not provide a visual model, I created one based on Greksa's

(2015) narrative description.

feel that declaration is an unnecessary step, suggesting that there is variability within the

atheist population (LeDrew, 2013; Vliek, 2019). As such, the *"coming out" atheist* stage

was not adopted into the current model (See *Figure 8*) whereas the remaining three stages

and the subtheme *the centrality of morality* were adopted (See *Table 1*).

The Atheist Experience: A Sociological Approach to Atheist Identity in College

Students

A more detailed, sociological approach to atheist identity was taken by Greksa (2015). Fourteen interviews were conducted with atheist college students and the content was analyzed thematically to better understand the disaffiliation process. The resultant model's (See *Figure 5*) three themes were the following: *precursors to atheism*, *pathways to atheism*, and *experiences with an atheist identity*. These themes were then split into sub-themes. The theme of *Precursors to atheism* was split into the following sub-themes: *church attendance*, *Christianity as the norm*, *obligation by friends and family*, *experiences at church*, and *a background of skepticism*. The first two sub-themes echoed Smith's (2011) theme, *the starting point: ubiquity of theism*, in that the stages encompassed a passive acceptance of religion in one's life and the influence of socialization towards Christianity (Greksa, 2015). The sub-theme, *obligation by friends and family*, referred to the acceptance of religious rituals/traditions to fit in with family and friends. In part, this reflected a child's tendency to behave according to parental/community teachings. Another factor was the lack of choice in religious event attendance. Social belonging, both in reference to family and peers, was also cited as a factor. The next sub-theme, *experiences at church*, included both positive and negative narratives. Some reported viewing church as a positive social experience devoid of significant religious meaning to the individual whereas others reported distress associated with church-going rules such as dressing up or sitting quietly (Greksa, 2015). Interestingly, the last sub-theme described the non-religious socialization (Thiessen & Wilkins-Laflamme, 2017) or secular upbringing that all 14 participants experienced.

Although only one participant was raised in an explicitly atheist home, all the participants were encouraged to question religion and come to their own conclusions about their belief system (Greksa, 2015).

Within the second theme (*pathways to atheism*), Greksa (2015) described five sub-themes. The first, *"I never really believed any of it,"* detailed the lack of belief all 14 participants displayed from a young age. When asked to rate their belief in God at the point when they were most devoted on a scale of 1 to 10, with 10 indicating a high level of devotion, 12 out of 14 responses fell below a 5. The next sub-theme, *negative experiences with religion*, encompassed experiences such as intolerance of differences, instances of immorality among clergy, poor treatment of women, intolerance of LGBTQ+ church members, lack of true separation between church and state, and arbitrary power hierarchies. Some participants also described *traumatic experiences* that formed the third sub-theme. The narratives suggested that after a traumatic experience, individuals experienced a shift in worldview that motivated them to question religion as well. Some formed doubt that a God who is good would allow traumatic events to occur. The *friends* sub-theme detailed accounts of peers who introduced atheist ideas or validated lack of religious belief, thereby making it acceptable to explore non-religious views. *Questioning beliefs and losing religion* was the final sub-theme of the primary theme, *pathways to atheism*. However, not all participants in this study experienced a stage of questioning but rather accepted atheism as their new identity immediately after recognizing their lack of religious belief. For those who did experience a questioning phase, two types of questioning (*external questioning* and *internal questioning*) were also discussed. *External questioning* involved active research, education via classes, critical media consumption,

and conversations with non-religious others. *Internal questioning* was a more private process wherein an individual thought their way to atheism rather than seeking external sources. Some internal questioners also described testing out the concept of God by praying for something and rejecting theism when nothing came of the prayer. Some based their new beliefs on a sense of discomfort with religion or religious traditions (Greksa, 2015).

The final primary theme, *experiences with an atheist identity* (Greksa, 2015) provided valuable information about forming an atheist identity. In other words, this process was framed as more than just the rejection of theism but rather the creation of a new identity. *Defining atheism* in a personal sense was important to this process. Most participants in this study defined atheism as a disbelief in God and a rejection of religion/the supernatural, with some including non-judgmental treatment of people who are religious. A *morality* free of religious tenets also seemed to be an important aspect of atheism. The next sub-theme dealt with how important or *salient atheism* was to participants' overall identity. Those who centered atheism in their overall identity reportedly did so because it gave them the freedom to make rational decisions or explore science with no pressure to reconcile them with religion. Those who did not center atheism reportedly did so due to the reduced importance of religion *and* nonreligion in their lives. A discussion of *perceived stigma* revealed that participants felt mostly accepted in academia and society. However, perceived stigma from religious others, including family members who remained religious, prevented a sense of complete acceptance. Participants often hid their atheist identity from older and/or religious members of their family because they predicted an unfavorable response to the

disclosure. Many hid their identity on social media to prevent potential employer

discrimination based on their disbelief. Doubt in their morality, general mistrust, and an

expectation of a return to religiosity were salient experiences for the participants. One

method used to *cope with stigma* was to create a close social circle of like-minded

individuals – typically other atheists but sometimes individuals low in religiosity – and to

control information about themselves around acquaintances/strangers. Another method of

coping was to create a moral code not based in religion and to reject religion-based

morality. This meant a constant reevaluation of what is moral for some and clear

delineations of differences (and by extension, similarities) from religion-based morality.

Some drew from societal norms in order to create their moral code whereas others relied

on their instincts (Greksa, 2015).

Greksa's (2015) model provided a high level of detail specific to disaffiliation

from Christianity. Many of the themes were adopted into the current model (See *Table 1*)

as they were similar enough to comparable stages of disaffiliation from Islam. For

example, the theme *church attendance* cannot be applied to ex-Muslim atheists, but the

content of this theme referred to attendance of religious services either to fit in with

family and peers or as a social event devoid of spiritual meaning. *Christianity as the*

norm can also be compared to Smith's (2011) stage, *the starting point: the ubiquity of*

theism in that both refer to societal norms that lean towards religiosity despite growing

secularism (Thiessen & Wilkins-Laflamme, 2017). Greksa's (2015) model as a whole is

specific to disaffiliation from Christianity and therefore could not be directly adopted into

the current model. However, its usefulness lay in the inclusion of both religious and

atheistic states with attention to internal processes. The verbatim quotes from participants

allowed comparison with interview content from Peek (2005) and Mohyuddin (2020) so that line-of-argument synthesis could be conducted. Another critique of Greksa's (2015) model is its lack of connectivity between the before, during, and after stages of disaffiliation. In addition, many sub-themes overlap, suggesting that each sub-theme could be pared down further and combined into more fitting categories. As such, the sub-themes were largely used as corroborating evidence and parts of each were incorporated into multiple stages in the current model (See *Table 1*).

The Road to Disbelief: A Study of the Atheist De-Conversion Process

Krueger's (2013) work built upon the model developed by Smith (2011) and proposed the following five phases of the de-conversion process: *Detachment*, *Doubt*, *Dissociation*, *Transition*, and *Declaration* (Krueger, 2013; See *Figure 6*). Within this model, an atheist became detached emotionally from their religious identity and community. The model proposed a general, sometimes vague dissatisfaction and/or discomfort with religious identity as drivers of *detachment*. The model also framed *detachment* from the religious community as a lack of obligation to stay involved with the community and therefore tapped a similar construct as Greksa's (2015) sub-theme,

Figure 6

The Road to Disbelief: A Study of the Atheist De-Conversion Process

Note. A visual representation of Krueger's (2013) model of deconversion from religion. As the original author did not provide a visual model I created one based on Krueger's narrative description.

obligation by friends and family. The *doubt* phase entailed a clearer sense as to which

aspects of religion caused the individual discomfort (Krueger, 2013). The individual was

able to describe the root of their skepticism with more clarity, such as impactful life

events, conversations with atheists, or research. The *dissociation* phase was the point at

which the individual stopped engaging in religious behaviors, rejected religious beliefs,

and dissociated from their religious identity. The *transition* phase captured a period

where the individual explored their identity and sought a bridge between theism and

atheism. This involved learning more about belief systems that do not include the concept

of God, such as Buddhism or agnosticism, but do not outright assert that God does not

exist. After continued exploration of the idea of atheism through conversations with

others and various forms of media, the individual reached the *declaration* phase. This

phase was when most individuals fully accepted their atheist identity and declared it

publicly (Krueger, 2013).

A strength of Krueger's (2013) model is its generic structure. Like Smith's (2011)

model, this model also provides a skeletal structure for a standard disaffiliation trajectory

(Krueger, 2013). As such, it was easy to use this structure to organize other, more

detailed models of identity formation for atheists (See *Table 1*). For example, *detachment*

was the first stage in the deconversion process but was most similar to the concept of

anchors (See *Figure 8,* Point 1b), or rather was the opposite of an *anchor*. *Detachment*

was defined as an emotional and/or physical distance from one's religious identity and

community (Krueger, 2013) similar to *challenges in holding on to Jewish identity*

(Altman et al., 2010). In addition, *transition* and *declaration* (Krueger, 2013) were

subsumed under the *atheism as chosen identity* category despite some contradictions.

Although an explicit declaration is optional per the *atheism as chosen identity* stage as it exists in the current model (See *Figure 8*, Point 4) it still fits into the concept of making a commitment to an atheist identity. The contradiction lies in including *transition* because this stage encompassed experimenting with other religions or agnosticism but was also described as a bridge between leaving one's religion and fully accepting an atheist identity. It is this latter half of the definition that fits within the *atheism as chosen identity* stage. Although the former half is somewhat similar to *questioning theism* (See *Figure 8,* Point 2), the *transition* stage implies an exit from one's original religion and would therefore be incompatible with a pre-exit questioning stage. Thus, the same generic structure that was useful as a guideline for the current model can also be viewed as a limited presentation of a complex process. The non-specificity may be due, in part, to the lack of diversity in Krueger's (2013) sample. All participants were in the age range of 18 to 22 and a majority were Caucasian. In addition, neither the ethnic makeup of the remaining participants nor the religious backgrounds of the sample population were disclosed.

Discovering Atheism: Heterogeneity in Trajectories to Atheist Identity and Activism

LeDrew (2013) conducted 15 interviews in Montreal and Toronto, using an international atheist convention and local atheist groups. The interview content was then studied via inductive analysis, meaning the author searched for major themes in the interview content and selected emerging themes for further discussion. All participants in this study were specifically active atheists, a subset of atheists that LeDrew (2013) specified as atheists who have attended at least one in-person meeting of an atheist group and interacted with other atheists. LeDrew (2013) argued that existing models of atheist

Figure 7

Discovering Atheism: Heterogeneity in Trajectories to Atheist Identity and Activism
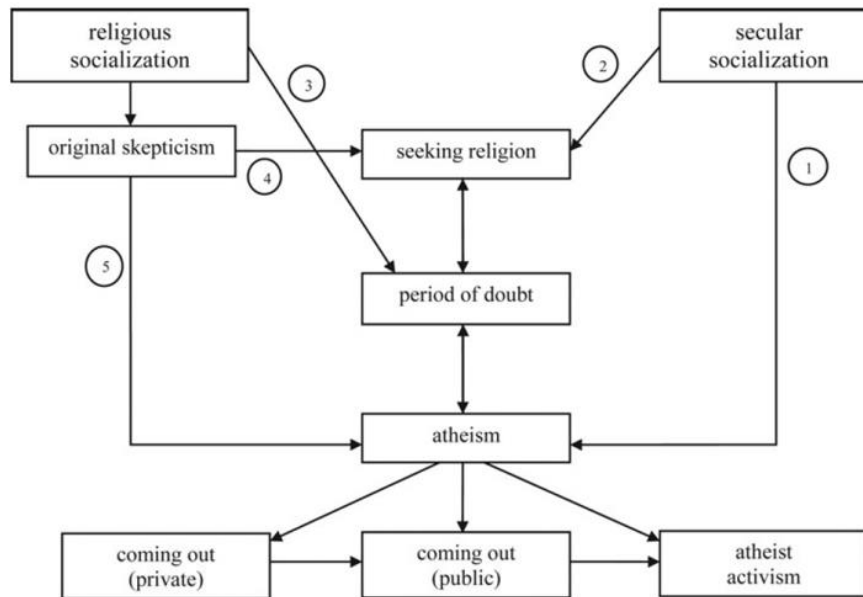
Note. A graphic representation of differing trajectories to atheism. Reprinted from "Discovering Atheism: Heterogeneity in Trajectories to Atheist Identity and Activism," by S. LeDrew, 2013, *Sociology of Religion*, 74(4) 431-453. (https://doi.org/10.1093/socrel/srt014).

identity formation referred to a standard, or one-size-fits-all, trajectory to atheism but that the evidence suggested the possibility of more than one pathway. The resulting model (See *Figure 7*) specified five different pathways one may take on the way to atheism. Socialization was proposed as the starting point of any trajectory to atheism but with the caveat that this socialization can be either religious or secular. *Religious socialization* was defined as having been raised in a religious environment and/or were once religious to varying degrees. *Secular socialization* was defined as having been raised in an environment that was either devoid of religion or was not significantly impacted by religion. These two forms of socialization produce one pathway each (*Figure 7*, pathways

3 and 2) that matched up with Smith's (2011) identity model in that people experienced religion (either via socialization or by seeking it out in the case of *secular socialization*, respectively), doubt, *atheism*, and then coming out as atheist (LeDrew, 2013). One pathway stemming from *secular socialization* (*Figure 7*, pathway 1) bypassed religion and doubt entirely to progress straight to *atheism*. Pathway 5 (*Figure 7*) also bypassed religion and doubt, and instead flows from *religious socialization* to *atheism* by way of a concept called *original skepticism* (LeDrew, 2013, p. 442). This term denoted a lack of belief in God since early childhood and a personality predisposed to atheism. The participants who reported this characteristic would also fit into Greksa's (2015) sub-theme, *I never really believed in any of it*. Pathway 4 (*Figure 7*) detailed a journey from *religious socialization* and *original skepticism* to religion, doubt, *atheism*, and coming out as atheist. Until the *atheism* stage, the various pathways differ in the aforementioned ways (LeDrew, 2013). Past the *atheism* stage, individuals experienced *coming out (private)*, *coming out (public)*, and/or *atheist activism*. This is done because many atheists accept and embody their new identity as atheist internally before sharing this with others (publicly or privately), if they share at all. Finally, since LeDrew (2013) specifically interviewed active atheists, the final stage of the model is *atheist activism*, although they need not necessarily pass through the coming out stages in order to reach the *atheist activism* stage. Per this model, an atheist identity may be public, private, secret, or some combination thereof depending on comfort and context. The model also allows for flexibility and multiple vacillations between religious and atheist states (LeDrew, 2013).

The main critique of LeDrew's (2013) model is that it was developed specifically for active atheists. However, some non-religious people do not endorse the term "atheist"

and prefer to be called a "sceptic" because they find a reason- and science-based lifestyle to be more salient than disbelief in a higher power (Simmons, 2018). This preference is in spite of a conviction that debunking supernatural beliefs or conspiracies is a form of activism, thereby making them active non-believers who do not consider themselves atheists. It is clear that variability exists even within the narrow category of active nonbelievers. The broader category of atheists holds even more variability (Smith, 2013b; Vliek, 2019). In addition, the model neglects the internal process of deciding between coming out, either publicly or privately, and keeping an atheist identity private although LeDrew (2013) does acknowledge a stark difference between the *atheism* and *coming out* stages.

The Current Proposed Model for Ex-Muslim Atheist Identity Formation

This paper sets forth a proposed model of identity formation (See *Figure 8*) for those who have left Islam and chosen atheism. The model flows from top to bottom and is also labeled in numerical order for ease of reference. In addition, there are concepts labeled with a numerical and alphabetical marker (e.g., 2a for *morality*). These concepts are closely related to the stage with a matching numerical marker (e.g., 2a for *morality* and 2 for *questioning theism*). However, these periphery stages can also be considered flexible in that they may interact with other stages. For example, *morality* (2a) is a significant factor contributing to *questioning theism* (2), but moral rules or moral decision-making guides can also be taught by parents/guardians/community, thereby making it an aspect of *socialization* (1a).

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Religion as Ascribed Identity (1)

      The number of people identifying as "religious none," agnostic, or atheist has grown in recent years such that both disaffiliation and non-religious socialization (i.e., raised as non-religious) are on the rise (Thiessen & Wilkins-Laflamme, 2017). Those born in 1990 were 60% likely to be raised as non-religious compared to a 20% likelihood for those born in 1910. Nonetheless, the *ubiquity of theism* (Smith, 2011) is a cultural cornerstone in the United States with nearly 88% of adults claiming belief in God to some extent in 2014 (Pew Research Center, n.d.). In addition to a cultural emphasis placed on religion, parental views on religion are a significant factor in a child's religious identity (Thiessen & Wilkins-Laflamme, 2017). As such, many individuals – atheists (Greksa, 2015; Smith, 2011) and Muslims (Mohyuddin, 2020; Peek, 2005) alike – attribute their earliest concept of religion to imitating religious beliefs displayed by their parents/guardians and communities. Even those raised in non-religious homes demonstrated awareness of God and at times engaged in practices such as attending religious service or engaging in prayer as such actions were connected to social belonging (Smith, 2011). As such, the identity model I propose begins with *religion as ascribed identity* (See *Table 1*)*,* or an identity that is placed upon an individual by others and is largely based on birth conditions (Ruzzeddu, 2022).

      An ascribed identity (Ruzzeddu, 2022) may be personal, such as personal identifiers like woman or Persian. Social identity, meaning the role one plays in society or behaviors deemed appropriate according to your social status, may also be ascribed. For example, an individual whose sex is assigned female at birth may be expected to become a wife and mother based on gender expectations. It may also be socially expected

Figure 8

The Final Model
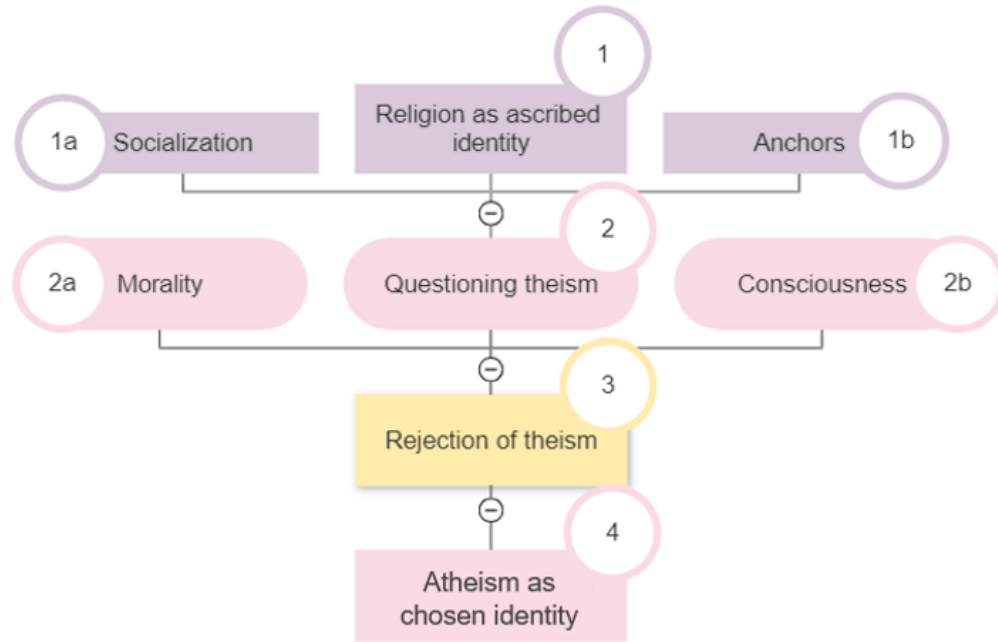
Note. A graphic representation of the proposed identity development model for ex-Muslim atheists. The top, center-most square ("religion as ascribed identity") is the starting point with related factors branching out on either side. The progression is from top to bottom and the endpoint is marked by "atheism as chosen identity."

that one's sex assigned at birth and their gender identity be the same, which is an important example of the difference between ascribed and achieved identities. Achieved identities involve more agency on the individual's part and are often formed over one's lifetime through varying processes. A cultural identity may also be ascribed based on the geographical location or the cultural background an individual is born into, and may dictate the traditions, customs, or language(s) one practices. Herein lies a complex identity dynamic that continues to be negotiated during an individual's life and ultimately

includes a combination of ascribed and achieved identities (Adams & Marshall, 1996; Ruzzeddu, 2022).

When viewed through the lens of social learning theory, the stage of *religion as ascribed identity* can be understood as imitation (Adams & Marshall, 1996; Bandura, 1962). Young children identify primary caregivers or important others to imitate as a route to learning essential human tasks. In the formation of a religious identity, young people typically identify a religious role model (Frost, 2019) and imitate them to assess how well the religion may fit (Ruzzeddu, 2022). One may argue that some individuals are more prone to religiosity and that those individuals must have shown deeper faith even as adolescents. However, the research suggests that even teens who later became more religious were often passively involved in religious activities at an early age and that young children are typically not reflective about their beliefs (Peek, 2005). However, this is also the point at which I propose that religious and non-religious individuals may begin to diverge. I propose conflict, incompatibility, and inconsistency as drivers of identity formation (Adams & Marshall, 1996; Erikson, 1968). Although these are not represented in the model, they could be described as that which pushes an individual from *religion as ascribed identity* (See *Figure 8*, Point 1) to *questioning theism* (*Figure 8*, Point 2). For example, when an individual is assigned as Jewish at birth and they do not feel an inconsistency between the religion and the rest of their identity, they are unlikely to question theism. Atheists-to-be, on the other hand, may feel a sense of wrongness when identifying as religious or engaging in religious activities. They may feel as if they are not like their more religious peers/community members in some way. Thus, being assigned a religious identity that does not fit seems to be a logical first step in

disaffiliation and a push towards *questioning theism*. Although uncertainty about one's

identity can certainly contribute to anxiety, research suggests that it can also motivate one

to further explore their identity in the search for certainty (Frost, 2019; Tormala, 2016).

This in turn increases critical engagement with the part of self being explored and

prevents extreme views.

Table 1.

The method behind the model

Stage in current model	Method used to adopt into model	Original stage/theme	Source
Religion as ascribed identity	RTA	Religion as ascribed identity	Peek, 2005
	RTA	The starting point: the ubiquity of theism	Smith, 2011
	LOA	Church attendance, Christianity as the norm	Greksa, 2015
	LOA	Religious socialization	LeDrew, 2013
Socialization	LOA	Religification	Kaviraj, 2010
	LOA	Social construction & performance, identity salience & socialization, Islamophobia, stigma, school context, presence of supportive adults	Mohyuddin, 2020
	LOA	Perceptions of stigma, coping with stigma: redefining friend groups and controlling information	Greksa, 2015
	LOA	Religious socialization, secular socialization	LeDrew, 2013
Anchors	RTA	Obligation by friends and family, experiences at church	Greksa, 2015
	RTA	Spiritual anchors	Kaviraj, 2010; Mohyuddin, 2020
	LOA	Detachment	Krueger, 2013
Questioning theism	RTA	Period of doubt, original skepticism, seeking religion	LeDrew, 2013
	RTA	Doubt	Krueger, 2013

Stage in current model	Method used to adopt into model	Original stage/theme	Source
Questioning theism (cont.)	LOA	A background of skepticism, "I never really believed any of it", questioning beliefs and losing religion, friends	Greksa, 2015
	RTA	Questioning theism	Smith, 2011
	LOA	Awareness, exploration	Siner, 2012
Morality	RTA	The centrality of morality	Smith, 2011
	LOA	Negative experiences with religion, traumatic experience	Greksa, 2015
	RTA	Coping with stigma: redefining morality	Greksa, 2015
Consciousness	RTA	Awareness	Siner, 2012
	LOA	Perceptions of stigma	Greksa, 2015
	LOA	Intersectionality, Identity salience & socialization	Mohyuddin, 2020
	LOA	Atheist identity salience	Greksa, 2015
Rejection of theism	RTA	Rejecting theism	Smith, 2011
	LOA	Dissociation	Krueger, 2013
Atheism as chosen identity	LOA	Atheism, coming out (private or public), atheist activism	LeDrew, 2013
	LOA	Atheism personally defined, coping with stigma: redefining morality, coping with stigma: redefining friend groups and controlling information	Greksa, 2015
	LOA	"Coming out" atheist, applying the label, liberation	Smith, 2011
	LOA	Religion as chosen identity, religion as declared identity	Peek, 2005
	LOA	Transition, declaration	Krueger, 2013
	LOA	Deepening/commitment, internalization/synthesis	Siner, 2012

Note. RTA stands for reciprocal translational analysis and LOA stands for lines-of-argument synthesis (Dixon-Woods et al., 2006; See Methodology section for further clarification).

The question thus becomes, why do individuals not immediately shed identities that are incompatible with their worldview? Extant identity literature suggested that any

type of identity other than identity diffusion included commitment or personal investment (Marcia, 1966). In fact, religion (and by extension religious identity) was one of the identity choices that were studied in ego-identity literature (Fisherman, 2002; Marcia, 1966) and was found to be a product of exploration and/or crisis. Later research has explored the ways in which people were committed to their religious identity and the process involved in rescinding that commitment in favor of a new identity (Altman et al., 2010; Greksa, 2015; King, 2003; Layton et al, 2011). This research is explored in the following section.

Anchors of Religious Commitment (1b)

Within the religious identity literature, religious commitment has been conceptualized using the term *anchor* (King, 2003; Layton et al., 2011). An *anchor* is a religious idea, person, or experience to which an individual can be committed. It is thereby also a tangible identifier of that which keeps an individual connected to their religion. In the case of an individual who was ascribed a religious identity but is inclined to question or reject theism, understanding their *anchors* may shed light on the process of disaffiliation. King (2003) conducted interviews with adolescents of various religious backgrounds to better understand how religious commitment can be operationalized. An analysis of the interview content resulted in the following list of important *anchors*: religious traditions or rituals or laws, God, faith tradition or denomination, faith community members, parents or family, scripture or word of God, and religious leaders. Layton and colleagues (2011) further asserted that religious communities/congregations serve as social and ideological contexts in which one can explore their religious identity and thereby form commitment – or lack thereof – to religion. Family traditions, religious

parents/family, and religious community members can all serve as *anchors* that hold an individual in the religion.

Research conducted by Altman and colleagues (2010) with a Jewish population revealed a construct similar to an *anchor* referred to as a *reinforcer of Jewish identity* as well as its conceptual opposite, *challenges in holding on to Jewish identity* (See *Table 1*). A *reinforcer* strengthened one's connection to their Jewish identity whereas a *challenge* made it difficult to maintain a Jewish identity. Family, Jewish community and friends, acceptance by and attraction to other Jews, experiences with those who are tolerant and/or respectful, everyday experiences that contribute to identity formation, having to explain/educate, and Jewish dating/marriage were all identified as *reinforcers*. Absence from Jewish reinforcers; being a minority and the lack of awareness in the majority culture; differences in levels of observance; and difficulty balancing/choosing between American and Jewish identities were all identified as *challenges in holding on to Jewish identity* (Altman et al., 2010, pp. 167-169). For example, participants described being with family and friends who are Jewish as a comfortable setting in which Jewish history and traditions could be experienced. Jewish cultural values were also prevalent in such a setting and provided guidelines for how to respect elders and live a Jewish lifestyle. When an individual was removed from such interactions with Jewish friends and family, they experienced a major challenge to Jewish identity. Participants who lived in an area with fewer synagogues, friends and family, or Jewish dating options endorsed despair, longing, and disconnection from their Jewish identity. A similar connection between religion, culture, *reinforcer*, and *challenge* (Altman et al., 2010) was demonstrated in Vliek's (2019) work with ex-Muslim atheists who avoided declaring their atheist identity

because they did not want to explicitly reject religion at the cost of losing connection to their culture and family. In this example, connection to Islamic culture was an *anchor* or *reinforcer* whereas the desire to live an atheist lifestyle was a *challenge* or a push towards atheism. Another *challenge to Jewish identity* was a struggle between American and Jewish identities that required the individual to choose between, for example, going to a friend's gathering or observing the Sabbath (Altman et al., 2010). A similar struggle between American and Muslim values was endorsed by those in both Mohyuddin's (2020) and Peek's (2005) sample populations. Although the current model uses the term *anchor* rather than *reinforcer*, the two concepts both refer to an aspect of religious life to which the individual has committed or feels attachment. Therefore, the concept of *challenges in holding on to Jewish identity* was reciprocally translated to mean a lack of *anchors* in the individual's life (See *Table 1*).

Socialization (1a)

Definitions of identity cannot leave out the impact of important others and the social environment in which an individual forms their identity (Peek, 2005). The process of identity formation is social in nature and often requires an individual to assess their identity in relation to those with whom they regularly associate or share group membership. *Socialization* is defined as the process through which children take on the worldviews of their parents or caregivers (Neblett et al., 2006) and is thought to play a role in identity formation as well. Socialization may occur via overt or implicit messages from parents. For example, in a study exploring the connection between racial identity and racial socialization among African Americans, the authors found that the frequency and positivity with which parents discussed race/ethnicity were highly impactful, even

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with a year between data points (Neblett et al., 2006). Adolescents whose parents discussed race rarely (albeit positively) demonstrated more Eurocentric values and endorsed more similarities between themselves and White Americans. More frequent discussion of race was correlated with feelings of pride and uniqueness about African American culture.

Religification is a dialectical process in which one is ascribed a religious identity that supersedes other identities (e.g., race, gender, class) by both people questioning their citizenship – that is to say their "American-ness" – and by the individual themselves (Ghaffar-Kucher, 2012). During the aftermath of the terrorist attack on the World Trade Center in 2001 (henceforth referred to as 9/11) Muslims were not only othered by the illusory connection to the attackers but also had their citizenship called into question. Pakistani-American participants interviewed by Ghaffar-Kucher (2012) further stated that prior to 9/11, their peers were unaware of and indifferent to whether someone was Pakistani. By comparison, after the terrorist attack, their peers were more attuned to identifying features of Muslims such as their countries of origin. Hence the participants noticed more experiences of being "religified" or ascribed as Muslim and simultaneously having their ethnic or class connections deemed as irrelevant (2012, p. 39). This is significant because many participants had previously identified ethnically (e.g., Pakistani) or as Americans, but felt unable to identify as such in the face of external religification. Instead, they increasingly identified as Muslim regardless of their belief in the Islamic faith. Being religified in this manner had detrimental effects on the adolescents such as acting out behaviorally, interpreting non-discriminatory disciplinary actions as anti-Muslim, or "playing into" (2012, p. 44) the terrorist stereotype via humor. Thus,

religification appeared to be a major aspect of socialization for Muslim teens and although it is not explicitly included in the current model (See *Figure 8*), it is subsumed within the *socialization* stage (*Figure 8,* Point 1a; See *Table 1*).

Many adolescents also reported instances of bullying or discrimination at school based on their religious affiliation (Ghaffar-Kucher, 2012; Mohyuddin, 2020). As discussed previously, experienced or anticipated stigma based on group membership can have the effect of strengthening an individual's identification with that group, but individuals with weak attachment to the group did not increase their identification with the group (Branscombe et al., 1999; Schmitt et al., 2003). The terms thick religification and thin religification (Kaviraj et al., 2010) were used to describe the personal intention underlying religification for the individual. Thick religification is a religious identity that encompasses rituals, traditions, and beliefs whereas thin religification refers to religious identity that stems from political or nationalistic interests rather than religious tenets. Thin religification did not necessarily equate to higher religiosity (Ghaffar-Kucher, 2012). Some teens who endorsed low religiosity reportedly identified as Muslim to seek belonging after being ostracized by non-Muslim peers or to make a political statement about the difference between Muslims and terrorists.

An example is provided here to illustrate the interactions between socialization, religification, and social pressures/stigma. Mariam was born into a Muslim family in Pakistan and immigrated to the United States as a toddler. She is currently in high school and views her "American life" and "Muslim life" to be separate. Mariam's family socialized her towards Islam by celebrating Islamic holidays, declaring themselves as Muslim when meeting new people, and discussing the uniqueness of Islam. Mariam's

family was not engaged with the Muslim community in the States and Mariam only prays on holidays. Of note, she has never read the Qur'an and follows her mother's lead when praying. In this example, Mariam has experienced thin religification (little knowledge of Islamic tenets, prays without knowledge of the Qur'an), has few *anchors* (holiday prayers) outside of her family, and has been socialized with few expectations of religiosity (not taught to read the Qur'an, led in prayer). By contrast, Safaa, who was also born in Pakistan and moved to the States as a toddler, was enrolled in Islamic classes at the local masjid, has a working knowledge of the Qur'an, and prays at least once per week. Her family attends monthly events at the masjid and all the women in her family wear a *hijab*. Safaa has some Muslim friends at school and feels her "American life" and "Muslim life" can overlap at times. Safaa has experienced thick religification, as her understanding of Islam is more grounded in scripture/rituals and has some *anchors* or ways in which her religious commitment is demonstrated (masjid events, involvement in religious classes). She has also been socialized towards religion differently by the outward presentation of Islamic beliefs (wearing the hijab) and expectations of religious knowledge (enrollment in masjid classes). If both of these adolescents were to experience a social pressure, such as religiously-motivated bullying, Mariam may be pre-disposed to distancing herself from Islam by concealing or questioning her religion. Such an instance is described by Peek (2005) in his study with Muslim adolescents. Others in the study responded by strengthening their knowledge of Islamic tenets and displaying pride in their faith – a method that Safaa may be predisposed to using. As illustrated in this example via inclusion of *anchors*, *socialization* alone does not determine one's

disaffiliation process, but rather may be used to build a holistic understanding of an individual's identity development.

Consciousness (2b)

When Muslim adolescents were asked to describe the initial stages of identifying themselves, they often described a struggle deciding which identity variables they wished to own and how to convey this complex identity to their peers (Peek, 2005). Some subjects identified as American because they were born in the U.S. but found that their peers demanded more clarity on their ethnic and religious backgrounds, often ascribing which identity was most salient without the subject's consent (Nadal et al., 2012). As identity is formed through social comparisons and reassessment of one's worldview throughout the course of their life, the act of identifying oneself to others requires the budding disaffiliate to consider multiple layers of self (Greksa, 2015).

Anzaldúa (2009) describes *mestiza* consciousness, or "mixed blood" (2009, p. 321) consciousness, which refers to a way of thinking and being in the context of one's cultural history, often making room for many conflicts and contradictions. This term was created to describe those separated from members of their family when the borderlands of Mexico and Texas were officially split along national boundaries. Being separated from half their clan and thrust into American/Texan culture led to a mixed-race, biology-based culture that was passed down through the family. Anzaldúa (2009) then extended this concept, coined "new mestiza consciousness" (2009, p. 203) to include intellectual, spiritual, and emotional ways of being part of more than one culture. This concept was then applied to African Americans, who were also "involuntary immigrants" (Nwosu, 2014, p. 25). African American and White culture were often at odds and yet the two

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needed to be reconciled to form a sense of self. This internal conflict between layers of self was resolved through intuitive knowledge of how to exist based on the context (Anzaldúa, 2009) and through active creation of counter-narratives (Nwosu, 2014). Thus, the concept of multi-consciousness can be applied to the Muslim-American who experiences their Muslim self and American self as being in conflict and in need of reconciliation (Peek, 2005). Multi-consciousness can also be applied to the ex-Muslim atheist who may be in the process of reconciling contradictory selves multiple times throughout their disaffiliation journey.

In the identity literature, *consciousness* refers to how multiple identities are internalized by an individual and consolidated into a sense of self (Hull et al., 2002). Research suggests that information (both situational and physiological) deemed relevant to the self is encoded as part of one's self-consciousness and that this process often occurs outside of one's awareness. In other words, actions/emotional responses deemed congruent with the self are added to one's idea of self, whereas a challenge to one's idea of self can be a point of conflict. For example, an individual may view their American self and Muslim self as separate identities (Itzigsohn & Brown, 2015) that exist in specific, predetermined contexts. An emotional response that is consistent with the Muslim self but not the American self, the individual may need to engage in active resolution tactics. An example of this might be the emotional response to negative comments from peers about one's nation of origin. Whether the individual will defend those they identify with ethnically or choose to prioritize their American values is a conflict that may require reflection. In this way, layers of self may be separated with tension ("living on the hyphen"; Sirin & Fine, 2007), or blended (multi-consciousness;

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Anzaldúa, 2009; Nwosu, 2014). Working the hyphen or living on the hyphen (Sirin &

Fine, 2007) entails holding identities that are both together and separate due to any

number of factors such as history, political situations, or loss. An example of this is the

hyphenated life of a Muslim-American – the two halves of this identity have been

described as separate and contradictory throughout the discussed literature and yet many

continue to reconcile the two with varying degrees of fluidity as they establish their

consciousness (See *Table 1*). Mohyuddin (2020) discusses these degrees of fluidity using

the terms integrated selves and parallel selves. With an integrated self, Muslim youths

were able to blend their American and Muslim identities and fluidly shift between them.

A parallel self was more separate and fractured although they still co-existed as parts of

the individual's identity.

Morality (2a)

Morality is often pared down to decisions of right versus wrong. Although this

definition is not inaccurate, it does leave out many important aspects of morality. From

an evolutionary perspective, morality was defined as cooperation (Tomasello & Vaish,

2013). Working from the assumption that human beings are most interested in their own

survival, morality is also seen as the ability to sometimes put aside self-interests in favor

of another person. Alternatively, individuals may make such a decision if they decide

their interests and the interests of others are the same. Some examples of taking on the

interests of others include the concepts of justice or the maintenance of social norms. In

both of these cases, helping another person will also benefit the individual in time. In

fact, modern-day morality hinges on the belief that if certain rules and norms are

followed – such as obeying laws against murder or theft – then society as a whole will

function well. Moral actions have also been categorized into tiers. The first tier includes any actions that happened directly between people and could be observed or reciprocated. An example of this tier is holding the door open for someone, which then allows a display of gratitude and encourages similar actions for those who observed the act. The second tier includes behaviors that could not be construed as survival-oriented but rather are symbolic behaviors that signaled one's morality. An example of second tier morality is adhering to dietary restrictions deemed "right" such as Jewish people eating Kosher meat.

Neuroscientific literature has also studied moral decision making in search of a highly evolved cognitive skill that would set humans apart from all other animals. However, findings suggested that moral decision-making used the same neurological pathways and cognitive processes as any other decision (Kelly & O'Connell, 2020). Hence moral decision-making was also subject to the same biases and misjudgments that might lead someone to make a poor economic decision. Evidence existed for a dual pathway to decision-making, one that was slow and reason-based and another that was based on quick, emotional response. Perspective-taking, empathy, goal-directed thinking, understanding of rewards, and emotional responses were all cognitive processes relevant to moral judgment. In other words, these general processes – processes that serve various functions – were activated and acted in tandem to help humans make moral decisions. For example, someone may have helped an injured stranger so that they might receive help if injured in the future (goal-directed thinking). They may have also wanted to avoid being perceived as a bad person for not helping (perspective-taking). They may have wanted to receive the stranger's gratitude (reward) or foresaw feeling guilty (emotional

response) in response to inaction (Greene, 2015). However, neuroscientific findings alone could not explain the complexities of human morality. Studying the biological processes underlying morality involved the combination of a moral dilemma setup and neuroimaging. As such, the findings were often based on highly specific situations and used vignettes devoid of identity variables such as ethnicity or gender (Kelly & O'Connell, 2020), which made it difficult to generalize these findings to the spectrum of moral decision-making.

Morality has also been defined as the interaction between what is deemed right by society, an individual's view of the "moral self" (Ellemers et al., 2019, p. 332), and an individual's thoughts and experiences. Research suggested that the difference between right and wrong is dictated by the culture, religion, and political context in which one lives, indicating that what is right may vary greatly. In addition to knowing what society expects, the individual was thought to also adjust their actions to better fit the values of their social group. For example, if Mina's friends value social justice, she may strengthen her own attitude towards social justice advocacy to enhance her sense of belonging. Another factor in moral decision-making was one's idea of how moral they are, or even how immoral they are not. Essentially, people wanted to avoid association with immoral behavior such that they engaged in mental strategies to distance themselves. An example of this was the re-interpretation of their past behavior so that it could no longer be described as immoral. Another example was to shift responsibility for the immoral behavior or ignore how those actions affected others. Deliberate action taken based on moral principles, as described above, was an example of the reason-based, slow cognitive decision-making process described by Kelly and O'Connell (2020). The quicker

cognitive process based on emotion was addressed by Haidt (2001) via the theory of intuitive moral decision-making. The model predicted that the intuitive decision is made based on a combination of cultural/societal or in-group norms and the individual's emotional response. Shame and guilt were reportedly common emotions that drove decision-making. The model further predicted that the individual went through post-hoc (or after-the-fact) rationalization in order to ensure their decision would not cause an immoral self-perception or social rejection even with longer, more in-depth consideration.

Atheists are often described as immoral or untrustworthy (Doane & Elliott, 2015). The question thus becomes how or why one would make the choice to embrace a supposedly immoral identity (that of atheism) despite the strong desire to maintain a moral self-perception (Ellemers et al., 2019). The research suggested that for some, religious institutions held values that atheists-to-be could not condone (Krueger, 2013). Churches/religious doctrines that did not support women's or LGBTQ+ people's rights, for example, were inconsistent with values held by atheists-to-be. This finding would suggest that rather than making an active choice to be seen as immoral by their religious community, atheists-to-be began to perceive their religious community as immoral. Thus, the desire to preserve their moral self (Ellemers et al., 2019) led individuals to reconsider their affiliation with a group, in this case their religious community. Some also found issues with the part that religion has played in world history or the lack of scientific evidence for religious beliefs (Krueger, 2013). These moral objections were initially about Christianity specifically but spread to organized religion generally and eventually led to doubts in the existence of a God. Smith (2011) also found that atheists-to-be saw

themselves as moral people, but upon seeing religion as immoral, could no longer believe that their morality stemmed from religious beliefs. Therefore, questioning religion-based morality was a primary driver of *questioning theism* (2011).

Of interest is how atheists and atheists-to-be went about redefining the source of their morality. Research suggested that the beginning of this process involved delineating the ways in which the atheist-to-be was different from religious people. This delineation was conceptualized as a cognitive boundary (Guenther et al., 2013; Smith, 2011) and functioned in much the same way as comparing oneself to an out-group. In other words, religious people must be different from the atheist-to-be and those differences must contribute to a positive moral self separate from religion (Smith, 2013b). Given the religious nature of American society, research (Sumerau & Cragun, 2016) suggested that connection with religion – whether one is raised religiously or simply surrounded by religious society – was an essential part of an atheist-to-be's moral code and that theist models of morality became a guide for what *not* to do. Atheists in the process of re-evaluating morality positioned themselves as experts on religion due to their deeply religious upbringing. Some of these people were missionaries, had family members who held leadership positions in their church, or had family that actively and frequently engaged in religious behaviors (e.g., Bible study, prayer, church attendance). Those who were raised without religion took the position of having lived a moral, positive life without religion, thus implying that others could as well. One method of rejecting a religious morality was to frame religion/religious people as the source of negative experiences, something that was forced upon them by parents/guardians/community, and non-conducive to free thought (Sumerau & Cragun, 2016). This evidence was in line with

earlier findings (Krueger, 2013). Participants also noted that non-religious people were viewed through a reductive, prejudicial lens by religious people (Sumerau & Cragun, 2016). Some participants found this comparable to how sexual and ethnic minorities are often made out to be untrustworthy or evil. Thus, atheists involved in this study sought to subvert such expectations by living positive, moral lives. A similar pathway to differentiating one's moral self from religious people was proposed by Guenther and colleagues (2013). In this pathway, religious people were framed as dangerous to atheists and society, inferior to atheists, and starkly different in ideology/worldview from atheists. Thus, multiple studies have found that atheists separate their moral self from religious others in a self-enhancing way as a first step to redefining morality outside of religion (Guenther et al., 2013; Krueger, 2013; Smith, 2011; Sumerau & Cragun, 2016).

In addition to identifying how they were different from religious people, atheists also had to actively decide who they were as people. Similarly, they also had to form a framework for making moral decisions, since religious rules were no longer their guide. For some, moral decision-making was intuitive (Smith, 2011). They felt confident that they could be good because they naturally saw murder, theft, cheating, lying, and other forms of harming others as immoral. Others suggested that morality stemmed from societal norms and that being good was related to prosocial behaviors rather than religion. One participant in Smith's (2011, p. 225) study succinctly summarized this notion by saying, "So killing would be OK unless God said no?". Qualities such as integrity were cited as superior sources of morality when compared to the religious sources, punishment and reward. Thus, morality devoid of religious principles seemed to be one based on rational decision-making. This point was particularly interesting when one considered

neurological evidence, which stated that moral decision-making was no different from other types of decision-making (Kelly & O'Connell, 2020). Evolutionary evidence also supported non-religious morality in the form of early human cooperation (Tomasello & Vaish, 2013). The combination of this evidence suggested that there is more than one basis for morality and that using theistic models as the default by which all others are judged may be simplistic and inaccurate.

In the current model (See *Figure 8*, Point 2a) *morality* is proposed to be an inherent part of *socialization* (*Figure 8*, Point 1a) and indeed a factor that is relevant at various other points of identity development (See *Table 1*). However, it is proposed to be most relevant in the formation of an atheist identity in tandem with *questioning theism* (*Figure 8,* Point 2). Such a proposition is made based on Greksa's (2015) theme, *coping with stigma: redefining morality.* This theme suggested that morality could be intuitive and based on values of human cooperation (Smith, 2011; Tomasello & Vaish, 2013), but often became most salient for atheists-to-be when theistic models of morality were perceived as inconsistent and harmful (Krueger, 2013; Sumerau & Cragun, 2016), thereby spurring the future atheist toward *questioning theism* (See *Figure 8*, Point 2). Furthermore, the current model uses the term morality in reference to an individual's personal definition of morality rather than any one definition discussed throughout this section. Doing so allowed the current model to be flexible to the deconversion and new identity formation process. As the atheist-to-be disaffiliates and begins to form an atheist identity, their conception of morality is proposed to shift from a theistic model to one based on personal conception of right versus wrong.

Questioning Theism (2)

In their identity formation models both Smith (2011) and Peek (2005) refer to a period of transition, typically when entering college, as the point at which their participants began exploring their identity in an intentional manner. For Muslim adolescents, this time period is when they began learning more about Islam and accepted responsibility for their religious beliefs rather than depending on their parents (Peek, 2005). For atheist individuals, this period was when they learned more about religions different from their own, perhaps explored atheism through media or atheist others, and generally accepted that something about religiosity was incompatible/inconsistent with their sense of self (Smith, 2011). *Questioning theism* is the term used by Smith (2011) and is adopted into the current model (See *Figure 8*, point 2) as it fittingly described the dual process involved in questioning theism (See *Table 1*). Half of the process is the questioning/exploring of Islam and all the ways it does not fit for atheists-to-be. The other half of the process is the exploring and acceptance of atheism (2011).

Many aspects of self can be the spark that leads one to start questioning religion. Finding fault with religion-based morality is a frequently cited spark. Considering religious identity as one of the many layers of self (i.e., *consciousness*) to be consolidated can also be that spark. External experiences can also prompt someone to begin or continue questioning theism. For example, meeting new people, such as friends or professors, can serve as motivation to question theism, especially when these new people are considered smart, trustworthy, or respectable (Smith, 2011). For example, atheists-to-be may rely on others they deem intelligent and who are critical of religion to provide guidance. They may seek suggestions for media such as books or podcasts that delved

into the "God question," (2011, p. 223) or have conversations/debates with atheists. Some

atheists-to-be were also spurred towards doubt by religious others. Such experiences

included recognizing inconsistencies in religious peoples' behavior such as clergymen

involved in misconduct or religious people who view atheists as immoral but maintain

friendships with them nonetheless. Another push towards the *questioning theism* stage

can be higher education and resulting skepticism. As some participants learned more

about scientific and secular explanations of natural phenomena, the more they found it

difficult to reconcile religious explanations and their lack of evidence. Another

inconsistency was the fact that different religions set forth different, at times conflicting,

value systems and explanations of the world (LeDrew, 2013). In fact, a subset of atheists

in Canada refer to themselves as "sceptics" and view their daily skepticism as a form of

activism (Simmons, 2018, p. 5). These non-believers make it a point to engage in

scientific thinking and advise others against delusions, wishful thinking, and the dangers

of scientific misinformation and pseudoscience (e.g., Flat/Hollow Earth theories, Atlantis,

homeopathy, etc.). Such actions are reportedly more meaningful to their personal identity

when engaged in consistently and across various life roles, suggesting that questioning

theism based on rational thinking is highly significant for atheist identity. That is not to

say, of course, that *questioning theism* was a direct bridge to atheism. Many atheists-to-be

dwell in the highly connected stages of *questioning theism*, *morality*, and *consciousness*

for varying stages of time. Krueger's (2013) findings suggest that some may also

experiment with other religions during this time. Some people found a religion that

worked better for them, such as the deity-free Buddhism, or the less severe nonreligion,

agnosticism. However, atheists-to-be typically experienced continued dissatisfaction.

They were unable to assuage their skepticism about God in particular and therefore shifted from questioning their religious identity generally to questioning God's existence specifically.

Rejection of Theism (3)

The next stage, *rejection of theism* (See *Figure 8,* Point 3), is a stage of active choice. The research suggests that atheists may spend varying amounts of time in the *questioning theism* stage, including a continuous evaluation of *morality* and *consciousness* (Greksa, 2015; Krueger, 2013; LeDrew, 2013; Smith, 2011). It is the active choice to reject theism that solidifies one's identity as a religious disaffiliate. It is not, however, the stage at which one accepts and forms an atheist identity (that will be discussed in the next section). In this stage, the individual has essentially answered the question they have been asking themselves throughout the *questioning theism* stage regarding the existence of God. Sometimes, an individual had all but disaffiliated from religion, but had not verbalized their disbelief in God until an atheist or important other provided the language or courage needed to disavow religion entirely (Smith, 2011; See *Table 1*).

A critique of including *rejection of theism* as a necessary step towards atheism is that it implies a theistic default that must be denied. The number of people who are raised without religion or even in a non-religious society entirely has grown over the years (Thiessen & Wilkins-Laflamme, 2017). In fact, evidence suggests that society is on a trajectory to becoming more secular in general due to increasing scientific knowledge, improved living conditions, and a loss of religious figures in positions of authority in the public sphere. As such, it is even less plausible that a theistic worldview be deemed the

default. Indeed, if the current model were intended for disaffiliated individuals generally, including converts and agnostic individuals, *rejection of theism* might be an unnecessary stage. The former leave one religion for another, thereby displaying dissatisfaction with their original religion rather than religion in its entirety. The latter neither believe nor reject the concept of God but rather assert that the reality is unknowable. And of course, individuals who leave religion do not always choose to become atheists, who are by definition those who reject the concept of a higher power/God. They may choose to remain vaguely non-religious without a need to label themselves. It is only when one seeks to model identity formation for atheists specifically that *rejection of theism* becomes important. As such, it was included in the current model.

Atheism as Chosen Identity (4)

The final stage is *atheism as chosen identity.* Within this stage are two possible trajectories: declared identity or identity achievement (See *Table 1*). Identity achievement is a term borrowed from Marcia's (1966) work on ego-identity formation and is used here to refer to an atheist who does not choose to explicitly declare themselves as an atheist. Vliek (2019) demonstrated that some ex-Muslims did not feel the need to declare themselves or were fearful of important others' reactions. Some viewed an explicit rejection of Islam as an implicit rejection of their family and culture. As such, many chose to quietly live an atheist lifestyle and found that they were only dissimilar to some practicing Muslims – who also broke Islamic rules at times – in that they considered themselves a nonbeliever (Vliek, 2019). Therefore, I propose that those who choose not to "come out" as atheist may still experience identity achievement (Marcia, 1966) after having explored their beliefs and made a commitment to atheism as did Fisherman's

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(2002) subjects. Interestingly, none of the reviewed literature discussed the internal process involved in choosing to come out as atheist. Much of the extant literature is focused upon the choice to not come out as atheist, perhaps due to the stigma associated with atheism (Abbott & Mollen, 2018) as well as the stigma associated with leaving Islam (Ashworth et al., 2020). In fact, lack of support from one's family after coming out was related to anger, rejection, despair, lack of connection, silence, lying, and tension (Zimmerman et al., 2015).

An important aspect of this stage is to understand the internal process of forming an atheist identity. Some researchers have asserted that atheists must form a collective identity by seeking out atheist organizations or friends due to the strong connection between social and individual identities (LeDrew, 2013; Simmons, 2018). Others assert that society as a whole is gradually shifting towards secularization as living conditions improve and science is able to explain more of the natural world, thereby making it possible for atheists-to-be to find role models more easily (LeDrew, 2013; Thiessen & Wilkins-Laflamme, 2017). Smith (2011) asserted that an atheist identity is rejection-based, meaning that it is defined more by what atheists do not believe than what they do believe. Additionally, atheism is thought to be an identity borne out of rejection rather than fulfillment of socially and culturally defined roles. Smith (2011) also asserted that an atheist identity is biographical in that the newly atheist individual must attach personal and social meaning to the atheist label, thereby allowing them to subvert societal expectations in a robust manner. Sumerau and Cragun (2016), who studied the formation of a non-religious morality, asserted that non-religious people often create lives that are dissimilar to religious lifestyles. In other words, atheists live good and positive lives, but

by disregarding theist models of how to do so, they disprove negative, morality-related stereotypes about atheists. Namely, they disprove the assumption that without God, people cannot be successful, happy, or moral. Other such stereotypes regarding "godless lives" included the inability to have strong family values, well-behaved children, or drug and alcohol-free lives (Sumerau & Cragun, 2016). Smith (2011) suggested that since religion is a social institution that garners respect, atheists may seek another such social institution using which their identity can be grounded, such as science. The institution of science can thus provide a structure within which meaning can be created and the self can be understood (Smith, 2011). Overall, the extant literature provides pathways to an atheist identity that are varied and, at times, contradictory. Therefore, the current model defines *atheism as chosen identity* to mean that an individual has committed to an atheist identity and has begun the process of defining what atheism means for their life.

Chapter V

Conclusions

Atheists have gone largely ignored in clinical psychological research (Brewster et al., 2014). Existing literature has studied the types of people who identify as atheist, which have typically included young, White, college-aged men (Caplovitz & Sherrow, 1977; Hadaway, 1989). The formation of an atheist identity has often been studied in reference to disaffiliation from an unspecified religion or, when specified, Christianity and Catholicism (Greksa, 2015; Krueger, 2013; Smith, 2011). Some of these models include exploration of the religious period in future atheists' lives (Smith, 2011, Greksa, 2015), but these models neglect most non-Christian religions, making it difficult to generalize findings to minority populations. Although studies exist on the topic of Muslim identity (Peek, 2005; Mohyuddin, 2020), studies about Muslims who disaffiliated have largely focused on the stigma and potential dangers of disaffiliation (Ashworth et al., 2020) or identity concealment (Vliek, 2019). Indeed, there are countries where disaffiliation from Islam is punishable by death (Ashworth et al., 2020), forced dissolution of marriage and parental rights, inability to marry in the future, and inability to inherit property (Peters & de Vries, 1976) thereby making it no light matter to live an atheist lifestyle. Most ex-Muslims living in the modern Western world, however, are able to live such a life, so long as they remain vigilant about the social consequences of "coming out" as atheist (Vliek, 2019). However, these social consequences may extend past their local social circle. There exists a delicate negotiation for an ex-Muslim atheist

living in the West who also holds familial ties in their native country, where apostasy

may be a crime or socially taboo. Some would call Islam a "high-commitment faith"

(Cottee, 2017, p. 5) that is not just a religion but a major aspect of individual identity and

daily life. As such, American atheists may not be able to visit family who reside in such

countries or may have to conceal their atheist identity in order to maintain

familial/cultural ties. This is especially true for those who wish to criticize Islam while

avoiding Islamophobic rhetoric and protecting Muslim kinsfolk (Cottee, 2017).

The study of identity, on the other hand, has been multi-pronged and resulted in

the related concepts of social identity (Adams & Marshall, 1996), religious identity

(Baltazar & Coffin, 2011; Lopez et al., 2011; Peek, 2005), and ethnic identity (Altman et

al., 2010; Anzaldúa, 2009), to name a few. The topic of healthy identity formation with

attention to the internal process was described as the result of crisis followed by

exploration and solidified with commitment (Marcia, 1966). The formation of a healthy

religious identity was also found to be the product of thorough exploration of one's

beliefs, reconciliation of beliefs and outward behaviors, and intrinsically motivated

religious commitment (Fisherman, 2002). Of interest to the current project were religious

and non-religious identities. Specifically, there is no extant literature on the identity

formation of ex-Muslim atheists to the best of this author's knowledge. The current paper

was written to fill the theoretical gap between disaffiliation from Islam and formation of

an atheist identity via the development of an identity model for ex-Muslim atheists.

The current model (See *Figure 8*) was based upon the remarkable overlap

between a model of Muslim identity formation (Peek, 2005) and a model of atheist

identity formation (Smith, 2011). The current model shares two stages in common with

Peek's (2005) model and four stages with Smith's (2011) model. The model was supplemented with five other models of identity (See *Table 1*) and resulted in four stages with four peripheral factors. The model includes (1) *religion as ascribed identity,* (2) *questioning theism,* (3) *rejection of theism,* and (4) *atheism as chosen identity.* The four additional factors were placed alongside the stages during which they became most relevant but can be relevant at multiple points during the disaffiliation process. These factors were (1a) *socialization,* (1b) *anchors,* (2a) *morality,* and (2b) *consciousness.* The intention behind the model was to shed light on the doubly stigmatized identity of an ex-Muslim atheist (Ashworth et al., 2020; Doane & Elliott, 2015) because the stigma surrounding it may contribute to difficulty seeking mental health services or poor treatment outcomes due to the lack of research on the topic.

As Mohyuddin (2020) pointed out, spaces of resilience and healing are necessary for healthy identity development. Although she referred to Muslim adolescents, I propose that ex-Muslim adolescents have the same needs, and perhaps have fewer resources to meet those needs. The empirical validation and implementation of the current model in clinical practices may allow such spaces to be created. In practice, the model can be used to support atheists-to-be through the disaffiliation process. For example, a client may present with a sense of wrongness about their religious identity and may disclose that the concept of God does not make sense. By using the model, their clinician could recognize that the client has just entered the *questioning theism* stage and may be considering matters of *morality* and *consciousness*. They may fear that they will not be a good, moral person without religion or that their identity cannot exist without religion. Their clinician may be able to provide resources on these topics to help the client educate themselves in

tandem with discussion about *socialization* and *anchors* during their sessions. Use of the model allows the clinician to predict some of the future concerns the client may have and prepare themself to discuss these topics. The model does not encourage disaffiliation but rather empowers a clinician to discuss salient topics for someone who may be undergoing the process of disaffiliation. By doing so, the client may be able to develop a healthy non-religious identity as opposed to maintaining an unhealthy religious identity. It is no easy undertaking to recreate one's identity from the ground up and as such, knowing the nuances of the process is a worthwhile endeavor.

Chapter VI

Limitations and future directions

As is the next step for any theory, the current model (See *Figure 8*) of identity

formation for ex-Muslim atheists requires empirical validation. Not only does the model

as a whole need to be studied further but each stage also needs to be studied to confirm

construct validity. The ideal way to do so may be a longitudinal mixed-methods study so

that atheists-to-be can be studied throughout the disaffiliation process using both

quantitative and qualitative measures. A mix of interview data, self-report questionnaires,

and quantitative measures could be used to test the hypothesis that the final model (See

Figure 8) adequately captures the disaffiliation process for ex-Muslim atheists. For

example, interview data could provide qualitative narratives about the disaffiliation

process. Standardized questionnaires that measure perceived social support or moral

foundations could be used to test some of the stages within the model as well.

Although the current model has not been empirically tested, a large amount of the

extant empirical literature was reviewed in order to develop it, suggesting that it may

hold up well to empirical testing. This assertion is based on the model's strong theoretical

underpinnings including but not limited to identity theory (Marcia, 1966; Stryker &

Burke, 2000), social identity theory (Adams & Marshall, 1996; Stets & Burke, 2000),

religious identity (Altman et al., 2010; Baltazar & Coffin, 2011; Lopez et al., 2011),

Muslim identity formation (Mohyuddin, 2020; Peek, 2005), atheist identity formation

(Greksa, 2015; Krueger, 2013; Smith, 2011), cultural considerations (Altman et al., 2010;

Anzaldúa, 2009; Crenshaw, 1989; Morten & Atkinson, 1983), stigma (Doane & Elliott, 2015; Zimmerman, 2015), and critical interpretive synthesis procedures (Dixon-Woods et al., 2006). The current model serves as a bridge between models of Muslim identity formation and disaffiliation process that could allow clinicians to better understand and treat ex-Muslim atheists and atheists-to-be. However, due to gaps in the current literature that were beyond the scope of the current paper, there are inherent limitations to the current model. There is a lack of extant literature exploring the internal process of forming an atheist identity and as such, the current model largely addresses external influences and the social process of disaffiliation. If an atheist identity is similar to an LGBTQ+ identity as Siner (2012) proposed, the study of atheists must include the process of accepting a new identity, the decision-making process of whether to come out as atheist, forming a new understanding of self, delineating what one now believes, how one's visible identity may be shifted, and how this impacts the relationships in one's life. In other words, research is needed not just on the rejection of religion but on the underlying process of creating a new non-religious identity.

There are also limitations that stem from this author's intention for the study which was to create a model for atheists. As such the final model does not directly apply to those individuals who leave Islam and choose to remain vaguely nonreligious or identify with agnosticism. Such nonreligious individuals may also experience identity struggles during the process of disaffiliation and future work on the topic should include various types of non-religious identities. Future study in this area should also explore how this model might be used with individuals of varying ages. The final model is developmentally rooted in the sense that young children are likely to be ascribed religions

and adolescents/young adults are likely to question various aspects of their identity. Clinicians working with young children or adolescents can therefore use this model to guide discussions of disaffiliation, although developmentally appropriate language should be used to best approach this complicated topic. The use of the final model with individuals at the end-of-life stage may also be a fruitful avenue of study as religion is often used to cope with questions of death and what comes after (Wong, 2010). Although many studies support the use of secular coping skills for the same purposes, some individuals may find themselves re-entering the *questioning theism* stage to cope with end-of-life, health concerns, or catastrophic events (Horning et al., 2011; McDougle et al., 2016; Wong, 2010). Indeed, the act of reconsidering theism in times of crisis might suggest that an atheist individual has not found a fitting system through which the natural world can be explained. In theory, a healthy nonreligious identity – one gained through reconciliation of an individual's beliefs and their outward behavior (Fisherman, 2002) – would predispose an atheist individual to use secular coping skills rather than turning to religion when distressed. The final model's benefits are twofold as it could be used with older atheist adults to facilitate re-exploration of beliefs and it could also serve as an early intervention tool to develop healthy nonreligious identities that are resistant to existential distress later in life. This could be achieved in clinical settings via proactive conversations about morality, consciousness, or the impacts of socialization. Ex-Muslim atheists, especially those who are hesitant to openly question their faith, may also benefit from the provision of resources that support the *questioning theism* phase. Ultimately, the current study adds to a growing area of research that has gone understudied thus far and highlights the need for continued exploration.

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