

Empowerment & Conversion: A Contemporary Explanation for Why People Join Minority Religions

by

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ABSTRACT

In contemporary society, popular discourse surrounding minority religions is negatively impacted by usage of the word “cult” or “brainwashing”, words which carry connotations. Many minority religions, and adherents thereof, are “othered”, these include Jehovah’s Witnesses, the Baha’i, Paganisms and Scientologies.

The research aim was to ascertain the hidden social mechanisms which lead to a participant’s conversion. A broader aim was to investigate the impact of popular discourse surrounding “cults” on individual religious identity, illuminating the lived reality of minority religion adherents. Ultimately, this research investigated why individuals choose to convert into minority religions which are often considered “bad religion”. Overall, this thesis discusses the implications this has for the individual’s lived reality.

I employ a qualitative method of data collection of collecting conversion narratives while blending a critical realist, interpretive, and rational choice theoretical frameworks. This thesis reviews the emerging data from the pilot study and three additional case studies. Through qualitative interviews, the lived reality of conversion was explored which revealed a hidden social mechanism impacting on the rational choice of participants to affiliate with minority religions. This thesis demonstrates empowerment is a key category requirement for conversion and/or affiliation into minority religious organisations. Furthermore, this thesis explores a generalised emergent model of empowered conversion which can be applied in future investigations of conversion in religious and non-religious contexts.

This research interjects into the current discussions concerning methodology and paradigms for understanding religion. Ultimately, this thesis is submitted at a time when the fields of religious studies and sociology of religion, as well as the sub-field of minority religion, is in a state of flux. Therefore, this thesis further seeks to engage in the discussions currently taking place regarding “world religions”, minority religions and the use of “cult” rhetoric.

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ABBREVIATIONS

ACM	Anti-Cult Movement
AMA	American Medical Association
APA	American Psychological Association
ARIS	American Religious Identification Survey
BPI	Bridge Publications inc. (Scientology)
CAN	Cult Awareness Network
CCM	Counter-Cult Movement
CoS	Church of Scientology
CSC	Church of Scientology California
CSI	Church of Scientology International
CST	Church of Spiritual Technology (Scientology)
FBI	Federal Bureau of Investigation (USA)
FDA	Food & Drug Administration (USA)
GO	Guardian's Office (Scientology)
HASI	Hubbard's Association of Scientology International
INFORM	Information Network Focus on Religious Movements
IRS	Internal Revenue Service (USA)
LRH	Lafayette Ronald Hubbard
NRM	New Religious Movement
OSA	Office of Special Affairs (Scientology)
OT	Operating Thetan (Scientology)
OTO	Ordo Templi Orientis
RCT	Rational Choice Theory
RE	Religious Education
RS	Religious Studies
RTC	Religious Technology Centre (Scientology)
Sci-Fi	Science Fiction
Sea Org	Sea Organisation (Scientology)
SP	Suppressive Person (Scientology)
UCLan	University of Central Lancashire
UHJ	Universal House of Justice (Baha'i)
USA	United States of America
WISE	World Institute of Scientology Technology
WWI	World War I
WWII	World War II

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Since the 1960s, there has been an explosion of social change which has impacted society, shaping the lived reality of the individual. Religiosity is one of the major aspects which has morphed since the 1960s. Religiosity has moved from a public to private belonging (Davie, 1994), and those studying contemporary religion recognise individual identity is not bereft of religion (Thomas & Graham-Hyde, 2021). Individuals are free to choose what to believe and where to belong through their rational choice (Stark & Bainbridge, 1985; 1987) which has reduced the hegemony of religious institutions; most notably, the Christian church (Cotter & Robertson, 2016).

This shift in religiosity has led to a plethora of minority religions, popularly known as “cults”. This has generated significant discourse both in popular and academic circles. Some refer to this shift as a ‘spiritual revolution’ (Heelas & Woodhead, 2005) or question whether this is a post-modern approach to religious identity (Beckford, 1992). Others argue the shift provides evidence of secularisation (Bruce, 2011) or the outworking of despotic yet charismatic leaders (Singer, 2003).

Despite the early debates about what minority religions are and how they attract new members, it is clear they have become a permanent fixture in the global religious landscape. Academics are now suggesting the term ‘NRM’ is an inappropriate term because these religions are no longer “new”; in fact, many have existed for half a century or more (Chryssides & Wilkins, 2006). Elsewhere, I have argued we should refer to these groups as ‘minority religions’ if people feel the need to differentiate between larger and smaller religions (Thomas & Graham-Hyde, 2021). Equally, the study of religion has also began to change with many calling for the World Religion Paradigm (WRP) to be phased

out of pedagogy (Cotter & Robertson, 2016), and for the field to become a holistic study of contemporary religion (Thomas & Graham-Hyde, 2021).

My research is timely. This last decade has housed several significant shifts in popular discourse. Politically, the terms “cult” and “brainwashing” have crept into political discussion. Equally, there have been significant changes in legal frameworks with several previously controversial minority religious adherents gaining the same rights that Christians, for example, have enjoyed for aeons. This is due to legal challenges made by minority religious organisations, like the Church of Scientology (CoS) and Watch Tower Society. These took place during the “cult wars”, which spanned across academic discourse, court rooms and popular discourse. Popular discourse has continued to portray minority religions with negative and often vitriolic narratives. However, there are significant minorities of the British population who self-identify as affiliating to one of the minority religions included in this research (ONS, NRS, & NISRA, 2016).

Most research specifically investigating the factors which contribute to the successful conversion of adherents into a minority religious context is dated (Barker, 1984; Lofland & Stark, 1965; Stark & Bainbridge, 1980) and needs updating for contemporary society. Recent research by Ines W. Jindra (2014) refutes the “brainwashing” thesis, arguing individuals are making decisions but stops short of arguing conversion is a rational choice. The debate about “brainwashing” is long over and it has been extensively disproven (Barker, 1984; 1986; Reichert et al., 2015; Richardson, 1991). However, A contemporary sociological examination of mechanisms contributing toward conversion into minority religions is lacking in literature. My approach of understanding the lived reality and rational choice of adherent conversion is novel, extending the field’s knowledge on conversion and affiliation into minority religions.

2.0 APPROACHES AND METHODOLOGY

2.1 Research Outline

This thesis explores the mechanic of empowerment as a social aspect of the participant's conversion experiences, leading to their recruitment into a minority religious organisation. Although models of conversion abound ([see 3.4](#)), I found the models failed to cater for the impact the feeling of empowerment had on participants. My research into conversion experiences suggests a new model of conversion which places empowerment as a meta-factor.

2.1.1 Aims

My primary objective for this research was to investigate recruitment and retention of individual adherents within minority religions, through the collection of participant conversion histories ([see 2.3.2](#)). I used methods emanating from the study of lived religion, approaching data with a critical realist and rational choice perspective. As I soon discovered, empowerment did not feature in any of the widely accepted models of conversion and the impact of empowerment on religious adherents was mute by comparison to other widely discussed topics¹. This thesis explores conversion, but further explores empowerment as a sociological mechanism that influences individual conversion.

To unpack this topic from the perspective of lived realities, I gained access to four minority religions: Jehovah's Witnesses, Baha'i, Paganisms and Scientology. I chose a case-study approach to have comparative data, ensuring that the findings were not specific to a single minority religion but broadly applicable. Most of the participants interviewed resided in the North-West of England, although varied in nationality and

¹ Such as discussions into definitions, typologies, secularisation and how terminology has had a negative (or positive) impact on religious adherents. See Thomas & Graham-Hyde (2021; [see also 3.1](#)).

ethnicity. Due to access issues ([see 2.4.1](#)), some Scientologist participants reside in Australia, USA, and Sweden.

I provide an analysis of twenty-two conversion histories, using a grounded theory approach ([see 2.7.1](#)) toward the data emerging from semi-structured interviews. More specifically, my research suggests a new model of conversion which builds upon previous conversion theory ([see 3.4](#)). The purpose of my research can be summarised by the following aims:

1. To identify and analyse the influence membership of a minority religion has on an individual reality.
2. To identify and understand, linking to existing research, the way adherents of minority religions feel they are perceived in society and to analyse the effects this might have on social engagement.
3. To critically analyse the relationship between empowerment, conversion, and recruitment within the context of minority religions.
4. To critically analyse the definitions of NRM, Minority Religion, Cult and Brainwashing, drawing distinctions where appropriate. Specifically, to address current terminology used within the field, which is currently repositioning.
5. To carry out primary research with adherents who affiliate with Jehovah's Witnesses, Baha'i, Paganisms, and Scientologies.
6. To produce a discussion within the context of analysing my primary research findings and to outline implications of findings for social institutions and future research.

Ultimately, this thesis seeks to answer the question: to what extent do the social mechanisms underlying conversion directly and indirectly impact individual recruitment into minority religions?

2.2 Approach and Methodology

This is an empirical study with a qualitative design. My theoretical framework to this research was a blend of critical realism, interpretivism and rational choice. This approach led to a methodology of semi-structured interviews with twenty-two participants², collecting self-narrated conversion histories.

2.2.1 Theoretical Perspectives: Critical Realism, Interpretivism & Rational Choice

Roy Bhaskar (1975; 1989), a British philosopher, is credited for developing critical realism as an epistemological position. For those who adopt such an approach, there are two presuppositions influencing the researcher. Firstly, objective reality is knowable but only through the conceptualisations of the researcher. Bhaskar (1975: 250) suggested that science “is the systematic attempt to express in thought the structures and ways of acting of things that exist and act independently of thought”. Secondly, not all social mechanisms are directly observable, meaning that social mechanisms are measurable only by the effect they have on observable reality (Bryman, 2016).

The researcher adopting critical realism has an active role in theorising the mechanisms which foundationally root a social phenomenon. The approach moves from epistemology to ontology with a focus on social mechanisms impacting on an event, rather than merely focussing on an event overall. Barth Danermark and colleagues identify the three ontological domains critical realism holds in equilibrium:

The empirical domain consists of what we experience, directly or indirectly. It is separated from the actual domain where events happen whether we experience

² For more explanation on sampling in this research [see 2.4.2](#)).

them or not. What happens in the world is not the same as that which is observed. But this domain is in its turn separated from the real domain. In this domain there is also that which can produce events in the world, that which metaphorically can be called mechanisms (Danermark et al., 2001: 20).

Conversion is a subjective experience and is not directly observable. However, the effects of conversion on the individual are observable. Therefore, by adopting critical realism as part of my theoretical approach, my research is investigating the relationship between the theoretical conceptualisations of conversion and the real-world phenomena, as articulated by participants.

Language has a significant impact on conceptualisation (Bhaskar, 1975; Danermark et al., 2001). The language often used by individuals to describe their conversion histories is an important aspect of my research. Bhaskar (2008) argues that despite reality being perceivable only by the five senses (therefore subject to language) it is not dependent upon perception. Kevin Schilbrack (2014: 168) explains that:

[C]ritical realism seeks to defend a clearer recognition of the fact (a) that our perception and knowledge are conditioned by our social locations does not imply (b) that we cannot refer successfully to a world that exists independent of language.

When approaching the literature through a critical lens, it became clear there might be alternative and/or additional explanations for conversion, especially when considering the potential for unrecognised social mechanisms which provoke the phenomenon. In acknowledging the impact of language, including how scholars have deployed its use in analysing conversion, I have been able to perceive the mechanisms of conversion through the effects it has on observable reality, a reality that would otherwise remain unnoticed or ignored until a critical realist approach is adopted.

Within this framework, I have utilised abduction and recontextualised language used by the participants when describing their experience of conversion into the context of empowerment; supported by a corpus of literature investigating the phenomenon (see [3.4](#) & [3.6](#)). Abduction avoids empirical generalisation (inductive) and is not rigidly logical (deductive), allowing for interpretation (Collins, 1985). There is a level of creativity and imagination which allows for new explanations of social reality (Danermark et al., 2001; Jindra, 2014). Therefore, by operating within a critical realist framework, I have been able to interpret the data through the lens of theory otherwise unutilised within this field, generating a new model of conversion.

Bhaskar's central argument is that critical realism helps identify whether values are science free, rather than social science being value free. Thus, values can be approached rationally through explanations, and critical realism helps discover the "superior" explanation. This perspective is not without critique. Andrew Sayer (1997: 475) identifies that "[i]t is not always clear which among rival explanations is superior, or what the relevant explanations responsible for secreting particular values are...". Sayer further critiques critical realism as being linked to "recently fashionable" focus on "empowerment". However, in my adoption of this approach, I do not assume other explanations of the conversion phenomenon are inferior, nor do I believe they are without merit. I have simply uncovered scarcely considered social mechanisms which add to general theories of conversion, in particular Ines Jindra's *structural-substantial model* of religious conversion ([see 3.4.7](#)). Certainly, I am not advocating this approach as emancipatory for the study of conversion or religion generally, which seems to be Sayer's focal critique.

The positioning of critical realism is within the broader theoretical framework of interpretivism and having such an approach lends itself to qualitative methodologies (Bhaskar, 1989). When researching human experience generally, it is not possible to adopt quantitative methods as they do not provide a sufficient context in which to interpret the data with depth (Giorgio, 1992; Mishler, 1990). A critical realist interpretivist approach has enabled me to position the perception of the participants as vital in understanding the implicit social mechanisms (Schwandt, 1998) involved in their conversion histories. Ultimately, internalised monologues of opinion, thought, ideology, and otherwise, are expressed through communication, both verbal and non-verbal as well as evidenced through the culmination of the consequences resulting from individual decision making (Bryman, 2016). Much like the critical realist approach, interpretivism is also heavily impacted by language. Therefore, it is my responsibility to hermeneutically interpret participants' conversion histories, contextualising their narrative within a corpus of academic literature outlining conversion and empowerment (Bryman, 2016).

Rational choice theory (RCT) is an economic approach to understanding social behaviour. Rodney Stark and William Sims Bainbridge (1985; 1987, [See also 3.4.6](#)) posited a general theory of religion based on RCT. They identified what they labelled "compensators", which lead toward religious conversion and embodied practice and helped individuals cope within the material world. They suggested there was a series of rational choices made by individuals, and so their theory of religion was heavily founded upon notions of free choice and identity construction.

Scholars who argue for an understanding of the individual's lived religion are critical of the theory. Nancy Ammerman (2021) argues "human religious action simply cannot be

reduced to the costs and benefits of paths to salvation” (ibid: 7). She further argues people engage in religious activities for the sake of being engaged in religious activities.

I argue RCT need not be rejected when seeking to understand the lived religion of individuals, particularly in the case of participants’ conversion histories. Through the lens of RCT, it has been possible to recognize what John Lofland and Rodney Stark (1965) call “situational factors” leading to conversion ([see 3.4.5](#)). Certainly, the themes which emerge in my research ([see 8.3](#)) can be considered “situational factors”, determined by rational choices made by my participants, and forming part of their conversion and lived experience overall. Therefore, participants lived experience is not reduced to a “cost-benefit” analysis, as participants did not articulate such an approach. Nevertheless, participants certainly felt compensated by their experience which was incorporated into their embodied practice of religion.

2.2.2 Methodological Contexts in the Study of (Lived) Religion and Conversion

The study of religion obviously contains the sub-field of minority religion. Historically, the study of religion was predicated upon a typological approach to understanding religion (Cotter & Robertson, 2016; Thomas & Graham-Hyde, 2021). The study of minority religion has developed significantly since the 1960s (Thomas & Graham-Hyde, 2021), beginning with phenomenological approaches to research, while reflexive approaches came later. The phenomenological approaches were usually adopted by those who were “outsiders”³; individuals who do not identify as belonging to the group ([see 2.5](#)). Whereas reflexive approaches were more likely to be used by “insiders”; those

³ For example, notable scholars such as Eileen Barker (1984), James Beckford (1975) and Aled Thomas (2021).

who identify “as being part of the culture, or society, or group under observation” (Ashcraft, 2018: 212)⁴.

Arguably, the study of lived religion is intrinsically linked to the diversification of religiosity in post-1960s society. The secularisation thesis took prominence, explaining the institutional decline of established religions (Bruce, 2011), yet concerns regarding the limitations of the thesis contributed to the prominence of the lived religion method in the 1990s. Deeper discussions over this approach began with Leonard Primiano’s (1995) work on “vernacular religion”, and it was David Hall who first coined the term “lived religion” at a conference in 1994 before later publishing *Lived Religion in America* (1997). Subsequently, Meredith McGuire (2008) provided a sociological context for the study of lived religion, which was followed by Marion Bowman and Ulo Valk who gave an RS context (Bowman & Valk, 2012), although terminology differed slightly. The field continued to develop and the study of lived religion⁵ has become a multi-disciplinary field.

More recently, Nancy Ammerman (2016) notes how the fields of sociology, history, religious studies, practical theology, and other social sciences and humanities now have published works which focus on the lived religion of individuals. This is, in part, due to the variety of fieldwork methods at our disposal (ibid). Ammerman (2021) has also codified the methodological approach to the study of lived religion and the contexts in which it can be used, contextualising the research in a reflexive approach.

⁴ [See 2.5](#) for more detail on ‘insider/outsider’ positioning of researcher(s).

⁵ Also referred to as ‘vernacular religion’ (Bowman & Valk, 2012; Primiano, 1995) and ‘Everyday Religion’ (Ammerman, 2006).

Methodological approaches to conversion can be traced back to the 1960s. Initial approaches toward a general theory of conversion applied positivist and strictly realist approaches, producing procedural models (Lofland & Stark, 1965; Snow & Phillips, 1980; see [3.4.5](#) & [3.4.6](#)). Most recently, Ines W. Jindra (2014; [see also 3.4.7](#)) proposed a new model of conversion by deploying a critical realist and narrative driven approach to participant centred life biographies. I have adapted this approach through the collection of “conversion histories” ([see 2.3.2](#)), with aspects of the Schütze’s narrative interview approach featuring in my semi-structured interviews ([see 2.3.2](#)).

In approaching this research, I have considered Rambo’s reflexive approach of holism within a broader context of critical realism, interpretivism and RCT. By empathetically connecting with the participant, while being able to reflect on the social world surrounding the individual, my description of conversion has been enriched. Emerging from the study of (lived) religion, considering the theoretical approaches I have adopted, I utilised qualitative interviewing ([see 2.3.2](#)) as the primary method for collecting data. I engaged in some field visits, which Alan Bryman (2016) would consider to be “micro-ethnography”, which had some impact in the research design. For example, discussions with adherents of minority religions illuminated the problems with the term ‘NRM’ which I discuss elsewhere (Thomas & Graham-Hyde 2021; forthcoming).

2.3 Research Design

I conducted twenty-two semi-structured interviews, adapting Schütze’s narrative interview approach, collecting conversion histories of the participants. The interviews conducted were a blend of online and offline, with some taking place in the field.

2.3.1 Case Studies

A case study is a contextual method which can be centred around a location, organisation and, in the case of this research, community (Bryman, 2016). An

interpretivist approach to research can utilise case studies with significant impact. It is not possible to research conversion histories in all religions, therefore case studies provide an appropriate methodological approach for understanding conversion and comparing experiences across multiple religions. Equally, case studies provide a means to identify the interrelation between social actors, events, and mechanisms across multiple contexts; providing a foundation to generate a model of conversion upon.

Positivists often view case studies as an opportunity to test theory (Mitchell, 1983; Perry, 2011); however, Kathleen Eisenhardt (1989) demonstrated that case studies can be an opportunity to build theory. Eisenhardt provides a 'roadmap' for how one can build theory using case studies: (1) defining the research question, providing a focus for collecting data; (2) selecting cases carefully, which allows for controls over extraneous variations; (3) developing data collecting methods, typically combining multiple methods; (4) overlapping data analysis and data collection, applying reflexivity as themes emerge; (5) analysing data within the case, providing detailed case study write-ups; (6) examining cross-case patterns, evaluating the generalisability of emergent theory; (7) using data to shape hypotheses, identifying an emergent frame which can be compared with theory and other data; (8) enfolding existing literature with careful examination of conflicting literature with the emergent theory; (9) reaching closure, potentially leading to new concepts or repetition of existent theory (Eisenhardt, 1989).

For this research, I applied Eisenhardt's (1989) 'roadmap' with some minor modifications. Having defined the research question, I set boundaries for which religions would constitute as an appropriate case study. The criterion being minority in number and impacted upon by the "cult wars" or wider "cult rhetoric" (Thomas & Graham-Hyde 2021; forthcoming; [see also 9.2.3](#)). I modified Eisenhardt's approach by choosing a

singular method for data collection. This modification was due to the constraints of doctoral research and my approach in understanding conversion through participant description rather than through my own observation. The other steps for building theory out of case studies were followed as Eisenhardt outlines.

There were limitations which impacted which cases I was able to include in this research. The most significant limitation was around access to minority religions. Due to the complexities caused by the “cult wars” (Gregg & Thomas, 2019; Thomas, 2021; [see also 3.2](#)), gaining trust from would-be gatekeepers and/or participants is not simple or easy. Therefore, by having a broad enough criterion for what constituted a case, I was able to mitigate issues of access. Cases arose out of opportunity rather than targeting specific minority religions. Providing the criteria were met, access was possible, and enough participants wished to participate in interviews, the case was adopted as part of the research.

Each case study followed the same procedure. Initial gatekeepers were approached ([see 2.4.1](#)); participants were invited to interview ([see 2.4.3](#)), the qualitative interview ended with an invitation to invite others ([see 2.4.2](#)), analysis of interviews happened after all interviews were conducted in each case ([see 2.7](#)); conclusions were drawn (see [4.4](#); [5.5](#); [6.5](#); & [7.7](#)).

2.3.2 Qualitative Interviews

Interviews are like purposeful conversations carried out by researchers which are guided by the overall aims of inquiry (Robson, 1993) and I used semi-structured interviews (sometimes referred to as non-standardised interviews). When investigating concepts which are emotive and highly subjective, semi-structured interviewing is advisable (Fielding & Thomas, 2001). Conversion is as emotively subjective as it is indirectly

observable. As a critical realist ([see 2.2.1](#)), I determined that a semi-structured interview was the most appropriate method for understanding the deeper roots of conversion phenomenon. Semi-structured interviews allow for a flexible approach which gains rich data. John Lofland (1971: 76), who helped develop an early model of conversion ([see 3.4.5](#)), suggests that semi semi-structured interviews “elicit rich, detailed materials that can be used in qualitative analysis”, which help “find out what kinds of things are happening” rather than a simple count of how often they occur.

Utilising individual semi-structured interviews with participants enabled me to explore participant conversion histories ([see 2.3.2](#)), uncovering previously unobserved social mechanics which emerged because of my methodological approach.

Qualitative interviews have a host of uses. Nigel Fielding and Hilary Thomas (2001: 125) highlight how interviews can “identify the main behavioural groups to be sampled”, potentially leading to definitions. Semi-structured interviews can also aid the researcher in becoming “acquainted with the phrasing and concepts used...” (ibid: 125) by participants. The method can also help “establish the variety of opinions concerning a topic or to establish relevant dimensions of attitudes” (ibid: 125). However, I have utilised the semi-structured interviews to help inform “the motivation underlying behaviour and attitudes...” (ibid: 125). Through collecting conversion histories, participants outlined their behaviour and attitudes of their conversion/recruitment experience; providing me with data which could be analysed for themes correlating across all interviews ([see 2.7.1](#)).

A criticism of interviewing in general is that the researcher must rely on the verbal behaviour of the participant, and aspects of life the participant takes for granted might not emerge without probing questions (Bryman, 2016). I have been careful to mitigate

this issue in the construction of my interview topics ([see 2.4.3](#)). However, as discussed elsewhere ([see 2.6](#)) the demographical background of participants may have impacted the research, rendering some details as obsolete in the minds of the participants. Nevertheless, the semi-structured qualitative interview allows for a level of probing that would not be possible in other forms of data capture.

As discussed later ([see 2.7.1](#)), empowerment is the “key category” of this research. There has been significant empirical consideration toward the notion, but less consideration has been given to empowerment in methodological contexts (Ross, 2017). As suggested by Denzin (1981), consideration is needed regarding the power dynamic between me, as researcher, and the participant. When knowledge construction can be influenced by power imbalances, it becomes essential to redistribute power through the knowledge production process (Foucault, 1981; Ross, 2017). An historic paradigm of researcher-participant relationships positions the researcher as powerful and participant as less powerful (or vulnerable); with emphasis being placed on the primacy of knowledge (Bashir, 2019). Power dynamics are complex, fluctuating as the research continues. There are circumstances where the researcher has less power (Elwood & Martin, 2000), such as my experience while trying to gain access to the Church of Scientology ([see 2.4.1](#)).

From a critical realist perspective, there has already been recognition that participants need to be more actively involved in the research journey as they are experts of their own life experience (Ross, 2017). My use of semi-structured interviewing further empowers participants by providing them with more control and respect, eliciting their feeling of power over the research process (Mishler, 1986). Of course, this starts with their initial contact and interview. Beyond the interview, participants are given access

to the process through on-going communication. By inviting participants to read their transcripts and act as additional gatekeepers, I was partnering them with aspects of the research. Having this approach helped mitigate a uni-directional relationship with participants, giving them power where possible (Bashir, 2017). Participant involvement in the wider research has benefitted the qualitative interviews.

Participant comprehension, memory recall, and reporting the information are important factors to consider with all participants and/or respondent-based research. Stanley Presser and Linda Stinson (1998) argue these issues are exacerbated in interview contexts, as opposed to surveys' questionnaires, due to the social desirability bias of the participant communicating with the interviewer (ibid). In the interviews I conducted, participants asked for clarification if they had not understood the question. Equally, the nature of semi-structured interviews meant I could ask follow-up questions to ensure a full answer was given by all participants. Therefore, I do not consider the potential for error, outlined by Presser and Stinson (1998), to be a problem here.

The way in which participants recall their conversion, and how much they can remember, is data. I found participants had no problems giving full accounts of their conversion histories and the rhetoric used to describe the event helped develop my model of conversion through empowerment.

The method of qualitative interviewing is common in the study of religion generally and minority religion more specifically. James Beckford (1975) used qualitative interviews with a schedule of open-ended questions and combined analysis with historical development of the Watch Tower, ethnographic visits to congregations and information conversations. Barker (1984) used 'in-depth interviews' in triangulation with participant observation and questionnaires. More recently, Aled Thomas (2021) deployed qualitative

interviewing (online) in combination with participant observation, online content analysis and informal email communications. Therefore, the use of qualitative interviewing in my research is firmly supported as an appropriate method.

2.3.3 Conversion Histories

As mentioned previously, Jindra's (2014) research produces the most recent model of conversion ([see 3.4.7](#)). Jindra used interviews to collect life histories, utilising a narrative interview approach developed by Fritz Schütze. According to Schütze (1983), narrative interviews are designed to map the participants' life history. The narrative interview process typically begins with participants recounting their life experiences without interruption, enabling the story to flow as they externally process life events. By going through this process, the participant is less likely to interrupt the narration before the interview is concluded. By inviting participants to provide their life history through a guided process, it is ensured they bring the story to an end having provided relevant material and condensed for the purposes of the research. The researcher provides some structure to the interview in this sense, (Jindra, 2014; Schütze, 1983;) being an attentive listener to help participants transcend barriers to memories (Glinka, 1983). Next, participants are invited to interpret repeated life events and the connections between them before the interviewer finishes by recording important life events that can help with data analysis (Jindra, 2014).

In this research, I have adapted the method of life history collection to collect what I have labelled a "conversion history". I made space for participants to freely recall a condensed life history which predated their conversion experience. The first and second topic areas ([see 2.4.3](#)) for exploration in this research required participants to recall their contextualised life history, enabling me to guide them into a flow of memory recall

which built toward their conversion event. I did not use the term “conversion”, instead opting for broader terms such as “joined” or “involvement”. This intentional refrain was built into the design because I wanted the data to be intrinsically connected to a condensed biography surrounding the participants’ first point of entry into a minority religion. By having participants build an individual biographical snapshot surrounding their conversion, it became possible to uncover the underlying mechanic(s) which led to the phenomenon. As a critical realist, I was interested in information the participants deemed important and/or linked to their lived reality of conversion.

I deviated from Schütze’s narrative interview approach by not plotting significant life events of each participant. During the design, and while carrying out the research, I decided to only plot the events participants chose to explain. The intention was for participants to provide their overview of their conversion experience, with some guidance from the topic areas. When participants did not provide information about significant life events (for example, marriage, divorce, children, etc.), then it was not completely relevant to their conversion history. On reflection, perhaps this data would have been useful to have, providing a comparison between different participants. Some participants included their marital relationship as part of their conversion history and clearly outlined the impact this had⁶, while others placed importance on other relationships⁷. Nevertheless, I do not believe the research has been negatively impacted by this omission, rather it is an avenue which could have further positively impacted the research had it been explored.

⁶ For examples of this, see JW3 ([see 4.4.1](#)), BH3 ([see 5.5.1](#)) and SCI6 ([see 7.7.1](#)).

⁷ For examples of this, see JW2 ([see 4.4.1](#)), PG6 ([see 6.5.1](#)) and SCI5 ([see 7.7.1](#)).

Collecting conversion histories is a time-effective way of having participants contextualise their experience of the phenomenon through the narration of their lived experience. By focusing on the event(s) of conversion, superfluous biographical information has been avoided. Ultimately, my approach records the lived experience of participants conversions as they perceive it at this fixed point in time.

2.3.4 Social Construction of Religious Identity

Erving Goffman (1959) used the analogy of drama and theatre to describe the myriad ways in which people present bespoke personas dependent on the situation. Goffman suggested people manage impressions to avoid embarrassment, behaving in ways which benefit the relationships experienced in the context the person is performing in. If Goffman's analysis is accurate, there are methodological implications to consider such as the portrayal of constructed religious identities impact upon the validity of collected conversion narratives. In other words, what influence does stating "I am Baha'i", for example, have for this research.

Philip Hammond (1988) suggests religious identities are either "ascribed" or "achieved" and can become of primary or secondary importance. A religious identity which is collectively constructed might become the core determining factor in religious identity; Hammond would suggest this is an "ascribed" religious identity of primary importance. Nancy T. Ammerman argues individuals in the "modern situation" face complex issues and increased mobility. She states choosing an ascribed primary religious identity would be an "exceptional" choice when one is surrounded by a pluralism of identities to engage with (Ammerman, 2003). Within minority religions, "exceptional" choices are made by converts seeking to affiliate into communities which have traditional belief, praxis, and

less complicated lifestyles (Bromley & Hammond, 1987; Robbins, 1988). In essence, Ammerman (2003: 210) argues:

The ability to align our actions with the actions of others, mutually defining and working within a recognized script, marks us as sane and competent members of our society.

For participants in this research, it would be fair to argue their conversions were their efforts to become part of a group which, I argue, provided empowering experiences ([see 8.4](#)). People are socially complex and adopt simultaneous multiple “intersectional” identities (Minow, 1997). For example, JW1 is a “faded” Witness ([see 4.4.1](#)), a father, a husband, middle-class, and in his middle adulthood ([see 9.1.1](#)). These identities are all true and have greater or lesser influence over his religious identity. Additionally, when BH3 states “I am Baha’i” he is invoking a term with infused meaning impacted by pre-existing cultural, popular, and meta narratives. Participants will have engaged with religious and non-religious forms of these narratives, implicitly and explicitly, in the construction of their religious identities. Therefore, it is possible the participant’s conversion histories ([see 2.3.2](#)) are also socially constructed memories rather than a re-telling of events as they transpired (Ammerman, 2003).

Uncovering the hidden social mechanism(s) of religious conversion would not be possible through the investigation of a single minority religion. Equally, interpretation of conversion narratives is required if one wants to understand the hidden social mechanism rather than merely a participant’s current interpretation of events. Therefore, this research utilised case studies ([see 2.3.1](#)) using an interpretive, critical realist approach ([see 2.2.1](#)).

2.3.5 Pilot Study

Conducting pilot studies can either help act as a trial run of the major study to come (Polit et al., 2001) or it can help identify flaws in the research instruments being used (Baker, 1994). This pilot study was designed to operate as a “trial run” ahead of the major study (Polit et al., 2001). During the pilot, I found an area lacking from the qualitative interviews as well as issues with access and gatekeeping (Baker, 1994).

My original intention with the pilot study was to gain access to the Church of Scientology (CoS). However, the nature of the CoS to vehemently gatekeep their community became counter-productive, a commonly occurring issue explored elsewhere (Urban, 2011; Thomas, 2021; [see also 2.5.1](#)). During the construction of the pilot study, I was approached by a colleague who revealed they were connected to a local Jehovah’s Witness congregation, and they would willingly participate in my research (having read my participant information sheet (Appendix 1), as well as connect me to others within their community ([see 2.4.2](#)). I adapted the pilot study to accommodate this level of access. This gatekeeper also participated as JW1 and connected me with JW2, JW3 and JW4 ([see 4.4.1](#)).

All four interviews occurred in a publicly accessible space. JW1 and JW2 were interviewed in a café while JW3 and JW4 were interviewed in a Jehovah’s Witness care home. The location of the interviews for JW3 and JW4 provided a fascinating insight into the caring and welcoming nature of the community. However, interviews were often interrupted due to the regular check-ups that JW3 and JW4 receive. I was also not left alone with either JW3 or JW4, I did not probe as I did not want to make anyone uncomfortable with my presence. It was clear they felt comfortable with the interview and the location they were interviewed in, and the information gathered was

comprehensive. JW3 and JW4 clearly felt the interviews were an opportunity to evangelise their belief, JW3 even presented me with a copy of the 'New World Translation' Bible - the translation endorsed by the Watch Tower (Knox, 2018). Interviews with JW1 and JW2 were not disturbed despite being in a public place, most likely because they were conducted on a weekday evening and footfall to the café was reduced. Although the interviews with JW3 and JW4 were not undermined, the interviews with JW1 and JW2 flowed with uninterrupted ease. The decision to meet at unsociable hours in a quiet café provided a location I sought for all subsequent physical interviews in the case studies to avoid disruption where possible.

It became apparent during the first interview that JW1 was concerned by how they were perceived by others, and I chose to specifically probe this concern during the interview. I felt it was important to understand participant conceptions of themselves as an "ordinary leave-taker" (Chryssides & Gregg, 2017; Introvigne, 1999), providing data on what happens after conversion. When studying minority religion, the way in which participants feel they are perceived is important data. Adherents are typically viewed as "brainwashed" (or "other", see [3.2](#) & [3.4.2](#)) because of their involvement with an unfavourably viewed religious organisation (e.g., The Watch Tower; see Knox, 2018), and yet individuals still choose to join and/or convert to the religion. The normative social values surrounding "cults" (Thomas & Graham-Hyde, Forthcoming) have been circumvented by a mechanism, enabling the participants to join a group despite the cost; in this case, the benefit of being empowered outweighed the potential for pariah status (see [4.5.4](#); [5.6.4](#); & [7.7.4](#)). Therefore, I added the sixth topic area ([see 2.4.3](#)) which was explored with JW2, JW3 and JW4 and was included in the case studies to provide comparative data.

There is sometimes concern regarding data collected from pilot studies when included in the main project, as it may limit the validity of analysis (Teijlingen & Hundley, 2002). Due to the case study nature of this research ([see 2.3.1](#)), and because little was changed to the methods of data collection upon completing the pilot study (with the exception of introducing topic area six – [see 2.4.3](#)), I include the analysis of data from the pilot within the overall conclusions and model of conversion ([see 8.4](#)). Despite having two fewer participants than the other case studies, the grounded theory approach to analysis ensures the relevancy of the data from the pilot.

I transcribed the interviews for analysis. Using a grounded theory approach to analysis, I identified emerging themes which correlated across all interviews ([see 2.7.1](#)). I found the emerging themes of empowerment were also linked to rational decisions. That is not to say all rational decisions are predicated upon wholly amicable or coercive free influences, certainly JW1 and JW2 suggested they had family pressures to join. However, at no point did participants suggest they had a lack of control (akin to being “brainwashed”, [see 3.4.2](#)). Their choices seemed to be founded upon a cost-benefit analysis approach similarly outlined by Stark and Bainbridge (1987). Of course, this impacted my theoretical approach to the remaining project, adopting RCT. Approaching the data with RCT in mind led to a hermeneutical interpretation of participant driven conversion histories – highlighting rational decisions to join and/or convert into their respective minority religions. This further underpinned the new model of conversion, innovatively linking the lived religion of individuals with their rational choices, fuelled by the empowerment participants recalled experiencing.

Overall, the pilot study provided valuable data and acted as an initial case study. It was unnecessary to make sizable adjustments to the research design, meaning the analysis

and conclusions of the pilot study enabled me to morph this into a case study for comparison with other cases.

2.4 Approaching Participants

In approaching the twenty-two participants for this empirical study, I deployed the use of four gatekeepers to gain access to Jehovah's Witnesses, Baha'i's, and Scientologists. As explored below, three gatekeepers were effective. For Pagan participants, I sought participants from local groups by posting in social media communities and inviting potential Pagan participants to get in contact with me. Once gaining initial access through a gatekeeper or social media group, I used snowball sampling, inviting participants to connect me with others.

2.4.1 Gatekeeping

The use of gatekeepers is helpful in engaging with hard-to-reach groups, particularly in qualitative research (Ellis, 2021; Wilson, 2020). The religions in this research can be considered hard-to-reach due to their suspicions of outsiders ([see 2.5](#)), a lingering impact of the "cult wars" ([see 3.2](#)). Gatekeepers can provide or deny access to participants which might enrich the gathered data (Kawulich, 2011).

Kathy Ahern (2014) outlined her first experiences of gatekeepers, particularly the issues which can arise when university officials are involved. Ahern suggests the "human factor" can be problematic if not accounted for. My experience with the university ethics committee is similar with Ahern's (*ibid*). Having submitted an initial ethics application, I was asked to resubmit once "significant security issues" had been addressed due to "extreme risk" of danger and/or brainwashing. The committee were not specialised in the field, meaning their understanding of so called "cults" was predicated upon problematic popular media (Thomas & Graham-Hyde, forthcoming; [see also 3.2.1](#)). I had

failed to identify, at this point in the research journey, that there was a ‘human factor’ involved with terminology such as “cult” being used in my application.

Paul Olson (2006) demonstrated there has been a societal approach to the “othering” of so-called “cults” ([see 3.2](#)). The popular usage of the terminology has been weaponised, often leading everyday individuals to view minority religions with suspicion (Graham-Hyde, 2023). There are varying contributing factors to this. The field has begun to scholarly engage with the paradigms which have scaffolded scientific views of religion. Chris Cotter and David Robertson (2016) identify a World Religions Paradigm (WRP) which contextualises an understanding of religion through a comparative lens, placing an over-emphasis on “world religions”. Concordantly, there has been a continued struggle from minority religions to be viewed as legitimate in contemporary society (Côté & Richardson, 2001; Lewis, 2003; Williams, 2003).

When considering the individuals on the ethics committee understand religion scaffolded by the WRP, with their experience of so-called “cults” being wholly pejorative, it is clear there was a significant “human factor” (Ahern, 2014) impeding my application. Upon realising the “human factor”, I was able to successfully argue that minority religions are no more dangerous than any other minority group in society. I did this by providing a substantive list of literature which deconstructed the “brainwashing” concern of the committee members⁸. Resultingly, the research was approved as ethical and particularly encouraged from individual members of the panel.

After successfully completing the Pilot Study, I contacted a community leader who identified as a Baha’i and introduced myself via email before forwarding on the

⁸ The list included the following references: Barker (1984); Beckford (1975); Chryssides & Wilkins (2006); Olsen (2006); Richardson (1993; 1996; 1997; 1999).

participant information sheet (Appendix 1). Having initially met in a local café to discuss the research, they agreed to participate and connect me with Baha'i in the Northwest of England. My gatekeeper (also participant BH2 – due to availability when scheduling interviews) connected me with BH1, BH3, BH4, BH5, and BH6 ([see 5.5.1](#)).

Gaining access to Scientologists was initially more difficult, an experience not uncommon (Thomas, 2019). After failing to gain access in 2016, I was able to gain limited access in 2019 having attended an INFORM seminar where I discussed my research with prominent members of the CoS. I followed up this encounter with an email (providing a participant information sheet; [Appendix 1](#)) and was invited to the London CoS to discuss further. I was invited to Saint Hill Advanced Org in East Grinstead in 2020; shortly before the COVID-19 lockdown began. I had conversations about the research and was questioned on my approach, particularly the use of terminology such as “new religious movement”. Despite several follow-up emails, the link I had established with the CoS became cold. Of course, benefit of the doubt dictates this is most likely due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

I was still keen to pursue a line of inquiry with Scientologists. I contacted Aled Thomas who had success in gaining access to Free Zone Scientologies (see [7.6.1](#) & [7.6.2](#)); Thomas, 2021). He contacted some of his previous participants, inquiring about whether they would be interested in participating in my research. SCI1 and SCI2 responded, agreeing to participate. By using snowball sampling ([see 2.4.2](#)), I was able to ask participants if they knew of others, they might be able to send my participant information sheet to ([Appendix 1](#)). SCI2 connected me to SCI 3. SCI 3 then connected me to SCI4. SCI5 and SCI6 were introduced to me through SCI4.

2.4.2 Participant Interview and Snowball Sampling

As stated above, all participants were invited to pass my contact details on to other potential participants. This process of sampling is called snowball sampling. Kenneth Bailey (1994: 438) defines this method of sampling as:

[A] nonprobabilistic form of sampling in which persons initially chosen for the sample are used as informants to locate other persons having necessary characteristics making them eligible for the sample.

In this research, I ensured that the “necessary characteristics” were broad due to the hard-to-reach nature of some of the groups I was trying to gain access into. For example, after my experience with the CoS, I wanted to ensure I had a large enough sample of Free Zone Scientologists.

I steered participants who wanted to connect me with others by suggesting the following characteristics: (1) over the age of 18; (2) current or previously identifying members of the minority religion; and (3) open to discussing their experiences within the context of their wider life experience. I found the purposeful vagueness of these characteristics ensured the samples were of adequate size and produced a varied enough participant base to draw some generalised conclusions about the nature of conversion (see [2.3.4](#) & [2.6](#)).

Upon completing the interviews, participants were invited to read through the transcript of the discussion as well as remaining connected to the research. Checking through the transcript for inaccuracies by a participant is typically referred to as a “member check” (Chase, 2017; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Having participants read the transcript adds to the validity of the data captured and builds the credibility of the study. Thomas Schwandt and colleagues highlight those studies which build authenticity and credibility are

considered to have been conducted with rigour (Schwandt, Lincoln, & Guba, 2007). Due to the lack of outlined procedure in conducting “member checks” (Chase, 2017), I developed broad criteria for participants to have in mind while reading their transcripts. Participants were asked to (1) confirm they are happy with how they had been represented in the transcript, checking nothing had been added; (2) to check for any information they wished to redact, particularly information which might reveal their identities to others; and (3) provide any suggestions to evidence or further reading which supported points they had made. I found the criterion to be helpful in building participants into the research as partners, rather than data mines.

For a short time following their interviews and transcript checks, some participants would regularly email with book recommendations or to engage in some brief email discussions regarding wider research. However, most connections with participants have since faded as this doctoral research entered the final stages.

2.4.3 Interview Process

In approaching this research, I had already developed a clear focus on conversion experiences, contextualised through participants memories and perceptions of the event and surrounding history. As mentioned above ([see 2.3.3](#)), I developed a process for collecting conversion histories which can be summarised as follows:

1. Start recording and implement a strategy which allows for participants to begin narrating their brief history, building toward the event of conversion and/or recruitment into their minority religion.
2. Guide participants, when necessary, to continue recalling – allowing for a flow of memory recall to develop.

3. Specifically ask participants what the experience of joining the minority religion was like.
4. Ask participants about the aftermath of joining, probing into the impact on their current lived experience.
5. Explore the participants' perception of how they're viewed by wider society.
6. Bring their story to an end by asking participants to consider what might be next for them.
7. End recording and discuss what will happen next with the research. Field any questions the participant might have.
8. Re-engage participant after transcription of the interview (usually within four weeks), asking participants to do a member-check.

The aim of the process was to guide participants in their conversion histories using topic areas as points of guidance throughout the interview. The six topic areas were:

1. The social background of the individual, including education and early memories.
2. The events which led to approaching or joining the minority religion.
3. The initial thoughts and feelings, as participants can recall, of early involvement.
4. The nature of being involved in the group, including thoughts and feelings.
5. What has happened since the initial involvement, including leaving if applicable.
6. The perception of the participant toward how wider society views them and/or their minority religious belief.

Founded within my theoretical approach, I decided against specific questions so that participants had space to interpret the question. Developing topic areas meant each interview could be highly personalised with questions worded in a style which fitted the flow participants were entering. Breaking the flow would have been detrimental (Schütze, 1983; Jindra, 2014), and therefore, by tailoring questions within the topic areas demonstrated that I was an attentive listener (Glinka, 1998).

Research into conversion has demonstrated the significance of social background of the individual. For example, Jindra (2014) showed individuals coming from a relatively liberal background are more likely to join a rigid and strict religion (and vice versa). Equally, earlier models of conversion also included social factors leading up to the conversion experience being highly significant (for example, Lofland & Stark, 1965; Melton & Moore, 1982; Stark & Bainbridge, 1985; See also [3.4.5](#) & [3.4.6](#)). By adopting a critical realist approach, my research into conversion must seek to understand whether there are underlying social mechanisms impacting upon the event (Bhaskar, 1989; Danermark et al., 2001). Thus, the first five topics for exploration were necessary to critically approach the canon of conversion research and theory. Of course, as mentioned above, the sixth topic area for exploration was added because of the pilot study with Jehovah's Witnesses ([see 2.3.5](#)).

The above topics of study acted as a schedule for the interviews, all of which lasted between forty-five minutes to one and a half hours. By not having set questions, I was able to tailor my questioning throughout the interview to the participant. The flexibility of this method means such decisions can be made to ensure all relevant data has been captured (Bryman, 2016; Robson, 1993). I believe this built a rapport as the interviews

progressed. In some cases, participants went back and added details to earlier parts of the interview as they felt more at ease as the process progressed.

Due to the issues of COVID-19 and subsequent Government sanctioned lockdowns, some interviews were conducted digitally. Interviewing online had been gaining popularity before the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly as the method subverts issues of time and cost for both the researcher and participant (Janghorban et al., 2014). However, the implications of interviewing online can impact on the participant and research overall. Lisa Moran and Ana Caetano (2022) emphasise the importance of rapport building and gaining trust from participants, typically through face-face interactions. The ability to analyse body language is further diminished as usually online interviewing only captures the very upper torso (Cater, 2011). I found I was able to build as much of a rapport with participants online as I was when present. There was a shared experience of being in lockdown and interviews were conducted online from my home, which helped put the participant at ease and led to a level of intimacy not afforded to those interviewed physically (Jenner & Myers, 2019). With my focus on participant narrated conversion experience, further analysis of the body language was not necessary as analysis was based on narrative data.

I anticipated interviews would not need to last longer than an hour as my focus on conversion histories, a single part of their life history, was clear. Semi-structured interviews can range in length, some lasting 30 minutes while others take hours (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). Of course, the process can be longer. Eileen Barker (1984) demonstrated that some interviews could take up much of the day.

The average length of interviews was about 45 minutes. Interviews which were shorter than 30 minutes were due to participant succinctness or lack of susceptibility to revealing

more. I made the decision to probe but remain “light touched” in how I interpersonally communicated. It was important to ensure participants constructed their narratives without pressure to answer a question in a specific way, causing unintentional leading bias.

All interviews which took place physically were conducted in public spaces at unbusy times, avoiding potential disruption. All café locations were in NW England. The location of the interview did not adversely impact on the participants.

2.5 Notions of “Insider/Outsider” Status of Researcher and Participant

Notions of participant belonging, and the positionality of the researcher can impact data collection and analysis. Philosophical and methodological positions are shaped by predetermined assumptions which develop through socialisation, and they ought to be considered when forming a research project.

Stephen Gregg and George D. Chryssides (2019) argue a clear definition of an “insider” or “outsider” is difficult due to the fluidity of the boundary of being in or out of a religion. The subjectivity of the individual and how they might religiously identify muddies the water. Nevertheless, it is generally accepted that an “insider” is an individual who has levels of access, experience, and knowledge that an “outsider” is unable to obtain without becoming an “insider” themselves (Jensen, 2011; Neitz, 2013). Historically, research constructed in the sociology of religion is considered valid when predicated upon value-neutral approaches which are underpinned by a researcher’s objectivity as an “outsider” (Neitz, 2013).

Mary Neitz (2013) created a researcher “Locations Matrix” to demonstrate the positionality of the researcher when considering “insiders/outside” and dominant or marginal culture. Neitz (2013: 131) explains that:

[R]esearchers have complex identities and may find themselves ‘inside’ on some dimensions and ‘outside’ on others. Similarly the line between ‘mainstream’ religions and marginal ones (‘sects and cults’) is also one that can shift over time...

Notions of “mainstream”, as well as referring to locations as being within dominant or marginal culture (see Figure 1), have an assumed understanding of entwined religion. Positionality is impacted by socialisations which directly influence researcher and participant social frames of reference. The inter-relatability of religion with wider sociality is what, according to Clifford Geertz (1974), makes religion identifiable as a “cultural system”. Neitz’s (2013) “*Locations Matrix*” builds this approach into locating the positionality of the researcher.

Cell A represents research of dominant culture studied by “insiders” of the culture, with most research on religion in the USA filling this space with confessional research of Christianity (Nietz, 2013). Cell C concerns dominant culture with the positionality of the researcher being “outside” said culture. In other words, researchers who study a dominant religion (or cultural system) but do not also belong to that religion are usually considered to be on the “outside” by adherents. Cell B is another “insider” position for the researcher studying from within marginal culture, or, for example, minority religions. Finally, ‘Cell D’ is research of minority religions from an “outsider” perspective; the position that I have within this project.

Location of researcher	Location of researched	
	Dominant culture	Marginal culture
Inside/adherent	A	B
Outside/not an adherent	C	D

Figure 1: “*Locations Matrix*” (Nietz, 2013: 131)

The impact of this position should be considered here. Firstly, some of my participants were weary of scholars studying minority religion. As leave-takers, there were some critical views of the religious organisation to which they had previously belonged. Terminology such as “cult” had been used to contextualise their former status as members, suggesting they had escaped. For example, JW1 was adamant that the “Watch Tower” was a “cult” (in the pejorative usage of the term) due to the way in which it was led. SCI4 and SCI6 were equally critical of the CoS, suggesting David Miscavige was purposefully turning the CoS into a (pejorative) “cult”. Due to the development of the “cult wars” ([see 3.2](#)), some “researchers who were not themselves members did implicitly and sometimes explicitly support and defend the groups they studied” (Neitz, 2013: 136). For some participants, this brought concerns that I would twist their voice to overtly defend an organisation they had strong reservations against. Of course, I took care to reassure these participants before the interview process began, explaining how my research is participant led. In this regard, my overall approach of wanting to partner with participants was a helpful starting point with those who were wary.

Secondly, my “outsider” status may have impacted upon the conclusions I draw from the data. This research has a phenomenological undertone, seeking to understand conversion histories from the perspective and worldview of the participants; thus, validity comes from participant testimony. For those adopting this approach, only Cell A and Cell B should be considered valid for researcher positionality (Nietz, 2013). Obviously, as an “outsider” to the religions included in my research, I do not agree with an approach which considers “insider” status as the only valid positionality of the researcher. I research conversion with a critical realist theoretical approach as an “outsider” because my approach allows me to interpret participant narratives and

uncover social mechanisms which impact experience. While conversion experience can be considered *sui generis*, the social mechanisms that enable the experience to occur might not be – which is what this research sought to reveal. Through hermeneutically translating the experiences of participants and connecting to established theory and literature, I have been able to generate a model which captures a spectrum of unique conversion experiences – with multiple empowering facets that all or in part led to conversion.

Naturally, this position can be critiqued. As I lack “insider” knowledge and experience, there is potential for misinterpretation of participant narratives. Additionally, concepts, terminology, and overall approaches to understanding the religion being examined might have been assumed knowledge by “insiders”. Due to my “outsider” status – being the context of assumed knowledge – it is inherently possible that there is missed elaboration on such topics which would have captured unrealised data in this research. However, I suggest that any unrealised data in the research would further enrich the hermeneutical translation and further uncover the same social mechanisms already observed, rather than providing fresh new insights. Therefore, despite the potential for missed data, the observations in the research are still valid.

The “insider/outsider” characteristics of the researcher also contribute to the level of penetration one can have with a religious community (Gregg & Chryssides, 2019), which can impact data collection. Certainly, my experience with the CoS gatekeeping was problematic because of my “outsider status”, despite being a researcher with university approval. Although initial hesitation was shown by participants, being an “outsider” among Free Zone Scientologists was less of an issue; perhaps due to their experience of leaving the closed CoS community. With the other case studies, my “outsider” status

had negligible impact and I was warmly invited to a variety of community and religious events. Unfortunately, due to the ethical and institutional constraints on this research, I was unable to accept and had to maintain an epistemological distance from participants.

As Gregg and Chryssides (2019) observe, the issue of being inside and/or outside a religious group has impact on participant identity; therefore, impacting the data collected from participants. They go on to examine the impact language or ethnicity, as contributing factors to identity construction, have upon lived religious practice.

The Jehovah's Witness participants in my research were nuanced in their "insider/outsider" status. JW1 and JW2 both considered themselves outside the Watch Tower but recognised they were not totally "outside" the community. As "faded Witnesses", they have chosen to stop engaging with their local congregation and other Watch Tower activities but have not officially announced their desire to leave the Watch Tower due to their fear of being disfellowshipped. Equally, with their family being a network of fully involved members and disfellowshipped individuals, they have a precarious "inside/outside" position. JW3 and JW4 are both intricately involved with the Watch Tower and would very firmly consider themselves as "insiders" were they to use the terminology. JW1/JW2's "insider/outsider" multi-status has been particularly helpful for this research. Despite referring to themselves as Witnesses, in some form, they are highly critical of their previous belonging but were able to articulate their conversion history with considerable objectivity. Therefore, the interpretation of their conversion experiences when compared with JW3 and JW4 revealed the social mechanism of empowerment generally (with facets thereof) to be a significant contributing factor in their overall conversion at the time.

Several of the Baha'i participants had cultural and/or religious backgrounds which still impact them today. For example, BH1 outlined his Sri Lankan cultural and religious heritage as being a key factor in his conversion to Baha'i ([see 5.5.1](#)). BH2 converted from a Protestant/Unitarian Christian background and mentions his beliefs have been incorporated into his new religious identity. Of course, as demonstrated ([see 5.2](#)), the theological beliefs of the Baha'i can incorporate the multiplicity of religious identity when coming from majority religious backgrounds. The boundaries of "insider/outsider" status for Baha'i participants were more fluid than with participants in other case studies. While they have rigid boundaries of what makes one a Baha'i, these participants were able to incorporate other belief systems as harbouring some truth about God, meaning that "insider/outsider" status is not determined by belief but by other factors relating to how one engages with the community.

Paganisms, and those who adhere to a Pagan pathway, can be multiple in nature – numerous pathways can be followed or borrowed from at any given point ([see 6.5.2](#)), which is the lived reality of some of my participants in this case study. The participants had clear understandings of "insider/outsider" status. PG6 was especially vocal about her dislike of "Witchtok" and the impact it was having on Paganisms generally. She objected to those consuming it and thinking they are now witches (or "insiders") because of following a few short videos. Of course, participants did not use the language of "inside" or "outside" but there was a clear level of community and identity gatekeeping occurring.

Scientologist participants demonstrated a multiplicity of their religious belonging, further supporting the model proposed by Gregg and Chryssides (2019). Interestingly, all independent and Free Zone Scientologist participants in my research also

demonstrated a similar level of being “outside” and “inside” which Stephen Gregg and Aled Thomas (2019) initially found in their study of independent and Free Zone scientologists. They identified they categorically did not want to be associated with the CoS (notions of “outsiderness”) but wanted to be considered as defenders of the spiritual technology and connected to their new community (notions of “insiderness”)⁹. Interestingly, for Scientologist participants, there was an extremely clear notion of who is “inside” and who is “outside”. I observed that my status as an “outsider”, however, was not the same level of negative status attributed to senior members of the CoS; perhaps revealing a pejorative and positive “outsider” status which can be experienced. My status as “objective researcher”, once quelling concerns of participants about the process, was respected by all participants who were especially candid about their conversion experience and use of the spiritual technology.

2.6 Implications of Participant Demographics

The demographics of individual participants can have implications for the research and must be discussed. The most common demographics are gender, race, and socioeconomic status. Where possible, I have identified participants’ demographics when they have not been explicit in identifying themselves. Race, gender, and sexuality were explicitly described by all participants. In this research, identifying class required interpretation of the information provided by participants. Mike Savage, Fiona Devine, and colleagues (2013) experimented with a new model of social class after analysing and comparing data from the British Broadcasting Company’s *Great British Class Survey*. They identified seven classes: elite; established middle class; technical middle class; new affluent workers; traditional working class; emergent service workers; and precariat.

⁹ Also [see 8.5.2](#)

The categories were developed with considerations given to annual salary, type of employment, social contacts, cultural capital, and other factors. Participants in my research did not detail their salaries. However, information such as type of employment, parents' employment, and educational achievement enabled me to interpret their social class within the parameters of Savage et al.'s model.

A limitation of applying this model is that it is specific to Britain. With participants who have lived in the UK for significant periods (BH1 & BH4), the model was highly applicable. All participants in the Scientology case study are non-UK residents. However, as with the other participants, SCI1-6 did provide some details about employment, education, and cultural capital generally. I chose to remain consistent with the application of the model, interpreting their class based on a UK based model. My decision in this was three-fold: (1) models of social class (demonstrated below) are highly contested, fluid in nature, a flawless application of a model is not possible and therefore interpretation would be required regardless. (2) Although class can have impact on participant choices, this research was focussed on gathering conversion histories as narrated by participants; allowing them to construct their reality. Participants did not imply or state their social class or background positively or negatively impacted upon their choices. (3) This model was developed using survey data in which respondents were given some degree of interpretation of the questions. The survey also collected data which identified how respondents perceived their social and cultural capital to be. This approach fits well with my overall theoretical approach to research. Therefore, with the above considered, I chose to apply this model of social class when identifying participants class for their descriptions in this thesis.

This model is not without critique. Colin Mills (2014) protests the methodology used by Savage et al., suggesting that self-completion internet surveys contain self-selection bias and the Growth for Knowledge (GfK) sample, which was comparatively used by Savage et al., was too small to be empirically conclusive. In reply, Savage et al. (2014: 1020) explain:

There is no doubt that the GBCS is an unorthodox data set which is not nationally representative. The issue is what follows from this. Do we refuse to have anything to do with data which departs from the 'gold standard' of the standard large-scale nationally representative data sets, or do we try to make the best of what we have and explore using innovative methods to deploy it to its best advantage...?

I agree with Savage et al. (2014). The data provides a helpful display of patterns which emerge from self-completed surveys, providing insight into the social divisions which may (or may not) be perceived by respondents. I argue that the inclusion of this model to identify participant class in this research is helpful as it is based upon respondent perception, perhaps demonstrating a deeper level of identity than other models of social class.

The implications of race, gender and age in this research are also considered. Within this small-scale participant pool of twenty-two there was a representation of five nationalities (American, Australian, British, Iranian, and Sri-Lankan) with the cultural contexts of race, religion, domicile status, age and sexuality varying further. Jehovah's Witnesses were disproportionately older than in other case studies due to afforded access, however most participants across the case studies were averaging in the 20-49 and 40-59 age brackets ([see 9.1.1](#)). Pagan participants were disproportionately young, again due to access issues and the sample being taken from a university town which increased the activity of local Pagan communities.

This small-scale study of twenty-two participants across four case studies varies in class, race, gender, sexuality, and age enough to theorise that the model of conversion has the potential to be broadly applicable. However, I admit further research is necessary to substantiate this claim further ([see 9.1](#)). The ethnographic elements of this research are minimal, some minor field observations only. However, the nature of semi-structured interviews leaves the researcher open to cultural bias through the way in which the interviews are conducted. I sought to mitigate this through the method of collecting conversion histories ([see 2.3.3](#)), enabling participants to articulate their own narrative of the experience with minimalistic guiding from myself as researcher.

Nevertheless, when engaging with “cultural others” as an interviewer, there is potential for effects on data collection and analysis to occur (Griffiths, 1998). This is because the interviewee and interviewer are collaborating in the construction of knowledge, with subjectivities explicitly and implicitly impacting upon the knowledge constructed (Shah, 2004). There is a social ‘interplay’ between the interviewee and interviewer, questions are not merely answered but they are answered specifically to the interviewer in face-to-face exchanges. Naturally, there is a level of participant perception involved when responding to direct questions or guided narration (Shah, 2004; Kim, 1991). This means neutral objectivity is not possible when deploying such methodology (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), which would not be fitting for the theoretical approach I have toward research overall (Shah, 2004). I have not positioned this research as neutrally objective, rather I have intentionally sought to hermeneutically interpret the data through connecting it to theory.

When considering the above, it is possible there are deeper elements of race/ethnicity, gender, age, and sexuality which may have influenced participant answers in the

interviews. Aspects of participant identities are a fluid actualisation of the self. However, the limitation of scholarly research renders the exploration of holistic identity within the context of religion extremely difficult. In the context of interviews, how these participants identified themselves is fixed to that point in time and space, which may not be articulated or demonstrated in an identical way in subsequent interactions with others (Hekman, 1999). Additionally, my positioning as a researcher as well as participant perception of my gender, race, age, and sexuality may have encouraged or discouraged discussions of the influence the factors may or may not have had in their recruitment and/or conversion into a minority religion. For example, as discussed elsewhere ([see 6.5.4](#)), most Pagan participants in my research all identified as part of the LGBT+ community. It is entirely possible this was emphasised by participants because they perceived or assumed my cis heterosexual nature. Therefore, it could be suggested, my identification of non-heteronormative sexualities and fluidity of gender being incorporated into religious practice as an empowering facet of Pagan identity is biased.

I argue this has not biased the data analysis and subsequent findings but enriched it. If a Pagan participant felt the need to emphasise their gender and/or sexuality due to the personal characteristics of the researcher, is that not a demonstration of expressing (empowered) identity? If we accept identity is not a faceted entity, but a fluid whole in that point in time and space (Hekman, 1999), then the participant's emphasis on their sexuality and gender provides valid data in connection with their religiosity; and their empowerment to practice and belong. Besides, as demonstrated, it is well evidenced that Paganisms are more likely to inspire religiosity in a non-heteronormative individual (Berger et al., 2003; Aburrow, 2009; Kraemer, 2012, [see also 6.3.3](#)). Thus, this research

builds upon other research findings demonstrating that sexuality and gender freedom are vital components to the general Pagan belief.

When considering age, I did perceive slight differences between younger and older participants. I found older participants respected the title of “researcher” significantly, alleviating any obvious issues they may have had with being interviewed by someone they perceived as younger. However, I found the younger the participant was, the more colloquial and “chatty” they were – speaking to me as a peer rather than someone with status. The impact of this is that the data given by older participants is more of their “story” and the data captured from younger participants more likely to be requiring more interpretation. By being treated as a peer, participants felt they could talk to me as they would any of their peer group, an unspoken assumption being that I understood their references and nods to cultural tropes. They did not describe their social backgrounds with as much depth but were more likely to reference popular culture and other cultural stereotypes to explain a situation.

As mentioned above, participants included explicit identification of their race when asked the first question of the interview. Interestingly, non-white participants gave significantly more detail about the impact of their race than white participants – who were more likely to refer to their nationality rather than race. Several participants were explicit in identifying their race and cultural heritage as having a substantial contributing factor in their conversion.

2.7 Data Analysis

The analysed data in this research was gathered because of semi-structured interviewing ([see 2.3.2](#)). After I conducted the interviews I transcribed them, thus ensuring the analysis was reliable. As demonstrated by Alan Bryman (2016), the

researcher's experience of transcribing interviews they have conducted enriches the data analysis. As I utilised a case study methodology in this research, I ensured all interviews in each case study were complete before transcribing. Once transcribing started, all interviews were transcribed before full analysis took place¹⁰. I found this a helpful strategy in absorbing myself into the data, making comparison between the transcriptions efficient. This strategy was deliberately organised to help eliminate bias, identifying themes in the data after the interview stage avoided accidental confirmation bias in subsequent interviews within the case study.

2.7.1 Grounded Theory Approach

Grounded theory is a research methodology which can be used in qualitative social research and is a methodology which has previously been used in the study of religious conversion (Jindra, 2014). Grounded theory is used to develop a theory which emerges out of the data, rather than approaching the data with a pre-existing model or theory to test (Glaser, 1992). Ultimately, this approach to analysis allows researchers, such as Ines Jindra (2014) in her study of conversion, to develop a theory alongside an intricate analysis of the phenomena being studied. This leads to theories which are rigorously tested and refined during the research process (Charmaz, 2006). The approach to analysis is born out of symbolic interactionism, accounting for symbols, meanings, and social construction of reality through interaction with others. For the researcher who applies this approach, their "goal is a systematic reconstruction of a specific case in its own logic: thus, it not only consists of a description of events, but ideally leads to the actual development of a theory" (Jindra, 2014: 204).

¹⁰ As a researcher transcribing interviews there is continuous reflection occurring during the process. Although this is not full analysis, it could be argued that some analysis was occurring before all transcriptions in a particular case had been completed.

I felt this analytical approach was befitting of my overall theoretical approach to research when used in combination with a categorical coding of data. As a critical realist, I hermeneutically interpret the narratives of individuals who explain their lived (socially constructed) reality while searching evidence on (potentially) hidden social mechanics. Furthermore, by developing the research as individual case studies, I was able to test and refine the overall model/theory of conversion I present in this thesis ([see 8.4](#)). This is made possible because grounded theory is an innovative analytical methodology. Data collection and data analysis occur at the same time which helps develop general theories that become refined throughout the research process. Through adopting this methodology, I analysed the data at the end of each case study, refining the emerging theory when additional data became available. I pursued lines of enquiry connected to the emerging theory in interviews when a participant suggested or explained something which linked to previous case study findings. At the end of each case study, I was able to test the emerging theory of empowerment with the data collected (Glaser, 1992); Ultimately, the empowered conversion model/theory I present in this thesis has been tested and refined on four separate but linked instances.

This methodological approach to data analysis is inductive, beginning with initial observations which are then used to begin the process of developing a more general theory of the phenomena being studied (Glaser, 1992). However, the use of deduction, verification, abduction and retroduction can be interchanged (Jindra, 2014). Of course, this contrasts with a purely deductive method of analysis which limits a researcher to engender predictions about data only in the light of general theories already existing (Charmaz, 2006). While grounded theory can be applied to quantitative data, it is mostly used to analyse qualitative data from various data sources such as observations and

interviews (Glaser, 1992). Thus, an entirely appropriate analytical approach to this research.

The themes which emerged from the data were identified using a categorical coding strategy. My decision to code data in this way is, in part, influenced by Ines Jindra's (2014) study of conversion.

My method of coding and generating categories was analogue for the purposes of this research, enshrining my critical realist hermeneutical interpretation of data with connection to theory. Having fully transcribed a set of interviews from a single case study, I identified similarities in the experiences shared by participants – using a single colour to highlight similar experiences, life events and behaviours across a set of transcripts within a single case study. By doing this, I was able to visibly identify categories which emerged and able to give labels to categories; for example, “a sense of belonging” or “making sense of the world”. Only emergent categories evident in the transcriptions of all participant interviews, within a single case study, would be considered further. Of course, depending on the individual differences of participants, some categories were more strongly alluded to than others but were commonly shared, nonetheless. As a result of the pilot study, and of the corpus of literature on empowerment ([see 3.6](#)), it became clear there is a “key category” which connects all categories together: empowerment.

Jindra highlights the important role that the “key category” has in structuring theory (or models) emerging out of the research. For Jindra (2014), the “key category” was social background. My research suggests the “key category” is “empowerment” ([see 8.3](#)).

Once the key category has been identified it structures the emerging theory as it:

[I]s in connection with all other categories and provides explanations for the largest degree of variation in observed patterns. The more complete the 'emerging theory' is, that is, the more conceptual "thickness" and "representative power" it has, the more it can incorporate variation by using only a small number of concepts (Jindra, 2014: 206).

As a result of identifying the key category and using case studies, I was able to continuously refine and test for variances in connection to the emerging theme of empowerment. Starting with the case study of Jehovah's Witnesses (pilot study), followed by the Baha'i, Paganisms and Scientologist case studies respectively.

2.7.2 Reporting the Data

I have aimed my thesis toward an academic audience, providing a contemporary multi-disciplinary model/theory of conversion. Within popular discourse, there is much discussion of reasons for joining minority religions. As demonstrated elsewhere ([see 3.2.2](#)), many unacademic sources suggest "brainwashing" or extreme coercion without providing significant empirical evidence. Therefore, I seek to provide a scholarly, empirically tested, model/theory of conversion founded upon primary data and analysis.

I will further seek to present my approach and theory in academic publications and conferences so that it might be further peer-reviewed, an entirely academic endeavour. Within this field it is important to be rigorously scrutinised due to the aftermath of the 'cult wars' ([see 3.2](#)) in popular discourse (Thomas & Graham-Hyde, forthcoming).

3.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

The use of the term “minority religion” throughout this thesis is somewhat novel ([see 3.1](#)). I use this term to refer to all religions previously considered a new religious movement (NRM), or “cult”. For clarity, the terms “cult” and “brainwashing” will be used with inverted commas when the term can be connected to a value-laden way which would be considered part of the Anti-Cult Movement (ACM). This is a deliberate choice in distancing myself from the vitriolic approach of the ACM when discussing minority religions ([see 3.2.1](#)).

The plethora of research on this topic refers to minority religions using other terms. “Cult” and “new religious movement” are used interchangeably in early scholarly research. However, the use of “minority religion” marks a shift in the field. To understand the nature of minority religion, one must also understand how they generally develop, recruit members, and are perceived externally.

Religion, as a broad term, is hard to define. There have been varied attempts to demarcate and typify the term over the centuries, increasing with further exposure to differing cultures. Early definitions equate the term with “superhuman”¹¹, particularly in Ancient Rome (Wulff, 1997). Western academic definitions of religion largely start with Edward B. Tylor. Fiona Bowie summarises his definition and suggests he is rendering religion as a “mistaken attempt to make sense of the physical world in which we live, as rational as science, but simply erroneous” (Bowie, 2006: 4). Berger (1967), in his book *The Sacred Canopy*, identified religion as a response to the human need for cultural stability. Humanity lives in perpetual tension between the biological imperative

¹¹ This is a reference to a popular culture character that has abilities such as super-strength, flight and other abilities that are clearly beyond the ability of a human.

to engender unwavering culture whilst contending with the fact that culture, by its very nature, is bound to change as humanity develops. Religion is born in this tension and provides space to connect subjective individuals to objective reality.

More affirming definitions of religion exist, too. For example, Rodney Stark and William Sims Bainbridge (1985) outline their proposed definition in *The Future of Religion: Secularization, Revival and Cult Formation*. They propose that religion provides “compensators” in the context of a continuous temporal cost-benefit approach to constructing one’s reality ([see 3.4.6](#)). They add that religion is still concerned with the supernatural: “human organizations primarily engaged in providing general compensators based on supernatural assumptions” (ibid: 8)¹².

3.1 Problems of Early Definitions and Typologies

Whilst defining religion might be complex, the complexities intensify when trying to define types of religious organisation. Terms such as sect, denomination, “cult”, and new religious movement (NRM) have all been employed through this enterprise. The effort to define cult was spurred from initial work to create a typology of “cult”. The term sect was initially coined in the early 1900s, while the terms denomination and cult were introduced in response to the perceived inadequacies of merely having church and sect to delineate between types of religious organisation. NRM, among other suggested terms, appear post 1970s.

Max Weber (1973) initiated the usage of the term sect, as he drew a distinction between religious organisations within Christianity. Weber identified the Church as a political

¹² For more discussion, [see 3.4.6](#).

institution; it maintains control through the administering of sacraments, membership is compulsory, and members are born into the church. Sects, on the other hand, are voluntary in nature. One must have the correct qualifications to be a member and members are not born into the sect; members must be able to decide for themselves as uninhibited autonomous individuals (Weber, 1973; Hamilton, 2001). Ernst Troeltsch (1931) developed Weber's analysis further. He posited that Church is an organisation underpinned by a desire to have the freedom to realise Christian values without regard to wider society. Sects are independent communities who desire to make use of society's institutions for their own benefit, with the vast number of members as working class (Troeltsch, 1931; Swatos, 1976; Hamilton, 2001).

From the end of the 1950s, we see an increase in the commentary on typology of religious organisations. H. Richard Niebuhr (1957) suggested a sect is not capable of surviving very long due to pressure to reconcile with wider society or being of a single generation. For Niebuhr, second generation members of the sect, while still needing to volunteer membership, are born into the group. Niebuhr proposed a new categorisation for groups which develop in this way. He used the term denomination. At a similar time, Niebuhr published his idea, John M. Yinger (1957) proposed the term cult as a form of further typifying religious organisations. He suggested a cult can be identified as small, deviant, and as having a short life with leadership being centred around a strong, charismatic individual.

The terms "denomination" and "cult" have certainly moved from academic to popular usage, which will be discussed later (in this chapter and chapter 8). Initially, the terms were considered quite helpful. J. Gordon Melton (2004b: 75) commented that "the definition seemed adequate for the time it was proposed, as the sociology of religion

was struggling to establish itself as a sub-discipline...". However, Yinger's definition of the term cult quickly became outdated as study into the social phenomenon became established.

Geoffrey K. Nelson (1969) pulled at the thread which unravelled Yinger's definition. Simply put, Nelson revealed cults/NRMs were not single generation. Furthermore, Melton (1991) demonstrated the role of a charismatic leader had been over-stated in sociological literature. Not all cults/NRMs in the 1970s and 1980s fit Yinger's definition.

When reviewing the technical terminology used and the typology being developed, there is a clear correlation between the timing of the "Cult Controversy" ([see 3.2](#); see also Beckford, 1985) and more negative definitions of cult being proposed.

Rodney Stark & William Sims Bainbridge (1979) attempted to establish a dichotomy between the church, sect, and cult definitions. They were frustrated by the theorisation which underpinned previous attempts to define the terms. When typologies are archetypal, then how can one theorise when there is no clear boundary between the types? Thus, a definition needs to be void of typological attributes.

Stark & Bainbridge paid homage to Benton Johnson's work. Johnson (1963: 542) attempted to assert clearer definitions of Church and sect: "*A church is a religious group that accepts the social environment in which it exists. A sect is a religious group that rejects the social environment in which it exists*" [Italics as sourced]. Stark & Bainbridge developed this further to clarify the definition of the term sect and subsequently adding their definition of cult. Ultimately, building upon Johnson's work, Stark & Bainbridge (1979: 124) identified there is also a clear distinction between social institution and social movement, principally defined as "institutions adapt to change. Social movements

seek to alter or become institutions". They go on to explain religious institutions and movements:

Thus we can see that if religious institutions are one pole of the tension axis, as we move along the axis in the direction of greater tension we discover religious movements. That is, religious movements are social movements that wish to cause or prevent change in a system of beliefs, values, symbols, and practices concerned with providing supernaturally-based general compensators (ibid: 124).

Stark and Bainbridge identified "sect" and "cult" based on their tension with the established religious culture. They noted Niebuhr's (1929) definition of sect should be applied to schismatic organisations, and then build upon this definition. Regarding cult, they identify two types, innovation, or importation, and three sub-types, audience, client, and movements. Stark & Bainbridge's (1979) work in defining church, sect and cult can be summarised in the following diagrams:

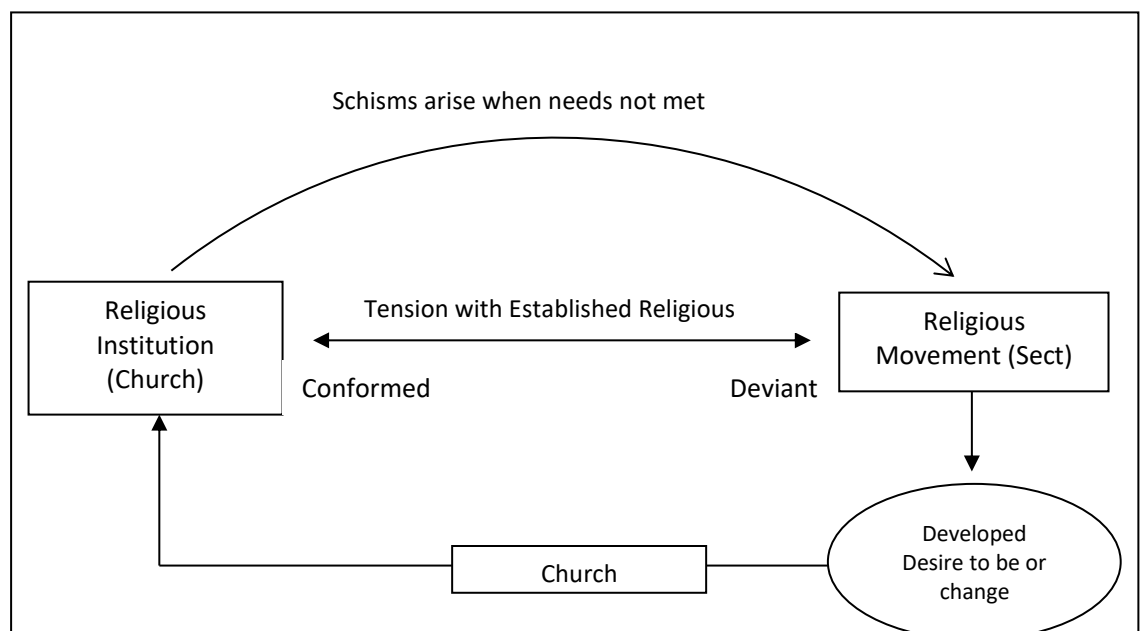


Figure 2: Stark & Bainbridge's Definitions of Church and Sect; diagram my own.

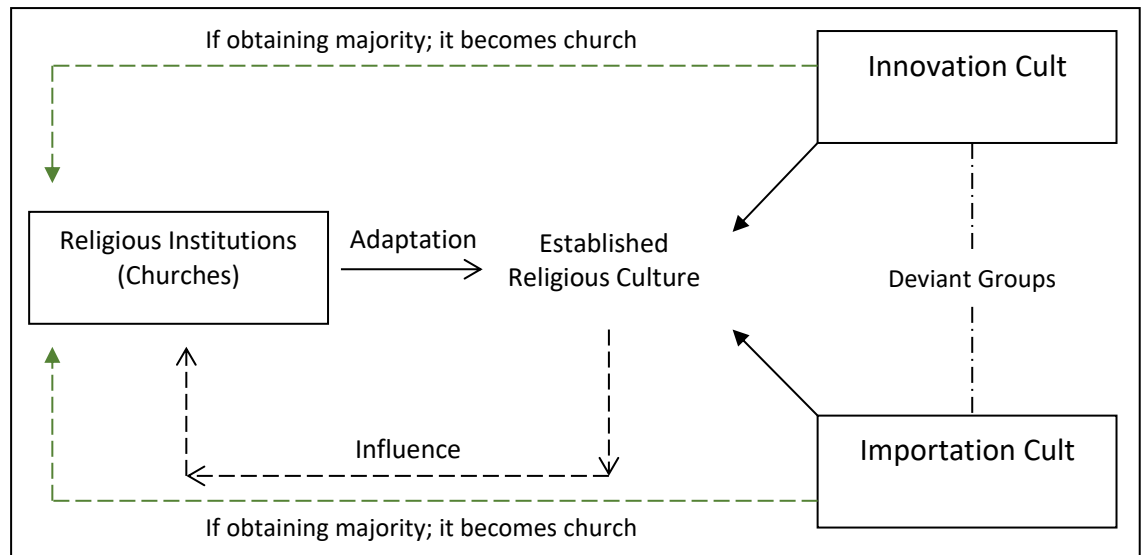


Figure 3: Stark & Bainbridge's Definitions of Cult; diagram my own.

It is worth noting the three sub-types of cults, although they can exist in the same space, tend to move forward from *audience cult* to *client cult* before becoming a *cult movement* (Stark & Bainbridge, 1985). An *audience cult* is a social milieu of individuals willing to accept non-normative narratives without much effort being required to convince them. Many of these individuals are openminded and interested in the “eccentric and the mystical” (ibid: 28). Stark and Bainbridge (1985: 28) suggested “[a]lthough many people who end up in cult movements seem to have once been part of this audience, few members of the audience are ever recruited into a cult movement”. *Client cults* are minority religions which provide some form of service for adherents to attend, sometimes offering therapy, healing, or some other “compensation”. Most individuals in *client cults* also attend other religious organisations while sampling a new religious service. A *cult movement* is a regular, established religious organisation operating similarly to a Christian church. Although, the organisation might be weak in nature, the intention is to provide a fully encompassing religious reality for the individual adherent.

Of course, as shown above, should a cult movement gain majority it becomes a Church (Stark & Bainbridge, 1985).

The above summary of Stark & Bainbridge (ibid), in which they linked the term deviancy with cult, meant the field was left with a negative definition of cult by the end of the 1980s. The idea of deviancy, non-mainstream, and not in keeping with society at large became part of the popular narrative about cults (Melton, 2004; Dawson, 2006). Deviance, as a narrative, was popularised by the ACM, a lobby of influencers who sought to inform society of their view that “cults” were dangerous to the individual and society overall. Ultimately, this meant the definition of “cult” was pejorative at a very early stage in the discourse of minority religions.

Unfortunately, Stark and Bainbridge’s idea of deviancy was hijacked and, quite frankly, grossly misused by the ACM who sought out their own ends. The negative definitions of cult were solidified by evangelical Christian writers defining “cults” to be dangerous deviations from Christian orthodoxy (Martin, 1977; Cowan, 2003; Dawson, 2006). The ACM were quick to demarcate what a “cult” is within the view of the public ([See 3.2.1](#)). Sociologists were slower to get to the point of defining cult (Dawson, 2006). In fact, by the time sociologists set to the task, the ACM, along with popularist and sensationalist media outlets, had successfully attached negative issues of “brainwashing”, excessive control, and despotic leadership to the term. This subsequently led to published definitions which included these criticisms.

Steven Hassan (1988), for example, describes four types of cults: religious, political, psychotherapy and educational. Hassan attached negative characteristics to how he defined all four types. For example, his explanation of psychotherapy cult suggests it

leads to marriage breakdown and business failure (ibid). Despite the plethora of publishing and his status as an expert, one must question his objectivity. He openly discusses his time as a member of the Unification Church, and often compares negative examples to this minority religion. Despite the empirical evidence to the contrary, Hassan continues to suggest the experiences of ex-members and third-party “victims” of “cults” constitutes sufficient evidence for 'brainwashing'.

In addition to this, Hassan recently submitted a Ph.D. in which he refers to the term NRM as being created by “cult defenders” – with little justification. He fails to refer to any literature which does not agree with his biased view in a bid to position his thesis as an authoritative text, further choosing to define minority religions as “cult”. This is best example in how he referred to Jon Atack, a vocal critic of the Church of Scientology (CoS) through podcasts and other media, as an expert on Scientology simply because he is an ex-member (Hassan, 2020). Hassan does not refer to other ex-members who do not perpetuate a similar pejorative narrative.

Margaret T. Singer (2003) also includes negative characteristics as being part of the broad definition she uses for cult. Singer highlights the need for charismatic leaders and places much emphasis on this in the definition. Equally, Singer collaborated with Langone who suggested one of the more negatively nuanced definitions:

... a group or movement that, to a significant degree, (a) exhibits great or excessive devotion or dedication to some person, idea or thing, (b) uses a thought-reform program to persuade, control and socialise members..., (c) systematically induces states of psychological dependency in members, (d) exploits members to advance the leadership's goals, and (e) causes psychological harm to members, their families, and community (Langone, 1993: 5, cited in Dawson, 2006: 28).

For the Study of Contemporary Religion (SCR), these negatively biased definitions are not sociological in origin, they are often psychological definitions (Saliba, 1995). They are specifically basing their definitions on the experience of individuals who have left minority religions, some still harbouring spiteful feelings usually toward the leader(s) of the minority religion. One cannot simply define minority religions using the subjective experience of ex-members alone.

Dawson (2006) pointed out a further flaw with Langone's definition. Dawson suggested the limitation of his definition being used to describe groups which are harmful renders most minority religions undefined. Dawson further slams the ACM definitions as being value-laden when definitions of other religious organisations are objective. Nevertheless, despite the negative discourse emerging post-1960, many sociologists and scholars in the study of religion were working hard to suggest and discuss value-free definitions of "cult". Early definitions (early 1960s - late 1970s), as briefly noted before, arise out of trying to differentiate between sect and cult.

Bruce Campbell (1978) divided cults into sub-divisions, much like Bryan R. Wilson (1970). Campbell's concluded there are two main distinctive types of cults: illumination and instrumental. Illumination cults are centred around inner experience of the divine and instrumental cults are centred around inner transformation to meet the demands of life. In doing this, Campbell defined cult as "*non-traditional religious groups based on a belief in a divine element with the individual*" (Campbell, 1978: 232) [italics as sourced]. His typology, and subsequent definition is fixated around the notion of divine encounters within oneself. This adds to Campbell's (1972) observation which previously outlined cults as "loosely organised" and relatively underdeveloped while moving toward being classified as a sect.

An alternative suggestion to Campbell is to categorise and define cult with reference to how they respond to metaphysical issues. Thomas Robbins & Dick Anthony (1979a) categorise cults into dualistic and monistic movements, where dualistic movements fixate on good and evil forces while monistic movements fixate around unity between all temporal objects. Some cults will have an approach to teaching which understands it all as literal, while others have a “multilevel” approach, meaning an interpretation of teaching is on a spectrum between literal and symbolic. To complicate the distinctions further, Robbins & Anthony add there are further distinctions between technical and charismatic movements, the former helping to manipulate consciousness and the latter centred around a spiritual leader (ibid). There are plenty of possible combinations of the above categories to show a simple, singular, definition of cult is hard to distinguish.

Perhaps more successful, and somewhat more simplified, is the delineation of cults along the lines of Weber's differentiation between types of religious organisation. Wallis notably attempts to show there are three types of cult: *world affirming*, *world accommodating* or *world rejecting*. World affirming groups tend to focus on the individual being able to access hidden potential with a view to continue accessing the world as is. World accommodating groups draw clear boundaries between the spiritual and physical world with the desire to understand the spiritual self and help one adapt to the physical world. World rejecting, as suggested by their title, tend to reject the world as evil and subversive of the divine plan (Wallis, 1984).

3.2 The “Cult Wars”

The study of minority religions garnered significant attention from the 1950s onward, and outlining the distinctiveness of minority religions was a point of debate. A confounding factor was the growing popular concern over dangerous groups and the

impact they were having on everyday people, and by the end of the 1970s an anti-cult movement (ACM) had emerged. Both religious and non-religious groups within the ACM specifically targeted the existence of non-traditional religions and usually harboured a Christian bias. As a result, the beginning of what has become known as the “Cult Wars” started in both the academy and popular domain.

3.2.1 Anti-Cult Movement (ACM)

Initial voices within the ACM were predominantly Protestant Christians who sought to challenge the rise of alternative theologies “undermining” Christianity (Miller, 1995). Often, accusations of Satanic influence or affiliation were levied against minority religions who were considered deviant or “other” within a popular understanding of normative religion (Bainbridge, 1978). As the ACM developed, additional literature outlining that adherents were “brainwashed” (Hassan, 1988; Singer, 2003; [see also 3.2.2](#)) became common reference points for a non-academic understanding of how individuals become involved with so called “cults” (Miller, 1995). The vitriolic response toward minority religions encouraged scholarly investigation of the phenomenon. As discussed later in this thesis ([see 3.4.6](#)), scholars were concluding (and have since consistently concluded) adherents were making choices in their affiliation, rather than having their agency removed and being mind-controlled by nefarious “cult” leaders (Barker, 1984; Lofland & Stark, 1965; Stark & Bainbridge, 1980; 1985). This contradiction of the anti-cult “brainwashing” narrative led to accusations of “cult” apology and subversion of the academy.

3.2.2 The “Brainwashing” Myth

The “brainwashing” myth arguably arose out of an emotional response to “cult” controversies which occurred sporadically between the 1960s and 1990s. This was compounded further by the social milieu of communist conspiracy in Cold War United

States (Reichert et al., 2015), a period during which distrust and constant threat of subversion from Eastern enemies was a public and political concern. The most notorious “cult” controversy involved The Peoples Temple and the suicide-murders of over 900 adherents in 1978 (Barker, 1986). The Peoples Temple, unfortunately, was not the only minority religion to have a violent ending. The Movement for the Restoration of the Ten Commandments of God (Mayer, 2001), Aum Shinrikyo (Reader, 2000), Heaven's Gate (Zeller, 2014), and the Branch Davidians (Newport, 2006) also ended, or transformed, violently. All these instances have triggered debates about the existence of minority religion in modern society. However, the most prominent and on-going debate is centred around “brainwashing” ([see 3.4.2](#)), a term the ACM pushed in the wake of minority religion violence.

There are multiple models of “brainwashing” which are explored thoroughly elsewhere ([see 3.4.2](#)). Although the models vary slightly, the central premise remains the same: adherents who join so-called “cults” are victims of a nefarious group leader’s system of thought control. This premise became particularly prominent in the scaffolding of popular media analysis and legal prosecutions of individuals and minority religions. Jenny Reichert, James T. Richardson, and Rebecca Thomas (2015: 7) highlight how the term “brainwashing” was widely accepted and, therefore, leaked into acceptable usage within courts:

As the term ‘brainwashing’ gained popular acceptance in America, legal actors involved in early NRM court cases in the 1960s and 1970s were willing to accept evidence of ‘brainwashing’ and ‘mind control’ under the *Frye* standard for admissibility of scientific evidence even though “general acceptance” of the concept as an explanatory device was lacking.

The reality of “general acceptance” of “brainwashing” as scientific evidence meant the ACM, alongside concerned relatives ([see 3.3.3](#)), were able to challenge minority religion’s rights to operate as their beliefs stipulated, and adherents were not psychologically fit for rational decision making over their own religiosity. These decisions were being taken to courts presided over by “judges and attorneys [that] knew as much (or as little) about the scientific status of brainwashing-based claims as did the general public” (Reichert et al., 2015: 8). Thus, ACM narratives were validated in courts of law, and the overt pressure against minority religions became socially and legally justified. The ACM began operating in an unchecked manner and adopting a culture of “self-help” remedies (*ibid*).

3.2.3 Deprogramming

As the ACM continued to increase in volume so, too, did the “self-help” remedies deployed to try and withdraw adherents from minority religions. The notion of “brainwashing” became a tool used by ACM groups who would forcefully kidnap adherents from minority religions before putting them through a “deprogramming” process (Bromley & Richardson, 1983; Reichert et al., 2015; Richardson, 1999; Robbins & Anthony, 1979b).

Deprogramming was a popular service provided to the concerned friends and relatives of minority religion adherents and was initially influenced by the growth of the ACM, particularly in the United States. Deprogramming, as a practice, involves coercive processes forcefully persuading “cult” adherents to denounce their faith or practice with a minority religion. Often, stress was used as a technique to break the “programmed” individual (Robbins & Anthony, 1982; Sharpiro, 1977) to “reprogramme” for functioning in what the kidnapers (in collaboration with concerned friends or relatives) considered

normal everyday society. Thomas Robbins and Dick Anthony (1979b) suggest the practice of deprogramming is akin to the models of “brainwashing” posited by those within the ACM. Robbins and Anthony also highlight the likelihood this has in becoming abusive and violent toward the so-called victim being “rescued”.

David G. Bromley (1988) highlights how parents, with the advice of ACM groups, used law courts to override their adult children’s legal right to freely choose their religious affiliation. Bromley also demonstrates how so-called “deprogrammers” would attempt to veil their use of force, kidnapping, and assault, with a “lesser of two evils” argument because they have “rescued” victims from a “mind-controlling” group. Eventually, incidents of deprogramming began to be legally challenged by individuals who had been kidnapped with the support of their religious community. The most cited case involved Rick Ross and the Cult Awareness Network ([see 7.3.1](#)), in which they were fined for their involvement in kidnapping and assault while deprogramming an individual. Subsequently, although a “deprogramming” narrative still exists in the contemporary ACM, the practice of kidnapping and forcing an adherent to submit to a course of deprogramming has been made illegal in most cases.

3.3 “Minority Religion”: Seeking Appropriate Terminology to the Alternative

Throughout the “Cult Wars” it became apparent early typologies of “cult” and “sect” (Troelstch, 1931) were becoming obfuscated by popular usage of scholarly terminology. The link to deviancy became a dominant popular and scholarly narrative during the 1960s and 1970s (Dawson, 2006; Melton, 2004). As noted earlier ([see 3.2.2](#)), violent endings to minority religions drastically changed the way terminology was used and connotations of “brainwashing” became intrinsic “cult” rhetoric ([see 3.2](#); see also Thomas & Graham-Hyde, forthcoming). Jeffery Pfeifer (1992) found when individuals

are asked to assess an “indoctrination scenario” the participant is more likely to use terminology such as “brainwashing” when referring to a group popularly referred to as a “cult”, such as the Moonies. Arguably, this demonstrates the wider impact the “Cult Wars” had on popular discourse concerning minority religions with the emergence of a pejorative “cult” rhetoric (Gallagher, 2017; Thomas & Graham-Hyde, forthcoming).

The issues of “cult” rhetoric continued to negatively develop from 1970s to 1980s and signalled a need for a new term and reframing of typology. The adoption of “New Religious Movement” (NRM) as a scholarly term for referring to post-1960s religions became commonly used in the field (Thomas & Graham-Hyde, 2021). Additionally, Paul Olson (2006) analysed how the public are more comfortable with neighbours joining an NRM than they would be with a “cult”, which further helped the scholarly framing of such groups. However, despite widespread usage in the field, the term has since been deconstructed as it fails to accurately reflect the lived reality of individual adherents. For example, Pagans believe they follow a religious path which can be considered a “root religion” ([see 6.2](#)) and do not identify with the concept of “new”. George D. Chryssides and Margaret Z. Wilkins (2006) discuss the problematic usage of “new” by highlighting groups such as Jehovah’s Witnesses, Latter-day Saints, and the International Society for Krishna Consciousness, who all claim a lineage predating the religious pluralism emerging from the 1950s. Although Chryssides and Wilkins correctly point out these groups were officially founded within the previous 180 years, their work demonstrates the term is not entirely accurate when trying to reflect the lived reality of individual adherents.

The Information Network Focus on Religious Movements (Inform) was established by Eileen Barker in 1988 because of misinformation from the ACM about religious groups

accused of “brainwashing”, among other allegations (Barker, 2011). Inform’s impact on the field has been seminal¹³, and by working with adherents, ex-members and minority religion leaders, the institution provides clarity to worried parents, journalists, and officials about so-called “cults”. Recently, Inform have adopted use of the term “minority religion”, and it is considered a term which has fewer connotations, further aiding in providing clarity in a muddled discourse. Elsewhere, I have written that our terminology matters, and we should consider the field as the “Study of Contemporary Religion”, removing unintended biased terminology such as NRM from scholarly discourse (Thomas & Graham-Hyde, 2021; Thomas & Graham-Hyde, forthcoming).

Adherents of minority religions contextualise their religious identities in meaningful ways, often seeking empowerment. Therefore, terminology which has negative connotations in social discourse or to the individual believer obscure the factual reporting of their lived reality, which is a prominent aspect of this thesis ([see 2.2.2](#)). Thus, as is already apparent, the term minority religion has been adopted for this thesis to refer to any religious group which does not have a majority influence in Western society, particularly the United Kingdom. More specifically, Jehovah’s Witnesses ([see 4.0](#)), Baha’i ([see 5.0](#)), Pagans ([see 6.0](#)), and Scientologies ([see 7.0](#)) are defined as minority religions in this thesis.

3.4 Theories of Conversion

Theories of conversion emerged in the field of Psychology before becoming a multi-disciplinary sub-field. Most early theories were predicated on notions of psychological instability of the individual with scholars arguing conversion is an attempt to escape problematic realities such as depression or trauma (Starbuck, 1903; Thouless, 1923).

¹³ For further information about the history and impact of Inform, see Barker (2011).

Studies of conversion which did not focus on negative realities (e.g. Pratt, 1920) were in the minority. All early studies into conversion pre-1950 were contextualised within a Christo-centric approach toward understanding religion. Interestingly, most studies suggested conversion was an individual's attempt to make sense of the world and how they identify within it (see [3.4.6](#) & [3.4.7](#)).

Following the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s there was renewed interest in the study of conversion as Western society was grappling with a pluralisation of religion, which saw many young middle-class individuals forsake their parental heritage for minority religious identities (Warburg, 2006). In the study of minority religion, process models of conversion have often been utilised for explaining how individuals become members of fringe, alternative, and non-traditional religious organisations. Since the 1960s explosion of religious plurality, several key process models have developed, the most prominent of which are John Lofland & Rodney Stark's "*Lofland-Stark model*" (see [3.4.5](#)), Stark & Bainbridge's theory of "compensation" (see [3.4.6](#)), and Jinda's "*Structural-Substantive Model*" (see [3.4.7](#)).

3.4.1 Religious Experience

William James (1902), in his series of lectures on *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, sought to argue that religious experience is meaningful because it is a personal experience which can be observed through a psychological lens. This is perhaps the earliest attempt to understand religious conversion as an aspect of lived reality for the individual. In his lecture on conversion, James argues the phenomenon can be considered gradual or instantaneous while further suggesting a causal relationship with the sub-conscious self. James further argues conversion need not be a supernatural, "numinous" experience but can be considered a natural process.

Conversion has a series of feelings¹⁴ which individuals will feel during their conversion experience. Firstly, individuals are likely to experience a “sense of higher control” which James argues comes through a faith in Christ’s righteousness and accomplishments on the cross. In pluralistic terms, this can be interpreted as individuals feeling as though limiting factors (such as depression or lack of positive relationships) have been removed and provides the individual a sense of greater control over their everyday life. Secondly, conversion experiences provide individuals with a perception of previously unknown truth which may not be articulatable. That is, individuals perceive they have experienced truth but lack the linguistic nuance to explain such truth in detail. Thirdly, an experience of “truth” leads an individual to view the world through a new lens, the world begins to make sense and converts describe this as “beautiful” or “like new”. Finally, according to James, converts are likely to feel an “ecstasy of happiness” (James, 1902). As argued later, the feelings James (1902) outlines have also been observed in the findings of this thesis. Perhaps the “ecstasy of happiness” is better interpreted as a sense of empowerment (see [8.4.1](#) & [8.4.2](#)) which, as James suggests, individuals can permanently identify with but may lapse in overall feeling of happiness (or empowerment) over time (see [8.5.2](#)).

In contrast to James (1902) is Rudolph Otto’s (1923) *Idea of the Holy*, in which Otto argued religious experience to be a *sui generis* “numinous” extraordinary phenomenon which supersedes definition or explanation as an ordinary experience. If a religious experience, conversion can be considered a phenomenon which all people have a predisposition for being able to experience yet it is through *a priori* experience alone

¹⁴ Which I describe as individual experiences. Describing such experiences as feelings fails to incorporate the external social factors that illicit feelings within those experiences. For example, a feeling of more control has an external cue, thus making it an experience.

which “awakens” a convert to the “holy”. The experience can provide knowledge extending beyond a rational comprehension which exhibits outwardly as a feeling or emotion. It is in this tension which Otto argues a “numinous” experience occurs and can be considered a unique religious experience (Otto, 1923). In essence, Otto argues religious experience should not be defined by nonreligious terms.

When applying a *sui generis* approach toward the study of conversion one must argue the experience as an outward expression of a non-rational state of mind. Thus, conversion is a cognitive experience with social implications but is not socially constructed or influenced. The lived religious experience of an individual (the rational) is predicated on a “numinous” non-rational religious experience(s), an experience of a presence which is *ganz Andere* (“entirely other”). Ultimately, conversion is a result of a direct encounter with something “other” or beyond reason.

3.4.2 “Brainwashing” Thesis

Before exploring theories and models of conversions, it is important to discuss the “brainwashing” thesis for several reasons. Firstly, the “brainwashing” thesis was a trigger for many studies of conversion into minority religions. Secondly, the notion of “brainwashing” had a significant impact on the popular understanding of minority religious conversion. Thirdly, the “brainwashing” thesis continues to be routinely pushed as an explanation for recruitment to controversial groups. Finally, the narrative of “brainwashing” has entered other discourses concerning politics, health, and media (Graham-Hyde, 2023; Thomas & Graham-Hyde, 2021).

Margaret T. Singer (1995; see also Singer & Ofse, 1990) was a psychologist best known for expounding the “brainwashing” thesis and was an expert witness in criminal and civil cases on numerous occasions (Dawson, 2006). Singer (1995) notes there have been

several other terms indicative of the “brainwashing” thesis, such as “*thought reform, coercive persuasion, mind control, coordinated programs of coercive influence and behavior control, and exploitative persuasion*” (ibid: 53; italics in original). However, Singer asserts “brainwashing” is the most appropriate term for her theory.

Those who espouse “brainwashing” as an explanation for minority religious conversion argue it is a systematic, intentional, and highly strategic process utilised by an individual or small group. The desired outcome of the process is usually complete control occurring through thought-reform. Singer (2003) suggests these individuals are seeking to subvert a person’s identity, pushing them to re-evaluate their life history before altering their worldview which is replaced with a scripted version of reality. This can “develop in the person a dependence on the organization, and thereby turn the person into a deployable agent of the organization” (Singer, 2003: 62).

Singer (2003) brought together emergent “brainwashing” theories and developed the thesis by combining necessary conditions for the process to occur with Robert L. Lifton’s

themes of “brainwashing” (1961; 1989) and Edgar H. Schein’s (1961) stages of the process.

Conditions (Singer)	Themes (Lifton)	Stages (Schein)
1. Keep the person unaware of what is going on and the changes taking place.		1. Unfreezing
2. Control the person’s time and, if possible, physical environment.	1. Milieu control.	
3. Create a sense of powerlessness, covert fear, and dependency.	2. Loading the language.	
4. Suppress much of the person’s old behavior and attitudes.	3. Demand for purity. 4. Confession.	
5. Instill new behavior and attitudes.	5. Mystical manipulation.	2. Changing
	6. Doctrine over person.	
6. Put forth a closed system of logic; allow no real input or criticism.	7. Sacred Science.	3. Refreezing.
	8. Dispensing of existence.	

Figure 4: Criteria for Thought Reform (Singer, 1995: 63)

The conditions (see Figure 4) are a step-by-step process to ensure the person being targeted remains unaware of what is occurring. Singer (2003) argues, that by keeping a person unaware, one can illicit small changes in the person’s behaviour without them noticing before being introduced to the overall goals of the organization. Singer further suggests controlling one’s environment, creating a sense of powerlessness, and consistently admonishing old behaviours leaves an individual malleable. At this point, the leader facilitating thought control can use rewards and punishments to actively encourage new behaviours before introducing an authoritarian regime beyond critique.

This theory is an integration of Lifton's (1961) eight themes of thought control, which Singer (2003) argues complement her six conditions (see Figure 4). Lifton's eight themes can be summarised as follows:

1. *Milieu Control*

- A total control over all communication within the organisation, specifically targeting divisive discussions which could destabilise group cohesion. This control can extend to external communication with non-member friends and relatives.

2. *Loading the Language*

- Creation of oppositional language and jargon which forces individuals to think and speak within the constraints of controlled "groupspeak". This generates a culture of group members self-correcting and editing each other in how they speak but also how they pejoratively refer to outsiders.

3. *Demand for Purity*

- This is a capitalisation of the oppositional language already introduced, further entrenching the "outsiders" as impure or evil. At this point, a stringent ethical framework is introduced by which members judge themselves, each other, and the outside world.

4. *Confession*

- Members are encouraged to reveal past behaviours which contravene the ethical framework. The information can be used against the individual by making them feel powerless without the ethical framework.

5. *Mystical Manipulation*

- The organisation (or leader) suggests new behaviours members are exhibiting are a spontaneous sign they are special and chosen for membership within the organisation.

6. *Doctrine over Person*

- Members re-write their life histories in accordance with organisational doctrine, essentially re-interpreting their identities within the context of the group's beliefs.

7. *Sacred Science*

- The leader's wisdom is incontrovertible and impervious to scholarly or popular critique. The leader becomes the only source from which members obtain special knowledge.

8. *Dispensing of Existence*

- At this point, existence of the self is entirely dependent upon the group. It further entrenches an "us versus them" mentality and a member of the organisation would do whatever necessary to remain in good standing.

Schein's (1961) stages have also been included in Singer's conceptualisation of "brainwashing". During the *unfreezing* stage, everything about the self is challenged through compulsory seminars, lectures, counselling, reward and punishment, or social exchanges within the organisation. The aim is to induce a crisis of identity in the individual, so they are more susceptible to reinventing their identity during the *changing* stage. It is during this stage an individual begins to believe there is a (often divine) solution to life's questions, obtainable through group membership. By being exposed to

longer-serving members, the individual begins to emulate their behaviour. Finally, the *refreezing* stage is a doubling-down with social and psychological rewards and punishments. The more one is conformed, the closer they get to enlightenment, salvation, or other desired outcomes.

The critique of Singer's (1995) "brainwashing" thesis is significant and, considering the weight of evidence contradicting her theory, should be rejected on empirical grounds (Barker, 1984; Dawson, 2006; Richardson, 1996; Robbins & Anthony, 1982). Eileen Barker's (1984) research into the Unification Church demonstrated the "brainwashing" thesis had little utility in explaining how her participants became involved with the group. Barker admits "brainwashing" is an easy explanation of an individual's drastic change in behaviour and adoption of non-traditional beliefs, but also highlights the flaws in the "brainwashing" thesis generally. For example, the term "brainwashing" is often applied in a value-laden approach and Barker (1984: 126; italics in original) states: "[i]t is, to repeat, the *process* by which one comes to beliefs, not the result or the *content* of the beliefs, that must be judged if we wish to address the problem of coercion".

James T. Richardson (1993) suggests the "brainwashing" thesis is a convenient tool often used by parents and ex-members seeking to explain the decision to join an unconventional or marginalised group. Equally, deprogrammers ([see 3.2.3](#)) were initially able to legally protect themselves using this as a defence. In essence, the thesis becomes a "social weapon" rather than an evidence-based explanation for conversion. Richardson (1993) challenges Singer's (1995) incorporation of Lifton (1963) and Schein (1961) in her "brainwashing" theory. Richardson refers to Dick Anthony and Thomas Robbins (1992) who suggest Lifton and Schein et al. had a "soft determinism" approach

which allowed for the complexities of human psychology and did not assume “brainwashing” led to human “robots”.

Eileen Barker (1984) is likely the most cited scholar who systematically disproved the “brainwashing” theory of conversion. Barker demonstrated that the Unification Church (Moonies) are likely to have been brought up within sheltered environments provided by “respectable families”. Those who joined had likely been intelligent, successful, and young individuals who experienced levels of disappointment and disillusionment upon leaving their sheltered environments. For these young people, the Unification Church offered opportunity to re-establish oneself within the confines of a surrogate family.

Despite the evidence contravening the “brainwashing” thesis, it is not without levels of support by scholars and so-called experts. Steven Hassan (1988) argues there is a difference between “brainwashing” and “mind-control”, by suggesting the latter can be non-violent process rendering an individual’s rational freedom controlled by a nefarious group leader. Hassan posits the Behaviour, Information, Thoughts and Emotions Model (BITE) of “brainwashing” which can be wittingly or unwittingly used by group leaders. Hassan (2020) has since outlined this model in more detail in a doctoral thesis. Hassan (2019) proposed President Donald Trump tried to mind control the USA in a bid to explain Trump’s seemingly quick rise to power.

The critique of “brainwashing” outlined above is still relevant to Hassan’s nuanced version. Additionally, Hassan has broadened the concept of “brainwashing” (and derivatives thereof) to such an extent one can correctly question if everyone can be considered “brainwashed”. When anti-cultists such as Hassan (2019) suggest the voting majority of a country is in a so-called “cult”, it renders the “cult” rhetoric meaningless

(Thomas & Graham-Hyde, forthcoming; Zeller, 2021). Ultimately, Hassan's contribution fails to satisfy the significant amount of critique toward the "brainwashing" thesis overall.

3.4.3 Psychological Snapping

Flo Conway & Jim Siegelman (2005) suggest psychological snapping as a better

assessment of a perceivable sudden personality change. Conway & Siegelman (ibid: 5)

define snapping as:

[A] term which designates the sudden, drastic alteration of personality in all its many forms... snapping is not merely a superficial alteration of behavior or belief. It can bring about deeper, organic changes in awareness and the entire structure of personality.

There is an intrinsic link to the "brainwashing" thesis (as outlined in 3.4.1) as Conway & Siegelman state there is an "alteration of behavior or belief" occurring through external influence. However, Conway & Siegelman argue the "brainwashing" thesis is pejorative and cannot account for the positive lived experience of individuals. Minority religion converts who state they have encountered super-natural phenomenon or have a revelation of perceived truth often have such experiences independent of existential threats, which the "brainwashing" thesis does not facilitate. Conway & Siegelman suggest snapping can also account for all sudden personality changes across various social contexts. Their theory can be applied to those who suddenly change political opinion, commit serious crimes, or accept a conspiracy theory as true. Therefore, this theory does not have an in-built assumption of only minority religions being deviant or pejorative but simultaneously upholds theories of "mind control" while defending deprogramming from minority religions.

Conway & Siegelman position their theory in the field of psychology arguing there are biological impacts from external forces pushing individuals to a snapping point. Although this theory is like the “brainwashing” thesis because of the focus on external pressure impacting on the rational individual, the suggestion of internal biological change extends this theory beyond the boundaries of conventional “brainwashing” arguments. Conway & Siegelman suggest “mind control” is a mental health epidemic which swept across the USA, which they call “information disease”. They argue this disease is a direct result of sudden overloading of information and manipulated experiences (Conway & Siegelman, 2005).

Conway & Siegelman suggest there is a causal link between number of hours spent in “cult” ritual, “indoctrination”, and long-term psychological effects on the individual; ultimately stating the impact is negatively psychopathological. Kilbourne (1983) critiques Conway & Siegelman, suggesting the data they provided exhibited no support for their claims. Using Conway & Siegelman’s data, Kilbourne suggests their data shows a causal link between “altered states”, chanting, “cult” ritual and the extent to which adherents are safeguarded from negative long term psychological effects of being involved in the minority religion.

The theory of snapping posited by Conway & Siegelman (2005) should be considered an anti-cult theory because of the connection to “mind control”. Nevertheless, the theory is a distinctive formation of “mind control” beyond the parameters of “brainwashing” and, therefore, must be considered independently of the overall thesis.

3.4.4 Attribution

As outlined above ([see 3.4](#)), early conversion theories posit conversion is a phenomenon which arises out of an individual’s attempt to explain or change negative psychological

aspects of their life. While these early theories have been shown to not fully articulate conversion considering contemporary study, their influence can be clearly seen in the development of attribution theory.

Wayne Proudfoot and Philip Shaver (1975) outlined that multiple psychological explanations of religion were connected by applying attribution theory to a specific religious context. The focus is on the cognitive involvement of the individual in interpreting their own conversion experience.

Proudfoot and Shaver (1975) analyse an individual conversion experience and suggest they found meaning external to themselves when explaining it. In essence, the individual attributes the physiological experience (such as increased heart rate) with an encounter of the Holy Spirit.

Attribution theorists identify a range of human cognitive and physical experience which can be attributed with meaning regarding oneself, others, or God and this becomes an important aspect of one's conversion narrative overall (Rambo, 1999). Bernard Spilka, Phillip Shaver, and Lee A. Kirkpatrick (1985) presented *A General Attribution Theory for the Psychology of Religion*. They suggested there are three basic needs all people have: a desire for meaning, more control over outcomes in life, and self-esteem. Spilka, Shaver, and Kirkpatrick suggest events which challenge an individual's current belief system, lower feelings of control over life situations, or alter the self-esteem of an individual trigger attributional processes. For example, Sheldon Solomon, Jeff Greenberg and Tom Pyszczynski (2015) suggest an individual's loss of meaning and self-esteem can lead one to seek a new worldview. After a religious conversion, many "report feeling that they have a greater meaning in life, higher self-esteem, and lower

fear of death” (ibid: 53). They argue this is an attribution which helps an individual escape their overall fear of death, providing a feeling of agency and meaning which fuels their perception of lived reality as being positive and controlled.

Attribution theory remains a psychological theory of conversion which lacks applicability across other disciplines. Many psychologists who forward theories of attribution often have misconstrued concepts of minority religion, failing to fully account for social and cultural contexts as well as a wider range of human experience (Proudfoot & Shaver, 1975). However, this theory has merit in highlighting the intimate role individuals have in attributing their empowered experience to a religious context. As discussed later, specific social contexts can invoke feelings of empowerment in an individual ([see 8.4](#)) and, for attribution theorists, it can be argued this is part of an active human need to search for meaning in mundane reality. Nevertheless, conversion can be viewed as an involved social experience as well as a cognitive experience (or series of experiences). Attribution theory should be considered an important contribution to the study of conversion, and the theory has implications for the theory of conversion in this thesis ([see 8.5](#)).

3.4.5 Seekership & Interpersonal Bonds

John Lofland and Rodney Stark’s (1965) widely cited conversion model was developed through their research into what would become known as the Unification Church, popularly referred to as ‘Moonies’. The Unification Church was also the focus of Eileen Barker’s (1984) seminal research which analysed whether adherents freely chose to join the religious group or not. Although not explicitly stated, the narrative of “process” or “seekership” can certainly be argued to have started with the Lofland-Stark model. Despite arguments to the contrary (Lofland, 1977), I would argue there is an implicit

undergirding to the Lofland-Stark model which allows for recognition of conversion as part of a mundane reality, not requiring supernatural phenomenon. Furthermore, considering the methodological approaches in the field at the time lacking a lived religion approach ([see 2.2.2](#)), I would argue this is the first model of conversion which has some consideration of the lived reality of individuals as there is a recognition of everyday tension (step 1) requiring problem solving (step 2).

The Lofland-Stark Model outlines how a “pre-convert” and “verbal convert” progresses before becoming a “total convert”. In essence, Lofland & Stark (1965: 874; gendered language in original) simplify their 7-step process as follows:

For conversion a person must:

1. Experience enduring, acutely felt tensions,
2. Within a religious problem-solving perspective,
3. Which leads him to define himself as a religious seeker;
4. Encountering the [Divine Precepts] at a turning point in his life,
5. Wherein an affective bond is formed (or pre-exists) with one or more converts;
6. Where extra-cult attachments are absent or neutralized;
7. And, where, if he is to become a deployable agent, he is exposed to intensive interaction.

In summary, the process begins with an individual struggling between the idealisation of how things ought to be, compared to the present reality, and is perpetuated through a tendency to solve perceived tensions by religious means which leads to seeking a religious conduit to find relief. Should the individual be at a point of change (for example: failing their PhD viva) when they encounter the Divine Precepts (Unification Church teachings), whilst also having a relationship with a convert (or more), then they are likely to start being involved in the same social spheres as adherents. As relationships outside the Unification Church taper off, one might consider themselves a “vocal convert”. It is

at this point the individual will confess themselves as an adherent but do little to show fervent belief. After confessing, intense interaction with the Unification Church adherents tend to take place leading to what Lofland & Stark identify as a “total convert” (Lofland & Stark, 1965).

The Lofland-Stark Model arguably became the most cited model in early conversion literature, specifically in the field of minority religions (Richardson, 1985; Richardson & Stewart, 1977; Snow & Philips, 1980). The model was subject to rigorous testing (Dawson, 2006), with scholars noting fifteen participants is an insubstantial number on which to base an entire model (Richardson & Stewart, 1977; Dawson, 2006). Lofland (1977) revisited the Lofland-Stark model over a decade after publication, considering the almost industrial-like conversion machine the Unification Church tried to become. Lofland (1977: 6-13) outlines additional observations which lead toward conversions into the Unification Church: (1) *picking-up*, which is a combination of media campaigns, casual contacts with adherents in public spaces and the now infamous practice of “flirty fishing”; (2) *hooking*, or the practice of getting to know prospective converts and routinely serving them, making them feel cared for; (3) *encapsulating*, a weekend workshop in a controlled environment which provided opportunity to deal with hesitations in converts and lead them to “logical” conclusions about the Messiah; (4) *loving*, a process which also took place during the weekend workshop, where prospective converts felt loved and like they belonged, latterly known as “love bombing”; (5) *committing*, an aftermath feeling of the weekend workshop having returned to a non-controlled, mundane reality. Many individuals who return as *total converts* are drawn back through the need and desire to feel loved and like they belong.

In revisiting his conversion model, Lofland realises the steps in the process are over-generalised and many of the additional observations he makes could be retrofitted into the broad criterion of the original model. Lofland's main critique of his own initial model, however, is the assumed passivity of the individual in their conversion process. Lofland (1977: 817) explicitly encourages "students of conversion to turn the process on its head and to scrutinize how people go about converting themselves. Assume, that is, that the person is active rather than merely passive". When considering the wider methodological developments in the study of religion ([see 2.2.2](#)) it is a fair criticism of the Lofland-Stark model overall.

As well as Lofland's (1977) critique of his own model, other scholars have also analysed the viability of the Lofland-Stark model as a generalised model of conversion. James T. Richardson (1985) suggests the Lofland-Stark Model of conversion bridged the paradigm shift from the old Pauline conversion model toward the activist, the former a single event of a total and radical break from the past and reorientation as a new self, and the latter being a recognition there is an organisational role to be observed in the on-going process of conversion. Richardson affirms the Lofland-Stark model by arguing Lofland (1977) was wrong to view the model as "thoroughly passive" as it has become an "open door" for activist-organised work into conversion.

Robert W. Balch and David Taylor (1977) analysed the Lofland-Stark model in their research into the 'Bo and Peep' religion, now known as Heaven's Gate. Their critique of the model centred on the steps that included active social bonds and social interaction, as they found this not to be a "fatal omission in recruiting members to a contemporary religious movement" (ibid: 58-59). However, Balch and Taylor demonstrate the importance of "seekership", referring to converts as "seekers" throughout their article.

Equally, Balch (1995) explicitly reaffirms the majority of those who joined the Heaven's Gate were spiritual seekers who shared a New Age worldview.

The central critique of the Lofland-Stark Model concerns the requirement of seekership. David A. Snow and Cynthia L. Phillips (1980) analysed the effectiveness of the Lofland-Stark Model on the conversion research they did with Nichiren Shoshu Buddhists in America. Snow and Phillips suggest their findings are "at odds with the contention that personal tension, ideological congruence, and religious seekership are necessary predisposing conditions for conversion" (ibid: 443). They found many of their research participants were not previously religious seekers and, although they do not rule out the role of seekership completely, Snow and Phillips do question the emphasis placed upon it as essential (Snow & Phillips, 1980). However, one must question the approach used to arrive at this conclusion. Snow and Phillips take issue with the use of retrospective conversion accounts as they suggest there is likely a reconstruction of their personal biographies to fit the new narrative of their converted reality ([see 2.3.4](#)). As discussed elsewhere (see [8.5.4](#)), this thesis rejects Snow and Phillips' critique: if one currently defines themselves as a religious seeker, does that not demonstrate a new-found awareness of their previously "passive" reality? I would argue it does and further argue it reflects the lived reality approach now prevalent in the study of contemporary religion.

It would seem the essentialism of seekership is not as vital as first posited in the Lofland-Stark Model, despite initial support (Balch & Taylor, 1977; Balch, 1985). Barker (1984) found, in her investigation into joiners of the Unification Church in the UK, leavers were more likely to exhibit levels of seekership than those who become and remain members of the minority religion. In fact, Barker (1984: 199) states "[o]nly a few Moonies had explored many other alternatives". Similarly, E. Burke Rochford (1985) found the

majority of those who joined International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON) in the USA were raised and/or practising a single religion before joining the movement, suggesting religious 'seekership' is not prevalent in converts across all minority religions.

As demonstrated above, there are several studies which found aspects of seekership mentality influencing the process of some conversions. Although not an essential aspect of conversion into minority religion, seekership does correlate with the popular perception of deviancy attributed to some religious groups. Arthur L. Greil and David R. Rudy (1984) support the notion of seekership being evident but fall short of insisting upon it being essential. Greil and Rudy provide nuance by suggesting seekership is prevalent in the conversion narratives of those joining a group which "advocates a communal lifestyle, when the group involved is stigmatized by the community at large and when conversion involves a radical discontinuity of social roles" (ibid: 315). Therefore, understanding seekership as an aspect of conversion has utility, but fails to adequately support a process model when there is an insistence upon the intrinsic need for seekership to be a step in the process.

The Lofland-Stark Model is also designed with an emphasis on interpersonal bonds between *pre-converts* and *total converts*. Lofland & Stark (1965: 871) found recruitment to minority religions was often through social networks previously established, essentially, "final conversion was coming to accept the opinions of one's friends".

After studying a minority religion in the early 1970s, William Sims Bainbridge (1978) found interpersonal bonds were vital in the growth and development of the religion. If interpersonal bonds were stronger with those in the minority religion than those outside, then the individual was more likely to join the group.

In their test of the Lofland-Stark Model, Snow and Phillips (1980) found the importance of interpersonal bonds was supported by their data. Equally, Bryan R. Wilson and Karel Dobbelaere (1994) evidenced very few UK-based adherents in the Sōka Gakkai movement were converted through impersonal advertisement. They found ninety-four percent of converts were introduced to the religion through social contact. There has been a plethora of additional research which supports the importance of interpersonal bonds and social networks (Richardson & Stewart, 1977; Rochford, 1985).

Stark and Bainbridge (1980) discuss the notion of interpersonal bonds and connect this notion to the deprivation-ideological appeal thesis. They suggest some level of deprivation is usually experienced by *pre-converts*, in which these individuals believe in the possibility of a supernatural remedy. It is the intersection of a *pre-convert's* need to solve a life issue and an interpersonal bond-forming experience with a *full convert* which increases the likelihood of conversion, a likelihood increased in “unchurched” individuals.

3.4.6 Compensation

As discussed earlier for their methodological contributions toward this thesis ([see 2.2.1](#)), Rodney Stark and William Sims Bainbridge (1980; 1985; 1987) generated a comprehensive *Theory of Religion* and entrenched RCT as a methodological approach toward the study of religion. For this thesis, the most notable aspect of the theory concerns their formulation of conversion. Stark and Bainbridge prefer to use the term affiliation, which they suggest is a two-sided process of recruiting-joining. Stark & Bainbridge (1987: 196) state:

Instead of *conversion*, we need a more neutral term that will not infuse our theory with the wrong connotations. We have considered *recruitment*, and will use this term in some contexts, but the verb ‘recruiting’ puts the locus of action

in the group that tries to draw in new members. 'Joining' places the locus of action in the new member... we have chosen *affiliate* and other words derived from it [sic].

Although well argued, the wider contemporary study of religion continues to use terminology such as recruitment and conversion. Nevertheless, the notion of "locus of action" and their observation it is a combined effort of both individual and institution is reflected in the empowerment model of conversion posited in this thesis ([see 8.4](#)).

Stark & Bainbridge (1987) build upon the *Lofland-Stark Model* ([see 3.4.5](#)) in their Exchange Theory of Religion. People will affiliate with minority religions, or "high tension groups", after a series of social exchanges which reveal *compensators* for some form of material or immaterial deprivation. Stark & Bainbridge suggest the level of deprivation comes from what they identify as a scarcity of *rewards*, defined as "anything humans will incur costs to obtain" (ibid: 27). A *reward* can be considered a general desire which can vary in value and be influenced by socialisation and biology. For Stark & Bainbridge, the market value of a *reward* is determined through social exchanges with others, and the volume of *rewards* obtained lead to implicit (sometimes explicit) evaluations between social exchange partners. For example, an individual who feels they have obtained only a small amount of their overarching desires will more likely evaluate themselves in negative terms. Of course, this can generate a downward spiral as an individual who has little, materially and/or immaterially, is often limited in their power to obtain more of the scarce *rewards*. However, everyone seeks to have a positive self-evaluation of themselves as this is a universal human desire. Therefore, in the context of religion, the process of conversion becomes a basic *compensator* for the lack of perceived *rewards* in one's life. An individual seeking a positive self-evaluation is more

likely to accept *compensators* provided by a minority religion if it “will give them the feeling of taking effective action, quite apart from any real changes in their ability to secure the desired rewards” (ibid: 197).

In essence, while it will be argued compensation and the need to positively self-evaluate is better explained as individuals seeking empowerment (see [8.3](#) & [8.4](#)), Stark & Bainbridge’s theory of religion has utility in explaining all types of conversion and has developed the field significantly.

The theory has been critiqued heavily, with some scholars even rejecting the utility of universal theories of religion overall (Ammerman, 2021; [see also 2.2.2](#)). A focal point for discussion concerned the secularisation¹⁵ of society and Stark & Bainbridge’s conclusion that the decline of majority religion has presented inroads for minority religions to grow. Another focal point has been in their assumption of finding compensation for missed *rewards* as an eternal human endeavour leading to supernatural explanations.

Roy Wallis & Steve Bruce (1984) heavily criticise Stark & Bainbridge (1980)¹⁶ and suggest the conceptualisation of *compensators* and *rewards* is flawed. Stark & Bainbridge outline a *compensator* has a cost, promise of future *reward* and an explanation on how to achieve the future *reward*. Wallis & Bruce (1984: 13) take aim at the materialistic nature of a *reward* and the assumption they need to be concrete and immediate or else become symbolic and unreal. Furthermore, many *rewards* are not immediately pursued. They use the example of desiring a long life to demonstrate this is a *reward* obtained in the future, and a doctor advising against smoking is not a *compensator*, but guidance on

¹⁵ For further outline on the secularisation thesis, see Bruce (2011) and Thomas & Graham-Hyde (2021).

¹⁶ Aspects of the theory of religion posited in Stark & Bainbridge (1980) are further expounded in Stark & Bainbridge (1985; 1987) and so Wallis & Bruce’s (1984) critique can be applied to Stark & Bainbridge’s theory of religion overall.

how to secure the *reward*. Wallis & Bruce's developed critique later fixates on the rejection of the secularisation thesis in the theory. They highlight the numerical decline of the Protestant church has not been numerically fulfilled by conservative minority religions growing into that space as claimed by Stark & Bainbridge. Wallis & Bruce suggest there is little evidence to support the conversion (or transition) from liberal religion to conservative religion.

In my analysis of Stark & Bainbridge's (1987) theory, I believe they have indirectly addressed this critique. They suggest a *compensator* is often sought by an individual because they seek active progression toward a *reward*. Seeking to live healthily in the present is an immediate *compensator* toward the ultimate *reward* of having a long life. Equally, the pursuit of a long life is as much an immediate concern as it is future. The desire for a long life includes tomorrow as much as it includes decades later and so is sought now, contrary to Wallis & Bruce's claim. Furthermore, evidence has emerged that conversions from liberal to conservative (or low control to high control) religions and vice versa does appear significant in the conversion narratives of participants within Ines W. Jindra's (2014) conversion model ([see 3.4.7](#)).

Reginald W. Bibby and Harold R. Weaver (1985) add to the critique by Wallis and Bruce and demonstrate many of the claims about minority religion growing and secularisation is not demonstrated numerically in Canada (at the time of publication). I have discussed the secularisation thesis elsewhere (Thomas & Graham-Hyde, 2021), arguing it has long since been debunked when no longer bound by traditional conceptualisations of religion. However, Bibby and Weaver also critique the sociological relevance of Stark and Bainbridge's theory. They suggest the conceptualisation of human desire requiring supernatural answers has no basis in sociology, nor is it particularly well-grounded in the

fields of psychology or theology. They argue there is an insufficient explanation of the link between human desire and the supernatural which leads to an implicit assumption everyone pursues the answers to “ultimate questions” and does so using supernatural answers. Bibby and Weaver (1985: 448) further argue “although some people choose to draw upon supernatural answers, others opt for humanist ones”. Thus, they argue that, although some humans are only satisfied by supernatural explanations, it does not entail all people will turn to them for answers.

In developing this further, Bibby & Weaver suggest supernatural explanations, which they label “A-science”, emerge in the space that “science” has not or has yet to sufficiently explain. Therefore, rather than the basis being human desire, they suggest it should be viewed as part of a cultural stock of knowledge. Bibby and Weaver signpost to Wallis & Bruce (1984) who argue people are born into a social world in which religion and supernatural explanations already exist, thus it stands to reason that socialised individuals may also want things promised in the supernatural world. In summary, Bibby & Weaver (1985) argue human desire, as outlined by Stark and Bainbridge, is not a sufficient sociological explanation because it can be demonstrated that supernatural belief is learned through culture and family socialisation.

Ultimately, the compensation model of religion is largely rejected in the study of contemporary religion (Ammerman, 2021; Bibby & Weaver, 1985; Wallis & Bruce, 1984). Nevertheless, I argue (see [2.2.1](#) & [8.4](#)) this approach to understanding conversion still has utility. Irrespective of my reworking on this approach to conversion, I would argue this theory of religion and subsequent discussion proves a universal theory of conversion is not possible ([see 8.5](#)).

3.4.7 Structural-Substantive Model

Ines W. Jindra (2014) used a grounded theory ([see 2.7.1](#)) and critical realist ([see 2.2.1](#)) approach in her study of religious conversion. Jindra collected the individual life histories¹⁷ of fifty-three participants and explored the “role of life course agency and network influence in conversion and biography, as well as a person’s ‘trajectory’” (ibid: 23). The connection between all three facets emerged from her analysis of participant conversion narratives.

Jindra’s analysis of her participant’s conversion narratives and other theories of conversion led to an emergent model of religious conversion: *the Structural-Substantive Model*. The model accounts for social background factors and an individual’s agency while categorising “push” and “pull” factors (motives and reasons) toward a specific type of religion. In essence, Jindra outlines how individuals who join more structured (or hierarchical) religions are likely seeking to mitigate risks which come with relatively unstructured aspects of modern life (e.g., lack of belonging or higher rates of divorce). These individuals, according to Jindra, are more likely to join a minority religion like Jehovah’s Witnesses because of the assured structure to life it provides. The opposite is also true, converts seeking to mitigate the perceived limitations of structure and rigidity are more likely to join religions which allow an experimentation of individuality and sense of agency over their religious journey. The individual participant’s life history was an important aspect of Jindra’s research. By collecting life histories, the theory also accounts for one’s early primary and secondary socialisation and demonstrates how an

¹⁷ A method that I have adapted in this research. Rather than collecting life histories I have collected conversion histories ([see 2.3.3](#)).

individual with a relatively strict upbringing might convert to non-structured or less rigid religions in later life.

Jindra's model of conversion features an individual's risk management. One might argue the management of risk is an entirely rational endeavour, compensating a potential negatively perceived outcome. As discussed elsewhere ([see 2.2.1](#) & [3.4.6](#)), Stark & Bainbridge suggest individuals have implicit and explicit rational choices to make over their everyday life. Jindra's model does not discount RCT and provides evidence highlighting an individual's desire to positively subvert, circumvent or challenge risks which might reduce their perceived agency over their own lives.

Jindra critiques previous approaches to the study of conversion as being deterministic and limited in the applications of varied methodologies. Jindra argues factors such as educational background, gendered experiences, and everyday emotions, combined with religious beliefs, can create "push" and "pull" factors into and out of religions. Although other conversion models can account for some of these aspects of identity, Jindra (2014) analyses the aspects individual and combined impact on the individual, her conclusion is multi-disciplinary approaches to the study of conversion are necessary in fully understanding individual conversion narratives. For example, Jindra found specific religious beliefs such as "unconditional love" function as an independent "pull" factor which could also combine with other aspects of an individual's life history. This concept is not something which has emerged in other models of conversion, further solidifying Jindra's argument for multi-disciplinary approaches.

The study of conversion is a small field which is perhaps the explanation for why there is a distinct lack of scholarly engagement with Jindra's model. Although a couple of

scholars have reviewed her monograph, they have done so by explaining the relevance her research has for their field(s) rather than critiquing the model overall. Certainly, I do not provide a full critique of Jindra's *Structural-Substantive Model of Religious Conversion* in this thesis. However, as demonstrated later, my research supports some of Jindra's (2014) findings.

3.5 Internet and Contemporary Religion

As the proliferation of the internet has continued, it has garnered interest from a wide variety of academic disciplines. In contemporary academia, the study of the internet is now a field in and of itself (Coco, 2008). Naturally, the internet has become an increasingly integrated part of people's everyday lives, in which offline and online realities become blended or individuals have an opportunity to live out an identity online not possible otherwise (Wood & Smith, 2001). James E. Katz and Ronald E. Rice (2002) demonstrated individuals can engage with multiple identity formations via contexts on the internet. Clearly, the prevalence of the internet in the everyday life of an individual is undeniable.

Modern popular discourses suggest the internet is a dangerous place where children and young people are exposed to websites dedicated to pornography (Carrigan, 2001) or where individuals are influenced by fake news, sharing such stories more widely (Carlson, 2020). In commenting on this further, Henry L. Carrigan (2001: 62) states "the number of [pornographic] sites (roughly 684,000) pales in comparison with the number of religion sites (roughly 1,800,000)". Despite a lack of research which stratifies the types of websites by category using statistical analysis, this is a clear demonstration that religion is popularly consumed via the internet. Equally, Carrigan's quantifying of internet sites comes before many of the social media sites which are now household

names. These sites are areas where individuals can discuss, share, and state their religiosity in individualistic ways. Thus, it could be argued religious content on the internet is more prevalent than early studies like Carrigan's indicate.

Since the inception of the internet, it has been increasingly used for religious purposes. Howard Rheingold (1993) found initial evidence online Bulletin Boards hosted discussions on "create your own religion", some of which were connected to people practising such religions offline. This initial phenomenon evolved into mailing lists known as *listservs*, enabling adherents to circulate emails to those participating in the lists (Farrington, 1993 cited in Campbell, 2006).

The internet has become a place where individuals and adherents can find community, information, and an additional place to practice religion with online temples or shrines. It has further changed ways people can recruit and convert others into their religious contexts (Campbell, 2006). This has certainly been the case for minority religions, and the religions included in my research have official websites (JW.org; Scientology.org; Bahai.org; Paganfed.org). Of course, there are many other websites dedicated to these religions which provide information, community, and places to practice.

Ultimately, the way in which religion has been engaged online can be seen as an extension of an offline reality (Campbell, 2006; Jacobs, 2007; Jenkins, 2008) rather than an independent online identity. Furthermore, offline participation in religion informs the online reality of religiosity for the individual (Campbell, 2005; Martinez-Zarate et al., 2008). Oliver Krueger (2004) suggests the internet has broadened religious activity by removing the traditional gatekeepers and obstacles usually guarding communities offline. Heidi A. Campbell (2012: 687) states "the Internet is seen as one of a number of

tools within modernity empowering individuals to act out their identity in unique ways”. It is also a tool which can empower through enabling connections with others which would otherwise be impossible (Cowan, 2005). Ultimately, the boundaries between online and offline religion and practice have become blurred (Barker, 2005).

Investigations into specific minority religions and the engagement with online practice or identity have also occurred. Paganisms are, perhaps, the minority religion which has had the most prolific attention of scholars investigating the impact of the internet.

Cowan (2005) suggests the Pagan internet reality is constructed in two different ways: the use of the internet and technology as part of ritual or practice, and the internet as a source of information to construct identity. Interestingly, Cowan found some Pagans would perform rituals to harness magick and ensure technology worked well, for example, conducting a chant which increases the speed of a modem’s processing power. Such a blending of technical and spiritual practice is akin to a Christian praying the computer will turn back on after accidentally spilling water over the device. This blurring between the sacred and profane (Durkheim, 1912) is an example of technology becoming a common aspect of an individual’s everyday lived reality. The individual does not distinguish between the boundaries of spirituality and technology.

Helen A. Berger & Douglas Ezzy (2004) found young people were more likely to incorporate religion into their identity formation as young witches. This was further supported by Mia Lövheim and Alf G. Linderman (2005) who identified young witches were using multiple sources on the internet to create their Wiccan identity. Douglas E. Cowan (2005) demonstrates how the lived reality of Pagans is easier to control via their online practice: “The relative anonymity of chat rooms and discussion forums, for

example, allowed participants to reinvent identity and re-present new identities in an ongoing fashion” (ibid: 70). The use of the internet to help construct Pagan identity has been supported by others. Lee Rainie and Barry Wellman (2012) showed there is a “networked individualism” which allow people to assume differing online identities interchangeably. This enables Pagans to practice alone without feeling disconnected from the wider Pagan community (ibid), meaning Pagan identity is tandemly solitary and communal.

Scientologies have had a varied relationship with the Internet. The relative freedom anonymous individuals have with posting on the Internet has led to several occurrences which have negatively impacted the CoS. For example, Operating Thetan documents were leaked online, which is where the infamous ‘Xenu Documents’ were thrust into the public domain (Thomas, 2021; Urban, 2011; [see 7.5.1](#)). Perhaps more uniquely, Scientology garnered the interest of Anonymous, a group of “hacktivists” (Robertson, 2016: 311), who began targeting the Church of Scientology (CoS) and were responsible for leaking the Xenu Documents (Thomas, 2021; Urban, 2011). Nicole S. Ruskell and James R. Lewis (2016: 330) identified Anonymous’ message to the CoS as a “declaration of war”. The Internet has been a competitive arena in which the CoS has fought rhetoric battles (Peckham, 1998), often impacting on the societal view of individual Scientologists.

Nevertheless, the CoS has continued to approach the internet in a similar way to other central organisations of minority religions. The CoS has effectively used the internet as a place to promote and provide resources to inform others about the religion (Urban, 2011; Thomas, 2021). In 2018, the CoS launched the Scientology Network which produces free to view Scientology television programmes (Scientology.tv, 2018).

The inclusion of the Internet in Pagan lived reality is not unique. For many Scientologists, the internet is essential for their practice as independents who no longer align with the CoS. Aled Thomas (2021) demonstrated Free Zone and independent Scientologists use the internet to form communities, advertise their services with the use of Scientology technology, and to arrange auditing sessions as part of their practice of the religion.

According to Byron (2015), the internet has become a central aspect of Free Zone Scientologist practice in forming communities. As Thomas (2021: 158) says:

For a considerable number of Freezoners, the internet is their primary method of conducting auditing sessions and interacting with other Scientologists. Whether they are auditing Scientologist practitioners or 'clients' who do not identify as Scientologists, they are applying Hubbard's theories and practices through methods he could not possibly have anticipated when writing his original Dianetic theories.

Hubbard could not have predicted the inception of the internet (Cusack, 2016) and, therefore, many Free Zone Scientologists disagree with the CoS's stance against information being made available online and being able to practice the tech online because it is not in line with original teaching (Thomas, 2021). The Free Zone and independent Scientologists' lived reality is very much intertwined with the internet.

The Baha'i and Jehovah's Witness approach to the internet has perhaps not been as encompassing as it could have been. The Watch Tower Society's initial reaction to the internet was one of caution. George D. Chryssides (2016: 246) writes:

The Society's first reaction was to warn its members – particularly young people – of the potential dangers of social networking and surfing the web, bringing its members into contact with so many other internet users worldwide... because of the risk of 'bad associations' as well as the prevalence of pornography, the Internet could readily become one of Satan's instruments to lead members astray.

However, with time, the Society adopted the use of the internet and in 1997 created an official website which they further developed in 2013, becoming a single location for Society produced online material.

The Baha'i engagement with the internet has had a similar trajectory to the Society, in that it started with the UHJ suggesting it had concern over the speed emails could be sent and digested posed risks to the Baha'i community (Piff & Warburg, 2005).

Certainly:

“[t]he availability of Baha'i email lists and the facility they provide for relatively free discussion of any topic has fostered important developments in the intellectual life of the Baha'i community” (ibid: 96).

David Piff & Margit Warburg's (2005) observation was demonstrated in academic literature involving several well-known academics public' squabble with Momen, via publications. This was proven when debates and arguments between Moojan Momen and academics began to take place through publications. The somewhat heated discussion was largely due to Momen (2007) labelling others as “apostates” who had a negative agenda against the Baha'i community. Momen attributes their success to the internet, although also claiming it is limited in scope ([see 5.3.1](#)). Perhaps this open discussion is a better example of how the historical development ([see 5.1](#)) of the Baha'i, parallel to the “Cult Wars” ([see 3.2](#)), leads to an “insider/outsider” perspective ([see 2.5](#)). In essence, Momen was gatekeeping against hostile ex-member testimonies from negatively impacting the Baha'i community, although there is little evidence this website had a large audience.

In summary, the internet has had an important impact on contemporary society. Naturally, this significantly impacted religion and the lived reality of adherents. As

shown, when religious organisations, and adherents following the religions in question, the internet can be a powerful tool for the belief and praxis in everyday life. However, the Internet can also be viewed with suspicion from official organisations who risk losing control over the narratives about the religion in general. Helland (2002) shows how when this is the case, organisations are likely to create an official presence on the Internet, which has been the case with all the religions included in my research ([see 8.2](#)).

3.6 Concept of Empowerment

The term empowerment originally found purchase in the “radical roots” of political discourse among Black American communities in the 1970s and was academically framed in social work literature (McLaughlin, 2016). An early definition outlines empowerment as:

[A] process whereby persons who belong to a stigmatized social category throughout their lives can be assisted to develop and increase skills in the exercise of interpersonal influence and performance of valued social roles (Soloman, 1976: 6).

In this definition, Barbara B. Solomon is suggesting empowerment is a process which is most likely to impact upon the lived reality of stigmatized people (*ibid*). Minority religions exist in a contested space, and adherents are often stigmatised or marginalised ([see 3.2](#)). Equally, as discussed elsewhere ([see 3.4](#)), theories and models of conversion into minority religions have an emphasis on the process or journey an adherent goes through before becoming a *total convert* (Lofland & Stark, 1965; Stark & Bainbridge, 1985; 1987).

Conversion theories and models are also intrinsically concerning recruitment and retention into an organisation (Stark & Bainbridge, 1985; 1987), however this is a topic which extends beyond the study of religious conversion and has interested the scholars

in the fields of organisation theory and business management (Arthur, 2001). In the context of organisation theory, scholarly investigations into empowerment have sought to generate understanding of how one might grow or sustain an organisation or business, or aspects in it (AlRahamnah, 2016; Turkmenoglu, 2019). Ultimately, generalised research into empowerment can be categorised in two main paradigms of empowerment: structural or organisational (Francescato & Aber, 2015), and psychological (Seibert et al., 2011). Naturally, differing paradigms of empowerment have prevented a universal definition of the phenomenon (Järvinen, 2007). Generally, empowerment is referred to as a process an individual can participate in to gain greater control over their life: acquiring rights, reducing marginalisation, involvement in decision making, and a critical awareness of socio-political environments (Christens, 2012; Peterson, 2014). Douglas D. Perkins and Marc A. Zimmerman (1995) note a distinction must be made between the process of empowerment and the outcome(s) of empowerment for clear definitions and tangible proof empowerment is taking place. Processes can include shared leadership, collective decision making, and participation in community organisations. The outcomes of which can include organisational growth, policy leverage, and pluralism of the organisation.

Definitions of psychological empowerment have similar aspects to structural empowerment. A broad definition well respected in the field was developed by Gretchen M. Spreitzer (1995), who suggested psychological empowerment is the individual's internal state of enabling. Focus is given to the foundational motivations in the individual when analysed in an organisational setting (Kouzes & Posner, 1997). Robert E. Quinn and Spreitzer (1997: 41) suggest "empowerment, then, is not something

that management does to employees, but rather a mind-set that employees have about their role in the organization”.

Literature on management theory recognises that empowerment is an important facet of organisational maintenance. Whilst empowerment is an individually unique lived reality (Zimmerman, 1995), organisational structure and mentality help aid the “road to empowerment” (Quinn & Spreitzer, 1997: 37).

An increasingly popular concept is organisational learning. John G. Burgoyne (1996: 177)

[H]as proposed that organizational learning occurs on three levels procedural, adaptive, and developmental. Procedural learning is finding something, forming a procedure, and institutionalizing it. Adaptive learning means adaptation to changing markets and other factors in the operational context that determine survival. Finally, developmental learning has to do with the issue of sustainability...to be more conducive to operate and other stakeholders to work in.

Even though Burgoyne is applying the concept of organizational learning to corporations and other business type structures, this is applicable to the field of contemporary religion. Most religions have a central organisation structured around the core characteristics not dissimilar to Non-Governmental Organisations (Leurs, 2012; Warburg, 2006). Therefore, much of the theory behind empowerment and organisational structure can be applied to religious organisations. When applying Burgoyne’s (1996) concepts to religion, the Church of Scientology (CoS) is an excellent example of an organisation that has institutionalised the spiritual “tech” they use, fought to be seen as a religion to adapt to societal values in the USA (and other countries) and continued to manage their auditing courses in an organisationally sustainable and stakeholder including direction.

Chris Argyris and Donald A. Schön (1991) further demonstrate that organisational learning is an undercurrent of empowerment. Through organisational learning, they show how influencing internal culture is possible (ibid), meaning organisations such as the CoS or the Universal House of Justice (UHJ) are able scaffold the lived reality of adherents in the religion.

Bruce Beirsto & Pekka Ruohotie (2003) recognise the process is about adapting the organisation to the individuals through structure change, resource provision, and rewarding actions which empower. In other words, they suggest organisations which affirm positive or desired behaviours are more likely to produce a sense of empowerment in the individual (Beirsto & Ruohotie, 2003; Bowen & Lawler, 1992). This can be catalysed by leadership as they are best suited to enhance empowerment (Sadler, 2003). Usually, an organisation will have leaders who play a crucial role in the development of the organisation. Peter Senge (1993, cited in Järvinen 2007: 178) suggested “leaders have been described as directors, heroes, captains of cavalries, navigators, captains of the ship, etc.”. Leaders will be able to effect changes in followers (Järvinen, 2007), creating an atmosphere which will inspire the followers toward successful achieving of goals, gaining their trust in the process (Spreitzer et al, 1999).

Scholars often argue a defining feature of minority religions is often strong and inspiring leaders¹⁸ (Bromley, 2014; Melton, 2007) who can inspire their followers through foundation myth (Chryssides & Wilkins, 2006). These leaders continue to be charismatic, and “might be regarded an avatar, a satguru, an end-time messenger, a spiritual

¹⁸ Although, as demonstrated in this thesis ([see 6.0](#)), not all minority religions require strong or inspiring leaders. It is also worth noting majority religions began with an inspiring leader who inspired commitment. Minority religions are of particular interest here as I would argue leaders within such groups have not become the cultural figures that Jesus or the Buddha have become.

channel, or one of a variety of messianic titles” (Melton, 2007: 29-30). These leaders can inspire their followers to commit to an organised system of belief which empowers, as suggested in the organisational empowerment literature.

According to Max Weber (1947), charismatic leadership can lead to the endowment of superhuman qualities upon the individual, which adherents accept as having some essence of truth. David G. Bromley highlights that an acceptance of charismatic leadership

[E]merges in an environment characterized by some degree of social dislocation that produces both nominations of solutions to perceived crisis by future leaders and resonance with those nominations by future followers (Bromley, 2014: 116).

It is easy to argue that charismatic leadership is inspirational to adherents, and I will further argue in this thesis that the emergence of charismatic leadership within a social milieu of crisis and dislocation can be part of an empowering sub-culture. It can give adherents a sense of belonging (see [4.5.3](#) & [5.6.2](#)) and help them to understand the world (see [4.5.1](#) & [5.6.1](#)). Following inspirational leaders can help an individual achieve an empowering sense of duty (see [4.5.2](#) & [5.6.3](#)) or provide adherents with a sense of insider knowledge only obtainable from the specific context the leader is speaking into ([see 7.7.3](#)).

Irrespective of religiosity, organisations which empower are usually embracing of a belief system (Maton & Salem, 1995), opportunity for role structure (Beairsto & Ruohotie, 2003; Maton & Salem, 1995), an ability to be flexible (Argyris and Schön, 1996; Bryogyne, 1996) a support system (Maton & Salem, 1995), and inspirational leadership (Maton & Salem, 1995; Sadler, 2003).

Kenneth I. Maton & Deborah A. Salem (1995) investigated three varying community organisations and their relationship with psychological empowerment. As a result of their research, they were able to identify foundational characteristics empowering organisations usually embrace: a belief system, opportunity for role structure, a support system and inspirational leadership. Certainly, this is observable in the minority religions such as Jehovah's Witnesses ([see 4.0](#)), Baha'i, Paganisms ([see 5.0](#)) and Scientologies ([see 7.0](#)), as explored in this research.

The impact of empowerment on the individual is they will be able to be proactive in making decisions in their life as they have been enabled to feel they have control over difficult situations occurring over their life course (Fetterman, 2001). This further helps participation (Adams, 1996). Psychologically, this is underpinned by reflective thinking and an increased motivation toward achieving goals despite the situation (Kuokkanen, 2003). Self-belief, or the confidence in one's belief, has also been suggested to be evidence of individual empowerment (Siitonen, 1999 cited in Järvinen 2007).

Specific literature investigating the link between religion and empowerment is scarce, but not non-existent. Maton and Julian Rappaport (1984) found displays of commitment in religious settings were causally affected by their subjective level of empowerment. Paul W. Speer et al. (1995) showed how religious organisations are better equipped to empower individuals, and this is supported by several investigations into this theory (Hood et al., 1996; Dockett, 2003).

Whilst there is limited literature on the relationship empowerment has with minority religions, the research which exists does not deviate drastically from the foundational

research outlined above. An example of minority religious empowerment was demonstrated by Chung Van Hoang (2016). The Hồ Chí Minh worship movements in Vietnam are a source of self-empowerment amid social tensions. These movements empower the collective to find legitimacy and maintain nationalistic social transformation (Van Hoang, 2016).

Further literature on empowerment and (minority) religions, however, seems to be an exceptionally niche area. Most of the literature investigating religion and empowerment tend to focus on issues of gender or health (Can, 2018; Griffin, 2000; Maton & Wells, 1995).

Overall, the literature on empowerment has minimal focus on religion. However, as I have demonstrated, many of the concepts of organisational and psychological empowerment can be applied to religious settings and identities.

The literature on empowerment has a minimal focus on minority religion and tends to focus on the organisation rather than the lived experience of the individual, although an individual response to empowerment is obviously implied when the concept is discussed. Having analysed the literature and conducted case studies with religious adherents, it is my observation that empowerment is a sense of active agency over one's own religious identity. The literature is applicable to the conversion narratives outlined by participants in this research; however, adherents would seldom articulate their experience using specific terminology such as "empowered" or "empowerment". Therefore, the empowerment as a mechanism of conversion is discoverable ([see 8.3](#)) by observing the effects it has on the individual and interpreting these effects considering literature.

As demonstrated above, the empowered individual is more likely to remain in the religion or religious organisation providing the belief system and/or religious organisation continues to provide avenues (Maton & Rappaport, 1984; [see also 8.4](#)) which can lead to an overall empowered identity. Should the organisation cease to provide these, or adherents feel they are receiving these through alternative means, then adherence will begin to decline. Ultimately, feelings of dislocation, isolation and oppression can be compensated for by religious organisations and belief systems which leads to conversion.

4.0 PILOT STUDY: JEHOVAH’S WITNESSES

This study acted as the pilot within this research project. In this pilot, four participants were interviewed, each giving their life narratives. The interviews gave insight into how they perceived themselves at the point of conversion, as well as how they identify now. It is important one understands the history and overarching narratives concerning the Jehovah’s Witnesses.

4.1 Overview of Jehovah’s Witnesses

Jehovah’s Witnesses have arguably been one of the most successful expanding minority religions in the modern, globalised world. Approximately 300 “pioneers”¹⁹ existed in 1885 (Chryssides, 2009) compared to 8.7 million believers worldwide in 2020 (JW.Org, 2020). Jehovah’s Witnesses ([see 4.2](#)) are a millenarian minority religion, believing in Armageddon and the second coming of Christ as imminent. Paradoxically, the minority religion grew despite seemingly failed prophecies (Chryssides, 2016; Holden, 2002). Usually, millenarian movements only grew up to the point when promises of radical change fail to materialise (Hamilton, 2001).

Jehovah’s Witnesses have a Governing Body which theocratically govern the central organisation called the Watch Tower Society – often being shortened to ‘The Society’. Most countries have a national headquarters which is also known as a Bethel. Below this body is a “circuit overseer” whose role is to ensure the governance of local congregations is in accordance with Society policy. Each congregation has a team of elders centrally approved by the Society, and there are ministerial servants in support of the elders. Broadly speaking, the elders oversee the spiritual leadership whilst

¹⁹ Pioneers are full time evangelists who seek to win new converts (JW.org, 2023); see also <https://www.jw.org/en/library/books/jehovahs-will/jw-pioneer/>

administrative leadership is managed by ministerial servants; much like the elder and deacon roles outlined in the Bible (Chryssides, 2016, Knox, 2018).

A diagram of the governance structure used in The Society does not exist in recent literature. What follows is a formulation of their structure as a graphic to demonstrate the hierarchal nature of The Society:

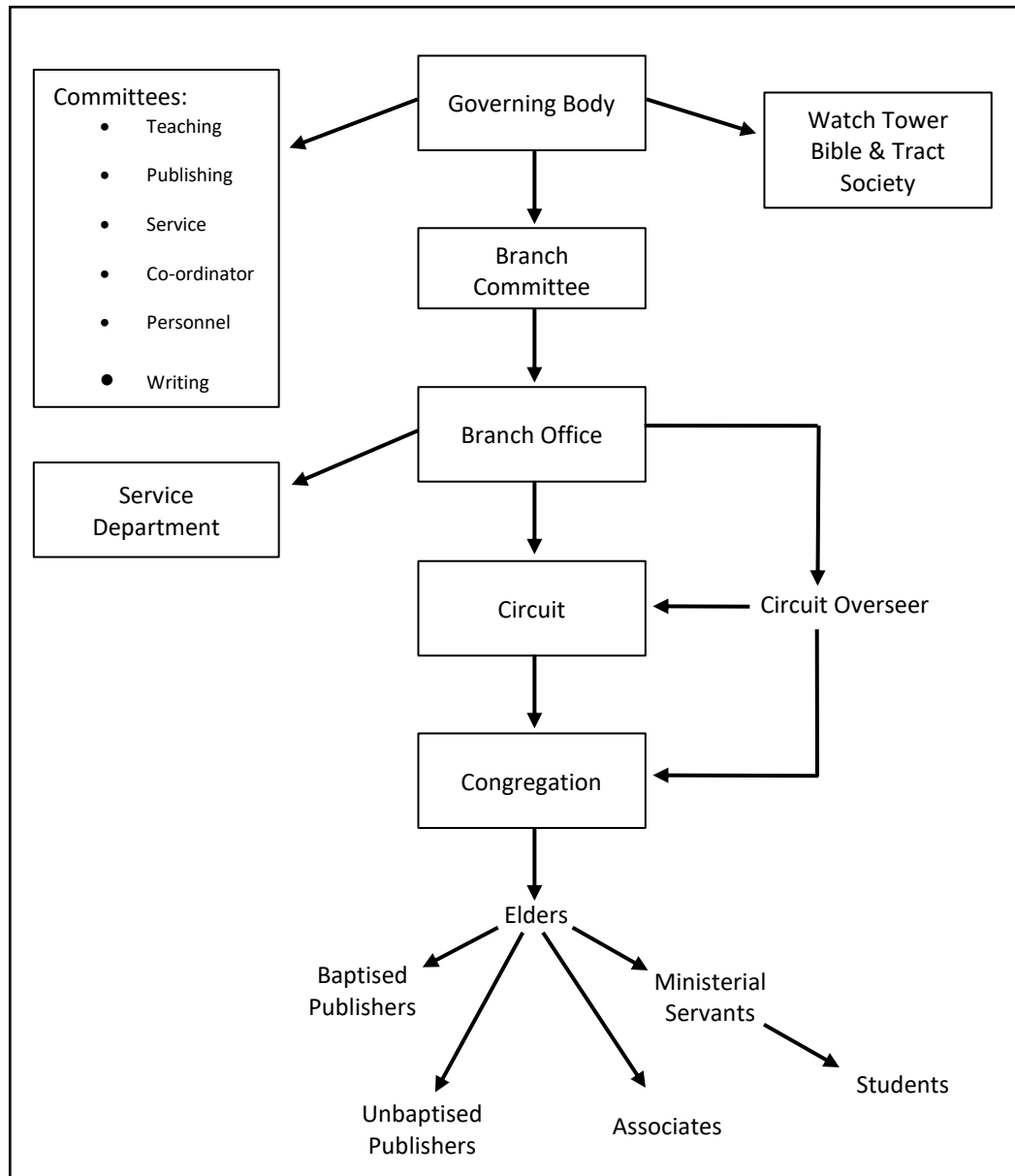


Figure 5: Hierarchy Map for the Watch Tower Society; diagram my own.

As shown above, the Governing Body presides over the entire Society by delegation to sub-committees, and local organisations.

4.2 Brief History of Jehovah's Witnesses

Charles Taze Russell founded the Watch Tower Society as a tract distribution organisation and laid the foundation of a group which would break away from the established Christian tradition, denying some of the dogma and creeds which had been accepted for centuries. Russell died in 1916. In 1917, Rutherford was elected as director of the Watch Tower Society. Rutherford was largely regarded as significantly influencing the expansion and theological solidification of the Watch Tower as a separate denomination from the Christian Church and it was Rutherford who introduced the name "Jehovah's Witnesses" (Penton, 1985; Knox, 2018).

The death of Rutherford in 1942 led to Nathan Knorr being elected president. Following the death of Knorr, vice-president Fredrick Franz was appointed as President (1977-1992). After the death of Franz, Milton Henschel was appointed as president of the Society. Henschel chose to resign the presidency in 2000 shortly before his death, at the same time as seven other members resigning from the Board of Directors while remaining on the Governing Body. All roles were refilled, and the position of president was fulfilled by two individuals.

4.3 Opposition Controversies, and Nuanced Belief

Jehovah's Witnesses have consistently been in the public consciousness for various reasons – often negative. Zoe Knox (2018) suggests this negativity is due to a lack of awareness about Witnesses which is fuelled by controversies such as refusal of military service ([see 4.3.3](#)) and blood transfusions ([see 4.3.6](#)).

4.3.1 The Development of the Watch Tower Society & Rejection of Accepted Dogmas

The foundational beliefs of the Witnesses centralise around the Bible as their source of authority, much like most Protestants. However, Witnesses reject certain fundamental dogmas the Christian church would uphold, such as teaching on the Trinity and salvation. Witnesses also reject predestination as preached in popular evangelical, reformed churches (Knox, 2018). Therefore, although Witnesses also see themselves as Christians, they significantly differ in their day-to-day beliefs to mainstream Christians.

4.3.2 The 144,000 & Great Crowd

Potentially the most well-known, but misconstrued, theological difference from the mainstream Christian church is the belief that 144,000 will reign with God in Heaven as spirit creatures, specially chosen by God to receive salvation by grace. It is generally accepted that Jehovah's Witnesses predating 1935 (at the time known as International Bible Students) are most likely to have a "heavenly hope" and are members of the Anointed Class. Those who are part of the Anointed Class but have yet to die are referred to as the remnant; they are acknowledged by consuming Memorial emblems at an annual event (Chryssides, 2009).

Everyday Witnesses would most likely accept they are part of the great crowd, an Earthly class of people who will be resurrected during the thousand-year rule of Christ after Armageddon (Knox, 2018). Unlike the Anointed Class, the great crowd is unrestricted in number (Chryssides, 2009; Knox, 2018; Penton, 1985) and only those judged by God as wicked at Armageddon will permanently die.

One of my participants (JW3) felt very privileged to be accommodated within a Jehovah's Witness care home that housed one of the alleged 144,000. A demonstration of the respect everyday Witnesses can have for the Anointed Class.

4.3.3 Refusal to Serve in the Military

Under the leadership of Russell (1884-1916), prior to WWI, Witnesses were encouraged to fulfil the call of military service when compelled to do so by the state²⁰; although, aiming to work in the hospital service was preferable. Considering WWI, this stance hardened to a categorical refusal to bear arms and serve in the military. The veneration of the state, through allegiances and saluting of flags, was preached against by Rutherford in 1935; with his suggestion that any veneration of the state could put one's salvation at risk.

The march towards WWII, when national identity was seen as vitally important, made Jehovah's Witnesses a target for persecution across the world (Melton, 2021). In fact, Allies, Soviets, and Nazi's all persecuted Witnesses for being conscientious objectors and refusing to serve in the war effort (Knox, 2018). At times, this led to violence against Witnesses (Chu, 2004). The pejorative view of Witnesses became entrenched in society, still impacting everyday Witnesses in contemporary society.

4.3.4 Door-to-Door Ministry (Evangelism)

Witnesses maintain a visible presence among the general population through door-to-door ministry and dissemination of literature. Building upon Russell's foundation of publishing, Rutherford attempted to make it an expectation of all members, as well as a requirement for eldership, to distribute literature. This continued under the presidency of Knorr who founded the Bible School of Gilead to train Witnesses in the Bible and how to discuss with sceptics (Knox, 2018).

For everyday Witnesses, their public ministry is recorded, and statistics are meticulously collected concerning all baptised members public ministry (Knox, 2018), further

²⁰ After WWI, the lived reality of Witnesses was to continually refuse to serve in the military. JW4 ([see 4.5.4](#)) also was detained for refusal to submit to a military medical.

embedding the centrality of evangelism as part of individual Witness's identity and culture.

4.3.5 Disfellowshipping

Disfellowshipping is the ultimate punishment issued by the Society. It is considered a tool by the Society to protect the faith from subversion. Chryssides (2009: 76-77) defines disfellowshipping as:

[E]xpulsion of a member for misconduct... Disfellowshipping can be employed for sexual misconduct, theft, alcoholism, worshipping at a mainstream church, or teaching or practice that might cause schism within the organisation.

The Society claims to have a biblical foundation for the practice of disfellowshipping. Equally, there is also a due process one must go through, and there is an annual opportunity for the Witness to be reinstated into The Society (Chryssides, 2009; 2016).

Further research is needed, but it is entirely possible that the lived reality for some Witnesses is to lead a double life, being outwardly Witness while inwardly rejecting the religion altogether. Disfellowshipping, as a practice, can dictate the choices made by everyday Witnesses in this regard.

4.3.6 Blood Transfusions

The Society uphold that the Bible decrees an abstention from blood because it is sacrosanct as taught by Paul in the Book of Acts (15:28-29) and, since 1945, have made blood transfusions impermissible (Chryssides, 2016). Ultimately, Witnesses have been taught their relationship with God is at risk should they accept a blood transfusion. Regardless of the potential endangerment to life, Witnesses have fought hard to ensure their rights to refuse blood transfusions are upheld by medical professionals (Knox, 2018).

As discussed earlier ([see 4.3.5](#)), the Watch Tower have a process of disfellowshipping to protect the religious community from those who do not adhere to the doctrines. Witnesses have an acute awareness of the potential for disfellowshipping, and their decisions in crisis moments might be heavily influenced by this. Therefore, decisions about blood transfusions are not as simple as merely citing and agreeing with scriptural interpretations, as there are additional costs involved with choosing to disobey a doctrine.

4.4 Interview Analysis

This pilot study involved qualitative interviews, where I gathered life narratives from four participants. Two of the participants were elderly, devout Witnesses who converted at a young age. The other two participants self-identified as “faded Witnesses”, meaning they had chosen to phase themselves out of their local congregation, becoming less involved over time. They stated their reason for fading was to avoid being disfellowshipped ([see 4.3.5](#)) as this would have cut them off from their family.

The intention of these interviews was to gain the life narratives of participants, with specific attention to their conversion experience. This emphasis is due to the overall focus of the research in investigating conversion and recruitment experiences in minority religion.

The core finding was that empowerment is a driving force behind conversion and recruitment for these participants. There are several factors which lead to the overall empowerment of the individual participant, which, in turn, leads to a rational decision to join the Watch Tower Society.

4.4.1 Participants

Initial access to these participants was gained through JW1 (See [2.5.5](#)). By way of JW1, I was afforded access to JW2, JW3 and JW4 who are socially connected to JW1²¹. The participant selection included two female and two male participants. Two of the participants were “faded Witnesses”²², both of who were middle-aged, while the two devout participants were retired. All participants had been heavily involved in their local congregation at several stages in their life course and are still socially intermeshed with many other Witnesses. Despite being small, this is a fair selection of participants and the split between age and gender is representative of their local congregations.

The participants have been anonymised to further aid the confidentiality promised to them. What follows is a brief summary of each participant, giving some broader context to the individual which helped in the analysis of the interviews.

JW1 is a Jewish born white, middle-class ([see 2.6](#)), man who has lived in the North of England most of his life. He has a career in the education sector and is a devoted husband and father. He has had some experience of working in Germany on mission for JW1 converted from Judaism when he was a teenager, shortly after several bereavements and during a time of financial hardship. The Society but is now a self-identified “faded witness”. Essentially, he has not left The Society completely, but no longer identifies as a “true” Jehovah’s Witness. JW1 still has a strong faith in the Christian God (as understood by mainstream Christians) but does not attend church.

JW2 is a white, middle-class ([see 2.6](#)) female who was raised as a Jehovah’s Witness in the North of England where she has lived most of her life. Having completed A Level

²¹ See [2.4.2](#) for discussion on snowball sampling.

²² “Faded Witness” is a term used by ex-members of the Watch Tower Society; often the term is used in online “survivor” discussion forums. This is where JW1 and JW2 became accustomed with the term.

study, JW2 later married and became a housewife whilst working part-time after the children entered education. JW2 also self-identifies as a “faded witness” and wishes to remain outside The Society. JW2 has issues with her faith, preferring to refer to herself as an agnostic.

JW3 is a retired white, middle-class ([see 2.6](#)), female who now lives in a Jehovah’s Witness care home. She had a long career as a nurse, serving during WWII and is widowed from a Jewish escapee of the Holocaust. JW3 was raised as a Methodist but struggled with her faith up until converting to Jehovah’s Witnesses in her 20’s. She kept her faith as secret as possible from her husband before later being revealed as a Witness. JW3 is still a strong believer in the Jehovah’s Witness belief system and upholds teachings of The Society.

JW4 is a white, middle-class ([see 2.6](#)), male who was initially raised in an atheistic household. His father converted to the Jehovah’s Witness belief system whilst JW4 was of a young age, which later led to his converting. He has experienced persecution and been in prison as a conscientious objector to conscription. He is now semi-retired and works as an elder in the Witness congregation in his local community.

4.5 Findings and Main Themes from Jehovah’s Witness Participants

JW1 and JW2 identified themselves as “faded Jehovah’s Witnesses” which means they no longer aspire to be part of The Society. Rather, they wished to “fly under the radar” due to the implications of no longer being in the organisation. It was evident these participants felt concerned if they were discovered as no longer believing, then they

would be unable to have contact with their relatives who were still heavily involved in The Society. This is due to the very real possibility they would be disfellowshipped.

JW3 and JW4 were vehement members of the organisation and have been heavily involved. JW4 remains an Elder in his local community. Both members spoke at great length about how incredible their experience had been. However, both experienced WWII, and cite the absolute nature of human depravity as one of the issues they perceived in the world before finding their faith as Jehovah's Witnesses.

There were several findings from the interviews of significant interest to the research, including themes centred around empowerment. In particular, the findings help achieve aims 1, 2 and 3 ([see 2.2.1](#)) and the overall research question: "to what extent do the social mechanisms underlying conversion directly and indirectly impact individual recruitment into minority religion?"

4.5.1 Empowerment Through Making Sense of the World

The notion of feeling empowered, through making sense of the world, came in various forms from the participants. JW3 and JW4 felt their then newfound belief enabled them to make sense of a world which seemed to be crumbling around them. Reference was made by all participants about living in the "end times". All participants believed (or had believed) the signs of this to be things such as famines, wars and disasters. As shown elsewhere ([see 3.6](#)), having an awareness of one's socio-political awareness can lead to empowerment (Christens, 2012; Maton, 2008; Peterson, 2014) due to increased feelings of control within said socio-political context (Fetterman, 2001). In being able to make sense of the world, JW3 and JW4 had gained a critical awareness of their socio-political environment which was contextualised through a religious lens.

All participants were faced with existential dilemmas that their faith, at the time of conversion, seemed to account for.

JW4 suggested:

That made me feel content. Happy. I wasn't confused in any way. I could explain things and know why I was explaining them, and that the Bible actually was right. Particularly the bits about 1914 as the setting of the kingdom and the various events happening on earth at the time. I thought this couldn't be any other time. You know, when Jesus said to his disciples – 'this will be the sign you'll see of my presence.' – I couldn't think with the evidence of that, that it could be any other time in history. It was the First World War; the Great War at the time.

The rhetoric displayed here identifies the importance of being able to have a conceptual framework in understanding the world to feel empowered (Christens, 2012; Maton, 2008; Peterson, 2014). JW4 very much felt released from doubts they had before and describes at length the freedom he felt upon discovering his faith. JW4 goes on to say:

The great plague of the Spanish flu that killed more people than the war that encompassed the earth did. Then the great earthquakes like Hiroshima and Tokyo that happened in Japan and China, killing millions of people. All the famines that came along due to the war and then the great famines that of course we didn't know about too much like in Russia and Ukraine, where Stalin was... when else could it be? When all these things happened on a world scene. So, that's one of the things that convinced me. I couldn't understand... But all that did fit instead.

JW4 at this point had entered a long monologue (some of which seen above) which jumped from point to point. There were not earthquakes killing millions, and neither Hiroshima nor Tokyo is in China. Nevertheless, all of what he said linked to natural and moral evils on a global scale. For JW4, the last century is the time of Christ's return. WWI and WWII, along with the famines mentioned, are all signs to JW4 that Christ has invisibly returned, and the world has entered the "end days" – which is in line with

Society belief. JW4 did mention more acutely those other points in history which did not fit:

So, that's one of the things that convinced me. I couldn't understand. Okay, we had the Franco-Prussia war and the American Civil War and so forth, but that didn't seem to fit somehow. But all that did fit instead.

This further shows the belief behind living in the “end times” is very much evidenced by Witness interpretation of history. For JW4 this seemed logical as well as exciting. The way JW4 rattled off these different events evidenced a well-rehearsed defence for this theology; whilst not strictly coherent, it was clear JW4 had taught on this before. Equally evident was the passion and conviction JW4 has for this belief. Genuine commitment to this belief exists and it is clear JW4 felt empowered by being able to make sense of these events within the context of a Witness narrative.

JW3 had a similar experience of struggling to understand the world. Being present when her mother passed away had a profound effect on her life. To compound this matter further, this participant served as a nurse during WWII. She found her duties working with severely and terminally wounded soldiers challenging, particularly Nazi prisoners of war who were extremely ungrateful towards the care given. Her duties also included trying to care for terminally ill babies.

When describing her experiences during that period, JW3 states:

It knocked the bottom out of my world, but I had to go back to nursing; control of engagement orders were still on and I had to do the best I could. So, during that, when they started actually putting us on the ward, the first ward they put me on was a huge isolation block. On this isolation block, there were all separate cubicles. In these cubicles were tiny babies, premature babies from the big wards in the general hospitals. These babies were suffering from congenital syphilis. What upset me terribly was to hear them screaming with hunger and we had to feed them on sterile water until they died. Being a good Methodist, brought up

on the Ten Commandments, I thought I'm helping to kill these babies and that filled me with such fear.

This chronicle demonstrates the same observation made above about JW4: a sense of powerlessness to either change, or make sense of, the situation was explicitly experienced before finding faith as a Witness. It is the dilemma they were liberated from which leads to a sense of empowerment to further deal with issues of life and death.

4.5.2 Empowerment Through Duty Bound Responsibility

An additional concept which arose out of interviewing all participants was they all were driven by a sense of duty, especially when they were younger and more active in The Society. Beairsto and Ruhotie (2003) demonstrate how organisations can empower through the affirmation of positive or desired behaviours. Additionally, Spreitzer (1995) highlighted the importance of an internal state of enabling. I believe the participants in this pilot study demonstrated an internalised sense of duty which was positively reinforced by The Watch Tower Society. Ultimately, receiving a positive reception to fulfilling the duties of a Witness, having previously internalised the beliefs, leads to a sense of empowerment.

The feelings expressed about this by participants varied. JW2 felt it was “weird” to go door-to-door, whilst JW3 and JW4 found it a joy and a privilege to be able to do so. JW1 felt self-conscious about it, as often they would be knocking on the doors of former school peers which could lead to further issues.

JW1 started at a young age and was the one who suggested the experience was unusual:

The beginning, when I was 11, going house to house was really weird of course. I went with my mum, but I remember going along with some other young chaps from the congregation as well because that was bizarre. I had to do all the talking because they wouldn't do the talking and I just winged it.

Interestingly, this sense of duty was being imposed by his mother. However, the dynamic of this relationship was complex. JW1 explained how the death of his father happened around that time and his mother had been a typically nurturing caregiver in his life. The sense of being forced was not evident but going along with it to support his mother seemed to be an accurate reflection of JW1's experience.

JW2 also conveyed a similar feeling of engaging in the duty of evangelism, but without the conviction found in JW3 and JW4. When asked what the feelings behind the experience were like, JW2 stated:

Performance fear and scared of meeting people I knew from school. I just didn't like the idea of going to people's doors uninvited and talking to something that they probably weren't interested in the first place. I'm just very nervous and more of an introvert type personality as well... So, there was that. I knew doing that all the time just in my heart of hearts wouldn't suit me, but I hadn't quite verbalised it that way in my head at the time. It was just a vague feeling that this is what I am supposed to do so I guess that is what I'll do.

JW1 and JW2 felt a strong sense of duty which seemed fixated around the issue of evangelism and outward behaviour. That is to say, participants may have had internal thoughts which were at odds with what was expected of them outwardly. Nevertheless, these thoughts did override the conformity to the group social norms and values. It is worth noting they now re-assess their experience in much the same way as ex-members might. Naturally, the negative framing of their sense of duty is to be expected.

For JW3, the same sense of duty to tell the world about the faith came through in the interviews, and she particularly felt she was a "true Christian". Additionally, the sense of duty for JW3 was interwoven in the persecution she experienced. Her late husband was particularly against her involvement, but her persistence in attending the local

congregation enabled her to continue practising in the sharing of her faith where she could, including with the nanny her husband hired:

We needed someone to look after the children and he put an advert in the paper and this girl answered the advert. He really approved of her, and she was a really nice girl, and she would look after the children... she said to me “why is your husband rude to you?” and I said “it’s because I’m a Jehovah’s Witness and he doesn’t like them!” and she said “who are they?” and became interested. So, I got someone to study with her because I couldn’t do it at the time.

This duty to ensure the nanny had someone to study with clearly originates in her beliefs as a Witness. Equally, as she believes she is a “true Christian”, she relished opportunities to share her faith and this included her husband, despite his objection.

JW4 was similar in how he expressed a sense of duty. Certainly, JW4 made it clear their duty as Witnesses to protect the congregation and uphold the Bible was important. During the interview, there was a discussion about whether someone could come back into the local congregation after being disfellowshipped ([see 4.3.5](#)). JW4 made it clear the way in which the individual responded and served was a testament to whether their apology was genuine.

Overall, the sense of duty these participants felt was evident, but often interwoven with other narratives. Duty, in and of itself, is only empowering when within a broader context of a community providing other aspects of empowerment, such as opportunity for roles or support structure (Maton & Salem, 1995).

4.5.3 Empowerment Through a Sense of Belonging

The participants felt they all belonged within the Jehovah’s Witnesses at the point of conversion and full engagement. Even the participants who had faded out of the group’s

day-to-day activity stated that, over a decade ago, they felt they wanted to belong and did while doing the activities required of them.

Further study would be required to ascertain if the activities are the binding force of the group or the result of already being bound together. Indeed, the interaction of duty and community can elicit a strong sense of belonging either way. Maton and Salem (1995) show how organisations which embrace a belief system, and provide a support system, empower individuals to maintain their involvement. In this case, the sense of belonging was maintained through the beliefs and support system by the local communities of Witnesses. Siitonen (1999, cited in Järvinen, 2007) suggests self-belief and confidence in one's conviction also can be a source of empowerment. In the cases of JW3 and JW4, their sense of belonging enabled their continued confidence, not only in their belief, but in the power of their community for their individual reality.

JW3 gave a vivid description of the events leading up to her baptism. JW3 was baptised at the largest gathering (at that point in history) of Jehovah's Witnesses since WWII in London (interestingly, JW4 was also baptised at the same event – with no connection between the two participants at that stage in their life). When asked how it made her feel, JW3's explicit response was:

I felt like I really belonged now. Before you're an associate. But now, I'm a dedicated baptised sister. I just felt I belong and that I've come home. I can't explain. This is real. I'm now part of the Christian congregation.

This response gives real insight into the power behind belonging. Not only had JW3 experienced personal revelation, but she also experienced being connected to a global congregation of what she later defined as "true Christians". It is easy to see this was an empowering experience which solidified her conversion into The Society.

JW1 and JW2 have alternative explanations about feeling like they belonged. JW1 states when she initially committed to the JW faith, she was given recognition among her congregation she felt she ought to have when growing up. JW2 stated:

I think all of a sudden I became kosher as it were. Good association, ...yes doing all the right things, it felt like being officially part of the club or part of the community. Otherwise, you are given a few extra privileges like asked to do demonstrations or talks or something like that. Otherwise, it was pretty much the same.

Here, JW2 explicitly states it did feel like being part of the club officially. JW1, on the other hand, states he never really belonged fully:

I always felt like a fish out of water. In [North England Location], the first congregation I was in as a child, I was in the grammar school and that wasn't looked down on very well. This very working class [industrial] town... I went abroad for a year, I went to Germany for a year, and I joined a German congregation, and they were lovely to me but, of course, I was the alien.

JW1 also explains when in France he felt the same. He is keen to point out they are all “lovely people”, but the cultural differences were glaringly obvious to him and how it made him feel. He ends this part of the story by saying:

So, the question about how it felt to be in the community... I made a lot of good friends, lots of nice people I made friends with, but it was limited friendship. It didn't share my interests in music, or reading, or literature or things that I had come across at university. It wasn't on their wave lengths so we couldn't have conversations about that. You could only have conversations about Witness related matters really... or football, they're all into football.

This proves to be a useful insight into the potential types of people who might be empowered to be involved in the Jehovah's Witnesses in the North of England. However, this might also be a consequence of the location itself. Again, it should be noted, they

are ex-members in their mindset and wish to distance themselves from suggesting they felt at one with the community, often referring to The Watch Tower Society as a “cult”.

JW4 does not specifically talk about belonging. In part this is due to the long monologues about the faith and asking questions in return to try and evangelise. However, there were constant iterations about being connected to, or having a deep affinity for, his brothers and sisters in the faith. For example, JW4 suggested “I would love to be able to explain to people and get them to know the real situation amongst many of our brothers that were in concentration camps during that time for not hailing Hitler”. This seemed evident of a notion he felt he belonged to the global congregation. More specifically in his location, as a local elder with brings increased responsibility for a local congregation, there is a deeper sense of belonging as he described leadership responsibility as “serving, caring for, and watching over them” as well as seeing himself as someone to “build up, strengthen, and increase my brother and sisters love for God. That’s all I’m here for”. The way in which this was spoken about displayed a gentleness to a role in which he takes very seriously.

The participants, each in their individual way, expressed a sense of belonging which enabled them to engage with the other aspects of the faith. This empowered them as Witnesses and was clearly an aspect of their lived reality.

4.5.4 Empowerment Through Persecution and Solidifying of Faith

JW3 and JW4 found persecution solidified their faith. Equally, reference was made by all the participants about how Jehovah’s Witnesses were conscientious objectors during WWII. This seemed to not only help recruit some of the participants but was also a source of invigoration throughout their journey in the faith.

Two of the participants were direct recipients of persecution. JW4 was imprisoned as a conscientious objector whilst the JW3 was a victim of continued “overt pressure”²³ from her spouse to relinquish her faith as a Witness. This almost certainly made them more zealous to be followers of their faith. This, combined with the release of being able to finally practice their faith post-persecution, led to a very empowered individual view of being involved with the “one true congregation” which follows the “one true God”.

JW3 explained how suffering and persecution is part of being a Witness, stating “*as Christians, we expect it. It’s what Jesus said: ‘Don’t think I came to bring peace; I came to bring a sword’*”. For JW3, there were consistent links made between her suffering and the suffering of Christ. In response to being asked whether she values suffering, she responded:

I don’t know if we value it or not, but it proves to us that we have the truth. We have to differentiate with the world, which we believe to be under Satan’s domination, and all the organisations within it. So, wherever they meet, they clash; because Satan is totally opposed.

Interestingly, JW3 volunteered information about the nature of the opposition she experienced from her husband and what difference that made to her at the time. When asked if the opposition made her more devout, JW3 responded:

Yes! But I loved him, and I wanted to please him, and it hurt me that I had to do something that appeared to him that I was breaking my promises to him. I had children whose lives depended on me. He had the right to teach them anything, but he didn’t do it, so I had to teach them. Their lives depended on it and their future depended on me.

²³ The term “overt pressure” has been used because the word “abuse” was not used by the participant and it is not my role as the researcher to make assumptions otherwise.

This provided insight into the nature of JW3's beliefs. Not only had the persecution solidified her faith, but she very passionately believed instructing her children on her faith was the only way in which they could be safe in the future. It would seem, for JW3 at least, persecution solidified her faith and made her more devout in believing the truth of it for salvation. This was even more evident when JW3 was asked how she would define Jehovah's Witnesses:

True Christians because they will die for their faith and they have proved it. That is what brought me in. People of every other denomination compromised with Hitler, even the Mormons, no one else stood against Hitler over the Jehovah's Witnesses.

JW3 still keenly feels the sting of WWII because she could recall vividly the experiences she had. When looking back at her conversion after the war, overlaid on her experiences during the war, it makes sense this would be a poignant point for her to use as a tool for solidification of her faith, primarily due to the global Witness identity surrounding conscientious objection.

JW3 also experienced an alternative solidifying of her faith which did not come through persecution:

My faith strengthened me for what was to come. I lost three more babies. Apart from being physically wearing, it's dreadful, they were all still born, and one was a girl, and I really wanted a girl. Then, I was having no more babies but then 10 years later, [child's name] came. Because I had lost three babies, my husband offered me an abortion, he said I didn't need to suffer again. I went to speak to a brother at the Kingdom... my mind was made up, I don't care what it costs, I'm having this baby.

Again, this illustrates into how the faith of JW3 dictated her moral decisions, but also how she was able to draw strength from it. These events solidified her faith and her resolve to follow it grew. Whilst this is not direct persecution, one can, and should, argue

this is a form of environmental persecution as the context of this is within a hostile marriage environment because of her religious conviction. JW3 found solace in her religious belief during traumatic experiences and was able to resist the offer of an abortion from a husband who did not share her religious ethics toward such a procedure. The situational context of her marriage was a form of on-going persecution which challenged the resolve and faith of the JW3.

JW4, who is of a similar age to JW3, also mentioned the actions of members of The Society throughout WWII. The following response was given after JW4 had been explaining how full-time ministry after the war was met with a lot of objections by the relatives of fallen soldiers. JW4 stated that:

It made us feel... actually, I would love to be able to explain to people and get them to know what the real situation was amongst the many of our brothers that were in concentration camps during that time for not hailing Hitler and not taking part in the war – all around the world! [sic]

This response led to further discussion about why JW4 thought his brothers were able to make such a strong stand during the period of WWII. Simply put, he said it was because they were “zealous” and revealing the strength of their faith. JW4 stated his brothers were:

Being obedient to their God. If then the Son of God Jesus comes along and says I am no part of the world - and he said to the politician Pontius Pilate about that ‘My kingdom is not of this house. It’s a heavenly source and not to do with worldly politics’ ... although God did have wars in the Bible didn’t, he, but they weren’t wars of expansion. They weren’t wars to take over empires or to take more land. They were doing what God had said – it was land already given to them.

JW4 often got stuck into monologues about the faith and regurgitated Jehovah’s Witness theology, history, and attitudes towards many things; WWII and subsequent

wars were a frequent feature. It is clear JW4 felt strongly about the persecution Witnesses experienced during this period.

JW4 also experienced persecution himself. JW4 explains how after conscription was over, there was “structuring” taken place by authorities which JW4 felt were targeted at his Witness community. He was sentenced to 6 months in prison for refusing to take a medical. JW4 stated that:

I was sent in a cell overnight at [North England Location], brought back in the morning, and then ordered to take a medical at [North England Location]. So, a policeman took me over to a medical, they took me in a room, and this white coated doctor came in and said, ‘would you submit to a medical?’ and I said ‘no’. The policeman arrested me for refusing a medical and that’s what I was sentenced for.

Unfortunately, no dates were given about when this was, but conscription officially started phasing out between 1960 and 1963 before being terminated as a law (Forty, 1980). It would stand to reason this event took place between those years when there were issues with it being phased out.

When asked about what this experience felt like, JW4 explained he was neither joyous nor mournful of the fact he was being persecuted. He accepted this was the case, and this is how it would be. Equally, when he responded to the question asking him about his faith, he stated “it strengthened it in a way”. This was before he continued explaining why pacifism was righteous, and this proved Jehovah’s Witnesses to be legitimate. Sociologically, the persecution is because of the anti-cult rhetoric often used against the Witnesses ([see 3.2](#)) and because the mainstream Church has rejected the Watch Tower. However, JW4 has amalgamated this into a theological identity, and it indicates a “truth” behind the teachings of the Watch Tower.

4.6 Conclusion of Pilot Study

The above analysis provided a helpful foundation for exploring empowerment within the context of a minority religion which has been well-established long before the explosion of minority religions from the 1960s onward. When regarding the literature on empowerment, this is an important litmus test for the application of empowerment theory within conversion narratives.

The Watch Tower Society has a comprehensive belief system (Maton & Salem, 1995), provides opportunities for adherents to fulfil roles within its structures (Beairsto & Ruohotie, 2003; Maton & Salem, 1995), has demonstrated an ability to be somewhat flexible in engaging with contemporary society (Argyris and Schön, 1996; Brygoyne, 1996) and provides a support system for local Witnesses (Maton & Salem, 1995) which is galvanised by inspirational leadership (Maton & Salem, 1995; Sadler, 2003). Application of organisational empowerment theory clearly fits with The Watch Tower Society.

As outlined earlier ([see 2.2.2](#)), there is a lack of literature successfully engaging with the lived reality of religion. My pilot study successfully demonstrates how organisational and psychological empowerment theory can be applied to the individual conversions of religious adherents ([see 3.4](#)). The concept of individual empowerment as a foundation for individual conversion emerges as a significant finding which must be explored with additional minority religions.

This chapter, by exploring lived conversion histories of JWs within a broader historical context, demonstrates how Jehovah's Witnesses, upon conversion, are empowered to engage with the world from a new perspective. Having once been powerless to affect change in their life, they are now afforded the opportunity to change the world through

helping others to have the same revelation they have had. Ultimately, this chapter demonstrates that, whilst empowerment is important at conversion, it is also necessary to retain adherence throughout one's life course.

5.0 CASE STUDY: BAHÁ'Í

Reportedly, the global membership of the Baha'í has expanded to 8.5million (Johnson & Grim, 2020). Margit Warburg (2006) suggests the significant number of adherents means the Baha'í movement should be considered a “world religion” ([see 5.2.3](#)). Warburg has also suggested the religion has not garnered as much interest from scholars as it ought to for its size and practice (Warburg, 2006). Within the UK, there is a small but significant Baha'í population. The 2011 Census data for England & Wales records 5021 Baha'í, which is an increase of 376 from 2001. In Scotland, there were 459 Baha'í at the time of the 2011 census, with a further 238 identifying themselves in Northern Ireland (ONS, 2016).

5.1 Historical Development of Baha'í

One of the central beliefs of the Baha'í movement is that a new manifestation of God occurs in every age, bringing eternal truth to a new context which reinterprets God for the current age. For Baha'í's, they believe Bahá'u'lláh to be the manifestation of God for the present age, as well as the founder of the Baha'í religion.

Bahá'u'lláh wrote the ‘book of laws’, among many other works attributed to his name. This formed the basis of teaching for Baha'í, and was later developed by successors (Smith, 1996). Bahá'u'lláh died in 1892 and left leadership and interpretation of his writings to his eldest son, Abbás Effendi, known as Abdu'l-Bahá. Abdu'l-Bahá was significant in the development of Baha'í theology and positions on contemporary issues and added more scriptures to the body of work. This was also a time of significant growth of the faith, in both the East and West (Momen, 2004; Smith, 2014).

Following his death, Abdu'l-Bahá's final will and testament appointed his grandson, Shoghi Effendi, as the guardian of the faith. He was able to interpret and translate the

writings of Bahá'u'lláh, and translated the writings into English, which saw the Baha'i movement grow from 100,000 to 400,000 during his leadership. Due to the untimely death of Shoghi Effendi in 1957, a temporary band of custodians known as 'The Hands of the Cause' were established. This later became the Universal House of Justice in 1963 (Jones, 2012; Lee, 2011; McGlinn, 1999; Momen, 2004; Smith, 1996). The current structure of the Baha'i organisation looks like the following:

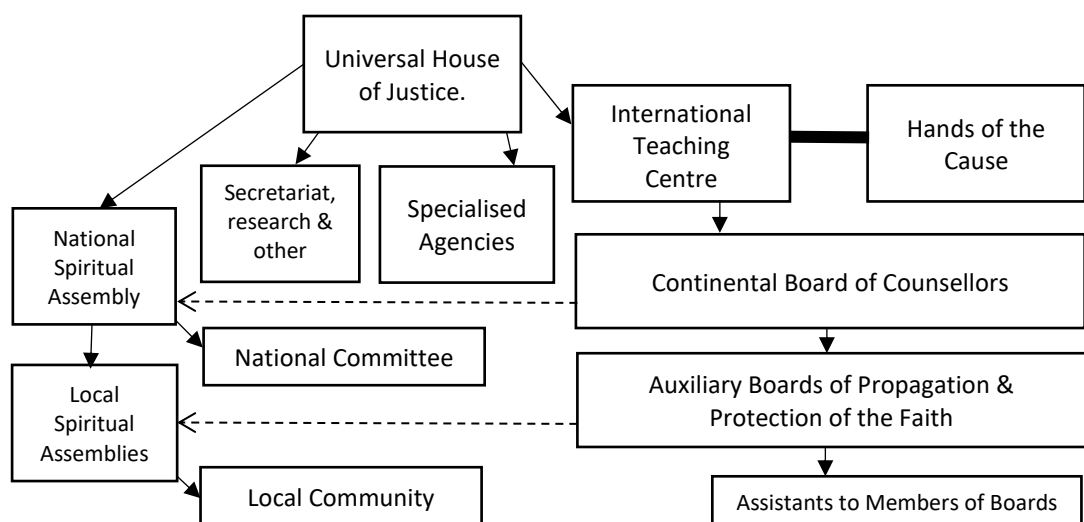


Figure 6: "The Present-Day Structure of Baha'i Administration" (Smith, 1999: 55)

The level of importance placed on the central Universal House of Justice (UHJ), as seen above, is especially high as the UHJ are charged with protecting the faith. There are several issues within Baha'i literature regarding the protection of the faith, most notably censorship ([see 5.3.1](#)).

The historical development of Baha'i impacts the lived reality of contemporary adherents. As demonstrated later ([see 5.4 & 5.6.4](#)), everyday Baha'i adherents live in the tension of being a minority religion in a society with a popular misunderstanding of minority religion (Thomas & Graham-Hyde, 2021; [see also 3.2](#)). Furthermore, a strong

centralised organisation can be empowering ([see 3.6](#)). Certainly, the level of gatekeeping and protection everyday adherents experience through the way the UHJ has developed leads to a trust this is happening on an international level – deepening the sense of belonging when accepted as a Baha’i by the UHJ ([see 5.6.2](#)) and leading to a rigorous defence of UHJ decisions (Cole, 1988; [see also 5.3.1](#)).

5.2 Belief & Praxis of Baha’i

The Baha’i religion has developed a full theology, much like Christianity or Islam. For individuals considering converting to Baha’i, the comprehensive theology legitimises the decision – mostly because of the popular understandings of what religion is or is not in contemporary society (Thomas & Graham-Hyde, 2021; [see also 5.4](#)).

The encompassing of all majority religions as being previously relevant, and still significant, has helped develop the theology to be recognisable by all modern believers, adding credence to the faith. This has been combined with a system of rituals adherents are invited to observe - further helping legitimise the faith within a popular conceptualisation of religion.

5.2.1 Consultation

The process of consultation is the glue of Baha’i community, with discussion and decisions being made in group contexts rather than dominated by charismatic figures. In essence, Baha’i are encouraged to weigh the thoughts and feelings of others before also contributing their own (Warburg, 2006). This leads to reflexive thinking becoming an ingrained habit of everyday adherents. Consultation is fuelled by the adherent’s belief in unity and truth, which can be obfuscated by poor communication. Thus, consultation has been developed to limit unwarranted hurt or misconceptions which will inevitably happen by being in community. Equally, the practice of consultation is

indicative of adherent's wider belief they are ushers of a new world order; language and cultural barriers exist, but this process helps alleviate that where possible. The process is designed to lead to a unanimous decision, or majority view at the very least.

5.2.2 Fasting and Feasting

Most Holy Days and other events throughout the Baha'i calendar year²⁴ include eating together and sharing an experience at a dinner table. Periods of fasting and feasting are usually practiced in community, although such events can be a solitary practice too.

The everyday lived reality of a Baha'i is rooted in a deep sense of belonging, in which the consumption (or non-consumption) of food and drink plays a pivotal role. For the Baha'i, these practices further connect them to other majority religions because of the rituals or beliefs concerning food and drink. For example, Jesus' miracle turning water into wine and the "last supper" demonstrates the importance drink has in social and religious settings.

5.3 Issues and Accusations of Baha'i

Sociological inquiry into the Baha'i began from the 1970s onward, despite the religion emerging in the mid-1800s. Of course, there are formative publications which predate this period, but they are either outdated or contested (Warburg, 2005). Edward G. Browne (1862-1926) is regarded as the first author to publish material about the Baha'i while maintaining an "outsider" positionality ([see 2.5](#)). While there are a few others who contributed to the overall field, dedicated research of the Baha'i in the early 1900s was uncommon. During the 1970s, British scholarship had a renewed interest in the Baha'i. This emerged out of Vernon E. Johnson's (1974) thesis on Baha'i history, which was immediately followed by several others (Garlington, 1975; Garrigues, 1976; Hampson,

²⁴ For more information and diagram, see Warburg (2006: 359).

1980; Kahn, 1977). Peter Smith (2019) suggests this led to a “birthing” of contemporary research of the Baha’i religion, in which he was invested due to being an “insider” and scholar. Peter L. Berger’s (1954) unpublished thesis “*From Sect to Church: A Sociological Interpretation of the Baha’i Movement*” outlines the growth of the religion using the work of Max Weber to discuss the routinisation of charisma, becoming one of the first full sociological inquiries into the Baha’i.

Overall, there are three prominent issues which arise out of literature concerning the Baha’i, with the insider/outsider debate underlying all three. The first issue is that there have been discussions over the level of control the UHJ has over members publishing material, which some scholars label as censorship ([see 5.3.1](#)). The second is centred around the nature of academic objectivity, due to the Baha’i being prolific researchers of their own religion ([see 5.3.2](#)). The third is predicated on the positionality of the religion, which has implications for definitions, typologies, and approaches to understanding religion generally ([see 5.4](#)).

5.3.1 Allegations of Censorship and UHJ Control

The Baha’i are fastidious in the intellectual understanding of their own religiosity. Much of the scholarly inquiry into the Baha’i has been conducted by Insiders ([see 2.5](#); see also Neitz, 2013), often publishing in one of the National Spiritual Assembly Association backed journals. The UHJ has an enshrined policy of prepublication review (MacEoin, 1990) and the UHJ have direct oversight over National Spiritual Assemblies (see [Figure 6](#)). This means the Baha’i have a centralised procedure for reviewing publications before the peer-review process of a scholarly journal (MacEoin, 1990). Therefore, the academic study of Baha’i has a flow of discussion being directly influenced by the UHJ which might

have impact on policy, pedagogy, and approaches toward understanding the everyday religion of individuals adhering as Baha'i.

This triggered a debate about censorship and has had impact on scholars who once identified as members of the UHJ but left due to differences in approaching peer-review. Perhaps Juan Cole's (1988; 1998; 2001) journey from researching inside to outside the central Baha'i organisation also provides a window through which one can understand religious conversion, de-conversion, and leave-taking, as resulting from levels of empowerment (see [8.5.1](#) & [8.5.2](#)). Having not had negative enough experience to take aim at the UHJ review-before-release policy, he was able to defend the UHJ from a faithful position. Overtime, one could argue this practice became a disempowering aspect of Cole's lived reality ([see 8.5.1](#)), which led to him publicly supporting Dennis MacEoin (1990) in criticising the policy.

It is important to note not all scholars suggest a review-before-release policy needs to be considered as a problem. Warburg (2006: 68) comments on this issue, stating:

It should be realised that academic freedom is a rare flower; most private and public institutions apply some form of review-before-release policy. However, the Baha'i review policy causes considerable distress among Baha'i academics of a liberal observation, and thereby it has a negative and stifling effect on the academic study of Baha'i.

Warburg should be considered a neutral voice, commenting on a "cold case" debate with hindsight. Her observation helps to further highlight that MacEoin and Cole were exploring their positionality at the boundaries of being insiders and outsiders. They were supportive of the UHJ when they were empowered by the organisation ([see 3.6](#)) and critical when that empowerment had ceased, or had become disempowering ([see 8.5.1](#)).

5.3.2 Positioning of Baha'i Researchers

Irrespective of who has accused who of what, the argument is about positionality, with authors arguing objectivity (which some say is unachievable) as being a matter of insider or outsider status ([see 2.5](#)). The debates are representative of a polemical approach to understanding religion, predating the lived religion approach ([see 2.2.2](#)) or a thorough discussion about insiders, outsiders, and ex-members of religious organisations (Gregg & Chryssides, 2019). Much of the recent scholarly literature includes Baha'i authors, irrespective of positionality, and the findings and conclusions of Baha'i authored publications provide, in and of themselves, a picture of the current lived religion of Baha'i.

Nevertheless, there is a clear dearth in outsider research into the Baha'i. There are legitimate concerns raised about the potential of censorship ([see 5.3.1](#)) and a remedy for this could be outsider researchers. It is likely, as Warburg (2006) has demonstrated, the findings would be synonymous with insider researchers and helpful to everyday Baha'i, which would mean the UHJ need not be concerned. However, this is not certain, and more outsider research is needed to quell this debate.

5.4 Positioning of Baha'i as a Global Religion

Another theme which emerges from the literature is the repeated attempts to position Baha'i as a global religion, or in other words a "world religion". Warburg's (2006) suggestion the Baha'i should be considered as a religion alludes to a perception the Baha'i have of themselves and their relationship with society. When one considers the persecution Baha'i have experienced in the Middle East, in particular Iran (Momen, 2005; [see also 'BH4' in 5.5.1](#)), it becomes clear everyday Baha'i feel a heightened sense of potential for persecution. Additionally, the lasting impact of the "cult wars" ([see 3.2](#)) and accusations of "cult-like" practices by ex-Baha'i authors such as Cole (2003) have

further heightened this sense of persecution. My research suggests the lived reality of Baha'i contains a consistent knowledge they are a minority religion, sometimes viewed with suspicion because of social factors outside their locus of control.

As mentioned earlier ([see 5.2](#)), the Baha'i have a universalistic approach to historically contextualising their religious beliefs in conjunction with other religions. The Baha'i believe religious figures, such as Christianity's Jesus and Islam's Prophet Muhammad are manifestations of the one true God, appearing in eras of human history to deliver a contextualised message. They believe Bahá'u'lláh is the most recent and last manifestation who delivered a prophecy that human unification (over time) will bring about utopia on Earth (Hatcher & Martin, 1998). Thus, the continued positioning of Baha'i as a "global religion" is as much a theologically motivated approach for Baha'i as it is a response toward potential persecution and current minority status.

Overall, one can understand the consistent attempts of everyday adherents to position and define the religion as global. In fact, the central principle of ushering in a new world order is predicated upon gaining a world-wide following. Nevertheless, Warburg (2006) is right to argue for Baha'i being considered as a religion, despite a misguided comparison with other "world religions". The Baha'i is a (global) religion precisely because there are many people who construct their identities around being Baha'i – little more justification is required here.

5.5 Baha'i Interview Analysis

As stated in Chapter 1, this study used qualitative interviews to gain the life narratives of Baha'i participants. There were six participants in total, and all were based in the North of England. The focus of these interviews was to gain the life narratives of participants, with specific focus on their conversion experience.

As is the case with Witness participants ([see 4.5](#)), the seminal finding was how empowerment was the key facet leading to conversion into the Baha'i. The analysis of the findings below specifically refers to Baha'i participants and before a broader discussion later in this thesis ([see 8.3](#)). The same aspects of empowerment emerged for the Baha'i participants as for the Jehovah's Witnesses, which suggests the Baha'i and Witness religions are similar in the way adherents feel engaged by the religion overall.

5.5.1 Participants

There were six participants, all of whom currently reside in the Northwest area of England: four are British born, and two immigrated to the UK over two decades ago. There were four male and two female participants, ranged between the age of thirty to sixty.

The participants were selected based on opportunity, using one of the participants as a gatekeeper. The community in the Northwest has multiple local assemblies, however, not all participants are from the same local assembly.

Baha'i 1 (BH1) is a male, middle-class ([see 2.6](#)), migrant person of colour who moved to the UK to study in 1987 and has resided here since then. He is a self-employed architect in the Northwest and previously lived in Scotland. He was brought up as a Hindu and went to a Christian school, though his place of birth is majority Buddhism. He has much experience of all three religions prior to university. His mother, despite being Hindu, would frequent the Buddhist temple which set a pluralistic example for him from the outset. BH1 was not religious, nor was he looking for religion, when he became a Baha'i at university. BH1 is an experienced member of the Baha'i community but is not currently in a leadership role.

Baha'i 2 (BH2) is a white British, middle-class ([see 2.6](#)), man born in Northwest, England. He was born to a protestant/unitarian Christian household and grew up in the Anglican church, where he was heavily involved as a chorister. He experienced the loss of his father at a young age and says this loss was the starting point for mental health issues, in particular depression. BH2 was perpetually seeking spiritual fulfilment, especially early in his career as a doctor, but became involved in an abusive relationship with someone he was trying to convert to Christianity. BH2 met his wife shortly after the dissolving of the abusive relationship, and she was Baha'i. BH2 readily converted to Baha'i after initial investigation and encouragement from his wife's family. BH2 retired early from being a doctor to work as a chaplain for the Baha'i faith.

Baha'i 3 (BH3) is a female, middle-class ([see 2.6](#)), person of colour with Indian heritage, born into a family of Indian born parents and siblings. BH3 was born in the UK after her parents emigrated. Both BH3's parents were raised as Catholics in convents and monasteries, which led to BH3 also being raised Catholic. BH3 experienced other religions through her uncle who converted frequently, adopting the religion of his partners without attachment to his previous faith. BH3's parents rented out property, so growing up she had contact with a diverse variety of belief systems. As a result, BH3 had a deep longing to be Mormon growing up as she had contact with many missionaries living in her parent's flats. However, BH3 became Baha'i at age 15, due to the most recent partner of her uncle at the time. They would discuss the faith and go to meetings. Her parents also started attending the local assembly, which solidified this routine and BH3 continued to declare her faith. BH3 faced challenges of culture clash while growing up, the majority of these reportedly around education and work, confounded by family values. BH3's parents wanted her to work to bring money into the household, which

often got in the way of her schoolwork. By making a compromise, BH3 trained as a nurse and later as a counsellor and sex therapist. BH3 has lived in the Northwest of England for a long time and is still settled there.

Baha'i 4 (BH4) is a female political refugee who was granted asylum and moved to the UK in the late 1980s. BH4 was raised Muslim in a working-class family and was the eldest of five siblings. BH4 had more contact with Baha'i when she married someone from the Baha'i faith. This was during a time of heightened persecution after the Iranian revolution, and BH4 and her family had to flee due to the threats and risk of imprisonment and torture. BH4 was a well-qualified teacher before moving to the UK, where her qualifications were not recognised and required her to retrain. Upon arriving in the UK, her marriage broke down and she became a single parent to three boys. BH4 settled in the Northwest due to some family connections in the area and has lived there ever since.

Baha'i 5 (BH5) is a white, middle-class ([see 2.6](#)), male, Northwest born, individual in his late 40s who trained as an optometrist and lived and worked in the Northwest all his life. BH5 was brought up in a Baha'i family but reports not being overly involved or interested in the faith until age 21. BH5 became Baha'i after personal investigation and says it simply made logical sense, rather than identifying specific religious experience as the cause for conversion.

Baha'i 6 (BH6) is a white, middle-class ([see 2.6](#)), male in his mid-70s. He was born in the Northwest and has lived there his entire life. He was brought up as a devout Church of England Christian and became Baha'i at the age of twenty-one through personal, individual, research. BH6 reports on having a difficult transition into the faith, wishing

the process had been different, with a view to mitigate how upset his parents were about conversion. Having worked in the social work sector his entire career, he is now retired but stated he likes to fill his time and now works as an estate agent part time.

5.6 Findings and Main Themes from Baha'i Participants

The Baha'i participants very much articulated their lived reality as belonging to a "world religion" ([see 5.4](#)). Two of the participants converted out of Christianity, after being involved with the Billy Graham rallies in the UK²⁵. Other participants articulated how their lived religion is an extension of all existing "world religions" as opposed to an alternative. While this was not explored in detail, it does further demonstrate how all participants were locked within the WRP when framing their reality.

The main themes which emerged from Baha'i interviews are like the Jehovah's Witnesses, suggesting the lived reality in both the minority religions might be similar. Nevertheless, I do not seek to compare religious organisations because the lived religion of participants is their unique reality ([see 2.2.2](#)).

5.6.1 Empowerment Through Making Sense of the World

The interviews showed a clear sense of empowerment arising from making sense of the world. Interestingly, this did not differ from the Jehovah's Witness participants in the Pilot Study ([see 4.5](#)). All participants from the Baha'i study demonstrated how empowerment came through conversion. This, they further demonstrated, led to the world "making sense". For both the Jehovah's Witnesses and the Baha'i, logic (evidence led rather than experientially led) is the key denominator in an empowered understanding of life, faith, and the world, which led to conversion. Empowerment

²⁵ The Billy Graham rallies of the 50s and 70s had auditoriums full and Dr. Billy Graham would preach the Gospel of Jesus. Although evidence suggests there was not significant impact upon church growth or culture (Dowson, 2009), large amounts of people attended – which these participants did.

literature focuses on “enabling” and having “control” over one’s life course and does not differentiate between the experience and knowledge (Christens, 2012; Maton, 2008; Peterson, 2014). Evidence based decision making over one’s lived reality is an experience, in and of itself. Therefore, the literature can be applied here.

Three out of the six Baha’i participants experienced trauma and disempowerment in their life during the lead up to becoming Baha’i. Participants conveyed their trauma helped to lead them specifically to their faith. Their trauma made it difficult for them to find power in their life, sometimes leaving them without a support network, all aspects of empowerment (Fetterman, 2001).

The remaining participants did not specify they had experienced trauma or disempowerment explicitly, however they did identify life began to make more sense because of being Baha’i. The traumatised participants mentioned the relief at becoming Baha’i and knowing they could continue in life, despite suffering. Baha’i gave them assurance that doing the right thing and being loving to others was powerful and had a source of truth they knew to be real.

BH2 testified how the loss of his father had a profound effect on his life, which later led to continual disempowerment through depression:

I got confirmed in the Anglican church. I lost my father when I was 10. So, before I went to grammar, I lost my father. That had a big impact on my life and later was to lead to a depressive kind of personality. I didn't recognise the genesis or roots of this depression until very much later in my life, but it did have a big impact on me.

For BH2, the empowerment leading to conversion was two-fold. BH2 was a devout Christian and remembered fondly how his conversion felt. He also explained how the

Baha'i faith is an extension of what he already felt, which brought happiness and empowered him in his life. This statement shows how BH2 identified himself whilst living as a Christian:

Yeah, I was very happy of course. I was very happy to be a Christian. I learnt the verses of the Bible. Devoted myself to teaching and to deepening in the faith and trying to live the life in terms of working with youth at the Baptist church...

However, despite how BH2 felt as a Christian, he later converted to Baha'i and described how it impacted his spiritual life. When asked about his conversion from Christianity to Baha'i, BH2 explained:

...It expanded my world perspective enormously. Certainly, I began to think globally rather than locally to use a jargon phrase. One of the things about becoming Baha'i is that I didn't feel like I abandoned Jesus because I believe in the Gospels still. I believe in Jesus, as a messenger of God.

Here BH2 reported he found fulfilment in the faith. He was devoted to the Bible and found no conflict when devoted to Baha'i scriptures also. He went on to explain this gave him purpose to tell others.

BH2 also experienced mental health challenges, particularly with feeling extremely low in mood, yet was empowered to "lift himself" out of depression and deal with the issues at the heart of what he identified as causing it: the impossible standards of living as a Christian. BH2 was empowered through his world making sense:

It expanded my view not just of religion but of all the world because I began to see that this is the time of one shepherd, and we are coming to global civilisation, so I could start to see God's plan in the world... It gave me a great measure of understanding and a great sense of privilege to be able to see it.

BH2 did state he still had issues with feeling unworthy, but the difference with being Baha'i is that the understanding of what God is doing is enough. The unattainable standards of perfection and following God completely is "compensated" through being in Baha'i community and continuing to learn the scriptures. By being in community and dedicating oneself to the scriptures, BH2 felt he was being brought toward the standards of perfection by God and this knowledge helps circumvent feelings of unworthiness.

BH3 also experienced substantial disempowerment growing up. She often spoke about how her parents were in control and, although she was fond of them, she felt she did not get to live her own life, both in terms of education and her marital relationship. When asked how much influence BH3 had on her own life as she was growing up, her immediate reply was:

None. None really. My mum and dad were typical Asian parents of that day. They say jump and you say how high - that's the end of it really. I didn't have my life as such - it was their life of whatever they wanted. You just did whatever was required of you as such.

It was around the age of eighteen that BH3 made a firm commitment to follow the path of a Baha'i. This came after an exploration into the Mormon faith and being unable to reconcile aspects of the faith with reason and logic. Her parents had already converted to Baha'i and she witnessed, maybe for the first time, that this was something they were not pushing her to do. Additionally, the conversion came at a pivotal point in her own life's journey; BH3 was stepping out as an adult, working as a nurse, and continuing her education in that field. When asked to describe how it felt, BH3's response was particularly illuminating:

I just felt like ... the faith is very much about self-improvement if you will. Very much about being the best that you can be. The 'come higher' as such in all walks

of lives. Whether it's the virtues, compassion and caring or whether it's about education, it's about being as much as you can be. I felt I could stretch; I could be me. I could talk about the Qur'an and not be rejected. I could talk about Hindus and why and ask questions. I could [develop myself] educationally as well; it was how nursing was going, how were the exams, etc. Whereas before it was like just go make the beds and get to the flats and clean the cooker kind of thing.

This shows the sense of empowerment she felt, particularly as she was able to be an autonomous individual being supported by a wider community (Maton & Salem, 1995).

This very much coincides with the findings from Witness participants in the Pilot Study ([see 4.5.1](#)) – most of whom cite clarity as being a state they felt after conversion. In this case, making sense of one's own world, or identity, helped empower, subsequently leading to conversion into the religion (Quinn & Spreitzer, 1997).

BH4 said reading about the history of the Baha'i and understanding how the process of consultation works helped empower her to make sense of the world further.

When I read about history side of it, especially our prophet is coming from wealthy family, a minister. Going through all this problem – it made my heart. I would like to be a Baha'i. Obviously, the way we try to consult and what we feel that way is better for everything.

BH4 felt the history of the Baha'i and the systems in place to ensure community adhesion made sense, certainly to a degree where she fought for her children to be registered as Baha'i upon making it into the UK. Through her life narrative, she showed how she felt the lens through which the Baha'i view the world makes sense and this was a reason for converting (Christens, 2012; Maton, 2008; Maton & Salem, 1995; Peterson, 2014; Spreitzer, 1995).

Both BH5 and BH6 explain how becoming Baha'i "fitted with them" (BH6) and how they came to a natural conclusion that this was truth. BH5 admitted there was not a "Paul on

the road to Damascus moment”, a religious experience some religious adherents across all religions sometimes attest to ([see 8.5.3](#)). For BH5 it was a quiet realisation this religion contained truth:

It was more of a head thing. I sort of realised that if I genuinely think this is true, then why not? ... it would be untrue to say that I had an experience, an out of body experience, or anything like that. I viewed the world as Baha’i, believing the earth is one country. I recognise it’s one human planet and the environmental things all made sense from that point of view – If I believe that, then why would I not actually want to follow that logically through?

BH5’s realisation, which corroborates his wider belief about the planet, led to a level of empowerment that enabled him to engage in community and helped him make sense of his beliefs further.

BH6 differentiated between understanding and intellect. When explaining his initial feelings about becoming Baha’i, BH6 testifies:

It wasn't so much intellectual at that stage; it was very much a feeling thing. The teachings, they just made so much sense. So, the learning about the faith in more detail came later over time by attending summer schools, winter schools, weekend schools, different gatherings, lectures, attending study groups. That's where I started to learn more about it.

BH6’s assertion that it makes sense fits with the other participants’ experiences of feeling empowered through making sense of the world. With rather more clarity of expression, BH6 said community is also an important conduit for furthering this underlying emotion of empowerment through making sense of the world.

5.6.2 Empowerment Through Belonging

Throughout the dialogue with the Baha’i participants, there was a consistent sense of empowerment, either through being able to understand the world or through being

involved in community. Certainly, the dialogue with BH5 and BH6 was focused more on the context of community than on individual faith.

BH5 recognised his sphere of friendship changed because of committing to the Baha'i path. He noticed his new sphere of friendship had a deeper connection to him. On reflection, BH5 suggested it would have been advantageous to consciously try and merge all spheres of friendship into one, including friends who were Baha'i and non-Baha'i – particularly for the purposes of evangelising the faith. However, his new community clearly became his focus. BH5 reflected on this:

They get where you're coming from on an intuitive level. When a situation arises, you know how people are going to view that problem on one level... it would have been much more profitable to keep all circle of friends and just widen the group, making it more inclusive. I don't remember it being a purposive thing to exclude people, it just happened... That new circle of friends saw the world in more of a similar fashion to me... Then I met my future wife, she was part of that new circle of friends, we were married within less than 2 years. Then you've got, sort of, a new reality, married relatively young... 23 years old.

BH5 was empowered into faith due to being in the community (Maton & Salem, 1995). BH5 spoke at length about the Baha'i community. BH5 said the lack of young people being involved in Northwest England is due to there not being universities in the towns where Baha'i have communities. Attracting younger Baha'i individuals in the smaller towns leads to different methods for inspiring the community to be active. For example, being connected globally via the internet is a particularly empowering activity as it gives a wider picture of how successful the global Baha'i community is (Barker, 2005; Campbell, 2012; Kruger, 2004; [See also 3.5](#)). When asked what entices him to continue as an active member of the community, BH5 stated:

What keeps me? Obviously, there is a connection to the world Baha'i community online, digitally, Facebook. You can see what's happening around the world—

places like the Congo - and literally see the tens of thousands coming into the community regularly. It's exciting to see that. [North-West] and Europe is very stayed and from a religious point of view, religion is almost like a dirty word.

This is of particular interest when corroborated with the other participants. BH6 identified he has been empowered in life issues through the Baha'i community:

I was always one that loved to share my problems and feelings. I would go to the community and go look, this is how I'm feeling, what advice can you give me? In each community there is what is called a local assembly of nine people who are elected. They're supposed to be shepherds of community and there for advice. On two or three occasions I've talked to them and shared my own feelings.

Although BH2 did not explicitly use the word "empowered" when explaining his involvement in the community, it is evident BH2 is empowered. BH2 is heavily active, often in an elected position, and very engaged with the wider, global community. Similarly, as a chaplain, he's continuously helping Baha'i who are in prison, universities, and schools in his local area. Maton and Salem (1995) assert opportunity for role structure is a fundamental aspect of organisations which empower the individual. The acceptance and affirmation of this behaviour in the religious organisation empowers BH2 (Bowen & Lawler, 1992). BH2 spoke at length about this, which gives the impression this outreach activity is of special importance to him. It is likely the reasoning behind this is because he retired from medicine to undertake his calling. BH2 articulates:

"We engage in our community. We engage with other faiths. Largely through things like the [location omitted] faith forum. We try to live a life of service to humanity. So, my wife and I are chaplains in prison. We didn't choose that; it came to us because one of the prisoners going through a bad patch started searching and became a Baha'i through his own choice. So, they needed someone to come and help with his rites and things to have for worship and teaching... We try in our small way to be a community that is trying to live up to its ideals and I enjoy our unity. It's not perfect, but you know, we are part of a world faith, and you go somewhere and you're readily part of that community."

This is a clear indication that BH2 believes this to be a calling. Ultimately, BH2 is clearly empowered through serving those in his community and believes this is a vocation given to him by God, rather than simply a job he managed to sort for himself. This further entrenches his sense of belonging, which retains him within the faith. Equally, this gives BH2 a sense of individual importance because he has a “role” to play through his belonging (Beairsto & Ruohotie, 2003; Maton & Salem, 1995; [see also 3.6](#)).

BH3 explained she was consistently searching for a community in which she felt she belonged. Growing up, BH3 had wished to be a Mormon as she witnessed how those she had come across lived out their faith. She also spent some time involved with the Billy Graham Christian movement but became dismayed when she was rejected by that same group for not committing to Christ. She explained that the adherents in the movement were rejecting of her after rejecting Christianity:

I had a few years in the wilderness when I started nursing ... and the Billy Graham movement was around at the time, and I went to quite a lot of their meetings to see what was going on. Felt very warm. Very embracing etc. Until I decided that this was not the path for me and then it was suddenly like a coldness that I have never experienced in my life before.

After leaving the Billy Graham movement, BH3 spent three years searching for a new community. She then re-joined the Baha’i faith and local community and articulated how she felt:

Well, I was quite sort of loved if that made sense? I was young and a lot of people were older in the faith at that time. There wasn't a massive youth movement and there was a lot of older people. I had lots of aunties and uncles as such.

BH3 views the community as a wider family as she consistently referred to the fact they were like aunties and uncles to her. This provides a community and support structure

(Maton & Salem, 1995) in which she is also able to shape and fully adopt the subculture due to family ties (Argyris and Schön, 1991). BH3 felt she belonged, and with that came a sense of empowerment to continue living the life of the Baha'i, rather than drifting as she had done during the years, she was in the Billy Graham movement. This solidity brought more control to her life course (Christens, 2012; Maton, 2008; Peterson, 2014).

Having gone through the process of becoming a political refugee, BH4 was left with nothing but her family and some clothes. The travel to the UK took months, and the circumstances endured left her family feeling disheartened. Their only hope was their future living in the UK, which they expected to be a dream world. However, BH4 explained that arrival led to dejection as they realised it was not all they hoped it would be. BH4's marriage broke down due to the intensity of their cramped living conditions with relatives. When BH4's husband left, he took their passports with him:

I... a few months after... I wanted to go back [Location Omitted] but I couldn't go back because my passport and everything was with him. I remember my sister helped for us to go and see MP. To get the paper from her office. To get something because she was at the time student person. She had her own small family. So, we moved to her house. We had a mansion in our country - all this squeezing and sleeping on the floor. It was horrible. [sic]

BH4 explained that, due to her positive experience of the Baha'i in her home country, she wanted very much to be Baha'i. She fought to have her children registered as Baha'i when they were enrolled into a British school and the school helped her engage with the local Baha'i community. As a result of being welcomed into the community, BH4 converted to the faith (this will be explored in more detail when analysing her sense of belonging). Overall, her experience of being involved in the Baha'i community, and eventually converting to Baha'i herself, helped empower her to work through the troubles of marriage, past trauma, and being a single parent in a foreign country where

she had yet to learn the language.

BH4 explicitly discussed the feelings she had when she was finally able to join the Baha'i community. BH4 was elated: *"Fantastic! I felt so great. I belong to something that I want to belong to. It was like achievement of something [sic]. It was fantastic"*. Referring to it as an achievement is an indicator that BH4 felt she had discovered something special, and it clearly invigorated her during a difficult point in her life.

There is a sense of empowerment which comes through being involved in the Baha'i community for these participants (Maton & Salem, 1995). At the very least, an invigoration or purposeful existence is something which enables the participants to continue with life as a Baha'i. Most significantly, perhaps, is how the community exists across the world and, in theory, would welcome any member of the Baha'i faith (and those outside the faith for that matter) without hesitation. This sense of community is certainly very enticing, and all participants spoke very fondly about the collective Baha'i.

5.6.3 Empowerment Through Duty Bound Responsibility

Among the Baha'i participants, the sense of duty-bound responsibility is somewhat reduced when compared to the Jehovah's Witness participants from the Pilot Study ([see 4.5](#)). There was a clear emphasis that being a Baha'i is about being on a journey or pathway. The concept of salvation is linked to action and is not an exclusive privilege to the Baha'i. BH1 clarified:

Salvation in our faith is not that you become Baha'i yourself and you're saved. It is about what you do in your life. How have you lived in your life matters. Someone might not have heard about the Baha'i faith, but they have lived a good life. The purpose of our religion is to serve others and so if your life is given up for others in whatever form you take. It could be a businessperson employing lots of people and if you do it in the spirit of service then that is service. Work and the spirit of worship and service. So, if you are a research person and you do it with a sincere heart then that is worship.

BH1 was an interesting case study for understanding the concept of empowerment through duty bound responsibility; he would often interpret questions aimed at uncovering the above ideas and link the answer more to the concept of duty and responsibility. BH1 demonstrates how opportunity for role structure is an important part of his empowered lived reality (Maton & Salem, 1995), and this stems from his desire to have autonomy over his life course (Christens, 2012; Maton, 2008; Peterson, 2014). For example, when asking BH1 about the nature of being in community and how it felt to be around those who share his faith, he replied:

Yes, it's good at coming together and meeting people and friendship, yes. But it shouldn't be any different to how you live your life because if you're only living your life for that moment then you're not really living your life as a Baha'i all the time and you're supposed to live your life as a Baha'i. Also, Baha'is are not supposed to distinguish between Baha'i and not Baha'i.

This happened again when BH1 interpreted a question aimed at uncovering the nature of how BH1 worships as a multi-cultural individual. He, again, brought it back to a duty-bound answer:

Bahá'u'llah says that you should meditate evening and night and read something of the writings so that you are refreshed. Also, to bring yourself to accountability... There are obligatory prayers and things I should say. One is that every day you say an obligatory prayer and you can choose one of the three. There is a long one and a very short one which you can say in the noon and another one you say three times which is when it suits you.

Before the above response, BH1 had outlined a similar concept of decisions and faith being fulfilled through appropriate channels in official meetings. This was instead of explaining what it was like to be in a Baha'i meeting. There was a clear focus on duty for

BH1, again linking to opportunities for role structure (Maton & Salem, 1995) whilst BH1's lived reality is further scaffolded by the decrees of the UHJ (Argyris and Schön, 1991).

While the other participants illuminated the concepts of belonging and making sense of the world with more depth, some participants alluded to the concept of duty. BH6, when asked about the notion of salvation in Baha'i, explained how the faith is about improvement:

It's a different... It's a desire to want to improve. It's very strong on ethics in the faith, improving your life. Trying to overcome your difficulties, progress and develop. Become a better person.

BH5's narrative confirmed this, and expanded by explaining how the principle of the Golden Rule is often applied by individual Baha'i. He explained that Baha'i communities are to come together to effect change in their local area.

On an individual level, you do your individual things. You treat other people as best as you can, as nice as you possibly can. You share your faith with people, if they want to accept it then great but if they don't want to accept it then that's also fine and up to them - there's an individual responsibility to tell people if you like... But communities come together to effect some transformation in where they live. Maybe they will reach out to their friends on a community level, invite them to devotional level, or if there are enough children then run children's classes.

It would be hard to definitively suggest this sense of duty is a source of empowerment for these individuals. However, there is an emphasis on this within the faith which cannot be overlooked as part of the full narrative of empowerment for a Baha'i. Certainly, the other participants all mentioned the ethical framework the faith provides as being a continuous source of encouragement in their community and for them as individuals. It would seem, on some level, the framework provides a scaffolding for the

adherents' lives, which enables them to move forward, safe in the knowledge they are on the right path (Argyris and Schön, 1991).

5.6.4 Empowerment Through Persecution & Solidifying of the Faith

Persecution, and the subsequent solidifying of their faith after conversion, provided consistent empowerment to the adherent. Indeed, the nature of persecution happening in the world was mentioned by several participants, and it gave them a sense of renewed passion that they were following the correct path. For those sharing this information, the underlying question was: "why would we get persecuted if we weren't correct?"

The most blatant example of empowerment through persecution comes from BH4, whose journey to becoming Baha'i started with witnessing the intense persecution of the Baha'i faith shortly after the Iranian revolution in 1978. BH4 explained there were daily issues for the Baha'i in her home country, and for her as the wife of a Baha'i man. Having already fought her family for the right to get married to a Baha'i, she was then faced with fighting for her job after an unfair dismissal. During this time, the Iranian government made many offers to get her to go on record against the Baha'i. BH4 testified:

They [the government] would bribe me. Whatever you could imagine. If I get divorced in our country of Iran, children belong to father [sic]. If I get separated, they offered to get a house for me. They offered me a job near to my mum and dad's house and they could support me. They offered me a big amount of money. They offered me a husband. They offered get the children from the husband and give it to me as long as I just go and say they're bad [sic].

Remarkably, the persecution BH4 experienced for simply being married to a Baha'i, despite not being one, drove her closer to the faith. BH4 further explained:

[My previous] government's attitude gradually, gradually, made me to realise that is not as bad as they say. At that moment, at that time of my life, obvious I was busy with children. Carrying a normal life... To me, if you... if they were right,

I would do it. But they were not right. There was nothing that I could point out of this people are doing wrong. They were saying for example, Baha'i community get money from American or English or Israeli governments, or imperialists; whoever you call it. It wasn't true - I never saw any money!

The experience of other participants was not as radical, though they often still faced discrimination from their family and other relationships after the conversion to the Baha'i faith.

BH6 clearly regretted his parents' hurt after his conversion to Baha'i. However, BH6 does not specifically state this was an empowering aspect to his faith, nor did it give him more zeal to continue – it merely caused tension. Nevertheless, the other aspects, such as belonging and making sense of the world, empowered him to remain in the faith. BH5 stated his mistreatment was limited and mostly involved his friends thinking he was strange. Again, this is not specifically something he mentions as empowering. However, the oppression of others around the world was cited as more of “a sign”. Persecution encouraged them to solidify their belief, that their faith being true is why people persecute them in the first place. They do not take delight in the suffering of their wider community, hence why they would not suggest it was encouraging in the traditional sense of the word. Indeed, they feel moved to help them, pray for them, and have a solidified view that their faith must have worth.

BH2 highlights the indifference of the West to the persecution of Baha'i in the lands of its origin. BH2 also vehemently believes this is evidence of the fact the Baha'i are needed to bring about a new world order of peace and justice. This is further referred to by BH5 and BH6, although they are undecided if the Baha'i, as they're known now, will be the ones who will bring about the change, or if change will be a subsequent development of

their faith. Nevertheless, they are empowered enough to suggest the ethical framework of the Baha'i faith is the conduit for global change in one form or another.

Whilst persecution is not supported in the literature as an empowering action, the ways in which organisations and other individuals react in the face of persecution can provide empowerment for the person witnessing it. According to Maton & Salem (1995), support structures and a belief system are foundational in organisational empowerment. Equally, the Baha'i faith contextualises persecution in a geo-political way, which provides understanding for the reasons underpinning persecution. This is also empowering for the individual (Christens, 2012; Maton, 2008; Peterson, 2014). The participants in this study were able to contextualise persecution in a way which gave further credence to their belief, empowering them to continue in the organisation and experience other forms of empowerment through role structure and inspired leadership (Maton & Salem, 1995).

5.6.5 Empowerment: Baha'i Specific Themes.

Perhaps due to cultural differences and comprehension issues, BH1 seemed to be very matter of fact about the faith. He did not necessarily give explicit information which could be interpreted as him being empowered through understanding or through community. However, BH1 was an exceedingly self-actualised individual who spoke more specifically about how the Baha'i faith is very personal to him. Although it is a social faith, the onus for belief falls on the individual's shoulders rather than the community.

A confounding variable in this set of interviews was that some of the participants have an internal locus of control whilst others have an external locus of control. It would stand to reason that BH1 had an internal locus of control, while those who have demonstrated

a sense of empowerment through community would have a more external locus of control. Research shows the positive effects of religion can vary depending on an individual's locus of control (Osbourne et al., 2016).

5.7 Chapter Conclusion

The application of empowerment theory into the context of Baha'i conversion provides a sufficient explanation for how these participants rationally chose their religious lived identity. All the participants, in their own way, articulated they had a clear support network (Maton & Salem, 1995) with opportunity to serve in structured roles (Beairsto & Ruohotie, 2003; Bowen & Lawler, 1992). The UHJ has clearly helped to scaffold their lived reality by providing opportunity for the participants to influence and shape internal organisational culture (Argyris and Schön, 1991). Furthermore, the central Baha'i belief in Bahá'u'lláh as an inspirational leader reflects the impact a figure of this stature can have on individual empowerment (Maton & Salem, 1995; Sadler, 2003).

As outlined in Chapter 3, the literature on empowerment is applicable to a minority religious setting, and this study has further evidenced this. The Baha'i are empowered through the organisational structures in place, and this leads to their psychological empowerment. Ultimately, Baha'i convert because they can make an empowered rational decision.

6.0 CASE STUDY: PAGANISMS

Paganism is significantly different to the other religions included in this research because it is an inclusive umbrella term for a plethora of individual traditions, such as Wiccan, Druidism, and others. Whilst all Druids and Wiccans can be identified as Pagans, not all Pagans would identify as Wiccan or Druid (Stewart, 2011).

Paganism does not have a rigid organisation structure, nor does it have rigid doctrine and dogma due to it being an umbrella term for a plurality of minority religions. Nevertheless, there are also characteristics of the minority religions which make Paganisms an entirely suitable and appropriate candidate for comparison with Jehovah's Witnesses, Baha'i and Scientologies; Paganisms also emerged in the nineteenth/twentieth century, is treated with suspicion, and is considered an alternative to mainstream religious hegemony.

6.1 Key Terms and Issues of Perception

Definitions of Paganism are contentious: "the term Paganism as an *-ism*, implying a coherent set of beliefs and practices, is misleading since Paganism is not a coherent and unified movement" (Bogdan, 2009: 81). Despite the difficulties, several prominent scholars have attempted to define Paganisms. Michael York (2003: 157) defines Paganism as "an affirmation of interactive and polymorphic sacred relationship by the individual or community with the tangible, sentient and/or nonempirical". York (2004) develops this further by suggesting there are different levels of Paganisms and puts forward his notion of "deep Paganism" which he suggests can also be identified as "root religion" ([see 6.2](#)). The principle being that Paganisms are an innate human response to the natural world. Defining Paganism as a "root-religion" not only places Paganism as the origin of all religion, but also redefines other religions: "The other world religions

are in one manner or another either modifications or rejections of some if not most of the natural features of Paganism.” (ibid: 16). An alternative to “root religion” is “nature religion”, another term which contextualises and helps define Paganisms. There is a recognition that the Pagan religious tradition “venerates nature” whilst also accepting pluralistic deities (Jones, 1998). Paganisms are not necessarily religious traditions seeking the supernatural revelation of a singular deity (although some Pagans have this belief), but they encourage the adherent to ground themselves within the broader context of their natural surroundings (Clifton, 2004).

Potentially the most prominent term connected with Paganisms is “magick” (or magic), which is an integral aspect of religious practice for adherents. Magick is hard to define because there is not a consensus on how it should be integrated into religious adherent identity (Clifton, 2004; Harvey, 1997; 2007), with York (2004) suggesting aspects of Pagan pathways do not receive equal value among individual adherents.

6.1.1 Magick

Within popular vernacular, magick is often referred to as an “occult” practice and most associated connotations emerge out of the Counter Cult Movement (Oake, forthcoming). The term “occult” is part of wider “cult” rhetoric, pejoratively referring to minority religions in everyday discourses (Thomas & Graham-Hyde, forthcoming). For the everyday Pagan, their use of magick will be met with scepticism by those who uphold an anticult perspective toward Paganisms. This attitude has the potential to progress into hostility on a societal level due to pejorative stereotypes emerging out of the “satanic panic” (Hughes, 2017). It stands to reason that a Pagan identity requires a courageous “coming out” process ([see 6.3.1](#)).

Sian Reid points out how an understanding of magick predicated upon pejorative attitudes toward the occult is a Western cultural bias which does not accept magick practice as having validity or “real” existence. Magick, therefore, has been viewed as irrational, pathological and deviant, which elicits scepticism and hostility in non-believers (Reid, 1996). Contemporary Pagans live a reality which contrasts with these popular discourses because magick reflects an adherent’s desire for self-control and their dedication to the discipline of their religious beliefs.

The act of magick is often referred to as an “art” which is predicated upon causing change to happen through will power. Reid (1996: 150) outlines magick:

“[b]elief in one’s ability to perform magic involves coming to accept a belief that one is capable of causing change (that one is powerful) and that the change will occur according to one’s will (that one is in control)”.

Adherents practice magick with the intention to will tangible change through thought (Reid, 1996).

The practice of magick permeates other aspects of the lived reality of contemporary Pagans. Shelley Rabinovitch (1992) found Pagans were likely to have had difficult or abusive experiences, usually in childhood. Reid (1996) uses Rabinovitch’s observation in conjunction with abuse survivor literature to further demonstrate magick is an adherent’s desire to take control of their life after a traumatic experience. Contemporary Pagans practice introspective reflection as part of a wider corpus of understanding their identity in the universe, a practice believed to increase the effectiveness of magick. This is an act which is synonymous with techniques developed by trauma victims, knowing oneself truly and acknowledging personal needs aids healing processes (Ried, 1996).

Reid, therefore, is suggesting that one of the reasons for contemporary Pagans articulating religiosity as their “true self” is due to the practice of magick becoming a helpful tool to those who have survived abuse, even if this is not specifically articulated by adherents in this manner (Reid, 1996). Becoming a Pagan feels like the right decision for adherents (Adler, 1986; Marron, 1989; Reid, 1996), which the participants in this research also expressed.

Magick, as a contemporary Pagan practice, does not require a causal relationship with the physical world for it to have meaning to the adherent. Whilst many Pagans do believe the physical world can be wilfully changed, other Pagans accept magick as a metaphor for their relationship with the meta-physical world. Ultimately, contemporary Pagans are choosing to engage with magick, mastering visualisation and meditation, by understanding their identity using the context of a Pagan pathway they have actively chosen for themselves (Reid, 1996).

6.1.2 Wiccans and Druids

While there are many unique Pagan pathways, there are collective names which can be applied to groups of adherents. Focus is given to Wicca and Druidism because these were the two Pagan pathways participants in this research self-defined as.

Vivianne Crowley (1998: 170) believes the term Wicca derives from the “Anglo-Saxon word for ‘Witch’ and has been used in its present sense since the 1950’s”. The definition allows for a broad category of Wicca to develop, focussing on the “witch” identity through Pagan practices.

Druidry, as with the broader term Paganism, is harder to define. At the time of publication, Emma R. Orr (1999) was the joint chief of the British Druid Order. Orr states defining Druidry is not an easy task, but attempts to define it as:

[A]n attitude, an understanding, an exquisitely simple and natural philosophy of living. For a great many it is a rich and ancient religion, a mystical spirituality. For others it's simply a guiding way of life. It is absolutely open and free for anyone to discover (Orr, 2020: N.P.).

The attempted outline of what Druidry is only confirms the confounding nature of definitions.

The lived reality of individual Wiccans and Druids is often unique to the adherent, and yet many adherents will clearly self-define as belonging to one of these (among others) sub-groups, much like the participants in this research. Interestingly, the definitions outlined above are provided by “insiders” researching Paganisms (see [2.5](#) & [6.4](#)) and are intentionally broad, which demonstrates the emphasis on autonomy in religious identity formation among contemporary Pagans.

6.2 A Brief History of Paganisms

The history of Paganisms is layered, because the interpretations of its history are dynamic and continuously evolving. Equally, contemporary Pagans have begun to differentiate between history, myth, and practice in a bid to honour the “old religion” while maintain a contemporary rationality (York, 2003).

Modern witchcraft practice was rebirthed in England in the 1940s and 1950s. Gerald Gardner claimed he had discovered the remnants of a witch “cult”, and with this discovery declared witchcraft had descended through the generations without gaps in practice (Gardner, 1959). According to Gardner, the witch trials in the seventeenth

century were specifically targeting this same religious tradition and the work of Margaret Murray (1970) also connected with this group. Murray was a professor who stumbled across a “witch cult” and published her findings. She posited the history of this group can be traced back through many generations. Her status as a professor legitimised the history further, and it was not until the 1970’s that her work was eventually dismissed as inaccurate (Pearson, 2003). This historical view of witchcraft was initially accepted by many Pagan adherents as a source of continuity for their practice (Cornish, 2009), and many contemporary Pagans continue to adhere to this history.

As a result of Gardner’s publications, Wicca began as a minority religion (York, 2003). The practice of witchcraft has shaped and grown the Pagan expression, along with the emergent histories in response to Gardner’s claims (Cornish, 2009).

Joanne Pearson (2003) demonstrated the argument posed by Gardner as an historical inaccuracy. Pearson identified how modern Wicca is shaped by those who maintain historical myths as part of their identity, including persecution anxiety, distrust of academia, and the empowerment of women. Therefore, modern Wicca synthesises the historic view of the witch with the modern reality of witchcraft practice (ibid). As demonstrated in this research ([see 6.5.6](#)), the “root religion” remains an aspect of contemporary Pagan lived reality, despite Gardner’s refuted narrative. My findings support L. Dorna McGee’s (2005) understanding of individual and organisational legitimisation in Neo-Pagan contexts as being a process of connecting to ancient (or “root”) religion. Evidently, claims of being an “old religion” or a re-emergence of witches is a large aspect of contemporary Pagan identity.

Contemporary Druidry can trace roots back further than Wicca. The roots of modern Druidry began in the seventeenth century with growing romanticism for the lost histories of indigenous people (Hutton, 2009; Cusack, 2012). Generally, commentators on Druidry during this period suggest it should be viewed as an early pre-cursor to Christianity. Although, Michael Cooper (2008) believes academia adopted a Protestant Christian view of religion, and eventually turned on Druidry as being part of the historical imagination of the time, vilifying them as anti-Christian. Cooper (2009, 2011) argues modern Druids seek to legitimise their lived reality through the “ancientization” of their religious identity, claiming a lineage which pre-dates majority religions such as Christianity.

For the contemporary Pagan, a process of what James R. Lewis (2003) would describe as “social legitimation” is seated within an “ancientization” (Cooper, 2009; 2011) of religiosity. However, Murphy Pizza (2009) argues Pagans are more likely to identify with a subjective, personal experience as part of a “religious authentication”. Pizza suggests intense and emotional subjective experience is more likely to seduce an individual to follow a Pagan pathway. Sabina Magliocco (2004), similarly, argues ethnic Pagans are drawn in through experience rather than traditions and identities embroiled with ancestry. Irrespective of whether contemporary Pagans are more likely to go through a process of “social legitimation” or “religious authentication”, a lived reality grounded within a contemporary social context is important to everyday Pagans.

6.3 Living as a Pagan in Contemporary Society

Navigating a Pagan pathway as part of an everyday lived experience is impacted by contemporary society norms and values. Pagans often feel empowered by their belief ([see 6.5](#)) but might face challenge or hostility from pervading popular misconceptions

about their religious practice. Nevertheless, as demonstrated below, contemporary society's technological advancements have also become entrenched aspects of a Pagan lived reality.

6.3.1 Coming out of the 'Broom Closet'

Gwendolyn Reece's quantitative survey of Pagans numerically reveals contemporary society's ill-informed views of Paganisms and the impact that has on the individual. Reece (2014: 160) uncovered that "[t]he sixth most prevalent and seventh most severe obstacle to practice identified by the respondents is that they have to hide their identity because of prejudice". According to the study, 60.8% of the sample suggested the prejudice impedes on their practice, and 56.3% claimed they withhold their identity from someone. Reece also noted respondents choose to hide their practice from a range of entities including the legal system, health practitioners and colleagues. They did this, argues Reece, for several reasons, including the fear of their identity negatively impacting their career or being denied fair access to social institutions.

Reece (2016) identifies issues of the stigmatized identity often faced by Pagans, highlighting false accusations and non-traditional households (for example, LGBTQI+ households) lead to perception issues for Pagans. Following the "Satanic Panic" in 1980's USA²⁶, there is a continued level of stigma attached to Paganisms. In the survey, 39.4% of the respondents said there is a risk that false accusations will be made against them because of being openly Pagan. A further 12.4% answered false accusations are very likely to happen. Additionally, the diverse identity of respondents (in terms of sexuality and gender) meant many contemporary Pagans face layered stigmatisation.

²⁶ See Hughes (2017) for more detail.

The impact of the stigmatization of Paganisms is manifold; particularly, issues surrounding Pagan children, such as parental custody, bullying, and the witnessing of domestic violence due to Pagan practice and belief. Inevitably, all the above lends itself toward institutional discrimination against Pagans – especially within the educational, legal, and social sectors (Reece, 2016).

Reece's findings were corroborated by the findings of Manuel Tejada (2015) who states that "the broom closet is real". Suggesting Pagans experience a process of "coming out" like that of the LGBT+ community. Among Tejada's participants, 100% reported the "coming out" process in some form. According to Tejada, Pagans are twice as likely to experience discrimination in the workplace as those who adhere to an Abrahamic faith (Tejada, 2015).

6.3.2 Online Pagans

The internet has enabled religious adherents to innovatively construct their identity, expressing their ideal lived reality by engaging with others through online forums, multiplayer games, virtual courses, and websites. Equally, the internet also benefits offline adherence as religious community groups and organisations can advertise events, connect individuals outside of meetings and provide information to the public about belief and praxis. Contemporary Pagans utilise the internet, engaging with online religion and religion online (Cowan, 2005; [see also 3.5](#)).

Using Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann's (1967) theory of the social construction of reality, Douglas E. Cowan suggests the Internet provides opportunity and potential, both implicitly and explicitly, for the construction of online and offline identity. With the development of the Internet, contemporary Pagans can either practice their religion online or become part of an online religion (Cowan, 2005), because the Internet provides

visibility to otherwise invisible communities, adherents are able to connect with others they would unlikely have become acquainted with otherwise. Contemporary Pagans construct and maintain their lived reality by minimizing the risk of stigmatisation through anonymity and serving as a conduit for religious conversation and practice, which would be impractical or impossible offline (Cowan, 2005).

The anonymity of the internet helps alleviate the stress of “coming out of the broom closet” ([see 6.3.1](#)) as online communities provide encouragement, support and advice to adherents facing potential adversity for identifying as Pagan. Cowan (2005) argues these discussion forums are indicative of an offline Pagan lived reality, illuminating a willingness to openly identify as Pagan in non-Pagan dominant culture. For contemporary Pagans, including participants of this research ([see 6.5.5](#) & [8.2](#)), the internet is a powerful tool in enabling adherents to “come out of the broom closet”.

The offline reality of everyday Pagans requires books, notes, and memory if one is to be effective in magick, an important aspect of Pagan practice ([see 6.1.1](#)). However, the internet can act as a “stock of knowledge” in which contemporary Pagans can consult websites, engage with communities, and visit online libraries to enhance spell craft and other religious practice (Cowan, 2005). Social media has also led to trends seeking to provide information to Pagans and non-Pagans, developing an online “stock of knowledge”, with phenomena such as “Witchtok” ([see 6.5.5](#)), a collection of content producers on Tik Tok related to witchcraft and Wicca. For contemporary Pagans, this stock of knowledge also becomes a tool for conversion, meaning it can also be effectively utilized as a recruitment tool if a Pagan community became inclined to advertise. As the internet has developed, so, too, has the willingness to live mediated identities online – projecting an ideal religious self as an online self through social media

(Dawson & Cowan, 2004; McClure, 2016). The interconnectivity social media provides has led to higher probability that an individual will be exposed to Pagan content. Therefore, contemporary adherents are increasingly likely to learn about, and come to define as, Pagans through an online, interactive, stock of knowledge.

While some contemporary Pagans live their religion entirely online, most Pagans have a blend of offline and online reality by finding harmony between their connection to nature and their desire to connect with like-minded adherents. This has led to an integration of hardware and software into the practice of contemporary Pagans; for example, using oils to enhance “web witching” and utilising blank screens as “crystal balls” (Cowan, 2005). Of course, this has led to tension between Pagans who reject the use of technology integration into what they would consider a nature religion, and Pagans who view the internet and other technological advances as magickal tools provided by the gods and goddesses. Those who reject technological integration live their Pagan religion through natural means, viewing the embodiment of life into ritual and practice as a requirement; technology cannot be considered Pagan as it is devoid of natural life (Cowan, 2005).

The integration of technology within contemporary Pagan lived reality has certainly widened the participation and increased the accessibility of Paganisms. However, this increasingly online lived reality, and the accessibility it affords, presents challenges to everyday adherents seeking legitimate and authentic leaders to learn and gain inspiration from. The internet allows for self-labelled Pagan leaders to emerge who create online communities and stocks of knowledge for everyday adherents to engage with. The open-source nature of Paganisms requires minimal checks and balances of so-called leaders - everyday Pagans will instead vote with their feet (Cowan, 2004).

Ultimately, the development of technology and increased inter-connectedness cannot be underestimated in contemporary Pagan religious identity construction.

6.3.3 Non-normative Gender and Sexuality

Historically, Paganisms have reflected the heteronormative gender roles and sexuality of wider society. However, contemporary Pagans who identify as LGBT are actively challenging the viability of heteronormativity as a status quo for those following Pagan pathways, providing a safe space for Pagans who do not subscribe to male/female and straight/gay binaries (Krämer, 2012).

For many contemporary Pagans, the intricacies of sexuality and gender are entwined due to the development of magickal practice and theological ideologies concerning deities (Krämer, 2012; Urban, 2006). The inclusion of sex(uality) within magickal practice, such as the Wiccan ritual of the Great Rite²⁷ is not new, the Great Rite has been practiced since the early twentieth century. The origins of the ritual, and sexual practice in magick generally, has a long tradition in Western esoteric practice and is specifically explored in the writings of Aleister Crowley and Gerald Gardner (Bogdan, 2009; Urban, 2006).

Hugh Urban (2004) insists sexual magick is not merely a “metaphor for spiritual experience” (ibid: 696) by highlighting how it was not until the mid-nineteenth century that sexual magick became part of a systematic approach to magickal practice. Sexual magick is used to manipulate the lived environment through “the explicit use of sexual intercourse and genital orgasm” as it is a “source of creative magical power” (ibid: 696).

²⁷ The Wiccan Great Rite is a ritual Wiccans believe is a representation of the lunar goddess and solar god; “by engaging in heterosexual intercourse (usually in private), celebrants would enact a primal, erotic union of active and receptive forces that mirrored and participated in the ongoing creation of the universe” (Krämer, 2012: 391).

Christine Hoff Krämer (2012) outlines how this form of magical practice requires a polarity, and heteronormative associations with the god/ess and priest/ess dominated early formations of British Wiccan covens. Magickal rituals were performed “sky-clad” (a Pagan term for ritualistic nudity), and the historic lived reality of Wiccans was predicated upon heteronormative values which reflected wider societal values overall.

Many contemporary Pagans have challenged the underlying values of early formations of sexual magick and theological ideology. This change is most likely Wicca extending beyond its British roots, as many women, lesbian, and gay individuals across the United States began to convert to Pagan pathways (Aburrow, 2009). Kraemer (2012) explains how American Wiccans led a gradual rejection of sexual polarity, which was previously seen as essential for worship and magick, through developing theologies around the notions of god/ess energies co-existing within every adherent. For contemporary Pagans, this renders the essentialism of heterosexuality obsolete, enabling them to forge their own understandings of sexuality and gender. This was a gradual change spanning the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s.

The individualised nature of Paganisms allows everyday adherents to explore their own theological understandings of gods and goddesses, some positing queer and transgender deities also exist (Krämer, 2012; Urban, 2006). Mary Jo Neitz (2000) found, despite the continued use of heterosexual imagery in the descriptions of gods, goddesses and Pagan practice, the individual Pagan lives a reality of openness toward gender and sexual fluidity.

In a culture where norms and values might marginalise or suppress non-heteronormative gender and sexuality, Pagans sometimes embody societal norms

despite a religious counter-culture narrative on these issues (Aburrows, 2009). For contemporary Pagans, marginalisation into sub-groups can sometimes be a lived reality for LGBTQ adherents. Nevertheless, there is a significant proportion of Pagans who identify as gay, lesbian, or bisexual. Helen Berger, Evan Leach and Leigh Shaffer (2003) found that 28.3% of American Pagans identified as either gay, lesbian, or bisexual which outweighs the percentage within the wider population.

In the Pagan Census Revisited, the most recent endeavour of its kind, James Lewis and Inga Tøllefsen (2013) uncovered data concerning gender differences among contemporary Pagans. The most substantial finding is the female heavy population of the Pagan community; of the 8000 respondents “2268 (28.1 percent) were male, 5709 (70.8 percent) were female, and another 81 (1 percent) self-identifying as “transitioning.” (Lewis and Tøllefsen, 2013: 68). The Pagan Census Revisited revealed there are not significant differences between male and female Pagans in their practice, pathway into the religion, or openness about their religious identity. There are some expected differences between male and females that are concurrent with wider societal norms, such as political ideology. However, an interesting difference emerged with how Pagans indicated their sexuality was lived:

A comparable percentage of female and male respondents (approximately two-thirds) self-identified as heterosexual. A full 17 percent of male respondents were gay, however only 3.7 percent of female respondents were lesbian. Rather, 26.1 percent of females self-identified as bisexual as opposed to 11.4 percent of male bisexuals (Lewis and Tøllefsen, 2013: 74).

This evidence demonstrates the openness of the Pagan community, comprised of many who live non-heteronormative realities, like participants in this research ([see 6.5.4](#)). Ultimately, the contemporary Pagan lived reality is one of acceptance and individuality,

allowing everyday adherents to self-identify their sexuality and gender, which later amalgamates into their religious practice.

6.4 Brief Commentary on “Insider” / “Outsider” Debates

Defining Paganisms, and the derivatives within, is an example of the difficulties which can arise when conducting research in this field. It is important to understand how the research in this area is not straight forward. Historically, and currently, there is a tension between adherents, scholars and those who occupy both spaces, particularly concerning the credibility (and subsequent validity) of who is conducting the research.

The insider/outsider debate in the study of Paganisms is prominent. Much of the research is completed by insiders. In other words, those who adhere to one or more Paganisms are the same who publish research. Of course, there are also outsiders; however, they are not the majority, as noted by Helen Berger (2015). Nevertheless, the positionality of the researcher can impact the conclusions drawn from research and caused discussion over research into Paganisms ([see 2.5](#)).

Inevitably, the tensions highlighted by Chas Clifton (2015) lead to discreditation of written histories, methodological approaches, and findings of “outsider” led research. On occasion, it is noted how insiders can also have a superiority complex, and this influences the impact of the research by outsiders. Helen A. Berger reflects on this whilst biographing her Paganisms research, and suggests she is less likely to be cited or be invited to collaborate but argues as an outsider she has more credibility with others outside of Paganism (Berger, 2015).

Graham Harvey (2015) puts forward a more nuanced way to traverse the debate about insider/outsider and objectivity verses subjectivity. Harvey draws conclusions from

research based around the Māori model of being a “guest”, suggesting there is a “both/and” approach, in which a researcher can be “a respectful but critical not-fully-native but entirely participative person” (ibid: 111). Harvey conveys a powerful insight into the way in which insider research has evolved and pushed the definitions of what one constitutes as research in the first place.

The above discussion highlights some theoretical issues in approaching research, whilst simultaneously demonstrating a perceived need to gatekeep Pagan communities. As mentioned earlier ([see 6.3.1](#)), those who identify as Pagan often feel the need to conceal or mediate their identities among non-Pagans. I would argue this attitude has sometimes leaked into the insider/outsider discussion as Pagans who disagree with, or wish to nuance the conclusions of, an outsider might feel the observations do not chime with their lived experience as an adherent. Likewise, due to phenomenon such as the Satanic Panic and other contentious events which have negatively stereotyped Pagans, some insiders might feel there is a potential for misinterpreted reality to negatively impact the Pagan community further.

6.5 Findings and Main Themes from Pagan Participants

What follows is a detailed analysis of the six qualitative interviews gathered on the participants’ life narratives. As a result of the data, several themes emerged, some of which were different to the themes which emerged in previous chapters, for example, empowerment through choice or leaving Christianity. The analysis in this chapter is specifically concerning Paganisms, however further detailed analysis and discussion is provided in later in this thesis ([see 8.0](#)).

6.5.1 Participants

There were six participants, all sourced from the Northwest of England, although not all grew up there. Most of the participants are heavily involved with the Wicca tradition, however, many of the participants are also adamant they are not part of any set path and will employ aspects of other Pagan traditions to suit their system of belief accordingly. There is a varied view on the existence of gods and goddesses, but the belief in deities is not a defining feature of any of the participants lived reality of their religion.

All the participants are white, mostly female, and of similar ages. Accessing a more varied sample was difficult due to last minute cancellations. However, my sampling is in keeping with the overall demographics of Paganisms, as I found most young female participants (Crowley, 2014; Lewis & Tøllefsen, 2013).

PG1 is a white, predominately working class ([See 2.6](#)), female in her 20s who had recently graduated university. She grew up in the Northwest of England. Her childhood was traumatic, which impacted her education, where until recently she was unable to thrive. She currently resides in the Northwest of England, but not the same location she grew up. She defines herself as an “atheistic Pagan” and does not ascribe to a set pathway in Paganisms.

PG2 is a white, middle-class male ([See 2.6](#)) in his 20s who grew up in rural Northwest, England. Prior to identifying as a Pagan, he identified as Christian until his late teen years. He is relatively new to Pagan belief and defines himself as a “British Druid”. While he has some beliefs from other Pagan pathways, he seldom commits to any rituals or practices outside of his chosen pathway.

PG3 is a white, predominantly middle-class ([See 2.6](#)) female in her 20s. She grew up in urban Northwest, England. Her upbringing was mostly Christian, via her grandparent's influence, until her teenage years when she started to explore Paganisms. She identifies as a Gardnerian Wiccan and has a belief in deities, but they are not gender specific.

PG4 is a white, working-class male ([See 2.6](#)) in his 20s. He grew up in urban Northwest, England. His upbringing was relatively conservative Christian, via school and his grandparents, although his parents were hands off in their approach to religious instruction. He defines as a Pagan but does not ascribe to a set pathway, instead preferring a blend from mostly "witch" Paganisms.

PG5 is a white, middle-class ([See 2.6](#)), non-cis individual in their 20s who grew up in an urban context in West Midlands, England. Their religious experience as a child was conservative Christian through the influence of their town and schools. They identify as Pagan, but do not strictly adhere to a set pathway, although they admit their practice is mostly animist.

PG6 is a white working-class female ([See 2.6](#)) in her 20s who grew up in rural Northwest, England. She was exposed to Paganism in her early teens through a Pagan family with whom she was friendly. She was involved with Spiritualist churches through her teens, which were mostly Christian based. In her late teens, she began to identify as Pagan, and does not adhere to a set path.

6.5.2 Empowerment Through Freedom of Choice

Throughout the interviews, a discourse developed which displayed empowerment through freedom of choice within the participants' system of belief. Some of the participants implicitly stated one of the aspects behind choosing to live as Pagans is due

to their ability to “pick and mix” their beliefs from across all traditions, even other religions. Equally, the lack of rigidity experienced by the participants further empowered them to continue as Pagans; it was clear their view of other religions was dogmatic and strict, which made them more likely to find freedom through Paganism (Jindra, 2014, [see also 3.4.7](#)).

PG1 sought out a system of belief which would suit her, as she stated she felt the lack of one was an issue which needed to be addressed. PG1 stated:

I felt like there was a gap in myself. I felt like everyone around me had a faith, a religion, a whatever. They had a belief system, and I didn't! I always felt there was a gap in me.

PG1 began to explain how she identified as an “atheistic Pagan” and she respected the openness and lack of belief in a singular truth. PG1 is tentatively involved with a Coven and is trying to decide, over the course of a year, whether she would like to be initiated. However, when discussing this further, PG1 conveyed concern this would become too rigid:

I am not sure I want to go down that path yet because that's the idea of structure for me. So, I don't know if the idea of individual practice is something that's more appealing to me than group. I don't like the idea of group structure.

The freedom to choose one's path is a value PG1 holds tightly. Equally, it is arguable the ability to choose, in and of itself, is empowering, and thus this level of choice is a form of religious empowerment (Christens, 2012; Maton 2008, Peterson, 2014; [see also 3.6](#)).

Overall, PG1's concept of truth is that there is not one truth:

I still don't believe that there is one truth. I think that Wicca isn't the only truth either – it's dharmic – it's multiple paths that lead to the same result.

Despite the wrong use of the term “Dharmic”, PG1 is conveying how she is unable to believe in a singular truth, which reflects the findings of Davies and Freathy’s (2014) study into marketplace spirituality. PG1 has no set pattern in her consumption of religious identity. Ultimately, it is this inability to conform which has led to her being empowered to reject Abrahamic religions as being non-viable in the construction of her religious identity.

PG2 did not speak at length about the freedom to choose, and this is arguably because he has chosen a specific path to follow. However, his discourse about how Christianity is not suitable for him did refer to the notion of being empowered through free choice.

At one point during the interview, PG2 stated:

Within Paganism it’s very much your belief is personal to you. We’ll discuss it with you but we’re not going to say any way is wrong. It’s sort of like no judgement at all. You’ll have one Druid that does things a completely different way to me.

Whilst PG2 has chosen a specific pathway for himself, he iterates the respect he has for those different in their lived reality of the religion. Equally, whilst describing the process of discovering Paganisms, PG2 went on to say:

One of the things that appealed to me when reading about it was all things said from people who weren’t Pagans was that the Pagan community was one of the most caring communities. There was none of the ‘if you don’t believe in what I believe then you’re wrong’ sort of thing. Which I loved.

PG2 is being empowered by the community (Maton & Salem, 1995). However, because PG2 is not in a community that regularly meets, the narrative here highlights how PG2 is also drawn by a particular Pagan belief of caring for; this supports Jindra’s (2014) conversion theory that beliefs are an important “pull” factor ([see 3.4.7](#)). This participant was empowered through the ability to choose and be respected for that choice; it is the

lack of dogma empowering his Pagan faith and enabling him to acquire rights, reducing his perceived marginalisation, and granting decision making power of his own identity (Christens, 2012; Maton 2008, Peterson, 2014; [see also 3.4.7](#)).

Whilst these participants all display a level of empowerment through the freedom to choose one's faith, not all adherents across the varying streams of Paganisms will consistently emulate this. PG3 highlighted this in explaining her experiences of sixth form and university Pagan societies. She noted there was not a full acceptance of varying belief within the societies. The following experience is from sixth form:

I joined a Wiccan group and the girl that ran it was about a year older than me. She was very 'this is the way it is' and when I questioned 'don't some people believe this' or 'I see that this holiday is this'... she was very much like 'no, you're wrong'.

And PG3 reminisced this experience from university:

It was a full Pagan society and there was a Satanist there and I had only gone to two meetings, and it was my second meeting. The Satanist finally said he was a Satanist and just got some really nasty comments from people and no one really stuck up for him. Except from me, and I was like 'well, you know all of you are sat there complaining about how people judge Wiccans, and most Satanists are exactly the same'.

PG3 does not explicitly outline how the freedom of choice is empowering to her. However, her previous lack of freedom was disempowering, due to not being involved in a supportive community where she felt comfortable being herself. She reflected how this is a formative time in one's identity, and so the discrepancy in belief and praxis displayed by these Pagans at the time can be explained away in that sense. Freedom of choice in belief is empowering for PG3, it provides her with autonomy and ability to reduce marginalisation of herself and others (Christens, 2012; Maton 2008, Peterson,

2014). A clear value which has emerged out of her Pagan belief is this notion of choice overall.

There was a sense PG4 felt the freedom of choice was a positive aspect of Paganisms. While specifically discussing the belief in deities, PG4 expressed he appreciated the lack of judgement in the Pagan community about theistic belief, or lack of:

I know there are sort of deities within Paganism, but then as well within Paganism is the freedom to do what you want with your own religion. I really really like that aspect rather than set rules of 'you must do this and that'. There's no one centralised body looking over everything with that much power in the world.

The latter part of PG4's explanation refers to the hegemony of the Christian church, of which he was particularly critical. This lack of authoritative structure and freedom to define one's own religion is very much an empowering factor behind PG4's conversion – which he also explicitly linked to his rejection of Christianity and the embracing of his sexuality (see [6.5.2](#), [6.5.3](#) and [6.5.4](#)). In particular, he was able to reduce marginalisation through his new religious identity (Christens, 2012; Maton 2008, Peterson, 2014).

PG5 referred to Pagan as a label they chose to identify as. They did not wish to put that label on someone who had not chosen it for themselves:

I started hanging out with people in my community and I realised we believed the same things. I finally found somewhere I am respected and accepted for who I am. A few years later, I'm going to take this label, it feels right and that is who I am.

PG5 also highlights a level of empowerment through being in a close circle of friends which they referred to as their community. Whilst they are still a solitary practitioner of Paganism, the notion of being around others and having a community they chose for themselves is not only empowerment through belonging, but also empowerment

through the freedom to be able to choose that community without consequence to their faith. Subsequently, they went on to describe how they have since lost contact with their initial community, and they did not feel the need for one – further highlighting the empowerment to be able to choose a community (or not) without cost ([see 6.5.5](#)).

PG5 further illuminates this theme, stating they wanted to wait until they were 18 to fully commit, despite being involved from approximately 13 years old:

I was maybe 13 or 14, might have been a bit earlier than that. When I confirmed, it was just before my 18th birthday. I don't really think that kids should really be able to make lifelong decisions, even then, I was going to wait until 18 to commit to something.

This demonstrates PG5's commitment to freedom of choice and the level of importance they placed on this. Choice is an empowering factor, but PG5 feels there is a responsibility which comes with the choice. PG5 has a mind-set linked to the importance they place on the role of the Pagan and their own religious lived reality, which is an empowering experience (Quinn & Spreitzer, 1997).

PG6's involvement with the Spiritualist churches and later practice of Paganism had a blended result on her pathway. Throughout the interview, PG6 demonstrated a strong level of empowerment through the ability to choose one's own pathway. For example, her initial reference to spirituality established this:

A lot of people, like some Pagans define themselves as religious. I don't. I don't follow a set path because I dabble in everything. I'm not going to focus on one thing when I find all of it interesting.

PG6 was able to take her experience of spiritualism and build upon it, while also maintaining the absolute freedom of choice Pagans enjoy with the construction of lived religious experience:

I then took it, built on it, researched, and made it my own thing, which is what a lot of people do with their pathways. Some people follow it by the book, we have a book called the Witch's Bible – everything from beginning to end, near enough. People follow it, people don't. People read a page and they're not wanting to do that, so they do something else. But it's so wide and varied because there's so many different paths.

One of the strongest themes to emerge was the importance put on freedom of choice. It is the distinct lack of dogma which attracts participants. Participants are no longer convinced by Christian hegemony and deconstructed aspects of their identity influenced by Christianity. Therefore, participants have found personalised ways to express their identity which reflects the state of society as it currently is.

6.5.3 Empowerment Through Leaving Christianity

Almost all participants were directly involved in conservative Christianity with traditional values while growing up. PG1 and PG5 were not directly involved, but there was a strong level of influence from conservative Christianity in their lives. This commonality of moving from relatively stricter backgrounds to more perceived liberal realities is established in the literature (Jindra, 2014; [see also 3.4.7](#)).

PG1 initially gave a comparison between Abrahamic faiths and Paganisms. PG1 made a link between the first theme of “freedom of choice” and the freedom in withdrawing from a traditional Christian religious experience:

I have always felt that Abrahamic faiths ostracise... in a way that is constrictive. It's Truth with a capital T and that is the only way. There's no paths that go off that and there's only one truth and that is 'The' truth and that's never quite sat well with me [sic].

Interestingly, the idea of freedom of choice in one's system of belief comes into conflict with a rationalised institutional faith. PG1 also demonstrated a clear struggle to recognise that there is not one single truth, and respected Christianity as a truth at the same time. When explaining her lived experience of Paganism, PG1 suggests the struggles she does have are due to Christianity:

I don't know what's holding me back from it [committing to the coven] than that some of the rituals can be really Christian. Obviously, you can argue that the influences of these rituals have been passing on through Christian denominations and all the rest of it – but what I mean by that is that it's so structured and it feels really constraining.

While this does also overlap with the previous theme, it strongly highlights how one of the determining factors behind PG1 choosing a Pagan pathway is to break away from Christian hegemony.

PG2 also had a strong Christian influence as a child. One of the factors that drew PG2 into practising as a Druid was the loss of his faith in Christianity:

I was a Christian, I was brought up as a Christian, but I sort of lost faith in Christianity. It didn't ring true to me. I spent a lot of time in nature with Scouts and things like that and I felt a calling, as cheesy as that might sound. I felt a calling to nature and started reading up on nature-based religions which is where I found Druidism.

PG2 was heavily involved in his local church through youth clubs and Scouts. The division within the global Christian church was another reason a Pagan pathway felt more suitable to him. Throughout the interview, PG2 consistently referred to Christianity, and provided a thorough comparison between his newly found faith and his previous experience as a Christian. PG2 clearly expressed a strong level of empowerment in the freedom experienced after leaving a dogmatic faith:

It sets out a way of life but without the restrictions of the Christian teachings. Whereas Paganism has, especially Druidry, and each society of Paganism, has its moral code – it's not set out in the way that Christians sort of think 'you do this, you go to Hell. You do this, you go to Heaven'. It's a far more open moral code and gives you the things you should avoid doing but much less emotional blackmail with it. It's not the whole 'you do this and you're going to Hell'.

Again, the use of language by PG2 further highlights the level of critique this participant has for Christianity, which subsequently led to a Pagan pathway. I argue this language is possible due to the empowerment of practising as a Pagan, which PG2 sees as an alternative to Christianity. PG2 challenged his previous identity and gained a deeper control over his religious identity. Equally, PG2 understands their religious identity through comparison to Christianity as the socio-context. I would argue PG2 is displaying a greater control over their own religious identity through Paganisms (Christens, 2012; Maton, 2008; Peterson, 2014).

PG3 had an explicitly Christian influence through her grandparents. PG3 was attending church up until the age of twelve, at which point she had the confidence to refuse to attend church on a Sunday. She reflected on how the death of her grandfather hit her hard, and since that point (age nine) she struggled to have any positive associations with church. Eventually, PG3 found solace in finding another religion which fitted more with her thoughts about the world:

I read this book when I was 14. I had just said I was done with Christianity, and I don't believe in God and Jesus and all that; it's not very me. Then I read this book about the multi-verse theory. This idea that you can have multiple universes... that idea kind of blew my mind!... Suddenly I started joining Witchbox and other online Wiccan groups. Talking to people on there about why they believe what they believe, and it snow balled from there.

Ultimately, PG3 was able to find a community outside of Christianity, and this is exactly what she was looking for. She felt empowered to follow the Pagan pathway through finding religious experiences outside the hegemony of Christianity and knowing she was not alone in that pursuit.

PG4's negative experience of Christianity directly correlates with his sexuality. PG4 explained how his Catholic high school and conservative Christian grandparents were a problem during a formative time in his life. Having stopped attending church when beginning high school, he went from an evangelical Christian experience to a Catholic one. It was during these years at school PG4 was lacking empowerment:

I never really saw anything wrong with it until about 2 years into high school and that's when I sort of started coming out to everyone about my sexuality... there was this one experience in class that I remember, in religious education, it's a trainee teacher and we had to act out. We were doing about homosexuality and the views on it. It was some story in the media about a couple in a hotel and how they got refused entry because they were two men. I basically got forced to go up in front of the class and tell everyone that homosexuality was an abomination.

This lack of empowering experience ([see 8.5.1](#)), at a formative point in life, led to a rejection of Christianity by PG4. After exploring other religions, PG4 settled on a Pagan pathway. PG4 explained how searching through the internet led to videos which empowered him to be something other than Christian and would fit with his sexuality. He was able to find a way of reducing his own marginalisation (Christens, 2012; Maton, 2008; Peterson, 2014).

PG5 had a similar negative experience of Christianity, which is intrinsically linked with them not being cis gender. In fact, whilst PG5 was initially worried about being offensive about Christianity, they did go on to exclaim: "I mean, in what world is it okay to threaten a 6/7-year-old because of something they can't help?" This comment related to the

notion of Hell as punishment and the teaching of Christianity in school. PG5 used a common phrase: “coming out of the broom closet” ([see 6.3.1](#)). Ultimately, through their rejection of Christianity, PG5 felt empowered to define themselves as something other than Christian (Christens, 2012; Maton, 2008; Peterson, 2014) with their social circle doing the same:

Well, even at high school, it was a church school, but you wouldn't know it was, to be honest. There was a little outcast group and I started hanging out with them. Once we were closer friends, they came out of the broom closet.

The phrase used by PG5 has connotations with the fear often associated by LGBTQI+ people “coming out” to friends and relatives. The use of this phrase by PG5 demonstrates the courage Pagans often need to have to admit to being Pagan. The Christian hegemony experienced PG5 required confidence to alternatively identify and they clearly felt empowered through finding an alternative to Christian religious experience.

PG6 did not explicitly cite leaving Christianity as a factor in her pathway as she was not involved with the Christian faith. There were elements of her discourse which alluded to a critical perspective of Christianity, but nothing specifically suggesting she was empowered by being “other”. However, the notion of being able to have an “alternative identity” – by being individualistic in her approach to faith – was a clear empowering factor in her lived religious reality ([see 3.6](#)).

Overall, most of the participants represented some form of escape from Christian hegemony. I argue this rejection of dogmatic or conservative religious backgrounds also supports Jindra's (2014) finding that converts from these backgrounds are more likely to convert into liberal, less controlled religious identities ([see 3.4.7](#)).

When further considering PG6, the ability to be alternative from established hegemony more generally is an empowering factor behind following Pagan pathways. Empowerment involves enabling and gaining greater control over one's life (Christens, 2012; Maton, 2008; Peterson, 2014; [see also 3.6](#)) and therefore the leaving of a more rigid religion, such as Christianity, can be empowering for individuals such as these participants.

6.5.4 Empowerment Through “Coming out of the Broom Closet”: Amalgamating non-normative sexuality and gender with religious identity.

Among Pagans, there is a common saying of “coming out of the broom closet”, like the phrase “coming out of the closet” to describe explaining non-normative gender and sexuality with others ([see 6.5.3](#)). This should not be understated. My interviews revealed a link between the rational choice of one's lived religious reality as a Pagan and the lived reality of one's sexuality or gender. Naturally, this theme overlaps with the previous (see [6.5.2](#) & [6.5.3](#)). The ability to live one's gender and sexuality free from opposing dogma and the openness of the Pagan community combine to have an empowering effect on the identity of the individual. These participants were enabled to live their identity, and reduced their marginalisation, through choosing a supportive community (Christens, 2012; Maton, 2008; Peterson, 2014; [see 3.6](#)).

Whilst PG2 and PG6 were not open about their sexuality, PG1, PG4 and PG5 were, and they provide insight into how their religious identity is constructed around their sexuality and gender.

PG1 spoke at length about being non-conformist and anti-structuralist in her religious identity. She explained how her bisexuality is in line with that:

I've always been non-conformist. Vegan, but overweight. I'm a non-conformist. Openly bi-sexual. It's all these traits that... [pause] I do think they feed into each other, and I don't think anything is a coincidence. It naturally feeds inquisitiveness.

The above response came from a question which sought information behind the decision to explore Paganisms. PG1 feels enabled to identify in a way which pushes against social norms, gaining greater control over her life. PG1 has found an embracing belief system flexible to the identity of the individual adherent, which is fully supported by the community; as discussed earlier ([see 3.6](#)), this is often an empowering experience (Argyris and Schön, 1996; Beirsto & Ruohotie, 2003; Brygoyne, 1996; Maton & Salem 1995). Therefore, this is an empowering aspect of PG1s religious lived reality.

PG4's experience of coming out to his family was not easy, as there was a breach of trust with his parents, who he believed told his grandparents. This shaped PG4's experience of "coming out of the broom closet" as he felt unable to immediately trust his parents would respect him and take it seriously. Nevertheless, throughout the discourse, PG4 amalgamated the language used to explain coming out as LGBT in much the same way he explained "coming out" as Pagan. His experience of being Pagan is one also shared by those building up the confidence to come out as LGBT (Reid, 2005; [see also 6.3.3](#)).

I've been really really secretive about it up until this year just after lockdown – I started telling people. No one knew up until this year really, but I didn't really seek out anything until around February time this year.

After a particularly empowering experience, PG4 felt comfortable "coming out of the broom closet":

I think it was just after the full moon in June, I think. I kind of just finished a ritual and, I don't know. Something weird. I just felt really really energised. So, I thought I'm just going to do it and tell my friends.

He later planned to tell his parents but was outed before he had the chance when he was found reading a book about Paganism. Since then, there have been conversations with his mother about his recent openness as a Pagan.

PG5's explanation of "coming out of the broom closet" is striking. As mentioned above, they were able to find a social circle which respected their reality of religion and gender. PG5 reflected on how their family had already figured they were Pagan, and the need to "come out of the broom closet" was unnecessary in the family context. However, when explaining their experience of where they lived, the overlapping use of language and links between their LGBT and Pagan experiences further demonstrates the amalgamation of sexual and gender identities with a religious one:

It was very underground... we weren't organised at all. It's a little bit like the LGBT community – if you're involved in it, then you know who else is involved in it. But it isn't something everyone talks about. It's like that dodgy drug dealer on the corner. Everyone knows who he is, but you don't say anything... yeah in a majority Christian town where the population is mostly over 50, it was underground.

The continued mirroring of the rhetoric demonstrates a clear accepted overlap between LGBT and Pagan identities, which empowers those who are LGBT to continue their lived experience as Pagan, while also reducing their marginality through the supportive community they seek to be embraced by (Christens, 2012; Maton, 2008; Peterson, 2014).

There is a significant amount of existing data which suggests Paganisms are more likely to attract LGBT adherents who seek to subvert normative gender stereotypes and sexualities (Aburrow, 2009; Berger et al., 2003; Krämer, 2012; [see also 6.3.3](#)). The

relationship between empowerment and sexuality in the context of religious adherence is less researched, and so these findings contribute to this less researched sub-field.

6.5.5 Empowerment Through Online and Solitary Practice

A shared reality for all the participants is how they all engaged with internet resources to understand more about their religious identity, supporting the findings of several key researchers (Berger & Ezzy, 2004; Cowan, 2005; Rainie & Wellman, 2012). Equally, they are all solitary practitioners, as their communities are often diasporic or online according to the participants. Nevertheless, despite the perceived lack of community and the clear need for the internet, the participants all report they do not feel isolated in their solitary practice – there is power in what they do as individuals, choosing for themselves (Christens, 2012; Maton, 2008; Peterson, 2014).

PG1 did not feel the need to be in a community due to the structure and rigidity this might bring to her faith ([see 6.5.2](#)). Whilst she was initially engaged in exploring Paganisms through her university studies, PG1 used many electronic sources to understand the Pagan pathways further. Initially, her engagement with a local coven came through the adding of friends on Facebook.

PG2 attended national Pagan events and celebrations and has attended local meetings but still identified as a solo practitioner. His initial information gathering was through the internet, but over time it became a ritualistic part of his life. He specifically cites his reasoning for solitary practice as fulfilling a wish to escape modern society as he saw it:

I've always been an old-fashioned person, I guess. Being raised in a small village is one of the things that led to that. I've always had a belief that modern society is just too crazy, I guess. City life isn't for me. Too many people without the sort of the spirit of the community, I guess. Modern society in my opinion has gone way too far with a lot of things... I felt more at home in the peace of nature

without the hustle and bustle of everyday society and life. So, I started looking into those sorts of religions.

The concept of solitary practice is an empowering feature for PG2. His wish to withdraw from modern society is further substantiated through the legitimization of his nature-based religious identity. I would argue his Pagan identity construction has enabled him to decide this life course for himself and, as previously discussed ([see 3.6](#)), having control over one's life course is empowering (Christens, 2012; Maton, 2008; Peterson, 2014).

PG3, apart from brief involvement in student societies, has never been in a physical Pagan community. Her entire community can be found online through mediums like Witchbox, a social networking platform specifically aimed at Paganisms. In answering a question about what community looks like for her, PG3 stated:

For me, it's quite a big online community. Lots of Facebook groups, lots of chatrooms where you can still talk to people. I also know specific circles are held [locally] that I could go to if I needed that guidance of multiple people... The main site I used to use was Witchbox. I have friends that I met on there when I was 14, a decade ago, and I will still talk to them for guidance if I need to. I've got multiple chatrooms that we can use, and we have a Google Hangout.

There are local communities which could be attended physically, but PG3 has no compulsion to attend. Her community is online, enabling her to continue as a solitary witch and have a community in times of need (Löveheim & Linderman, 2005; [see also 6.5.2](#)).

PG4 stated he discovered Paganisms through the online social media platform Tumblr. This became a source of information although he admitted it caught him unaware when going through a period in his life where he was seeking an alternative religious identity to Christianity.

I just stumbled upon it. I think I was just scrolling through Tumblr. It was like witchcraft tips. I was like, what are they on about? I sort of looked into it and was like, surely, they can't be real? I just started looking through it and looking at videos on YouTube again and then just stumbled on this whole world!

Again, much like PG3, PG4 discovered his faith through online searches. He already was seeking an alternative and found something which correlated with ideas he was beginning to form about religion and spirituality at the time. His ability to be proactive in making decisions about his religious identity was empowering (Fetterman, 2001) and subsequently further enabled his continued participation (Adams, 1996).

PG5 was initially involved in an underground group, as mentioned above, however since moving out of the area, they have found they are no longer part of a community and lost touch with their previous one. When asked what community and everyday life looks like for them as a Pagan, PG5 simply stated:

I don't really need it as much. I think I live pretty similarly to everyone else. I just like to keep my crystals and charms and things around. I have quite a lot of herbs and stuff that I prefer to use sometimes because it's natural. I haven't eaten meat in about 10 years. Yeah, I think very normal other than little, tiny things – like when I go out, I have a tigers eye crystal with me.

It is quite telling that PG5 did not dwell on the notion of community for very long. Stating it was unneeded and not dwelling on the topic shows a level of empowerment in themselves as a solitary practitioner in Paganism. PG5 is self-actualised in their Pagan identity and does not feel the need for community. For PG5, empowerment came, not through organisational empowerment (Maton & Salem, 1995), but through psychological empowerment (Järvinen 2007; Seibert et al., 2001).

PG6 answered the same question about community in a similar way to PG3. She is a solitary practitioner and has not felt the need to seek out an established community; largely due to feeling she has one via the internet:

With the Facebook groups there is a little bit of community, and you ask a question about a crystal, or properties of herbs, and someone will answer you. Which saves you trawling through books constantly.

The rhetoric PG6 uses seems to suggest the use of online community is simply a tool which aids her continued solitary practice. Interestingly, PG6 was somewhat critical of the online community:

There's also what we call 'baby witches' because there's this massive thing on Tik Tok called 'Wichtok'. Us who have been Pagans for a while and researched over years find a lot of it... [pause] it's not bullshit, but it's misinformation. People who have been practising for a week and saying that they're working with Lucifer and all these other deities.

PG6 finds the online community useful at times but questions the impact it is having on the wider perception of Paganisms. Nevertheless, the internet underpins her ability to practice solitarily which leads to her empowerment (Cowan, 2005). PG6 feared the misinformation might negatively impact the perception of Pagans through another fad of individuals temporarily identifying as Pagan without a fully formed identity, such as the “teen-witch fad” (Lewis & Tøllefsen, 2013). PG6 is perhaps referring to the “teen-witch fad” which led to further stigmatisation of Pagan practice as being a product of commercialism (Cush, 2007), reducing the publicly perceived authenticity. According to Löveheim and Linderman (2005) the internet allows for multiple and/or new identities to be explored. PG6 alludes to this being the case, while also seeking to act as a gatekeeper. However, the internet has diminished traditional gatekeeping (Kruger, 2004) and the internet has now become a tool for empowering identities through

connections with others (Campbell, 2005; 2012) whether current Pagans accept these new trends or not.

Overall, the internet can be a useful tool, and these participants also suggested solitary practice is possible using the internet. Certainly, being enabled to practice as a solitary Pagan not only supports the literature regarding online religion ([see 3.5](#)) but also has the fundamental features of empowerment (Christens, 2012; Maton, 2008; Peterson, 2014). On that basis, solitary practice is an empowering aspect of Pagan pathways.

6.5.6 Minor Theme That Emerges: Paganism as Root Religion

Paganism is perceived by participants to be the “root religion”. Several of the participants state the history of Paganism as being something which pre-dates Christianity. Whilst this largely comes through critique of Christianity, it should be noted this is an interesting finding, not least because it is unfounded and rejected by empirical research ([see 6.2](#)). The expressions of Paganism being lived now are “new” and can be dated to emerge around the spiritual milieu of the 1960s onward (Pearson, 2003). Nevertheless, this is a lived experience of the participants who mentioned it. PG2 was perhaps the most vocal on this issue and stated:

A lot of Christianity, when you look at it, has been taken and changed slightly from the Pagan traditions. Christmas was... if you read the Bible, Jesus wasn't born on Christmas... it was there to coincide with Yuletide. That was what the Pagans under Christian rule were celebrating so they sort of mixed together. A lot of other Christian traditions and symbolism is taken from Paganism.

While there are some who would corroborate the above (Gardner, 1959; Murray, 1970), the assumption is that Paganism, as practiced by PG2, predates Christianity, which is not supported in the literature (Cornish, 2009; Pearson, 2003). Equally, PG6 was explicit in referring to Paganisms as the root to a lot of other religions:

I'm not going to stop researching and learning. There's always stuff I don't know. It's also good to enjoy it and understand more. I mean, Paganism is the root for a lot of other religions. It's great having that little smug thing – 'oh, your religion is based off mine'. That's kind of funny.

PG6 states her research leads her to understand more, and she links to the idea of “root religion” as an example. Despite this not being backed in academic literature, it is a concurrent theme in adherent literature.

6.6 Chapter Conclusion

The reason these participants are on Pagan pathways is due to a form of empowerment which has led to a rational choice to follow the Pagan tradition of their choosing. Paganisms can empower the individual without the need for community, dogma, doctrine, or even formal organisation. Nevertheless, there is a strong form of psychological empowerment which emerged in narratives from these participants.

Paganisms provide those with non-normative identities a foundational and supportive community to engage with. The ability to freely choose one's pathway not only empowers religious identity, but further helps empowerment, through reducing marginalisation in other aspects of the participant's lived reality.

7.0 CASE STUDY: SCIENTOLOGIES

Scientologies are arguably the most contentious and well known of all the minority religions currently operating in the Western world. Unfortunately, several anti-cultists and self-defined “scholars” will suggest the term “cult” (and the negative connotations attached) is more appropriate (Hassan, 2015) which has gained traction in media representations of Scientologies. Regardless of definition, the Church of Scientology (CoS) has been embroiled in a multitude of controversies, legal proceedings, and media misrepresentation. Scientologies have become well-known minority religious groups which have received significant attention in the media and the ACM. More recently, Scientologies are receiving more attention from scholars. Their often-secretive nature has made them fascinating in popular and scholarly discourse and Scientologies’ global renown make for an excellent case study.

7.1 Scientology: An Overview

The CoS boasts of being the "fastest growing religion in the 21st Century" (Urban, 2011: 206) with "more than 10,000 Scientology Churches, missions, related organizations and affiliated groups minister[ing] to millions in 165 countries" (Scientology.org, 2020: Para.1). However, the numbers are more conservative. The American Religious Identification Survey (ARIS) quantifies a decline from 55,000 to 25,000 between 2001 and 2008 within the USA (Goodstein, 2010).

7.2 Brief History of Scientologies and the Church of Scientology

Scientology emerged in 1950's/1960's United States at the height of the Cold War, when individuals were confronted with the “end of times” and searching for meaning considering existential threats. Scientology itself finds purchase with science-fiction

themes of futuristic redemption, historic “alien” activity, and achieving “superhuman” abilities. The founder of the CoS was also a successful sci-fi writer.

7.2.1 Dianetics

In 1950, Lafayette Ronald Hubbard, the founder of Scientology, published his central work entitled “*Dianetics: The Original Thesis*” in the *Astounding Science Fiction* magazine. This initial work was later expanded and published as a book entitled *Dianetics: The Modern Science of Mental Health* (Urban 2011).

The science of Dianetics dichotomises the mind into two elementary parts: analytical and reactive. The analytical mind is analogised as a computer, capable of input and output; it is logical, rational, and methodical in nature. The reactive mind is the harbour for trace memories, or “Engrams”, which contain painful experiences. It is specifically the impact of the Engrams which Hubbard targets for remedy with the use of Dianetics. The process of “auditing” enables the individual to track and re-live the root cause of an Engram, enabling them to “Clear” their reactive mind (Thomas, 2021).

Adherents are provided with a “*Bridge to Total Freedom*”, which is the pathway initially set out by Hubbard to help Scientologists track their progress toward total spiritual freedom. The Bridge shows the levels leading to Clear status and being free from Engrams. The Bridge outlines how to achieve the highest “Operating Thetan” levels, which Scientologists would consider levels of spiritual freedom that give them the ability to control matter, energy, space, and time (Urban, 2011). Additional levels have been added to the Bridge of Total Freedom since Hubbard’s initial conceptualisation (Urban, 2011; Westbrook, 2019) and other levels may be developed beyond what is currently available to Scientologists.

The E-Meter is a pivotal tool which indicates the mental and spiritual wellbeing of an adherent. The device is used to uncover engrams from previous existences to work through them, helping to remove disconnect between the mind, body and soul (Westbrook, 2019).

7.2.2 Transition into Scientology

1954 marked the beginning of a new chapter for Dianetics by amalgamating under the name Church of Scientology. The transition from Dianetics to Scientology has had an ongoing impact on the lived reality of Scientologists. Restructuring the Dianetics movement as a religion, under the banner of the CoS, meant individuals engaging with Dianetics have an opportunity to explore their religious identity in the same context as their initial psychiatric interest. As demonstrated by participants in this research ([see 7.7.2](#)), Dianetics is the gateway to discovering a religious self.

7.2.3 Development of Sea Organisation

The Sea Organisation, commonly known as the 'Sea Org', has a mission to guide adherents who are Clear through the Operating Thetan (OT) levels (Westbrook, 2019). Currently, OT levels reach OT XV. It is believed at OT level VIII individuals will have control over matter, energy, space, and time. The Sea Org also ensures ethics and tech are implemented effectively throughout the CoS and is charged with defending the faith from Suppressive Persons (SPs) (Urban, 2011).

7.3 Controversies

There are many controversies which have plagued Scientology over the last half century, most of which have settled through litigation. After several accusations, some baseless, the CoS adopted the notion: a good offense is a good defence.

7.3.1 Cult Awareness Network (CAN)

A variety of divisive cases were embroiled as part of the “cult wars”. Ex-members who held a grudge would accuse the CoS of “brainwashing” and abuse. Usually, they had support from organisations like the Cult Awareness Network (CAN), an organisation who put the CoS at the top of their target list (Urban, 2011). Urban explains that CAN declared bankruptcy because of “more than fifty lawsuits” and an “aggressive plan to undermine and discredit the network” (Urban, 2011: 149). The CoS bought the remaining assets of CAN, which included extensive files, and then re-launched as 'New CAN'. In absorbing CAN, the CoS sought to educate individuals about minority religions using CANs already established reach (ibid).

7.3.2 Inland Revenue Service (IRS)

The IRS withdrew tax exemption from the CoS in 1967, which led to a legal war between the two entities that lasted for decades. It was, in fact, a war over the definition of religion and upholding the Constitution of the United States (Urban, 2011). The reaction of the CoS losing charitable status and its war on IRS had significant impact on the lived reality of everyday Scientologists. Most notably, individual Scientologists were experiencing a de-legitimisation of their lived religious identity from a United States institution. As Urban (2006) points out, there are questions over what authority the IRS had to decide what a religion is or is not. For Scientologists, they were viewed as victims of a scam, or approached with suspicion or contempt for fear they might try to “brainwash” others. Miscavige’s 1993 conference declaration that the war with the IRS was over would have been a rallying cry to everyday Scientologists. This was a validation of the lived religious reality in that the USA recognised their religion similarly to how other religiosities are recognised (Westbrook, 2019).

7.4 Issues of Perception

The CoS is seen as ready to “pull the trigger” with threatening or starting legal proceedings against individuals or entities it deems deserve it. The impact is that much scholarly work, which should be in place for a minority religion over half a century old, is simply missing. Scholars are concerned with being at risk, or causing their institution to be (Cowan, 2009), and fear potential harassment that the church has become known for. The work is research is deemed untenable or not worth the hassle.

7.4.1 Lack of Accessibility & Secrecy

Negative ex-member testimonies have led to a societal view that the CoS must be hiding something, which borrows credence from established “cult” rhetoric in mainstream media (Thomas & Graham-Hyde, forthcoming). It is a cycle which perpetuates the pejorative perception. The unrelenting nature of the CoS to silence critics through litigation and forms of harassment raises issues of what a minority religion's right to privacy amounts to, and who possess the responsibility to monitor a religion in general.

7.4.2 Impact of Apostate Testimonies

Pejorative perceptions are perhaps magnified by ex-CoS members writing exposés of life behind the iron curtain of the CoS. For example, Mike Rinder, a high-ranking official from within the CoS, left in 2007, corroborating claims of violence and harassment (Tobin & Childs, 2019).

So-called “cult experts” (such as Mike Rinder, Steven Hassan, and others) have often supported apostate testimonies, lending their popularly given credibility to amplify anti-CoS narratives (Hassan, 2015; Rinder, 2022). This leads to a perception that individuals join the minority religion because they are “brainwashed”.

Free Zone Scientologists²⁸ in my research (see [7.7.4](#) & [8.5.2](#)) have utilised the narratives emerging from ex-member testimonies to make sense of their own negative experiences in the CoS. Some participants referred to the CoS as a “cult” ([see 3.2](#)), describing alleged abuses either experienced or witnessed. However, participants in this research are ordinary leave-takers rather than whistle-blowers or “apostates” (Bromley, 1998), choosing only to share this information through anonymity as they still have many friends within the CoS while practising Scientology outside the CoS.

7.5 Scientology Theology & Praxis

The foundation for any aspect of Scientology theological tradition is the Thetan, which is the Scientologist concept of the Soul (Westbrook, 2019). In layman's terms, Hubbard claimed the process of auditing helped the individual to have better communication between their inner Thetan and physical body (Thomas, 2021).

7.5.1 Eschatology

The purpose of auditing is to help the individual to go “Clear”, ridding the reactive mind of engrams which hamper the communication between Thetan and body. Once an individual is Clear, they obtain full recall and several other advantageous attributes. Scientologists believe this is because of the communication harmony between Thetan and body. It is at OT III where adherents are given more in-depth eschatological theology concerning the origin of the Thetan (for more detail, see Thomas, 2021 or Westbrook, 2019).

7.5.2 Suppressive Persons and Disconnection

A widely discussed practice of Scientology is the declaration of individuals as Suppressive Persons (SP) and the encouragement for Disconnection (Urban, 2011) from such people.

²⁸ those that practice Scientology outside of the CoS (Thomas, 2021).

Should an individual be unwilling or unable to adhere to CoS policy - which is considered the greatest good for the world - then they may be declared an SP. Ultimately, this will then require those who continue to adhere to the CoS to disconnect from an SP, severing all association and ties to the individual.

For those who leave the CoS in an openly critical way, there is a danger social ties with friends and family will be broken through the practice of disconnection by continuing members. Although unsubstantiated, it would be fair to suggest some Scientologists might feel unable to leave or challenge the status quo in the CoS for this reason. Participants in this research often mentioned gains through using the Scientology technology while in the CoS as an empowering facet of their lived reality at the time ([see 7.7.2](#)). The positive (and empowering) aspects of remaining members of the CoS are effective up to a point before tipping toward disempowerment ([see 8.5.1](#)).

7.6 Routinisation Leads to Schism

According to Max Weber (1947), charismatic leadership is often routinised, especially in the wake of the death of the leader. The basic premise is that authority is often a mixture of rational-legal, traditional, and charismatic. Charismatic authority is considered incomparable or spiritual, or often both. The nature of charismatic authority is precarious and often is only incarnate in the original leader(s). Should the charismatic authority cease to be, organisations need to 'routinise' to survive. Rational, legal, and traditional ideals become central tenants to the new authority which emerges (ibid).

7.6.1 Free Zone: Ron's Org

Captain Bill Robertson was a senior leader within the Sea Org. In 1984, Robertson established Ron's Org with a view to shake off the shackles of the CoS in the practice of Scientology. Robertson claimed to receive special instruction from Hubbard after his

death, in which he declared Earth a “Free Zone” from intergalactic interference (Lewis, 2013; Thomas, 2021). It is this revelation which led to the name 'Free Zone' being applied which is now the label for all those outside the CoS. Whilst Ron's Org is the first major example of a schism within Scientology, a vast number of Free Zone adherents are independent of any organisation, claiming that a leader Scientologists rally behind is unnecessary; Scientology is about individual development (Thomas, 2021).

7.6.2 Free Zone: Independents

Within the Free Zone, there is an array of independents practising Scientology without belonging to an organisation, although this does not mean they do not access Free Zone organisations for services.

Thomas (2021) highlights that, until recently, most scholarly research on Scientology has been vertical, mostly addressing the CoS with few comments on Ron's Org. However, his research demonstrates that nuanced forms of Scientology exist independent of the CoS and Ron's Org, and these independents are centred around the auditing tech of Scientology.

Independents diverge from the perceived extraneous additions the CoS has established over time. The Purification Rundown, for example, is an essential aspect of preparing oneself for the spiritual process of detoxification of one's body to traverse the Bridge. However, Thomas (2021: 267) shows how Free Zone independents report to viewing this as a supplement and focus more specifically on auditing.

While some Free Zone Scientologists do not follow Hubbard’s Bridge precisely, the emphasis on spiritual liberation and overcoming mental neuroses remains the primary purpose of their practice.

Scientology has had schisms which led to independent practice. The internet has had important developmental effects on the CoS and Scientology as a whole (Urban, 2011; Westbrook, 2019), and the Free Zone is benefiting from that. As a result of the schisms, it seems to now be more academic to refer to the myriad of differences as 'Scientologies' (Thomas, 2021).

7.6.3 Lack of Scholarly Work with Free Zone Scientologies

There is a significant dearth in the literature concerning Free Zone Scientologies. In fact, the only author to have fully investigated the Free Zone is Thomas (2021). With that in mind, the findings of this research are timely as the academy is starting to realise the CoS's influence over research has prevented a true investigation of the routinisation of the religion overall.

Despite the current lack of research on the Free Zone, there are some indicators of what the lived reality of individuals practising outside the CoS might be. Scientologists who leave the CoS often cite it is because of how they were treated by senior members of the organisation (Cusack, 2020; [see also 8.5.2](#)). For those who leave but want to continue practising as Scientologists, the Free Zone offer access to services and materials which would otherwise be protected by the CoS (Thomas, 2021).

7.6.4 Defining Scientologies

As discussed elsewhere ([see 3.1](#)), defining religion is fraught with issues. Urban (2011) highlights how the war between the IRS and CoS has changed the way in which religion is defined in contemporary United States. However, current religious status does not excuse the CoS from organisational issues, such as illegal acts, harassment, or alleged bullying from leadership. As expected with any religious institution in society, the

organisation should be open to enquiry and any evidence of the above - should there be any - be brought to light in public, fair trials.

Scientists have a lived religious identity and the picture of how that impacts everyday life is beginning to emerge through contemporary approaches to research. Currently, there is a disconnection between how religion is popularly defined (Thomas & Graham-Hyde, 2021) and understanding religion as a lived reality for the individual. Scholarly research on Scientologies make it abundantly clear it should be accepted as a religion because it is a lived experience for individuals, a view that is becoming increasingly accepted by Western governments (Melton, 2000; Urban, 2011; Westbrook 2019; Thomas, 2021).

7.7 Initial Findings and Main Themes with Scientist Participants

There were six participants, all of whom had been very involved with the CoS before subsequently leaving. The majority of now practice independently. All have lived in the USA, or still do, because of their involvement with the CoS. None of them wish to have any further affiliation with the church. All but one participant (SCI5) were middle-adulthood ([see 9.1.1](#)), and averaged at around twenty years of involvement with the CoS.

The findings from this set of interviews does not fit the paradigm the other studies fit. Scientists, in these interviews at least, found empowerment through introspection rather than the extrospection displayed by the other minority religious adherents interviewed. I would argue that is due to having left an organisation yet continue to practice outside after leaving. This leads to a level of empowerment coming through having “special insight”, an ability to obtain an understanding of the technology and how it operates which helped retain individuals in the minority religion. Ultimately, and most

strikingly different to the other minority religions in this research, empowerment is reinvigorated *because of* disempowerment. After negative experiences of the CoS lead to disempowerment of the individual, they become re-empowered after leaving and becoming independent practitioners of the technology and beliefs. New themes have emerged because of the paradigm not fitting for this study.

Initial findings also suggest all participants became involved in Scientology at similar between eighteen to twenty-three years old. Their initial experience of Scientology invariably involved attending and completing the Communication Course, followed by the Study Technology course. These introductory courses are a gateway into the Church of Scientology for adherents in which they can attest to the tech working, motivating them to want to experience and learn more.

7.7.1 Scientologist Participants

SCI1 is a white, working class, male born in the UK. He immigrated to the United States due to his involvement with the CoS and has lived there since. He is married with children, and no longer a member of the CoS having been declared an SP. He now practices Scientology privately as an independent, mostly within the confines of his own family.

SCI2 is a white, middle class ([see 2.6](#)), male born in Canada. His family life was stable, and he has good relationships with his siblings. He is married with children and is no longer a member of the CoS having been declared an SP. He never identified as a Scientologist fully, however he was a staff member. He continues to practice the aspects of technology he feels add value to his life.

SCI3 is a white, working class ([see 2.6](#)), male born in the USA. He was raised in a single parent family after his father left them at an early age. He is no longer a member of the CoS. He does identify as a Scientologist but does not hold the theological beliefs of the church. He still practices the technology independently.

SCI4 is a white, middle class ([see 2.6](#)), male born in the USA. His parents divorced when he was at a young age. After completing his military service, he joined the CoS but has since left. He is still a Scientologist who practices and audits others as part of leading an independent group. Sci4 also claims to have been a Scientologist in a previous life. He vehemently disagrees with the CoS and avoids all affiliation to the organisation.

Sci5 is a white, middle class ([see 2.6](#)), female born in the USA. Her family life was traumatic, with both parents being alcoholics who later divorced toward her adult life. She was a high achiever educationally. She is no longer in the CoS although she reached OT Level VIII. She still identifies as an independent Scientologist and is involved with an independent community.

Sci6 is a white, middle class ([see 2.6](#)), female born in Australia. Her family life was stable up until her parents divorced in her mid-teens, which she found traumatic. She later became heavily involved with the CoS and immigrated to the USA during her time on staff. She is no longer involved with the CoS but is a vehement believer in Scientology. She still practices independently and is affiliated to an independent group of Scientologists.

7.7.2 Empowerment Through Gains

A clear theme which emerged out of the interviews was how the participants gained a sense of empowerment through the gains and wins they experienced because of using

the technology of Scientology. Essentially, this means they feel they obtained a tangible benefit through auditing and training. I would argue the gains obtained by Scientologists act as tools enabling them to gain more control of their life or understand their socio-political context through a Scientologist perspective.

When describing the initial courses (Communication and Study Technology course) most initiates complete upon entry into the CoS, SCI1 articulates his amazement at the initial experiences of the course:

It's a eureka moment. I signed up for a course, which started immediately, and I bought the book, a fundamental book on Scientology... I read the book and I did the course. Then after reading the book and doing the course, that's my real eureka moment at that point. Yes. This stuff works!

SCI1 is echoed by other participants in this study. Sci5 explained she had real issues with communication, meaning her journey through the course took five weeks instead of one. Nevertheless, she said it was a "really big deal" when she completed the course and realised her ability to communicate had radically improved. Similarly, Sci6 also explained the gains she had through the study technology course:

Then I did the student hat, which is the course to train you to be a student and teach you how to learn. That was a really amazing - that was a life changing - course. It taught me how to learn any subject. It didn't matter what it was; it gave me the skills to be able to understand and apply anything I read.

SCI3 initially identifies:

In that first year, there was like some of the basic training, but where a lot of the members were ... [pause]... they get a lot of benefits from what they call auditing.

SCI3 articulated his reason for continuing within the CoS initially was because he was also getting benefits from the auditing, culminating in better communication and

enabling him to make good friends, and even meet his wife. He explained some of the tangible effects:

It's what they called a communication course with training routines. I did the course, and I was like 'Wow!' this really did help. It made me feel better and more comfortable in trying to break some of the shyness and, you know, some of the issues with communication.

Even SCI2 had similar reasons for doing the communication course and equally found similar gains:

So, I got involved in Scientology, with the communication course, really had some very significant gains and improvements in my ability to communicate - with girls in particular. Yeah, I didn't handle everything, but I felt more free, more relaxed, much more able to just communicate without all the weird little embarrassment things and stuff like that...

Although SCI4 spent more time discussing David Miscavige and the problems faced by Scientologists because of the CoS, when questioned about gains he gave vivid examples of the differences the technology made in the individual. When describing the benefit of the communication course, SCI4 stated there is no end to the differences it makes. However, he does give an example of an immediate gain:

Well, that's only one thing. That's the start. you learn how not to back away, not to shy away - that doesn't handle the fear; you're still going to be afraid. You might be able to sit there and be there... I remember one time a friend of mine, a little 5ft 10 women. She was auditing this 6ft 9 guy and he looked like a bear!... he throws the cans down and says, 'I'm not answering that damn question!' and he gets up and walks out... and she gets up and says 'Sir, you just need to answer the question. I don't really care what the answer is. I don't do it for me, I do it for you'. He sat his ass back down and she got the answer to the question.

This story supports the initial differences articulated by Sci5 who shared a similar story about not allowing a mechanic to take advantage of her and her lack of knowledge about cars or the details of what work needed to be done. Through the gains she obtained in

communication, she had the ability to confidently ensure the mechanics knew exactly what she wanted, and she could stand up to them if that was required. She believed her persona in those discussions meant they were not able to take advantage of her because she was fully aware of the situation and knew she had clear communication.

The gains claimed by the participants because of the communication course are foundational for these individuals in their ability to gain control in their life. For example, SCI4 was able to take control of a situation, and SCI2 was able to communicate more effectively with others. The communication course run by the CoS enabled the participants in their daily lives (Christens, 2012; Maton, 2008; Peterson, 2014, [see also 3.6](#)).

The notion of gains is dynamic and multifaceted. One of the paradigms of empowerment identified in this research so far has been empowerment through a sense of belonging. While there were traces of this form of empowerment in this Scientology case study, there is not enough to concretely suggest there even is a sense of belonging overall within the CoS. Most of the participants did not seem to convey a strong sense of community. What they experienced is more an adult learning class, rather than any true friendships and it is their sharing of “gains” with others in the class replacing an overall sense of community. It is noted, however, that SCI6 and SCI5 did state becoming a staff member was initially like having a family. SCI5 lamented the loss of friendships experienced upon leaving the CoS. Nevertheless, the sense of belonging is less defined and interacting with likeminded people is described more in the context of a gain. SCI3 probably exemplifies this best when explaining what the initial courses were like:

It was really a fun time in there because they had like 100 people doing different courses in there - communication courses, like kind of courses, it was really really

a fun time in there... Certainly I had friends out of Scientology - it did, either through my work or, you know, I had friends. That's what you did - you did work and then went in for training and that's pretty much where you were spending your time in life.

Sci3 goes on to say he was “meeting ladies and dating” and it was “definitely an exciting time”. However, SCI3 does not specify this is the reason he joined, and it certainly did not keep him in the group, as seen below. It certainly comes across that this community of adherents is understood as a gain from the course he would have done either way. The focus remains on the inward psychological gains from the technology.

There is a level of organisational empowerment of Scientologists in providing contexts to gain foundational motivations (Kouzes & Posner, 1997; Quinn & Spreitzer, 1997) as well as a psychological lived reality (Spreitzer, 1995; Zimmerman, 1995). SCI1 said there were core groups of people who would loiter between classes and at the end of the day after class:

Obviously, I'd be taking these courses and the break times, lunch times, and there's general breaks, people wouldn't even leave the building. The hardest thing to get them to do at the end of the day was to get them to leave.

Whilst the above might sound like a “sense of belonging” that comes through community, SCI1 moved on to suggest they merely wanted to discuss what they gained from their courses:

They wanted to congregate after the session and tell each other their wins, the things they had discovered that day, and they're sharing... it's just natural, like you and I are talking, but it's so much more energetic. It's like 'Hey, guess what happened to me today!'

Although SCI1 did suggest it was "quite a community" - the empowerment is not coming from belonging to the community. The binding of the community stems from the gains and therefore the empowerment stems from that also.

Sci6 stated her initial community in the CoS was not even particularly enthralling. They often struggled to keep the local organisation going financially, meeting in garages of adherents as opposed to public spaces. Her initial community was very small with no sense of belonging to the CoS empowering SCI6 to continue involvement. Again, for SCI6, it was the nature of what she was gaining from the courses. In fact, SCI6 gave the most compelling personal testimonies of the gains she obtained. One course she went on to complete with her partner was:

The purification rundown which is a process to detoxify the body. Both of us did that and I had all sorts of interesting gains from doing that personally. I had sun burns turn on and off. I had an ear infection when I was 9, in this ear, and it had been a really bad infection. Middle ear infection. I was sitting in the sauna one day and went like this and all this black gunk came out of my ear and there was more and more of this black stuff coming out of my ear. Then my hearing completely changed!

Interestingly, in the context of describing the gains obtained from the courses, Sci6 alludes to a supportive community existing. Her partner also had similar experiences in seeing Dianetics positively impacting his health. Again, despite the community being supportive, it is not a sense of belonging which empowered SCI6 or her partner. These specific examples were about the healing power of Dianetics. More generally it was the gains which continued to be a source of empowerment, as they were able to experience the tangible effects of the technology which empowered them to continue.

As well as the initial gains from the entry level courses in CoS, higher levels also led to attestation of gains. SCI5, the highest OT Level interviewed, described her experience of OTII while trying to explain why she pushed through the OT Levels:

Oh, one other thing! Level 2 - no one ever talks about Level 2. When I did that, it was solo, which means you did it on your own and you held these cans in your hand and you looked at the meter and you asked questions. I asked a question, and I couldn't go any further because the needle was flopping back and forth - which means you're doing real well emotionally... I looked down and I saw people walking around on the street, and I saw the cars there... and then it dawned on me. There was no window in this room!

This is, along with SCI6's healing, an example of a gain obtained by one of the participants.

This initial empowerment certainly is one of the reasons these participants join the group after the first courses are completed. They have been able to tangibly notice the inward difference and apply that in their life. It stands to reason one would argue this is empowerment in the truest sense of the word: individuals are able to make positive change in their life due to the gains obtained because of Scientology auditing (Christens, 2012; Maton, 2008; Peterson, 2014). Other gains, such as being able to see through walls, is in line with Scientologist belief and should be accepted as a gain.

7.7.3 Empowerment Through Insider Knowledge & Special Access

Empowerment through special revelation is well documented in the literature on the charisma of leaders and their impact on adherents (Wessinger, 2012). Literature is less specific about the individual adherent accessing special revelation or insider knowledge independent of a charismatic leader. Having some form of special revelation or insider knowledge leads to empowerment, as exemplified by these interviews.

As well as obtaining gains, the OT level a participant reaches on the Bridge to Total Freedom is like a hierarchy system within the CoS. Participants who trust others and hold them in high esteem can also be a source of empowerment for the participants. Wessinger (2012) highlights that proximity to charismatic leaders can be empowering, and previous publications have also suggested aspects of this (Chryssides & Wilkins, 2006; Maton & Salem, 1995; Melton 2007; Sadler, 2003).

SCI5 exemplifies this when describing her desire to go through the OT levels. In recounting the aftermath of a gain, she obtained from OTII, SCI5 describes her anticipation for OTIII, the “Wall of Fire”:

This was amazing! So, the next session... my knees were knocking, I was scared to death. It's called the 'Wall of Fire'. You don't want to screw up, because you can screw yourself up psychologically if you get it wrong. So I went, you know I felt a lot better - well by golly I'll go ahead and do this!... What pulled me forward was the mystery of it all! You had no idea what was going to happen during OTIII. It was 'Ooh I've got to... even if it's crap... I've got to find out what this is, I've heard about it for years'.

The latter part of the above anecdote is perhaps most revealing in that it displays the level of anticipation built into completing OTIII. Whilst attesting to be Clear is supremely important, passing through the “Wall of Fire” is certainly the revelation of insider information despite this information now being in the public domain (Urban, 2011). The participants in my research demonstrate that attesting to be Clear and passing through the Wall of Fire empowers Scientologists to continue up the Bridge, as well as continue other aspects of religious practice.

It is worth noting SCI5 said she had never seen any of the Xenu Documents which have been vilified so much in mainstream media. She believed it was fabricated by the media. Although her understanding of the Thetan is there are many past lives. The theology was

not part of the OTIII documents she received. As a now pariah of the CoS, there is no reason for this information to be anything other than reputable and accepted as truth.

SCI2 was an interesting case study overall. While insider knowledge was not something he professed to have with the CoS, he is very much empowered by his own intellectual capacity for seeking truth. He is very much a seeker in the traditional sense of Lofland and Stark's (1965) model of conversion. However, his empowerment through insider knowledge comes more from his perceived ability to resist accepting Scientology doctrine as wholly true. When asked if he was still a Scientologist, SCI2 responded by saying: *"Oh no! I don't believe that I have ever in my life said, 'I am a Scientologist'. I just use it to help people when it seems like the appropriate thing to do"*. When I asked him how he identifies now, his response gave more depth:

I guess I'm just a free being. If I like something in Christianity, I'll use it. If I like something in Buddhism, I'll use it. If I like something in Scientology, I'll use it; and if I like something in Freud, I'll use it.

The use of the words "free being" and the notion of being equipped to help others is striking. Feeling free is an empowering aspect of religious adherence which enables individuals to gain greater control over one's life (Peterson, 2014; Christens, 2012; Maton, 2008; [see also 3.6](#)). The fact SCI2 can evaluate for himself, and then use his knowledge from religious doctrine to help others, is a form of empowerment through insider knowledge.

SCI4 is much clearer about his knowledge and how it empowers him as an independent Scientologist. He adamantly believes he was a Scientologist in previous lives, and when questioned about how he knew, his response was very clear: *"I don't 'believe' anything. When you woke up this morning, do you believe yesterday happened?... It's that simple"*.

However, when asked about this knowledge, SCI4 talked at length about his memories of and between past lives. His insider knowledge comes from having a solid grasp on understanding Scientology:

Honestly, the scary shit is not the lives you lived but what happened between those lives - which is some of the scariest shit that ever existed... but if you go back further than that, you realise that life controls matter, energy, space and time - and you have to define life... if you use Scientology in that way then it will all make sense to you. If you view it in some other way, it will never make sense to you because that is the basics of Scientology.

Despite being referred to as “basics”, the understanding of matter, energy, space, and time is usually considered a complicated topic which would require specialist knowledge of physics. The ability to claim to have knowledge of past lives, and even knowledge of the precursor to sentient existence, is surely empowering. It would be difficult to understand these claims as anything other than insider knowledge, providing the adherent with a sense of revelation not widely accessed or even accepted by all of humanity.

SCI1 said, simply, there is nothing in existence that is better:

"It's not like I'm clouded by belief. I've been looking since I left working for the Church of Scientology, say for the last 15 years, I've been looking for anything that's better than what I already know".

He explained the only helpful theory he found other than Scientology are theories behind sociopaths and psychopaths. Although he does not claim this is better, he does state he has been able to amalgamate the theories together which helped him make advances in his knowledge. This is quite typical for Free Zone Scientologists, they add to and adapt their beliefs and use of worldly knowledge without losing their identity.

SCI6 said after attesting to Clear, she felt a bigger calling and higher purpose. One could argue this would be a gain, however there were no physical or mental attributes which fit with how gains are understood. A sense of purpose was not described by any of the participants as being a gain though there was a responsibility which came through insider knowledge. Sci6 stated:

I attested to Clear and at that point realised really I felt I had a bigger responsibility to do something. To improve the planet. To make things better. you know, I needed to live like a bigger purpose, a broader purpose.

Sci6 is expressing a desire to have opportunities to make positive change, suggesting that access to roles, or structures which provide such roles, is empowering (Maton & Salem, 1995). Additionally, when such behaviours are subsequently positively affirmed by the organisation one is participating in, this further enables the individual to take control and make change (Beairsto & Ruohotie, 2003; Bowan & Lawler, 1992).

This is a type of insider knowledge only applicable to Scientologists who attest to Clear. Other religions do also illicit this realisation one must change the world, but no other religion does this through a clinical therapy approach. No other religion has participants declare to be Clear. This is very much a sense of empowerment, which is clear in how Sci6 feels connected to a higher purpose and needs to do something. This triggered her to join the Sea Org, and although this is not a gain. it is very much some knowledge she would not have otherwise had.

7.7.4 Empowerment Through Disempowerment

The most dominant theme which came through these interviews was the idea of empowerment through disempowerment. All participants began with positive experiences within the CoS. However, as the organisation developed, Hubbard died and

David Miscavige took over leadership, and experiences within the CoS became negative. Ultimately, this led to their disempowerment and exit from the group. Their lived experience as Scientologists outside of the CoS empowered them and their faith in a powerful way.

SCI1 refers to the changes being orchestrated by "draconian forces" and makes an interesting interpretation of the formation of the early Christian church:

Less so now because of the draconian forces trying to control the community. I imagine early Christians were kind of like that. They were telling each other stuff and, of course, the church becomes far more controlling - unfortunately it's [CoS] become more like that today.

The above shows how Sci1 stated the CoS was becoming more controlled and controlling, leading to disempowerment. He referred to the CoS as a "cult", the popular media understanding of the word, and blamed Miscavige. SCI1 gives a very articulate narrative which exemplifies the changes within the CoS after Miscavige came to power, particularly the changes around communication:

Scientology is common sense and so this was contrary to common sense. Not just beliefs. We believe that you can solve anything with communication. If you've got a problem with somebody you talk to them... Miscavige started saying 'you can't talk back. If I want you to do something, you just do it!'... this started to spread throughout the whole of Scientology.

It should be noted SCI1 was clearly referring to the CoS when talking about Scientology.

Using the term Scientology has often been shorthand for the CoS, but using the term in this way is reductionist as there are plenty of Scientologies operating outside of the CoS ([see 7.6.1](#)).

SCI1's narrative went on to describe how Scientology being practiced outside of the CoS feels:

Well... obviously, the community outside the church is a little bit more like it used to be. Which is very... back, you know, in '75, it was wonderful for about. 15 years and then it just became more draconian. Looking outside the church is much more like it was originally. We share this, we share that, we work together, far more voluntary.

Ultimately, SCI1 identified his community is smaller and centres around mostly family and a few good friends. Nevertheless, SCI1 clearly demonstrates a level of empowerment with being able to practice freely, without any perceived interference from CoS leadership. While the changes were difficult and contrary to Scientology belief for SCI1, he has been able to continue practising freely after exiting the CoS, something with which he is empowered to continue.

SCI2, although not ever declaring himself a “fully fledged” Scientologist, was a staff member for a significant period. His views about the CoS also cite Miscavige as being at the centre of negative change in the church. SCI2 does not shy away from speaking directly about Miscavige:

He's a sociopath. In almost any organisation, if you let them, the sociopaths will rise to the top... They want to be in control, they want the power, and they want the admiration they get from being in control and having the power. That's who he is. He's a total dictator.

This is an important narrative to include. The literature on minority religions typically describes leaders as revered (Wessinger, 2012). However, should they no longer be revered, or the successor is not revered in the same way, it often leads to the exit of adherents from the minority religion (Gallagher, 2006). That process, in and of itself, is a clear demonstration of disempowerment. Losing faith in the governance of the

organisation evokes feelings of being unable to change it or feeling chased out of something once wholly good, which is exactly the opposite of the empowerment process (Peterson, 2014; Christens, 2012; Maton, 2008; [see also 3.6](#)). SCI2 certainly displays this. However, his exit narrative and subsequent experience as a practitioner of Scientology technology further demonstrates empowerment through disempowerment. After exiting, and continuing to practice, SCI2 demonstrates a newfound empowering role in helping others unhappy within CoS:

So, I'm doing counselling and I started getting phone calls from friends that said, 'I heard you're out of the church' and I'd say 'yeah, you telling me to disconnect?'. 'No, fuck no, I want a session!'. They wanted a session but wouldn't go to the church for one! So, when they heard that I was outside the church I had about 20 or 25 people who were unbelievably unhappy with their services at the organisation.

The way in which SCI2 is empowered after a subsequent disempowering is similar to SCI1. It directly demonstrates the way the community came together for the sake of the technology and for the sake of continuing with a what they perceive is a correct way to practice seeking more gains.

SCI3 also suggests the group started changing towards the end of the 1980s, when Miscavige took over, but does not cite Miscavige directly as the problem. SCI3 explained:

I just felt it had changed and it wasn't helping me anymore, it wasn't aiding me. It was just harassment for money, for time, donations to their different causes. It just really got crazy at that time - it's pretty well documented about what happened during that period and I don't need to go through all that.

SCI3 was empowered through insider knowledge and the gains obtained through the Scientology auditing, but the above anecdote clearly shows the demise of such empowerment. It was no longer helping him in life. In other words, there were no gains

and the insider knowledge in and of itself was not empowering enough to retain Sci3 as a member of the CoS. SCI3 did state he does not feel he has “an axe to grind” with the church, he merely did not want to stay involved after the changes.

Sci3's subsequent empowerment has taken the form of exploring additional beliefs he can connect to his experience of Scientology. When asked about what his religious identity is now, SCI3 explained he has had some auditing in recent years but also is enamoured by the TV clairvoyant James Van Praagh. Additionally, he practices the “Law of Attraction”, notarized by Rhonda Byrne who authored the book *The Secret*.

SCI4 had a lot to say about the CoS and is perhaps the most outspoken about his experience with the church. However, he is consequently also most outspoken about his experience post-CoS. When asked about why he left the CoS, SCI4 explained:

There were so many things that didn't jive with Scientology that the church did. It was just absolutely a violation of everything that Scientology stood for. One thing that is a big violation of what LRH stood for was the idea of getting money from someone and then giving something in return. So, if you donate money, you should get something for that money.

Certainly, as cited by Sci3, the problems surrounding soliciting money from members of the CoS seems to have triggered Sci4 to start critiquing the way the CoS operates. Sci4 gave extensive analysis of the issues he felt the CoS has and how it is in breach of Hubbard's original intentions with Scientology. When asked if he would identify as a purist within Scientology, SCI4's colourful response gave a great summary of how being in the CoS after the death of Hubbard felt to the participants interviewed in this study:

"Yeah, you could say I'm that. If you had a good bowl of soup and someone came and shit in it, you're not going to eat it."

Sci4 subsequently initiated the start-up of an independent group of Scientologists who have exited the CoS. He provides guidance for those doing auditing but does not charge for audits he performs due to legal reasons. Not only in his descriptions of this group and what it can achieve, but the animation he had when describing it, was evident of subsequent empowerment. The fact SCI4 views himself as a purist who can bring some form of restoration to Scientology is synonymous with studies into schisms of Scientology (Thomas, 2021). I have observed this is a strong form of empowerment which comes through the initial disempowerment of being removed, or removing oneself, from the parent organisation and regaining a sense of control over one's life (Peterson, 2014; Christens, 2012; Maton, 2008; [see also 3.6](#)).

SCI5 was also immensely critical of the soliciting for donation policy the CoS adopted. Whilst SCI5 looks back fondly at the connections she made in the CoS, she certainly highlights the changes in that direction as repelling. If you missed events, SCI5 indicated the CoS even punished you for non-attendance, which is not inline to her experience prior to the turn of the millennium:

So, the next time you went into the church to do a service, they might send you to the ethics officer because you were a bad person that didn't go to that event. Before it wasn't mandatory, then it became mandatory and if you didn't go to the event you had to sit down and watch a video of the event.

SCI5 explained other policies surrounding donations changed after Miscavige took leadership of the CoS. She cited this was a contributing factor into leaving the church, which subsequently led to disconnection. It was a disempowering experience that led to her becoming involved as an independent Scientologist, which she since found empowerment through.

SCI6 perhaps had the most extreme story about her treatment from the CoS. Years after expulsion from the CoS, she attended anti-bullying training through her employer. SCI6 explains that all the signs of bullying happened to her while in the CoS. The most intense example of the disempowering treatment she experienced was around being sent to a “rehabilitation program” which involved a lot of manual labour. During this time, they withheld her passport, and she had no access to finances. Her description of herself after leaving the CoS is very evident of disempowerment:

I was like a shell of my former self. I was introverted. I was unsure of myself. I would second guess myself at everything. I thought I was useless. I was just a shadow of who I used to be. I was so messed up.

Despite the negative description of the CoS and the narratives Sci6 shared about the nature of the organisation, she remains a devout practitioner of Scientology as an independent. In fact, SCI6 continues to be an advocate of Scientology as a “philosophy and technology”:

I am still a Scientologist, but I have nothing to do with the Church of Scientology. I'm quite open about that to neighbours, friends. I believe in the philosophy and technology - it works! I still help people with it locally. We have nothing to do with that organisation. As far as I'm concerned, it's the most corrupt, power driven, horrible frigging - in Scientology terms - suppressive organisation.

SCI6 talked at length, and with enthusiasm, about how the technology and philosophy of Scientology still works and has power in her life. She became an avid supporter of other independent Scientologists. SCI6 also explained she moved past the previous emotional state she was in after leaving CoS and has become a successful employee, independent Scientologist, and mother. She credits Scientology technology for helping her achieve this, which is certainly a level of empowerment. Ultimately, she can gain more perceived control over her life through the use of the tech, and this also provided

her with an ability to understand her socio-context through the belief system Scientology provides ([see 7.5.1](#)).

7.8 Chapter Conclusion

The above analysis identified that, although nuanced, empowerment is still a central theme for adherents who become Scientologists. Perhaps the most notable finding was how these participants found empowerment, through initial disempowerment before finding an empowering reality once more. This is an important finding as it demonstrates empowerment is the key ingredient to retention within minority groups, especially when those groups are negatively impacted by popular discourse. Therefore, empowerment has a key role in conversion and retention.

Scientologists are a particularly fascinating case study as the courses provided by the CoS, and the practice developing in the Free Zone, break the concepts of psychological and organisational empowerment into composite parts which enable the participant to track their empowerment through 'gains'.

Overall, the participants demonstrated that when they are no longer feeling empowered through the practices of the CoS, they were willing to leave. However, rather than reject their religious reality, they sought to continue forging this identity for themselves. The ability to make that decision with that level of autonomy over one's life course directly reflects the application of empowerment literature (Christens, 2012; Maton, 2008; Peterson, 2014).

8.0 DISCUSSION

This discussion is based on the initial findings and key themes which emerged from the individual case studies (see [5.0](#), [6.0](#) & [7.0](#)) as well as the pilot study (see [4.0](#)). Further discussion of additional themes and the impact this has for the field of contemporary religion will also be explored. Throughout the course of the research, there have been several findings and developments which will be studied below with the most notable being the overall theme of empowerment.

Additionally, it is important to provide comparisons between current literature in the field of NRMs / minority religions and the findings of this research project. While there is a lack of literature, and subsequently a lack of theory, concerning empowerment in the field of NRMs / minority religions, there are some aspects this thesis either supports, nuances, or rejects with its findings.

8.1 Overlapping Doctrines, Origins and Practices in Minority Religions

Although not extensive, there are overlaps or connections between some of the minority religions explored in this research. Some of the foundational beliefs and principles, and even individuals connected with the founding of a minority religion, have influenced - or been influenced by - these same aspects from another minority religion. Of course, to those well versed in the field of NRMs/minority religion this will not come as a surprise, due to the emergent religious milieu emanating out of counterculture beginning in the 1950s and 1960s, initially in the USA (Ashcraft, 2018). Several prominent movements emerged with a view to arrest society in the bid to enforce positive change, including the civil rights movement and anti-Vietnam war protests (Dawson, 2006). At the same time, there was increasing widening participation in

university education and growing dissonance between the establishment and general population due to assassinations and political scandals (ibid):

In general, the clamour for change, the experience of disruption, the rising education levels, and the emergence of new ideals of personal authenticity in the sixties opened the door to a much greater interest in alternative world-views and ways of living” (Dawson, 2006: 43).

The greater interest in “alternative worldviews and ways of living” paved the way for the emergence of minority religions such as Scientology and Paganisms. With alternative worldviews emerging in the 1960s counterculture, some common themes underpin these perspectives and, therefore, provide a link between differing movements. For example, Scientology and Paganism proposes a link between occult practice and the Dianetic beginnings (Urban, 2011). Urban is arguably one of the more prominent scholars of the under-researched Church of Scientology, he proposes there was an indirect influence Alister Crowley had over Hubbard, prior to his publication of Dianetics. Through a mutual associate, Urban claims John Whiteside Parsons was a devout follower of Crowley in occult practice. Parsons and Hubbard allegedly worked together to produce a “moon child”, much to the dismay of Crowley (Urban, 2011).

These details are not insignificant. Urban highlights that, from the exploration of the occult, Hubbard turned to a new “science of the human mind”, or Dianetics.

As Hubbard himself reflected on the origins of his new science, Dianetics was the result of his exploration and synthesis of a wide array of different philosophical, psychological and spiritual traditions (ibid: 43).

Urban (2012) elaborates further and provides analysis, with reference to other notable authors, that there are striking similarities between early Scientology and Crowley’s

occultism which include the naming of an initial pamphlet “Golden Dawn” authored by L. Ron Hubbard and the “eight-pointed cross”.

Prior to the scholarly work of Hugh Urban, the notion of Crowley’s influence over Hubbard and early Scientology was discounted as insignificant. Both Roy Wallis (1977) and J. Gordon Melton (2009) suggested there is not sufficient evidence Crowley was a formative influence over Hubbard. Urban (2019) recently returned to this discussion and references again his belief Crowley influenced Hubbard with his article discussing Scientology and Gnosticism. However, it is worth noting Introvigne (2019) replies to this article and states this theory of Crowley’s influence remains insignificant.

While the influence Crowley had over Hubbard is heavily debated, it is an important factor to note. Many minority religions emerged out of the same counterculture, resulting in many similarities between them. When exploring minority religions and how they convert or recruit in contemporary society, these essential foundations indirectly impact the participants of this research. Due to Hubbard not openly discussing Crowley’s influence, and this being denied by the Church of Scientology, I would argue this is indicative of an attempt to remain distanced from any links to Satanism. As demonstrated elsewhere ([see 6.3](#)), the ‘Satanic Panic’ has led to an “othering” of Paganisms which targeted Pagan groups early on by claiming they were abusive (Hughes, 2017). The indirect influence over the participants stems from an early stance of defensiveness being taken by the Church of Scientology whilst the religion and praxis was still in development. This led to a selectiveness in what information is released to the public, which subsequently led to suspicion from those outside of the CoS and the negative discourses impact on individual lived realities.

The influence of Alister Crowley in Paganisms is largely due to his prolific writings on 'magick', of which many definitions of magick are derivative ([see 6.1.1](#)). Crowley also established the binary of the god and goddess, which many Pagans accept "polytheistic aspects of the divine as similar to Jungian archetypes" (Carpenter, 1996: 57). Crowley directly impacted the development of Wicca, as Gardner met him personally. Gardner served in the Ordo Templi Orientis (O.T.O.), an occult initiatory organisation, alongside Crowley, and was eventually promoted to replace Crowley's position upon his death (Hesselton, 2012).

The indirect impact Crowley's various influences have had on the participants of this study cannot be ignored. Whilst this history might not be known by individual Pagans, the roots in occult practice will still impact on them. For example, "Sex Magick" developed out of Crowley's involvement with the O.T.O. where it was part of initiation and is practiced by some contemporary Pagans today (Bogdan, 2009). Despite overlapping influences, Paganisms are a distinct minority religion adhered to by many individuals who may not access that history. For my participants, their lived reality is indirectly influenced by this history as they did not directly reference it, though some of their practices originated from this point in Paganism's development.

Jehovah's Witnesses and Baha'i have also intersected. In assessing religious freedom in Egypt, Johanna Pink (2005) identified both religions were persecuted over their suspected conspiratorial links to Israel and rejection from the established religions accepted by the Egyptian state at the time. There are plenty of brief comparisons between the two religions – specifically when referring to conversion, growth, and persecution (MacEoin, 1986; Warburg, 2006).

Interestingly, this overlap directly impacts the lived reality of the participants. I would argue because the histories of Jehovah's Witnesses and Baha'i schism out of religions with a longer history, the participants are aware they need to legitimate this fact. Often, it is because they are marginalised (see [3.2](#), [4.2](#) & [5.1](#)). By holding onto their persecuted global identities, the participants were able to feel they were connected to a deeper root of religion, which in turn empowered them to believe and continue choosing to belong (see [4.5.4](#) and [5.6.4](#)). The similarities in both minority religions' origins were reflected in shared themes in interviews.

Overlaps in studies are indicative of the ways in which minority religions originated and because of their origins there are several historic influences connecting the minority religions together. There are examples across the literature where similarities can be drawn between all four due to the nature of existing in the paradigm of NRM / minority religion research (Barker, 2006; Melton, 2007). Crucially, whilst Paganisms and Scientology are newer than Baha'i and Jehovah's Witnesses, they have all emerged since globalisation began to shape the now global village in which they all exist. This is particularly noteworthy, as explored below, due to similar levels of disempowerment taking place across rationalised society.

There are several powerful themes impacting all four of the minority religions in this project, further demonstrating the overlapping nature of the reality of the participants in the global village's religious milieu.

8.2 Internet as a Powerful Tool

The use of the internet was present across all case studies. Specifically, the internet is a tool for praxis, community, and discovery, with adherents often inferring that internet usage significantly impacts their lived reality.

The minority religions of this research project, much like minority religions across the globe, have either benefitted or been negatively impacted by the creation of the internet (Barker, 2005; Campbell, 2006; 2012; Cowan, 2005; Kruger, 2004). The Anti-Cult Movement (ACM) used the internet beyond the use of journalist allies (Chryssides & Wilkins, 2006), to embed the negative connotation of the word “cult”, and the belief in “brainwashing”, in the popular imagination (see [3.2.1](#) & [3.2.2](#)). Ultimately, this negatively impacted the image, understanding, and acceptance of minority religious movements as they emerged. The impact on the lived reality of my participants is prolific, which can be demonstrated in interviews with Scientologists, as they started with the participant feeling the need to defend their choices and beliefs. They would refer to the CoS as a “cult” with a view to demonstrate they can distinguish for themselves ([see 7.7.4](#)).

George D. Chryssides (2016) observes the creation of the internet was initially viewed with cynicism by the Watch Tower Society. It enabled many critics of the Watchtower, especially ex-members, to voice their rejection and dissension of The Society. It also led to many Witnesses connecting and discussing topics of theology and praxis, which led to questions regarding the legitimacy of the Watch Tower (*ibid*). The participants in this research certainly demonstrated this was an aspect of their lived reality, for JW1 and JW2 it was eventually their connections online which led to them deciding to fade from involvement in the Watch Tower. This exemplifies Chryssides’ identification of Witnesses use of the internet as leading to the challenging of Watch Tower’s legitimacy. Eventually, and tentatively, the Watch Tower embraced the internet and created their own website. This led to the dissemination of official materials which inform Witnesses

and the public about the religion, and saved costs from printing materials (Chryssides, 2016).

Much like The Watch Tower Society, the Church of Scientology has been hugely impacted by the internet. Most notably, the countermovement against the CoS was embraced by Anonymous through mostly virtual means. The CoS try to control the flow of information, particularly about the training packages it offers to members. Anonymous, and other internet sources have sought to undermine this level of control by publishing prohibited information and unearthing secrets of the organisation (Urban, 2011). The Free Zoners have benefitted hugely and are able to commune together virtually, some of whom have begun spiritual auditing and counselling online. Additionally, the internet is used as a form of social media in which Free Zone Scientologists can promote what they perceive to be a pure form of Scientology, opening the practice to the masses (Thomas, 2021).

The participants in this research were all Free Zoners who left the CoS, and they benefitted from being able to access Scientology materials online (Schorey, 2016) without involving the CoS in their endeavours. These participants were able to connect on a global level and practice the use of the Scientology technology through online video calling. The lived reality of these participants is that they do not need the CoS to facilitate their belief and practice, meaning these participants can choose to independently use the tech. My findings support the conclusions of Thomas (2021) which suggested the internet is a liberating feature for Scientologies in general, enabling adherents to practice the tech and be in community with others, extending beyond borders to do so.

Much like the above minority religions, the Baha'i and Paganisms have been impacted by the internet. The Baha'i have a similar issue to the Watch Tower Society in that the internet quickly became a location in which dissenters and defenders of the faith were able to clash. Bounded religious communities like the Baha'i constrain the use of adherent's internet usage, usually through policies and dictates. In 2004, The Universal House of Justice created the Baha'i Internet Agency to advise the community on how one must engage with the internet and the importance of avoiding apostate blogs, podcasts, and social media sites (Campbell & Fulton, 2013). However, there was no mention of this by the participants in my research. Clearly, this debate had not impacted their lived reality. Instead, a few of the Baha'i participants stated they were able to access news about their Baha'i brothers and sisters around the world which seemed to be an empowering aspect of their lived reality. The participants mentioned they were able to feel connected to the global Baha'i religion. These findings demonstrate, more broadly, the conclusions of Margit Warburg (2006) that the Baha'i is a globalised religion. In essence, the internet helps this to be felt on a local level by my participants.

Pagans engaged in some debate about the validity of online community and the possible impact on the lived reality of their faith. Some argue online Pagan communities cannot substitute offline reality, while others argue online and offline are equally valid (Cowan, 2005). The impact of the internet on Paganisms has further open-sourced an already open-source religion, increasing the access one has to varied belief (see [6.3.2](#), [6.5.2](#) & [6.5.5](#)). All my participants have adopted the internet as part of their religious lived reality in that they connect with others, find source material for their belief and praxis, or generally were introduced to Pagan concepts before their conversion via the internet (Berger & Ezzy, 2004; Cowan, 2005; Lövheim & Linderman, 2005). I argue several of the

participants might not have converted to Paganisms if not for the internet. Their increased exposure via the internet, which subsequently led to their empowerment ([see 6.5.5](#)), informed them of how to live as a Pagan and construct their own pathway, and connected them with others who had done the same. My research supports the arguments of Berger and Ezzy (2004), Lövheim & Linderman (2005) and Cowen (2005), but also adds value to their work by identifying empowerment as a key factor in the process of Pagan identity formation.

Within the interviews in my research, the internet was not a direct topic of investigation. Nevertheless, the theme emerged in multiple ways. Whilst interviewing Jehovah's Witnesses, particularly the two "faded" participants, there was discussion on the role of the internet. For example, the term "faded Witness" came through JW1's research on the internet:

I kind of saw a phrase on the internet of a post-JW. Not an ex-JW, that's someone who has been formally disfellowshipped or formally excluded or has disassociated themselves. A post-JW is someone that has gone beyond the basic mentality of the JW; left it behind but hasn't been deleted from the ranks. So, if somebody fades and wants to leave in a clandestine way and quiet... [they] go under the radar.

JW1 found the internet as a source of recommendation for apostate books and other readings highly critical of the Society. JW2 spoke more extensively about her use of the internet as she was involved in many forums, both for and against the Society. Initially, JW2 had issues with the way individuals would, anonymously, discuss those who suggest contrary statements to the Society, with the most usual retort being they were "apostates" and should be banned. JW2's attitude was they were spiritually shipwrecked and needed support. When asked about the online community JW2 was beginning to form via forums and email, she replied:

Well, it was far more exciting. You could talk about things that were a little bit dangerous without consequences, other than people shouting you down. I was more an observer back then and I was going into what I thought were pro-JW [forums]... my brothers and sisters who were perhaps thinking a little bit differently.

Ultimately, for JW2, the ability to use the internet as a tool was also a source of empowerment which replaced other sources of empowerment once received through involvement in The Society. JW1 experienced a new level of community which exceeded their current community structure, empowering them to begin fading out of their local congregation for this new sense of belonging. JW2 suggested that being able to explore controversial patterns of thought, due to anonymity, was an exciting aspect of her lived reality at the time:

I found it exciting. I found it quite liberating to be able to speak freely on things that were concerning me and ask questions. I could go to elders who were frequenting these sites and I could ask them questions. And it does even things out because, of course, as a female you can't challenge an elder or ask questions of an elder in the same way in real life.

Certainly, for JW1 and JW2 the internet was a powerful tool affecting their engagement with faith. For JW2, the ability to question one's faith with elders despite being a woman, was a source of liberation. This can be viewed as a modified form of making sense of the world, allowing JW2 to actively search for answers without fearing repercussions. As demonstrated elsewhere ([see 4.5.1](#)), making sense of the world is a facet of Witnesses empowered conversions. Although more data is required, it could be argued fading and ex-Witnesses might still feel empowered through new forms of sense making. JW2 made an explicit link to this being because of her gender. The excitement in finding a nuanced avenue for sense making, circumventing the Witnesses approach to gender norms, further empowered JW2 to "fade" out of being an active Witness. JW2 was being

empowered through gaining information from sources otherwise inaccessible in a physical space (Kabeer, 1999; O'Brien & Whitmore, 1989), thus the internet became a powerful tool for engaging with her faith and religious identity. JW3 and JW4 do not speak about the internet, although this is probably due to their age. Being quite elderly at the time the internet was made accessible, they are less likely to have engaged with it as a tool, if at all.

The interviews with the Baha'i did not evolve into discussions about the internet because the initial plans for the research did not set out to investigate the impact of the internet. Although there was some mention of being connected to a global community, and how being able to stay abreast of the news is empowering because it brings news of others willing to be persecuted for their faith, invoking a sense of deeper belonging ([see 5.6.1](#)). One can assume the internet is a source of this, as this has been demonstrated in the literature (Campbell, 2006; [see also 3.5](#)).

As mentioned earlier in the thesis (see [6.3.2](#) & [6.5.5](#)), the Pagan participants were particularly open with their approach to the internet. Interestingly, except for PG6, all the Pagan participants spoke about the internet as wholly positive. PG6 lends credence to the discussion over legitimate online realities found in Cowan (2005), in how some online communities delegitimise other online expressions of Pagan. "Witch-Tok", and the demarcation of them as "baby-witches", was intentionally patronising, implying a level of rejection from the online community PG6 engages with occasionally. Pagan participants are very similar to their Witness participant counterparts regarding the internet being a powerful tool, however they had the reverse outcome and became stronger in their faiths as Pagans. This research demonstrates how Pagans are creatively constructing religious identities via information and communities online, reflecting the

findings of Helen Berger and Douglas Ezzy (2004) and Heidi Campbell (2006). Additionally, Stephen Jacobs (2007) and Simon Jenkins (2008) show how online engagement is an extension of offline reality, which is evident in my research. However, I would suggest that in the process of constructing religious identity, my participants have sought an empowered reality which is an additional finding not found in literature on Pagan identity and the Internet.

As demonstrated above, the ability to anonymously question authority figures in the Watch Tower, or the legitimacy of organisation overall, can lead to a rejection of that organisation's hegemony. JW2, and partially JW1, reject the Watch Tower's hegemony, one now identifying as Christian and the other identifying as Agnostic. All Pagan participants, apart from PG6, were able to reject Christian hegemony using the internet in helping them identify an alternative system of belief they then chose to belong. Howard Rheingold (1993), Debra Farrington (2003, cited in Campbell, 2006) and Heidi Campbell (2006) discuss how online discussions take place outside of the authority of central organisations. The "traditional gatekeepers" (Kruger, 2004) of religion have been unable to guard against critique. My research shows the Internet has enabled the participants to find information alternative to the "official information" given by socially central organisations (see Helland, 2002) and thus reject Christian influence.

The internet was a particularly large aspect of being able to discover more about Pagan pathways. As seen in Chapter 5, the ability to explore varied Pagan beliefs means the internet is a tool leading to development. All Pagan participants gave some form of response that the internet was a tool for their engagement with community and in developing their praxis or understanding their theology on a deeper level. Certainly, this small-scale study on Paganisms lends support to the analysis of Cowan (2005: 71) in that

the use of the internet provides “a web of potential and opportunity”. My findings from these participants demonstrate that, during difficult times, the anonymity of the internet made exploration easier, whilst at the same time served as a stock of knowledge.

The only form of community the Pagan participants tended to have been online, which enabled them to connect into a global network they would otherwise not have access to. Cowan (2005) builds upon Berger and Luckman (1967) by discussing how the connections made online are important aspects of the construction of their Pagan reality. Cowan highlights an integral component of conversation is the construction of one’s reality. In having these conversations online, Pagans can live out a reality – irrespective of the virtual, rather than physical, input:

Without the World Wide Web, few of the participants in any of these lists would even know that these other modern Pagans existed, let alone have any chance to interact with them. In this way, the Internet provides one of the most basic components of conversation: potential and opportunity (Cowan, 2005: 73).

Inevitably, the Pagan participants in this research project have been able to construct their identity through engagement with other Pagans, largely using the internet as a tool to do this on a continuous basis. It is worth noting that all these participants were sourced via online social networking sites, and the Pagan community were the easiest of all the religious communities to gain access to.

The Free Zone Scientologists participating in this research were all interviewed online, from differing countries ([see 7.7.1](#)). The participants were snowball sampled after having an initial opportunity with a gatekeeper ([see 2.4.1](#)). From the first inquiry to interview, valuable insights were gained at this stage. Whilst seeking six participants for

the Scientology case study, the amount of interest and volunteers for interviews far outweighed the other minority religions explored. The implication of this initial experience implies the level of connectivity in the Free Zone community is not only strong, but largely online also.

The findings of this study with Free Zone and independent Scientologists further support the already ground-breaking findings of Thomas (2021). Thomas was able to demonstrate the Free Zone community largely grew from online engagement as a network of individual Scientologists who felt what they practiced was a pure form of their religion. Through their engagements online, they managed to create content that is accessible and outside the regulation of the CoS. Equally, Thomas found some individual Free Zoner's audit online, with technical apps being created to replicate the role of the E-meter. Ultimately, Free Zone and independent Scientologists have further embraced technology within their praxis and are able to continue with auditing outside of the CoS.

It is important to note not all the Scientologists interviewed in this research would self-define as in the Free Zone with clear boundaries in the minds of the participants. However, the Free Zone community certainly overlapped with all the participant's being connected through online means. Many of them are connected to a specific online service for auditing, although this cannot be named due to the risk of unveiling my participants. This online service enables individuals to access auditing outside of the CoS to all levels, as well as the ability to train as an auditor. This was a particularly interesting as the entirety of their practice has been adapted for online, as well as offline, reality. These participants can use the internet as a tool for advertising their services, connecting with other Free Zone and ex-Scientologists, and a source of information for

those seeking it. The participants can form global communities and have wider access to those outside of the CoS that provide auditing services, which is an essential practice ([see 7.2.1](#)). It also leads to the successful routinisation of Scientology because the CoS do not have overall control of those practising Scientology (Thomas, 2021).

Ultimately, the use of the internet as a powerful tool for religious exploration demonstrates that religiosity is synonymous with the technology available in contemporary 21st century. The participants in this research, in some form, used the internet to help construct their religious identity and explore or join a minority religion. Thus, the internet becomes a conduit which connects adherents to minority religions and can sometimes catalyse aspects of empowered conversion, such as being able to engage in community, sometimes providing roles, structure, and support, which leads to the empowerment of these participants ([see 8.3](#)).

8.3 Empowerment

The most dominant theme across this research was empowerment. Currently, there is a lack of specific theory into the area of empowerment and conversion in the field of minority religions. Empowerment significantly contributed to the lived reality of minority religious adherents and their subsequent identity.

General literature into empowerment has been gaining prominence over the last four decades, most notably in the field of Psychology but also within Social Science. The growing trend in empowerment research led to a special edition of the *American Journal of Community Psychology* (1995), with many findings transferrable to the field of minority religions. The general understanding of empowerment is largely applicable and relevant to the findings of this research (Argyris & Schön, 1991; Beairsto & Ruohotie, 2003; Maton & Salem, 1995; Sadler, 2003; and Soloman, 1976; [see also 3.6](#)). I broadly

agree with Marc A. Zimmerman (1995) that a universal global measure of empowerment may not be possible or desirable. Zimmerman notes empowerment can differ between individuals, contexts and over time. I argue this research shows religious settings can empower the individual and this is likely to look different between individual adherents and their respective systems of belief and religious communities.

In simplistic terms, empowerment concerns the nature of who owns power (McLaughlin, 2016). Within sociological literature, there is a plethora of empowerment theory and research predicated on demographics which are victim to systematic discrimination and othering. The sociological literature broadly views empowerment as a process which leads to the transfer of power (Kabeer, 1999).

The findings from my research supports the literature on empowerment ([see 3.6](#)). All four minority religions have provided some form of empowerment for the participants which can easily be identified as the primary motivating factor in their conversion and commitment to their respective religions.

Whilst JW1 and JW2 have since felt disempowered from their religious adherence, they were certainly empowered initially. Similarly, JW3 and JW4 demonstrated a lack of empowerment in their lives prior to converting into Jehovah's Witnesses. JW3, for example, found the faith of her childhood and the experience as a nurse during WWII particularly hard to reconcile. She was then able to gain access to a community who respected her on an equal level, something she was lacking in her life at the time. JW4 has a similar experience, although somewhat lived vicariously through his parents. Listening to his dad converse with Jehovah's Witnesses, and subsequently his mother being convinced it was true, led to him being raised as a Witness.

Both JW3 and JW4 experienced persecution, and this solidified the support system around them as they sought advice for how to maintain their belief system despite the hardships faced, which supports the findings of Maton and Salem (1995). With their continued involvement, they were able to access opportunity role structures which continued their development in the praxis of the faith. Robert E. Quinn & Gretchen M. Spreitzer (1997) suggested empowerment concerns individual mindset toward the organisation, and effective structures and mentality within an organisation help aid “the road to empowerment”. My research certainly demonstrates this is applicable to the religious context of Jehovah’s Witnesses, JW3 and JW4 felt supported through their access to the wider structure of the Watch Tower and the mentality of the organisation in the face of persecution.

The experience of the Baha’i participants, although part of a lineage of historic persecution of the faith, is not entrenched in personal persecution. However, the same foundational empowering organisational characteristics (Maton & Salem, 1995) are provided by membership of the Baha’i religion. The structure of local Baha’i communities certainly provides access to opportunity role structures as the leadership changes after elections. Equally, the participants in the research reported their community provided them with a support system, although this did vary between the participants. For example, BH1 outlined the process of consultation as a mature way of dealing with intrapersonal conflicts and interpersonal areas for development. The process is linked with eating together, further solidifying the relationships between the individual adherents in the local Baha’i assembly. The experience of Baha’i participants supports Soloman’s (1976) definition that empowerment is a process of stigmatised individuals gaining influence over social roles. Certainly, the Baha’i belief about a unified

world government being ushered in by Baha'i guidance can be seen as influence over a valued social role. This further added to the participants self-belief in being placed in the right religious context for the age to come, which is also evidence of an empowered lived reality (Siitonen, 1999; Järvinen, 2007).

Free-Zone and independent Scientologists who participated in this research did not report or infer that all foundational characteristics exist, and therefore do not lend support to Maton & Salem (1995). However, this is largely due to their lack of rigid organisation. Prior to becoming independent of the CoS, their initial experience of the CoS certainly demonstrated these foundational characteristics in a strong way.

The participants all reported that initial engagement with the CoS provided them with a belief system which helped them psychosocially interpret the world, particularly their intrapersonal connections in society. More defined was their opportunity for role structure in how they were able to train as auditors and continuously progress along the *"Road to Total Freedom"* whilst at the same time accessing a support system encouraging them to continue in the context of continuous inspirational leadership. As discussed earlier in the thesis ([see 8.4](#)), empowering organisations embrace a belief system (Maton & Salem, 1995), provide access to role structure (Beairsto & Ruohotie, 2003), have an ability to be flexible to the needs of the target demographics (Argyris & Schön, 1996; Burgoyne, 1996), provide a support system (Maton & Salem, 1995) and have inspirational leadership (Sadler, 2003). All the Scientology participants reported these empowering aspects were provided for them in the CoS and some maintain they still have this level of empowering provision as independent practitioners of the Tech. I would argue that the *"Road to Total Freedom"* could easily be a Scientology synonym for the *"Road to Empowerment"* (Quinn & Spreitzer, 1997).

When these participants began to feel these foundational characteristics were diminishing, they sought to find these empowering features through other means without having to completely give up their belief and praxis. I argue this further supports the literature outlined earlier ([see 3.5](#)) as it demonstrates individual psychological empowerment is drastically impacted upon by organisational activity. In essence, the Scientologist participants in my research demonstrate empowering factors (see [3.6](#) & also [8.4](#)) are replicable in a religious setting also. My findings also demonstrate how empowerment does not require access to role structure (Beirsto & Ruohotie, 2003; Maton & Salem, 1995) to be organisational; this can be theological or eschatological. Independent and Free Zone Scientologists can continue progressing on “*The Road to Total Freedom*” outside of the parameters set by the CoS (Thomas, 2021). Ultimately, having some form of progression is empowering in and of itself.

Similarly, to Free-zone and independent Scientologists, Pagan participants in this study did not organise themselves into a solid community structure, meaning the foundational characteristics for organisational empowerment were not all existing in their lived reality as an adherent. However, they were able to gain access to support systems (Fetterman, 2001; Maton & Salem, 1995) and a system of belief which empowered their self-belief in daily life (Kuokkanen, 2003; Siitonen, 1999) and encouraged their continued participation (Adams, 1996).

These participants were accessing opportunity role structure despite not being in a defined community. The nature of Paganisms being pluralistic with multiple pathways means the participants can define for themselves a clear role as a Druid, Wiccan, or eclectic. These labels have been carefully considered by the participants. Therefore, I suggest they have the opportunity for interpersonal development which directly

influences their intrapersonal connection when there are community events or religious festivals the participants can attend. This is certainly empowering for the participants and is in line with Beairsto and Ruohotie (2003) and Maton and Salem (1995), with support in the notion of self-empowerment through religious identity (Van Hoang, 2016).

The foundational characteristics outlined by Maton and Salem (1995) are a helpful starting point for understanding empowerment within the context of minority religions. Unfortunately, they are not fully fit for purpose on account of some minority religions being almost anarchic in nature. Nevertheless, this research shows it is vital to assess and understand empowerment (and disempowerment, [see 8.5.1](#)) as it is a foundational underpinning for every participant examined. Maton and Salem's (1995) characteristics of empowerment are reflected in this research, and demonstrates how, their theory applies to minority religious contexts. Empowerment theory, religious lived reality, and the impact this has on religious organisations should be investigated in conjunction together to understand religion holistically.

Upon evaluating the four studies in this research, three categories of empowerment are evident: making sense of the world, a sense of belonging, and connections with others who have been othered. I suggest these should be added to the wider body of literature on empowerment. These specific aspects of empowerment can be applied to non-religious contexts also, most specifically political, health, and educational contexts. I plan to conduct future research as to whether this is an accurate belief, or not.

Two of the themes from the studies which emerged as being mostly unilateral were empowerment through making sense of the world and empowerment through a sense

of belonging. Each independent religious identity means this can vary, but these two themes were prominent in the lived reality of their religious identity.

8.3.1 Empowerment Through Making Sense of the World

All participants in this research demonstrated some form of making sense of the world as being an empowered aspect of their lived reality although Scientologist's experience this introspectively. All participants can claim some form of community in their respective religion, although engagement with community varies. Therefore, it appears this is a distinctive foundational characteristic for empowerment when considering religious conversion and continued practice. Minority religions, and the organisations therewith, provide a context for nuanced understanding of the world, which in turn has significant impact on the subjective wellbeing of the individual (Graham & Shier, 2011), a concept intrinsically interwoven with empowerment (Diener & Biswas-Diener, 2005). For example, Jehovah's Witnesses can make sense of the world through an understanding Christ has returned, and humanity will be redeemed through him. Scientologists believe the issue with the world stems from engrams within the inner Thetan of an individual, which leads to external behaviours that are negative in nature, culminating in the suppression of society. Being able to make sense of the world led the participants to being able to engage with the world in a new way (Robins & Anthony, 1982; Paloutzian, Richardson & Rambo, 1999). It often resulted in the participants overcoming cognitive dissonance and intrapersonal difficulties which informed their personal identities. The result, whether described as "gains" or something else, is control over life change. From that point of clarity onward, the participants conveyed their identities took a new converted form. Overall, this enabled participants to make sense of the world and their place within it, empowering them in their everyday reality.

8.3.2 Empowerment Through a Sense of Belonging

Another strong indicator of empowerment is the sense of belonging participants were able to experience. Again, this was in multivariate form. For Baha'i the sense of belonging to a global community of believers enabled participants to feel they had a place in the world, as demonstrated by McGlinn (2005). In Paganism, participants were empowered through their solitary practice but there was a sense of belonging linked to the local history of where they practiced, especially through the sense of Paganisms as a root-religion.

This sense of belonging seen throughout the interviews should not be understood as pertaining to a membership of an organisation only. Free-zone and independent Scientologists and the Pagans interviewed were often solitary practitioners. However, they all either implied, or explicitly stated, they were part of something bigger than themselves. This commonality with their identities can be viewed as a variate form of belonging. One can connect to the global identity of the religion irrespective of their position as solitary practitioners (Rainie & Wellman, 2012). This global connection, through belief, enables a sense of belonging which empowers the participants to adapt and shape their identity accordingly (Paloutzian, Richardson & Rambo, 1999), altering the way they engage with the world.

8.3.3 Empowerment through Connections to Others That Have Been 'Othered'

Empowerment through connections to others who have been othered did not appear in the individual studies, but when all the studies are analysed together this theme emerges. This unilaterally applies to the minority religions and the adherents who participated in this research. The data included here further enriches the analysis I have provided after a case study approach ([see 2.3.1](#)).

Minority belief does not fit with the World Religion Paradigm (WRP) and this presents challenges to those belonging to a minority religion (see [3.1](#) & [9.2.3](#)). Ultimately, the norms and values of society lead to a type of othering of those who do not fit the WRP. All participants were asked how they thought wider society viewed them, and all participants felt there was at least a lack of understanding, if not total opposition.

For example, Sci1 responded to the question as:

There's been a lot of negativity about Scientology; it's been attacked for various reasons over the years, so the general public opinion is not good. I imagine if I get to speak to someone one on one it's rarely ever a bad result. Again, we're talking about the mob mentality. To the mob mentality, we're loony tunes.

This type of response was not isolated to the Scientologist participants. When asked about representations of Paganisms in the media, PG3 suggested there have been a lot of works of fiction helping normalise discussion but have also fed misinformation. He reflected on how it has impacted the opinions of those close to him:

However, it then led to even more of these misconceptions that it was all just about witchcraft, potions, and vampires. Especially from my dad's side of the family when I said I was Pagan, and that's just how I identified, I got a lot of 'you're going through an emo [emotional] phase'. That was quite interesting.

The above two examples are synonymous with the wider pool of participants. Interestingly, regardless of the extent to which a participant might suggest they have been persecuted for their faith, persecution of their minority religion in general led to a greater understanding they must be bearers of the truth, solidifying their socio-cultural identity further (Jonkers & Wiertz, 2020). The belief they hold the truth empowered them to go deeper into their faith.

Being persecuted, or othered, meant the participants inevitably adapted, or they faced the prospect of needing to withdraw from and deny the faith they had adopted. This, on the face of it, does not seem empowering. However, the very nature of perseverance must be accepted as empowerment as the participants felt they had control over their lives (which is empowering, see Fetterman, 2001) enabling continued participation (Adams, 1996). This leads to reflexive thinking and entrenched motivation to continue to achieve the goals of the religion (or organisation, see Kuokkanen, 2003). Perseverance can be broken down into composite facets which empower: enabling (or control), continued participation, and motivation. Therefore, it should be understood, based on this research at least, that these participants were empowered through their faith, despite being othered.

8.3.4 Definitions and Foundational Characteristics of Minority Religions that Empower
With an overview of empowerment ([see 3.6](#)) and the subsequent examples of how participants are gaining access to varying levels of empowerment, we can adapt the initial definition of empowerment from the Cornell Empowerment Group (Perkins and Zimmerman, 1995) into the context of contemporary religion.

I posit religious organisational empowerment is the result of an active cyclical process in a religious setting, involving belief, engagement in an external cause, a sense of belonging and community acceptance, through which adherents “lacking an equal share of valued resources gain greater access to and control over these resources”. Despite my belief that an all-encompassing definition is not possible, this adapted definition helps provide a foundational conceptualisation ([see 3.6](#)).

When identifying the empowerment process in minority religion organisations, the question is on access to resources of belief, critical engagement with an external cause,

sense of belonging and community acceptance. The outcomes of accessing these resources leads to numerical growth, cohesive religious communities (online or offline), the acceptance of leadership and the drive to pluralise the religious community through schism when the previous outcomes fail to materialise.

With reflection on Maton & Salem's (1995) foundational characteristics for organisational empowerment, this research finds these characteristics are intrinsic for religious empowerment. As outlined above, this thesis further develops list of characteristics for the context of minority religions and I would argue making sense of the world, sense of belonging, and being othered are also distinctive facets for empowerment in a minority religious setting, and potentially non-religious settings too.

Overall, the literature on empowerment often refers to the way an individual can engage with autonomy, whether this is organisationally or societally. However, this research demonstrates empowerment does not necessarily require a relationship with decision making, rather it flows out of further autonomy over one's identity. Therefore, it is identity at the centre of empowerment.

8.4 Empowerment: A New Conversion Model

The findings of this thesis further inform theories of conversion already existent in the literature. As mentioned earlier in the thesis ([see 3.4](#)), there are several prominent models which explain reasons for why individuals convert to minority religions. The models explaining conversion largely fall within two predominant paradigms: network theory and strong social constructivism. Network theories explain conversion happens due to the strength and number of social ties to individuals already within the religion (Greil & Rudy, 1984; Kox, Meeus & Hart, 1991; Snow & Phillips, 1980; Stark & Bainbridge,

1985). Alternatively, strong social constructivism explains the accounts given by converts are socially constructed considering the system of belief converted to, meaning memories and experiences are externalised through the present socially constructed identity (Jindra 2014).

Ines W. Jindra (2014) demonstrates these predominant conversion paradigms are not able to satisfy every individual conversion narrative. Some research conducted in this area generated a catch-all model despite only investigating the conversions of a singular religion (for example, Stark & Bainbridge, 1985; [see also 3.4](#)). Jindra's (2014: 5) findings presented two distinctive pathways for conversion:

The results of my study reveal that although most conversion biographies share some similarities, there are two broad pathways that conversions can take: those that move from relatively closed conditions to more open, theologically liberal groups, and those who, having experienced insecurities and disorientating conditions, convert to closed, theologically and socially stricter groups.

Jindra is subsequently able to show the two predominant paradigms within the literature are unable to account for all conversions. Jindra's approach to conversion research further includes varying factors which have not been combined in previous research, such as: a convert's background, the extent of influence religions have over conversion narratives, the level of life course agency, the impact a conversion has on life course trajectory, gender, and the specific dogmatic and doctrinal beliefs of a religion. Consequently, Jindra proposes the *structural-substantial model of religious conversion* (Jindra, 2014). Jindra's approach seeks to uncover the lived reality of participants; an approach emulated in this research ([see 2.2.2](#)).

This research lends support to Jindra (2014), particularly in terms of the two pathways Jindra identified. Those who were Baha'i or Pagan came from backgrounds that were

controlling and relatively conservative. This was particularly prevalent with the Pagan participants ([see 6.5.3](#)) and a central theme of escaping dogmatic Christianity emerged as a key factor for identifying as a Pagan, which was understood as being more liberal in belief and practice.

For Baha'i, BH3 perhaps best represents this notion of converting out of a strict, relatively closed, background. BH3 said she had typical Asian parents who required high levels of obedience. Certainly, the participant came across as somewhat contemptuous whilst explaining her background. BH2, who initially converted to Christianity, because of the Billy Graham rallies, converted to Baha'i after beginning to struggle with some of the doctrines of Christianity. The belief in the Trinity, for example, seemed limiting to BH2. Jindra (2014: 5) suggested those with a background in "closed, theologically and socially stricter group[s]" are more likely to join "more open, theologically liberal groups". My participants demonstrate this same journey Jindra was able to identify in her research of conversion narratives.

The Jehovah's Witnesses also support Jindra's conversion pathways. Undoubtedly, the level of certainty required to offset the negative issues, insecurities and struggles in JW3 and JW4's lives led them to a more regimented and socially controlled religious group. I would argue JW1 and JW2 are inconclusive in determining whether Jindra's theory can be supported or not from their narratives. This is because they were raised in the faith and have since adopted a hostile ex-member narrative in reframing their previous affiliation. Nevertheless, they consistently posit the control levied by the Watch Tower is a continuous source of concern and a reason for their "fading" from the minority religion. Perhaps, in future, they may find a liberal and less strict community with which to be more involved.

Although nuanced, the findings from the Scientology interviews continue to support Jindra's proposed pathways, though the participants would argue they have not converted away from Scientology. I believe it fair to suggest the transition from the CoS to Free Zone Scientology, is somewhat of a conversion (in the empowered sense, [see 8.5.2](#)) despite it not being explicitly stated by participants. At the very least, it can be considered an "awakening". It supports Jindra's (2014) conversion theory following individuals moving from a strict control and closed group becoming attracted to a more liberal and open group. In the context of the Scientologist participants, this is demonstrated by moving from the tightly controlled CoS to a more liberal, and less controlled Free Zone of Scientology.

Jindra explains these pathways, part of her *structural-substantial model of conversion*, better account for the myriad types of conversion to other religions while considering the individual at the same time. Overall, the narratives of conversion given by the participants in this research can lend support to Jindra's conversion model. Nevertheless, this research is also able to provide further nuance and perhaps offers another model for conversion.

Empowerment is a common social mechanism underpinning participant conversion narratives in this study. When considering Jindra's model, the "glue" between the motives, reasons, background, and agency in the biography of participants is empowerment. As seen above ([see 8.3](#)), empowerment can be outworked differently depending on those four factors in an individual's conversion narrative. For conversion to take place, for these participants at least, there must be empowerment ([see 8.4.2](#)). This does not need to equate to a religious experience, as some of the participants in

this research indicate religious experience came later. However, it must lead to some control over one's identity and lived reality.

Of course, Jindra's (2014) "*structure vs. agency*" aspect can account for all the narratives in the participant pool of both her research and my research. However, a singular explanation which can be applied to all religions has not emerged. I suggest that a singular and perhaps all-encompassing explanation for conversion is empowerment. However, empowerment can manifest differently depending on the religious context.

For a religious conversion to take place the individual "looking in" must experience some form of personal empowerment before joining, and/or conforming, to the minority religion. Without empowerment, I argue that individuals will not make meaningful conversion into, or remain within, any religious organisation.

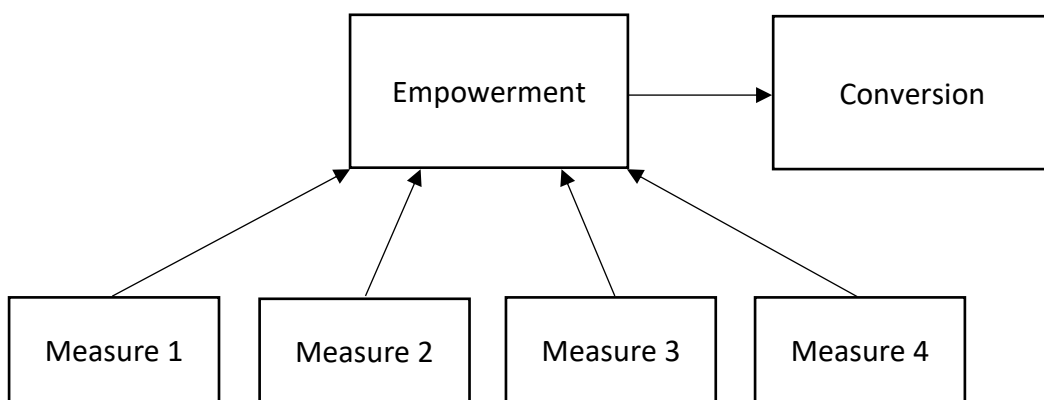


Figure 7: Conceptualisation of Empowerment

The above model of empowerment is a general concept which emerges from several more specific measurements. The model is a conceptualisation of how one might map the foundational requisite for conversion: empowerment. However, it is important to note the measures might not materialise in the same way for each religion when they are applied. The model is, therefore, designed to be broad. When applying this more

specifically to the minority religions in this research, it is possible to provide initial models of empowerment for each of the religions – all of which can be added to, adapted, and edited as more data is gathered in subsequent research. These models provide a foundation.

8.4.1 Individualised Models of Empowerment

The data from this research suggests the Jehovah’s Witnesses and Baha’i currently have a model of empowerment (leading to conversion) that are similar. The factorial parts are the same but will be experienced in different ways due to the uniqueness of the individual and minority religion in question. The model should be depicted as below:

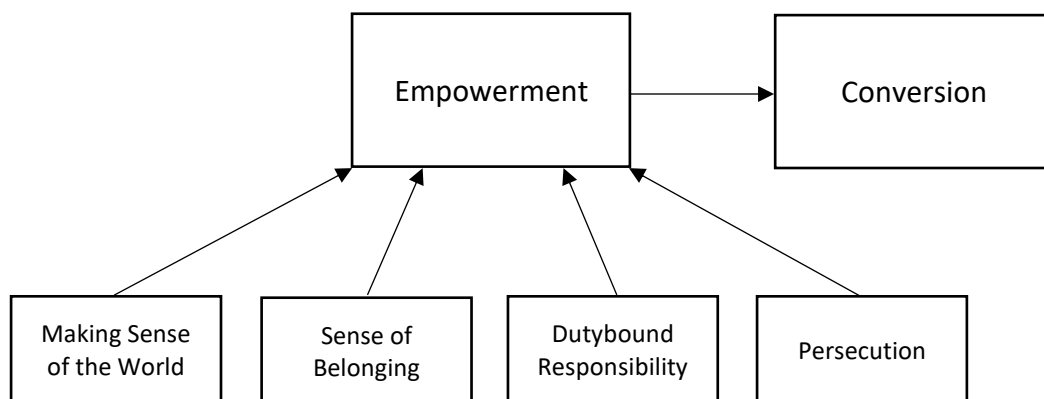


Figure 8: Conceptualisation of Empowerment for Witnesses & Baha'i

As further research into empowerment and minority religions is conducted, with the application of the above conceptualisation, the factors in Fig.6 might change, or more factors can be added. Unfortunately, while there is enough data to suggest a conceptualisation might be applied and initial findings are as reported, further research would illuminate additional factors or nuances to the measures which directionally build a concept of empowerment in this context.

As argued earlier ([see 2.2.2](#)), it is in the interest of the field to ascertain the lived reality of the individual adherent. One must further accept individual differences do not negate

a theory or conceptualisation, but rather the theory or conceptualisation must be adapted to the individual. In this context, the individual is not only the participant but also the minority religion in which they adhere.

The data from the studies with Paganisms ([see 6.5](#)) and Scientologies ([see 7.7](#)) demonstrate the “road to empowerment” is nuanced when compared to Jehovah’s Witnesses or Baha’i. Largely this will be due to participants being unique in nature, but also the socio-political context in which the minority religion has been established. The following conceptualisations of empowerment for Paganisms and Scientologies can be depicted as shown:

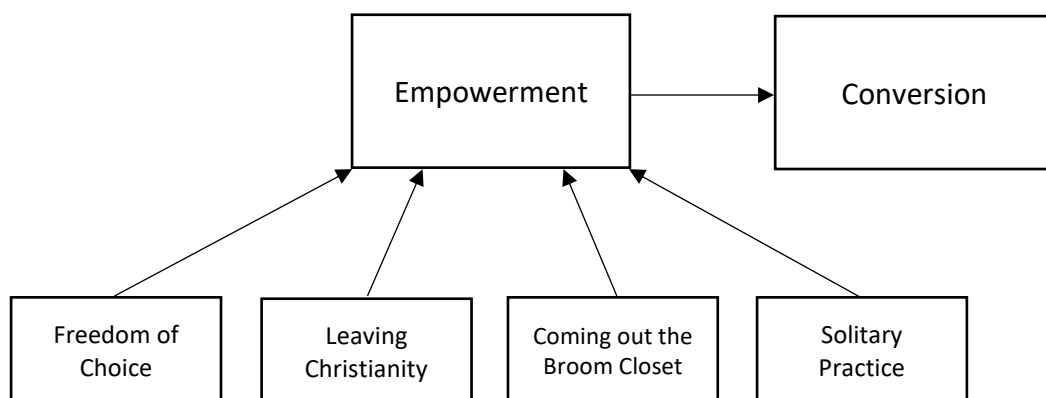


Figure 9: Conceptualisation of Empowerment for Pagans

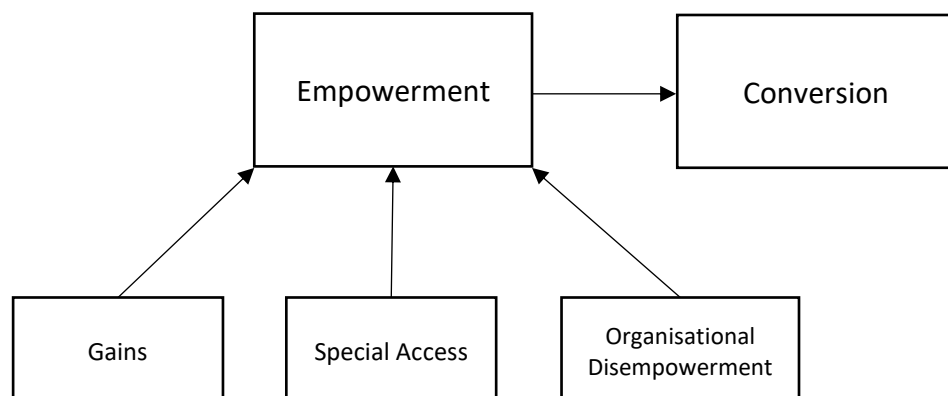


Figure 10: Conceptualisation of Empowerment for Scientologists

As demonstrated above, the conceptualisations of empowerment are tailored to the minority religions based on the data gathered. Certainly, as new data emerges, these conceptual models will morph.

It should also be noted, there is not a unilateral gauge for the measure of a factor a religious adherent might need to experience before being empowered. Equally, some participants may not need to access or experience all the measures. The proposed conceptualisation is intentionally not designed to lend itself to such a finite dimension. The conceptualisation of empowerment is designed to map and further the understanding of theory into conversion into a minority religious setting.

When the above conceptualisation is applied to minority religion conversion, a tailored conceptualisation will emerge from the data. The underlying social phenomenon is still empowerment (as defined in Peterson, 2014; and others, [see also 3.6](#)), but the process of empowerment is context specific.

8.4.2 Clarifying the Relationship Between Empowerment and Conversion

The above model(s) of conversion map the trajectory that participants in this research journeyed toward conversion and/or affiliation with a minority religion. Obviously, I have outlined a link between empowerment and conversion, and this requires further clarification here.

As discussed earlier in the thesis ([see 3.6](#)), although empowerment can be defined in varying ways it is generally accepted that individuals experience empowerment through feeling they are gaining control over aspects of their lived reality (Christens, 2012; Maton, 2008; Peterson, 2014; & Soloman, 1976). The experience tends to occur within a social setting that provides support to the individual (Maton & Salem, 1995) as well as

opportunity for “role structure” (Beairsto & Ruohotie, 2003; Maton & Salem, 1995). The social settings are most likely to be within organisations that empower, intentionally or unintentionally, individuals through inspirational leadership (Maton & Salem, 1995; Sadler, 2003) and demonstrating a degree of flexibility (Argyris and Schön, 1996).

Investigations into empowerment have focussed on organisational structure or psychological aspects of individual experience (see [3.6](#) & [8.5.4](#)) Clearly, one can apply the theories of empowerment onto religious and non-religious contexts which means the concept of empowerment is not inherently religious. Empowerment is a broad concept which can be instigated through various means, as shown by the literature outlined in this thesis.

William James (1902) argued there is not a single feature that marks what a religious experience is, instead highlighting actions, feelings, and everyday experiences as being facets of religious experience. In essence, James argues that religious experience can be broken down into mundane feelings that have been associated with a religious context. Rudolf Otto (1923), on the other hand, argued the “numinous” exists as a *sui generis* extraordinary religious experience only describable through simile and metaphor, describing the actual experience fully is not possible²⁹.

Ann Taves (2009) argues both James (1902) and Otto (1923) inadvertently presented two separate models of religious experience that she labels the “*Sui Generis Model*” and the “*Ascription Model*”; it should be noted that the term “ascription” is interchangeably used with “attribution” (Taves, 2009; [see also 3.4.1](#)). Taves identifies, through her discussion of the methodological implications of utilising either model, attention must

²⁹ This also links to the critical realist approach adopted in this research. By adopting such an approach, the indescribable becomes observable ([see 2.2.1](#)).

be given to what is meant by “religious” before articulating how something might be deemed religious (Taves, 2009).

Similarly for my discussion of this research, to understand what can be deemed conversion I must articulate here what conversion is. I argue conversion is a process inspiring affiliative change in an individual which is undergirded by a hidden social mechanism: empowerment. In other words, conversion is the overt process which an individual journeys through while exploring if they would like to join the organisation or social group being interacted with at the time of experiencing empowerment. This process is covertly impacted by the effectiveness of the social group (organised or otherwise) in providing support (Maton & Salem, 1995), demonstrating a degree of flexibility to accommodate the individual (Argyris and Schön, 1996), and displaying opportunities for the individual to feel important (“role structure”, see Beairsto & Ruohotie, 2003; Maton & Salem, 1995); usually with an inspirational figure or leader participating at the time of an individual’s exploration of joining (Maton & Salem, 1995). Overall, these are tacitly combined to generate a feeling of being able to gain more control over one’s life (Christens, 2012; Maton, 2008; Peterson, 2014; & Soloman, 1976), which, as demonstrated, is empowerment.

I suggest both James (1902) and Otto’s (1923) approaches to religious experience ([see 3.4.1](#)) provide a scaffold for articulating the distinction between conversion and empowerment. In essence, the individual who converts may believe they have had a “numinous” or special conversion experience which led to their affiliation. Of course, this makes it a reality for the individual and such an experience should be understood as part of their lived reality of religion. Irrespective of whether the experience was truly religious or other, the individual at least must make the attribution linguistically if not

cognitively also. When sociologically assessing the phenomenon, I argue the undergird to such conversion experiences is empowerment and the special knowledge, gaining of more control, and feeling important or valued becomes attributed as the conversion experience. Therefore, I am arguing a conversion experience is not inherently religious but is considered as such by the individual. However, individuals may accept the attribution as a “numinous” religious experience, which becomes a truth which impacts their religious lived reality overall.

For participants in this research, their experience of empowerment came at a time when they were engaging with a minority religion. The conversion experience of participants involves accepting their experience as being intrinsically linked to the minority religion they are engaging with. Participants ascribe their experience of empowerment as being religious because of the religious/social context they were involved in at the time. Many participants reported they were already engaging with individuals from a minority religion and exploring the beliefs or trialling religious practice.

BH2, as an example, had been struggling with his Christian faith and had low self-esteem and self-worth ([see 5.5.1](#)). BH2 was friends with a Baha’i he worked with at the time, who helped him through this difficult time in his life and began introducing him to other Baha’i. BH2 stated he felt his world perspective had expanded to a global mindset ([See 5.6.1](#)) which I argue helped him make sense of the world and this was part of his empowering experience. For BH2 at this time, he ascribed his empowering experience of involvement with the Baha’i (with other empowering experiences, [see 3.6](#)) as being a conversion journey out of Christianity and into the minority religion. PG4, as another example, secretly explored Paganisms through the internet and other literature. PG4 had an experience of feeling “really energised” after completing a Pagan ritual, this led

PG4 to openly identify as Pagan and inform others of his affiliation. This experience, along with other empowering experiences ([see 3.6](#)), was given ascribed meaning by PG4. An “energising” experience happened because of a ritual, enabling meaning to be ascribed.

For the participants in this research, I argue conversion does not require, and is not, a numinous religious experience. Instead, I argue religious conversion is the articulation of a participant ascribing meaning to their social setting at a time when they were feeling empowered by a religious social group. Therefore, as stated previously ([see 8.4](#)), genuine conversion requires empowerment.

I am aware the implication of this finding means conversion, as I have described, can be applied to non-religious empowering contexts. To further clarify the difference between empowerment and conversion I use the analogy of a political party. When an individual, perhaps engaging in politics for the first time, attends a local meeting it could become an empowering series of experiences. For example, they may be encouraged to get involved and told their involvement will make a difference (Christens, 2012; Maton, 2008; Peterson, 2014; & Soloman, 1976). The group will inevitably have social aspects, providing a sense of belonging and offering support to those frustrated about opposing political perspectives (Maton & Salem, 1995). After a time, the individual may also be encouraged to take on specific roles (Beairsto & Ruohotie, 2003; Maton & Salem, 1995). Usually, individuals within a political party will aim to elect an inspirational leader that they can follow (Maton & Salem, 1995).

The individual engaging with the political party will begin to feel empowered, but perhaps lacks the linguistic nuance required to fully articulate the experience. The

attribution here might not be a “conversion” but perhaps articulated as “clarity” or a “realisation”, undergirded by a sense of empowerment. For the individual, this leads to an affiliation or devout loyalty to the political party for as long as it continues to empower.

Ultimately, religious conversion narratives are the attributed articulations of an empowering series of experiences occurring within a religious context. The rhetoric used is inherited from popular vernacular because it is the only means participants have for linguistically structuring their experience ([see 9.2.3](#); Thomas & Graham-Hyde, forthcoming).

8.5 Critiquing the Empowered Conversion Model

The empowered conversion model I have revealed cannot be considered a universal model. Although I argue conversion need not be considered a totally unique experience, I do argue each participant uniquely shapes their lived reality through their empowered conversion experience. The model is revealed by using a critical realist and RCT approach ([see 2.2.1](#)), interpreting conversion narratives provided by participants. By critiquing the suggested model, I aim to demonstrate that this model is a product of bespoke findings from the case studies ([see 2.3.1](#)) in this research.

8.5.1 Disempowerment and Disaffiliation

JW1 and JW2 have silently disaffiliated from the Watch Tower and practice as Witnesses, choosing to “fade” and avoid the risk of being disfellowshipped by the Watch Tower ([see 4.3.5](#)). Scientology participants have not disaffiliated from religious belief, instead choosing to disaffiliate from the CoS and rigidity in religious practice only (Yang & Abel, 2014).

I suggest Stuart A. Wright's (1991) model can be used to explain the Scientology participants' exits from the CoS. Wright's research highlights the agency of the individual adherent, showing how the breakdown of social ties and external disapproval, which can come from key relationships, influences the individual toward leaving a minority religion (Wright, 1991; Wright & Piper, 1986). The model has five factors to explain why one might leave a minority religion:

- 1) [T]he breakdown in member's insulation from the outside world; 2) unregulated development of dyadic relationships within the communal context; 3) perceived lack of success in achieving world transformation; 4) failure to meet affective needs of a primary group; and 5) inconsistencies between the actions of leaders and the ideals they symbolically represent (Wright cited in Jacobs 1987: 299).

The Scientology participants demonstrate Wright's model does not function as a process which an individual journeys through, rather a milieu of what leads someone toward leaving their religion. All Scientology participants reported there was a disconnect between the actions of the leaders and the ideology they espoused ([see 8.5.2](#)). For these participants, the initial observation of inconsistencies by leaders led to a modest withdrawal from organisational activities. This early breakdown of insulation from the outside world led to non-CoS relationships beginning to form, which were unregulated by the CoS. I argue empowerment is a primary need, a "compensator" for the reality one lacks control over many aspects of life (see [3.4.6](#) & [3.6](#)). As these participants began to circulate within this milieu the effectiveness of the CoS to continuously empower these participants began to dissipate. When participants began to experience high control, abusive behaviour, or perceived they were not genuinely cared for, they began to feel disempowered. The feeling of disempowerment emerges from the loss of an

empowered feeling previously participants had become accustomed to within that specific context.

Research highlights the journey toward leaving a religion can be interpreted as disempowering, where the disempowerment starts while involved. Helen R. F. Ebaugh (1988) suggests ex-members of religion begin a process of exiting which starts with doubting and can emerge from changes in one's life circumstances. The doubting adherent will likely then seek alternative explanations to try and answer their doubts before coming to a turning point, which subsequently leads to their exit and an altered identity.

Ebaugh's model for exiting religion strongly correlates with the exit narratives of JW1 and JW2. As outlined elsewhere in the thesis (see [4.4.1](#) & [8.5.2](#)), JW1 and JW2 both began to doubt the validity of Witness belief and used the internet to seek alternative explanations. Their "turning point" enabled them to reduce their "cognitive dissonance" (Ebaugh, 1988) and develop a strategy to "fade" out. This model of leaving religion could be interpreted as a model of disempowerment for JW1 and JW2. I argue Witness participants were empowered through "*making sense of the world*" ([see 4.5.1](#)) and "*a sense of belonging*" ([see 4.5.3](#)). Both JW1 and JW2 were raised as Witnesses and were socialised into an understanding of the world predicated on Witness theology and praxis. To question a life-long construction of the world is not only daunting but antithetical to "*making sense of the world*" ([see 4.5.1](#)). Furthermore, JW1 and JW2 know there are implications of disfellowshipping ([see 4.3.5](#)) should it become known they no longer uphold a Witness understanding of the world. Therefore, this process of leaving (or "fading") should be viewed as disempowering.

I argue disempowerment is acutely felt by individuals who have previously been empowered by their organisational affiliation. The privation, or dissipation, of empowerment is acutely felt precisely because participants experienced empowerment as they converted into, or initially affiliated, with the religious group.

Ex-member testimonies which focus on the negative aspects of their previous affiliation can be interpreted as a process of their dissipating empowerment³⁰, which I argue would have been their entry point into their previous affiliation. However, I would also argue the process or experience which led to a disempowered exit does not mean that empowerment was not experienced when they converted and joined a minority religion ([see 8.5.4](#)). For all ex-members, especially those who are vocal in contemporary media, I maintain the experience of being published and listened to, combined with the belief one is making change through regaining control over one's life, is an empowering experience (Kabeer, 1994; see also [see 3.6](#)). Therefore, while I argue empowerment is a universal hidden social mechanism which directly influences individual decision to convert ([see 8.4](#)), disempowerment is not the direct antithesis to this theory. Disempowerment becomes a push factor toward disaffiliation to belief or belonging, leading an individual to pursue alternative means for empowerment³¹.

When considering ex-member testimony ([see 8.5.2](#)), it becomes clear that the original pull factors into a minority religion no longer empower the individual at their exit.

³⁰ I am specifically referring to testimonies that do not cite clear examples of abuse as being a reason for their exit. Instead, I refer to ex-member testimonies that utilise arguments of "brainwashing" (and other connotations of being "cult") as being the sole reason for their previous affiliation. Of course, this can be contentious ground as some ex-members argue that "brainwashing" is abuse and will often utilise language in such a manner. Therefore, I base this claim on the results from participants in this research and only theorise that there are wider applications when assessing ex-member testimonies generally.

³¹ An alternative means of empowerment can remain within the religious context an individual is already in. However, an alternative means of empowerment may be external to the religious context as well.

However, the privation of empowerment as a push toward disaffiliation leaves space for a pull toward the view that feeling important or having control might be better achieved through new means, which leaves the potential for a new belief/affiliation that is empowering. With participants in this research, JW1 and JW2 exemplify how disempowerment (or the privation of empowerment) can lead to seeking empowerment beyond their current affiliation, opening routes toward deconstruction of and leaving religion. JW1 and JW2 were beginning to adopt ACM understandings ([see 3.2.1](#)) of their previous affiliation. JW2 was beginning the deconstruction of her faith, stating an agnostic approach has brought her a freedom not possible while actively in the Watch Tower Society which she articulated using “cult” rhetoric. JW1 has not abandoned Christianity altogether, instead deconstructing their previous affiliation using the “cult” rhetoric often found in Protestant Christianity (Thomas & Graham-Hyde, forthcoming). Although further evidence would be required, I argue this ACM approach toward articulating their disaffiliation could become empowering as it provides an alternative source of understanding, gives greater control over their identities, and can include community. All Scientology participants, as argued earlier ([see 7.7.4](#)), believe they found freedom in practising Scientology outside the CoS while deconstructing their experience, often with an ACM approach toward describing the CoS. Again, by adopting “cult” rhetoric ([see 9.2.3](#)) and a broader ACM approach ([see 3.2.1](#)) toward explaining their previous affiliation, they have been able to disaffiliate and found alternative empowering experiences through their disempowered exit from the CoS.

8.5.2 Ex-Members and Leaving Religion

Some participants in this research experienced disempowerment before they converted. Several participants were also ex-members ([4.4.1](#), [5.5.1](#), [6.5.1](#), & [7.7.1](#)) experiencing disempowerment directly related to their exit from their respective

organisations. My research highlights how conversion into minority religions comes from empowerment (see [8.3](#) & [8.4](#)).

Although some participants reported they later left the organisation or their religion overall, their entry points were positive experiences. Coralie Buxant and Vassilis Saroglou (2008) argue many ex-members suffer negative effects resulting from disaffiliation. Similarly, Barker (1996) also suggests adherents exiting minority religions which required an intense belonging and sometimes isolation from the world were more likely to experience severe problems, such as difficulties in decision making, low socio-economic status and feelings of helplessness or hopelessness. Attention to the effects of disempowerment is important for testing the conversion model posited in this thesis. The connection between ex-members and disempowerment is often implicit in research. Interpretation is required when engaging with explanations of leaving religion, deconversion and ex-member identity. A significant proportion of ex-member research has focus on abuse and reintegration into wider society.

Flo Conway and Jim Siegelman (1979; [see also 3.4.3](#)) conducted a large-scale analysis of ex-members of over 48 minority religions. The longer one spends in a minority religion, the more likely they are to experience psychological trauma. Conway and Siegelman reported ex-members in their research suffered from a range of negative effects which included an inability to break mental rhythms of chanting, suicidal or self-destructive tendencies, hallucinations and delusions, and violent outbursts.

Conway and Siegelman's (2005) findings could be considered as part of a broader understanding of disempowerment of ex-members of minority religions. As discussed earlier, Spreitzer (1995) suggests empowerment includes an internal level of enabling.

Empowerment is a mindset within the individual. As outlined earlier ([see 3.6](#)), empowerment is about being able to gain greater control over one's life (Christens, 2012; Maton, 2008; Peterson, 2014). Armand Chatard and Leila Selimbegović (2011) discuss how failure to meet an important standard can increase the risk of suicidal-related thoughts. I argue a failure to meet an important standard could be interpreted as a perceived failure in being enabled or having control to achieve one's goals and is therefore disempowering. According to Conway and Siegelman (1979) twenty-one percent of minority religion adherents suffered from suicidal or self-destructive tendencies which can be reinterpreted as a symptom of disempowerment, for example.

Conway and Siegelman (2005) are not without critique. Brock K. Killbourne (1983) debated there is little support for their finding of negative association with minority religions. Killbourne argued their quantitative analysis may even support the notion that involvement in minority religions can have "positive and even therapeutic effects" (ibid: 384) which can be further supported by other literature which measures the impact of membership (Killbourne & Richardson, 1983; Richardson, 1983). Furthermore, theories of "brainwashing" are dangerous and lack empirical support (see [3.2.2](#) & [3.4.2](#)), which means the validity of conclusions made by such theorists are questionable. Although Conway & Siegelman (1979) might highlight what some might argue is interpretable as disempowerment, the application of their theory has the potential to be fraught with confirmation bias. When one looks for evidence of negative consequences for minority religious adherence, one will find data to support the view.

Research on abuse in minority religions should be considered as it suggests involvement in minority religions can be disempowering, potentially contradicting my assessment that involvement is initially empowering (see [8.3](#) & [8.4](#)). Such research also contradicts

my argument that disempowerment which leads to disaffiliation is a loss of empowering experiences within the same context ([see 8.5.1](#)). Stephen P. Pretorius (2014) conducted a small-scale study with 16 ex-members (and four parents of ex-members). His participants stated the absolute belief in the leader having or gatekeeping some form of divine or special knowledge led to fears of eternal repercussions. Pretorius' participants felt they could not leave despite them identifying it was not right to remain in the group. When these ex-members finally left the group, Pretorius (2014: 8) reported they had negative feelings such as "disappointment, hate, confusion, grief, misuse, betrayal" or being taken advantage of. Alisa Carse (2013) captures the rhetoric used by individuals describing moral distress with terms like "anger", "guilt" and feeling "overwhelmed, powerless, and frustrated. Carse argues moral distress, when combined with a limited sense of control that stops one acting as they feel they should, becomes moral disempowerment. Thus, it can be argued, Pretorius' (2014) participants can be identified as morally disempowered during their involvement in minority religions as they articulate this experience in similar ways.

I have argued participants in my research experienced empowerment through their interpretation there is some form of special or insider knowledge to be obtained ([see 7.7.3](#)). The Scientology participants in my research are ex-members of the CoS. In short, their empowerment through special knowledge and subsequent adherence when in the CoS cannot be reconsidered as disempowering as they do not believe they lost access to such knowledge. The Scientology participants adjusted their view of how one might access such knowledge, and criticised the CoS for gatekeeping something they believe can help themselves and the wider world. Although participants reported there were negative effects of affiliation which led to a disempowered to exit from the CoS, their

exit and continued practice demonstrated a level of empowerment through gaining more control over their Scientology practice overall ([see 7.6](#)).

JW1 and JW2 reported feelings of anger, guilt, and powerlessness when discussing their previous affiliation to the Watch Tower. Although JW1 and JW2's fears of overtly leaving the Watch Tower are not centred around eternal repercussions (Pretorius, 2014), they did exhibit fear over the consequences it would have for family life. It could be argued JW1 and JW2's choice to "fade" from identifying as Witnesses was because of moral disempowerment (Carse, 2013).

Three of the participants in this research were born as second-generation minority religion members (JW1, JW2 & BH5) with a further participant being raised within a minority religion because of their parent's later conversion (JW4). Much of the research into minority religion adherents has been focussed on first generation converts who were recruited into the group, and there is less research on those raised from within a minority religion (Shoenberger & Grayburn, 2016).

Cynthia H. Matthews and Carmen F. Salazar deployed a grounded-theory design ([see 2.7.1](#)) in studying 15 second-generation adult ex-members of minority religions. Matthews and Salazar found second-generation ex-members were likely to experience severe struggles to readjust into the wider world, with very negative effects such as destructive behaviours or depression. Matthews and Salazar argue these individuals are also likely to have experienced trauma, neglect, and abuse because they were raised in a minority religion. Arguably, the ex-member participants in Matthews and Salazar's sample can be considered disempowered and the authors' argument is this disempowerment is due to being in the group rather than from leaving the group. One

must contest the validity of Matthews and Salazar's (2013: 188) conclusions. Their analysis is undergirded by an anti-cult approach which assumes a negative agenda of minority religions generally. In their opening definition they state:

Religious cults, also known as new religious movements, highly restrictive religious organizations, and high intensity faith groups, are life-encompassing religious organisations that seek to control members' choices, decisions, and lives.

Matthews and Salazar lean heavily on Singer's (2003) formulation of "cult" groups. Such a definitional bias will obviously result in concluding these minority religions are disempowering their adherents as the definition itself is the antithesis of what is largely accepted as empowerment ([see 3.6](#)). As discussed elsewhere, the "Cult Wars" has influenced scholarly research and, despite referring to the term NRM, Matthews and Salazar (2013) do not refer to the plethora of research which suggests value-free definitions and approaches to minority religions. Therefore, much like Conway and Siegelman (2005), this research seems to have an implicit agenda and drawing further conclusions from such research must be done with care.

The issue with discussing disempowerment and minority religion is that there is a significant lack of scholarly literature that is not predicated upon an ACM bias. Equally, as argued ([see 8.5.1](#)), I do not argue disempowerment is the direct opposite of empowerment which means much of the discourse about disempowerment is inapplicable to disproving my theory.

There is a plethora of accounts outside of academia from ex-members who paint their religious organisations as being negative experiences which they seek to warn others of. Many of the accounts use "cult" rhetoric (Thomas & Graham-Hyde, forthcoming; [see](#)

[also 9.2.3](#)) to scaffold their previous religious affiliation, broadly perpetuated by ACM approaches toward minority religions and adopted into popular discourse ([see 3.2.1](#); Thomas & Graham-Hyde, forthcoming). Using findings from this research, I will argue ([see 8.5.4](#)) negative ex-member accounts are natural responses to the loss of a previously empowering sequence of experiences ([see 8.5.1](#)) which are articulated with linguistic tools available to the individual which can lead to alternative empowering experiences ([see 8.5.1](#)).

This research shows empowerment is the undergirding social mechanism of conversion, an implicit experience which occurs while engaging with other adherents within a minority religion. However, this research also demonstrates disempowerment is not the antithesis of empowerment and instead should be considered the privation of empowerment. Most participants in this research have converted from another religion or have left a religious organisation to practice independently. These participants also articulated the negative aspects of their previous affiliation, often explaining they had a diminishing sense of belonging or sense of agency over their religious or everyday life.

This research also highlights when an individual no longer feels empowered, or when circumstances within their life or religious affiliation change, then alternative opportunities for empowerment are explored. Ultimately, the reported experiences of ex-members which are considered disempowering does not contradict my finding that empowerment is an important social mechanism in conversion. Rather, empowerment should be seen as a pull factor toward conversion/recruitment and disempowerment as a push factor toward deconversion/leave-taking.

8.5.3 Social Construction of Conversion Narratives

Ex-members go through a reinterpretation of their lived experience when disaffiliating.

For example, when SCI1 explained he thinks David Miscavige changed the CoS into a “cult” he is reinterpreting his view of the organisation using a popular trope. However, SCI1 is mostly describing the change the organisation went through after Hubbard’s death, a process SCI1 (and other Scientology participants) found hard to accept.

The testimonies of Mike Rinder (2022) and Marty Rathburn (2013) also corroborate the issues articulated by Scientology participants. Both have become prominent critics of the CoS after their exit, explaining how abuse, bullying, and malpractice are operating practices of the organisation. Upon leaving the CoS, Rinder and Rathburn originally continued to practice as Scientologists before rejecting their beliefs completely. When they initially joined the CoS, they would not have believed, nor openly discussed they were joining a “cult”, as evidenced through their subsequent discussions about how they believed they were “brainwashed” and “escaped”. Although some might argue this is because “brainwashed” people are unaware of the process ([see 3.4.2](#)), I would argue this cannot be the case because “brainwashing” has been empirically disproven (Barker, 1985; Dawson, 2006; [see also 3.2.2](#)). Nevertheless, Rathburn and Rinder now argue their conversion was not a reality for them at the time, but the influence of the CoS superseding their rational and cognitive processing.

The argument here is ex-members may choose to re-interpret their previous affiliations and, in this case, use the popular trope of “cult” as it provides a scaffold for articulating such an experience.

Participants in this research, most of whom were ex-members of a religious organisation, were varied in their interpretation of their previous affiliations. Unlike

Scientologist participants, Pagan participants who left Christianity did not describe their previous affiliation as “cult”, but did display disempowerment, nonetheless. I would argue the new affiliations which these participants found become contexts for framing their religiosity (as discussed below).

As discussed earlier ([see 8.5.2](#)), JW1 and JW2 both stated they believed the Watch Tower to be like a “cult” and demonstrated distrust for the organisation. Clearly, JW1 and JW2 were no longer being empowered by their affiliation as Jehovah’s Witnesses within the Watch Tower. Both participants used “cult” rhetoric (Thomas & Graham-Hyde, forthcoming; [see also 9.2.3](#)) but gave candid conversion narratives by articulating how they felt at the time. Although their conversion narratives did not directly record their exit from the Watch Tower, the information provided about their exit is synonymous with other exit testimonies.

William J. Schnell (2011) published an account of his exit from the Watch Tower by beginning with an explanation of his conversion. He stated he was part of a generation “who had all stability and peace of mind destroyed for them long before they matured” (ibid: 2) because of World War I. His conversion brought a sense of “newness of life” during a traumatic period. I argue this enabled him to make sense of the world, empowering his choice to follow Jesus which brought a sense of purpose overall. Schnell’s “viewpoint toward the world in which [he] lived was changed” (Schnell, 2011: 10). This conversion, and later experience of meeting Bible Students, led to his affiliation with the Watch Tower. Nevertheless, Schnell has clearly disaffiliated and reinterprets this as being the entry point to “enslavement” by arguing Witnesses became victim to a system of “brainwashing” (Schnell, 2011; [see 3.4.2](#)).

Unlike many of the CoS ex-members who have published their exit testimonies, Schnell continued to practice as a “free” Christian and warned others against the Watch Tower. Schnell’s (2011) exit testimony is interesting, as it demonstrates a reinterpretation of a conversion narrative which led to affiliation with a minority religious organisation. Schnell now interprets his previous affiliation through the lens of identifying as a mainstream Christian. Schnell exemplifies the potential for one to reinterpret their conversion narrative through their most recent empowering experience. In this case, it is through Schnell’s most recent empowered experience of leaving the Watch Tower which scaffolds his conversion and affiliation narratives.

This presents a challenge to the model of empowered conversion I have devised in this thesis. If an adherent can socially construct their religious identity in the wake of a disempowered exit from a religious organisation, then the reverse should be true. In other words, it is entirely possible the conversion narratives ([see 2.3.4](#)) of participants have been socially constructed by their religious affiliation, rather than being an epistemologically true account of reality.

I would argue this potential for empowerment to structure participant’s conversion narratives does not detract from the models I have presented. The etic study of conversion narratives presents issues of validity in the information articulated by participants; however, it continues to uncover the social mechanism of empowerment irrespective of how that is articulated. For example, JW1 and JW2 explained they now believe the Watch Tower to be an organisation to distance oneself from. Their conversion narratives suggest they now have come to believe their affiliation was due to being raised as Witnesses and it was all they knew of at the time. JW1 and JW2 were adept at articulating how they felt at the time as well as adding on their reinterpreted

reasoning for such feelings. By utilising a critical realist interpretive approach ([see 2.2.1](#)), I argue JW1 and JW2³² presented information which could be objectively interpreted as an empowered conversion narrative despite having a lived reinterpretation of this experience decades later.

8.5.4 Empowerment is not a Catch-All Term

It could be argued I have used the term empowerment as a “catch-all” term for any factor leading to a conversion. However, this is not the case. I argue empowerment is a hidden social mechanism which can be uncovered by observing its impact on the lived experience of an individual ([see 8.4](#)) at the time of converting and/or affiliating with a religious organisation. Analysing disempowerment³³ and ex-member testimonies further uncovers how empowerment is often an unarticulated human desire individuals tacitly seek ([see 8.4.2](#)). Thus, religious conversion becomes an expression of empowerment, whereas deconversion/leave-taking becomes an expression of the failure for continued empowerment. Disempowerment, in this context, becomes an experience which pushes an individual toward seeking alternative empowerment – to satisfy the undergirding desire to be empowered.

This thesis shows how conversion occurs because of empowerment, but conversion should not be considered a complete change from one belief to another. Instead, conversion should be viewed as an observable by-product of empowerment manifesting in the life of the everyday individual. My participants experienced this in religious contexts. Naturally, this same outward expression of empowered conversion could be

³² and all other participants who identified as ex-members of a religion or religious organisation.

³³ Which I suggest is the privation of empowerment and is usually a series of experiences highlighting the lack of continued empowerment. Although more research would be required, it could be argued this is an explanation of why some participants (and other published exit testimonies from minority religions) do not immediately disaffiliate and often articulate it as an “awakening” over time.

experienced by someone joining a political party, community group, or sport club ([see 8.4.2](#)).

Nevertheless, attention must be given to participants who were raised in their respective faiths. It is entirely possible JW1, JW2 and BH5 all converted because of their upbringing rather than experiencing empowerment, independent of their socialisation. Furthermore, it could be argued the social networks of all participants were a significant but understated factor in their conversion narratives. As discussed earlier in the thesis ([see 3.4.5](#)), social networks have been shown to be an explanation of how individuals are recruited or converted into minority religions.

All participants in this research articulated a sense of belonging or sense of community led to their affiliation. For example, BH4 stated she identified as Baha'i during her asylum into the UK because she believed it would increase the likelihood of having her asylum status accepted as permanent. Equally, she also felt it would provide her children with better educational opportunities. As part of the asylum process, BH4 was connected to a Baha'i community who made her feel welcomed and she began to feel she belonged, subsequently converting to Baha'i. Another example is PG6. Although a solo practitioner, she had early connections to a Pagan family who modelled Pagan practices to her and welcomed her as part of their family. After leaving spiritualist churches, PG6 started researching Paganisms, which she stated was because of the influence of this family. PG6 found Paganisms provided a way of practice she felt comfortable with which led to her conversion, perhaps because of her prior experience of the minority religion.

I am confident I could argue each participant had a mundane entry into their respective minority religions. If I were to isolate each conversion narrative, and publish an

anthology of full interview transcripts, it would be possible to highlight the mundane experiences all participants articulated as contributing to their conversion. It is only through analysing emergent common themes ([see 2.7.1](#)) across all interviews, in each case study, that an undergirding social mechanism becomes visible ([see 2.2.1](#)). Each participant having a series of mundane experiences is, in part, central to my argument. As stated earlier ([see 8.5.3](#)), I do not suggest participants had “numinous” religious experiences. I also do not argue empowerment is a special experience. Instead, I suggest mundane experiences can collectively coalesce into an overall experience of gaining greater control over one’s life circumstance, which can be defined as empowerment (Christens, 2012; Maton, 2008; Peterson, 2014; & Soloman, 1976). This is particularly the case when a religious organisation or social group is interacted with at the time these mundane experiences coalesce for the individual participant³⁴. Therefore, all mundane experiences can be part of an overall empowering experience, but not all mundane experiences are empowering in and of themselves.

I further argue empowerment is an essential experience for those who convert into, and affiliate with, minority religious organisations or social groups. I suggest there are a plethora of initial contacts religious organisations and social groups have which do not lead to an individual conversion or affiliation. For example, many individuals engage with life Improvement Courses³⁵ provided by the CoS but do not convert. As advertised, it is possible such courses may have provided some level of improvement, but this does not equate to an empowered conversion. Therefore, empowerment cannot be considered

³⁴ The Pagan participants in this research had contact with social peers but did not organise as part of a formal organisation. For example, joining a Pagan Society or Coven would have the same impact as a central organisation. As demonstrated in this thesis, social groups can also be connected to using the internet (see [3.5](#) & [6.3.2](#)).

³⁵ See more here: <https://www.scientology.org.uk/beginning-services/scientology-life-improvement-courses/>

a “catch all” term, as the model I posit shows it is a collection of experiences which becomes empowerment (see [3.6](#) & [8.4](#)). As I have previously stated, it is possible additional factors may contribute to an empowered conversion and future research may reveal additional experiences.

9.0 CONCLUSIONS

The methodological approach, data gathered, and theory of conversion posited in this thesis contributes to the study of minority religions. However, this thesis is not without limitations, and additional ideas of how to develop this research further arose out of the findings and discussion.

9.1 Limitations of This Thesis

There are several limitations to this thesis which ought to be considered: the size of data set and the generalisability; consideration for the limitations resulting from methodological approach; the sociological application of a psychological phenomenon; and finally, the applicability of the empowered conversion model beyond religious contexts.

9.1.1 Data Set

The data gathered in this research has two weaknesses which prohibit a wider generalisation of the conversion model ([see 8.4](#)), both weaknesses are due to the level of access I was able to obtain through gatekeepers ([see 2.4.1](#)).

The beliefs of a minority religion provide individuals with a framework to interpret the world (Leavitt et al., 2022; Van Assche et al., 2019). For example, following a Pagan pathway is more likely to affirm non-normative or female gender traits above heteronormative male traits ([see 6.3.3](#)). In this example, “role structure” opportunities (Beirsto & Ruohotie, 2003; Maton & Salem, 1995), which is an empowering aspect of an organisation or social group, might be more available to females and non-normative genders overall. Therefore, Paganisms are more empowering for women than other minority religions.

Admittedly, the original design of this research did not account for variations in gender, and this was a decision made on advice over the limitations of PhD research overall. More specifically, access to participants in hard-to-reach minority religious groups was a concern and gender-balancing the participant pool would have made access harder.

In total, this research had twenty-two participants across four minority religions. eight participants identify as female, thirteen identify as male, and one is non-binary, which demonstrates a distinct gender-bias in the data. A further breakdown of genders across case studies is as shown:

Case Study: Religion	Self-Identified Genders (and Pronouns)	Totals
Case Study 1: Jehovah's Witnesses	Male (he/him)	2
	Female (she/her)	2
Case Study 2: Baha'i	Male (he/him)	4
	Female (she/her)	2
Case Study 3: Paganisms	Male (he/him)	2
	Female (she/her)	3
	Non-cis (they/them)	1
Case Study 4: Scientologies	Male (he/him)	4
	Female (she/her)	2

Figure 11: Breakdown of Participant Genders

Elizabeth Puttick (1999) surmises the female lived experience in minority religions can be liberating, fulfilling, and empowering. The literature on female experience in minority religions demonstrates women are not “brainwashed” by patriarchal leaders but rather choose to convert (Puttick, 1999); the data in this research further supports this. However, Olutoyin Mejiuni (2013) suggests religious institutions often favour tradition and culture as explanations for not making space for women to lead. The hierarchy of

these institutions, within a patriarchal system, often leads to greater male opportunity for “role structure”. As this is an empowering experience, which women have less access to, it could be argued female empowerment in minority religions do not empower women in this way. Ultimately, this would mean a more bespoke model of empowerment might have emerged for different genders if more data was collected.

During the sampling stage of the research the male participants were quick to volunteer. Within the Baha’i and Scientology case studies, I had to specifically ask my participants if they knew women who might choose to participate. The reverse was true in Paganisms. When reflecting upon Mejuni’s (2013) research and identifying the distinct lack of hierarchy (and female liberation being an essential part of Paganisms development), it could be argued the empowered conversion model should be gender bespoke. Nevertheless, there is not enough data to sufficiently make gender specific claims about empowerment.

Another limitation with the data concerns the average age of participants. I was unable to gain accurate demographical profiles beyond what was shared during the interviews. Margie E. Lachman (2001), using chronological age, suggests adulthood can be divided into stages: young adulthood (20-39), middle adulthood (40-59), old age (60-75), and old old (75+). These age ranges make it possible to observe an assumed life stage for participants:

Case Study: Religion	Participant Number	(Assumed) Life-Stage
Case Study 1: Jehovah's Witnesses	JW1	Middle Adulthood (40-59)
	JW2	Middle Aged (40-59)
	JW3	Old Old (75+)
	JW4	Old Old (75+)
Case Study 2: Baha'i	BH1	Middle Aged (40-65)
	BH2	Old Age (60-75)
	BH3	Middle Adulthood (40-59)
	BH4	Middle Adulthood (40-59)
	BH5	Middle Adulthood (40-59)
	BH6	Middle Adulthood (40-59)
Case Study 3: Paganisms	PG1	Young Adulthood (20-39)
	PG2	Young Adulthood (20-39)
	PG3	Young Adulthood (20-39)
	PG4	Young Adulthood (20-39)
	PG5	Young Adulthood (20-39)
	PG6	Young Adulthood (20-39)
Case Study 4: Scientologies	SCI1	Middle Adulthood (40-59)
	SCI2	Middle Adulthood (40-59)
	SCI3	Middle Adulthood (40-59)
	SCI4	Middle Adulthood (40-59)
	SCI5	Old Age (60-75)
	SCI6	Middle Adulthood (40-59)

Figure 12: (Assumed) Life-Stages of Participants

Due to issues of access, each case study lacks a variety of participant life stages. These life stages might be representative of the communities with whom I gained access, rather than the minority religion overall. For example, BH6 stated he believed their local Baha'i community lacked young people because it was not situated in a university town, and the Pagan participants were connected to a university Pagan Society. Nevertheless, the models of empowered conversion for each religion ([see 8.4.1](#)) might not be generalisable but they are emerging from the data and need further enquiry ([see 9.2](#)).

9.1.2 Methodological Approach

Deploying a RCT approach comes with limitations ([see 2.2.1](#)). The study of empowerment requires attention of religious organisations³⁶ and the impact they have on an individual's lived experience, meaning one cannot separate adherent belief and practice from an institutional understanding of religion. Therefore, there is the possibility the empowered conversion model which I posit has the implicit assumption empowerment cannot be experienced independent of an organisation.

I have argued for a blend between RCT and Lived Religion theoretical frameworks and believe this research demonstrates the utility such an approach has ([see 2.2](#)). While I maintain a lived religious understanding is beneficial to the analysis and conclusions of this research, I seldom had opportunity to ethnographically engage in religious practice as part of a broader lived religious experience (Ammerman, 2021). Equally, I was advised to maintain an epistemological distance from my participants ([see 2.4](#)), confounding this research practice further. Moreover, utilising a RCT approach meant I interpreted which religious beliefs and practices were “compensatory” experiences. For example, I suggest a new understanding of the world is a “compensator” for a previous lack of life course agency which is empowering. However, the lived reality for the participant is not to view this experience as a “compensator” but as a revelation of truth obtained by their religious conversion experience³⁷.

Therefore, the conclusions I draw about the “lived religion” of participants are theoretical, supported by literature, and not an experience I shared. Although I do not

³⁶ In this context, Organisation can also refer to social group.

³⁷ A good example of this would be JW3, [see 4.5.1](#).

believe this weakens the findings, because they are grounded in a broader critical realist approach ([see 2.2.1](#)), it could be argued the empowered conversion model I posit ([see 8.4](#)) is not an empowered lived experience of individuals but rather an organisational empowerment model. In essence, the empowered conversion models reveal little about the overall lived religion of the participants and suggests more about how they engage with religious organisations.

9.1.3 Sociological Application of a Psychological Concept

Most of the literature on empowerment is psychological and some of the literature refers to empowerment as a cognitive process ([see 3.6](#)). I believe the sociological critical realist application of this body of literature has revealed empowerment to be a hidden social mechanism pushing individuals toward conversion. However, this research has not psychologically tested empowerment with participants. Therefore, the mechanism I have uncovered might not equate to how empowerment is usually conceptualised in the literature.

As discussed earlier ([see 8.5.3](#)), I suggest the narrated conversion experiences of participants are not “numinous” (Otto, 1923) but rather an attribution of mundane experiences as an overall religious experience (James, 1902). I can argue this because I have sociologically applied the psychological concept of empowerment. However, if my application is inconsistent with a psychological conceptualisation of empowerment then a question remains: what did participants experience when they converted? Empowerment may have been, for some, a “numinous” experience and one cannot rule out the possibility. While I suggest this is unlikely, it is not impossible.

9.2 Future Research to Follow This Thesis

This thesis highlighted areas for potential future research which would further critique the model of conversion. Also, there are some wider implications which require research to ascertain the broader impact this research has for the study of contemporary religion.

9.2.1 Non-Religious Empowered Conversion

Earlier in this thesis ([see 8.4.2](#)) I used the analogy of joining a political party to clarify the difference between empowerment and conversion. I argue my theory of empowered conversion can extend beyond religious contexts and therefore explain phenomenon such as a change in political affiliation or acceptance of a marginalised conspiracy theory. However, this research only investigated conversion in religious contexts. Therefore, in future research, I would seek to investigate individual's experiences of affiliating with a non-religious group to ascertain whether an empowered conversion model is applicable in such contexts.

9.2.2 Multi-disciplinary psychological/sociological testing

Empowerment is a psychological conceptualisation which explains how organisations might “enable” their members toward being self-actualised or empowered. As mentioned earlier ([see 9.1.3](#)), I sociologically applied this concept rather than psychologically. Psychological testing of empowerment in the same religious contexts might further reveal the nature of individual empowerment, as well as how minority religions are empowering their adherents generally.

9.2.3 “Cult” Rhetoric in 21st Century

Elsewhere, I have discussed the implications of “cult” rhetoric in contemporary society (Graham-Hyde, 2023; Thomas & Graham-Hyde, Forthcoming) and highlight the disconnect between academic and popular discourses about minority religions. This research explored reasons individuals had for affiliating with minority religions who are often subjected to pejorative narratives from outsiders ([2.5](#) & [3.2.1](#)) and ex-members.

A range of participants from across the four case studies in this research utilised “cult” rhetoric when attempting to discuss their previous religious affiliations or their perceptions of what they converted into prior to their conversion experience. It is not uncommon for ex-members to reassess their previous affiliation pejoratively ([see 8.5.2](#)). These participants demonstrate “cult” rhetoric continues to be used as a “social weapon” as originally suggested by Richardson (1993) and further demonstrated in additional research I have conducted (Graham-Hyde, 2022).

Therefore, further research into the impact of “cult” rhetoric on deconversion would further critique claims made in this thesis about ex-members and leaving religions.

9.2.4 Pedagogical Research

The “cult” rhetoric used by participants is influenced by multiple factors: (1) a desire to distance oneself from a religion exited by the participant ([See 8.5.2](#)); (2) the popular discourse regarding minority religions entrenched in society (Thomas & Graham-Hyde, forthcoming); (3) lack of adequate religious education limits a participant’s ability to discuss nuances of religious affiliation with depth or empathy.

The participants in this research all successfully completed their compulsory education, with some obtaining additional qualifications through further and higher education. In the UK, religious studies is part of the National Curriculum and at least one hour of RS (or RE) should be studied per week by 11-16 year-olds. The spiritual, moral, social, and cultural development is considered an essential aspect of the curriculum, irrespective of being limited in scope (Lundi & Ahn, 2019). The lack of critical analytical awareness of minority religious affiliation in wider society continues to “other” those who adhere to a non-normative religion. Thus, this research can be used as an igniter for further

discussion into the pedagogical approaches toward understanding minority religion and “cult” rhetoric (Thomas & Graham-Hyde, forthcoming).

Therefore, I suggest pedagogical approaches be re-analysed and tested so that UK RS (or RE) becomes a holistic overview of how the everyday people are shaped by their religious views.

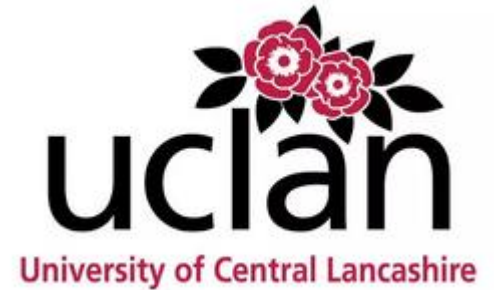
9.3 Concluding This Thesis

My conceptualisations of empowerment add value to the study of minority religion and furthers a holistic understanding of the lived reality of individual religious adherents and how they engage with minority religious groups. There has been a significant lack of theory and discussion on empowerment in the study of contemporary religion broadly, and more specifically it remains vacant in literature concerning minority religions.

This thesis demonstrates a multi-disciplinary approach to the study of conversion as advantageous, developing the understanding of how social mechanisms lead to the conversion and/or affiliation of an individual adherent. While there are some broader conclusions that require future research ([see 9.2](#)), the overall conclusion is as follows: individual adherents who experience multiple empowering aspects of a minority religious social group are likely to attribute their experience as a sign the minority religion is true for them, leading to their conversion and/or affiliation with the group. Conversion is not a single “numinous” experience but rather a continual series of empowering experiences which, should they cease to be empowering, lead the adherent to seek additional empowering experiences in or out of the religion.

APPENDIX 1: PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET

School of Education & Social Science Research Information Sheet



This research is designed with a view to investigate reasons as to why individuals become involved in religious groups that are often subjected to negative stereotyping and misconception. The findings from this research will be used to identify patterns and trends, if any, so that there is better understanding of why individuals engage in group and religious activities. This will also help us further identify the religion as lived by participants, focusing on their point of view.

The requirement of participants will involve being in an interview lasting between 30mins and 1.5 hours. This will enable participants to give their opinions about the group that they are part of and discuss their beliefs and practices.

You have the right to withdraw from this study up to 28days after the initial interview and all participant's identities will be protected; names not being published and identifying information will be redacted. Information obtained from the questionnaires and follow up interviews will be used strictly for this research only.

If you have any further questions during the 28-day period, please contact:

Edward Graham-Hyde
Egraham-hyde@uclan.ac.uk

Carolyn King
Cking@uclan.ac.uk

Once the information has been collected, and after the 28day period, all participants will be given codenames so that publication of research maintains the participant's privacy. The information will be used for the research only and will be analysed by the researchers.

APPENDIX 2: SAMPLE TRANSCRIPT

Researcher: Essentially, this is more like a conversation although most of the talking will probably be you. I've got six or so concepts that I want to explore and it's those concepts that I explore in every single interview. The semi structured element is that I might have some questions off the back of something you said - which always differs based on answers.

The first question really, what's your social background? what was growing up like for you? were you working class, middle class? What was your religious background? Mini life story if you would.

SCI3: Yeah, yeah, so I grew up in the [REDACTED] the United States, [REDACTED]. It was a city. city life, suburb life. It's semi-country kinda [sic] life, but you know, the [REDACTED] values as we say. Probably lower middle-class status. More blue-collar kind of status - my mom worked in a grocery store, single parent, my father had left. So, I have three sisters, so there were four of us.

I was a student, I graduated high-school and went to junior college. My mom... when I was really young, we were Catholic because of my father but after they separated and divorced, my mom ended up - we - ended up going to church. Probably the favourite church I went to, I was in high school then, it was a non-denominational Christian church. So, like, we went to, like, the [REDACTED], you know there was a summer camp there with 16/17-year-olds. It was really cool, that was a cool experience, in terms of the church, going to church, Sunday school and all of that. But yeah, that's just a quick summary.

Edd: Okay, so, did you have a firm belief as a Christian growing up?

SCI3: Somewhat I would say, I wasn't devout. I did for a while like... I think I was a sophomore in High School and there was a Christian Bible club. I was really looking for something - something for life's answers. You know, you're young and have more questions than answers and so I was exploring that. I mean, honestly, I loved going to and being adolescent in High School and going to church all the pretty girls in Sunday schools and church and all of that. So that was always appealing.

But no, I was exploring and interested in some of life's answers.

Edd: you mentioned about your father walking out and the lower socio-economic background. Were you the oldest of your siblings? did you have responsibility?

SCI3: 3 sisters and 2 were older.

Edd: Did you have any responsibility to help make ends meet?

SCI3: Oh yeah. Yeah, I did. I mean certainly around the house and yard work. Certain chores that my mom delegated to all of us to help with the maintaining the house. We did have a house and, you know, what do you call it, a single-family home. You know? Good neighbourhood had a basement, there was enough space for all of us. But yeah, I contributed.

Even as I got into my senior year, and when I graduated and in junior college, I'm working full time and going to college. My mom went back to school, so I was helping to make the house payment.

Edd: what was your relationship like with your family?

SCI3: It was good; overall it was good. It could be strained with my mom. My mom now, in retrospect, I can understand all the stress and pressure of raising four kids on her own. You know, but it was good. I still have a good relationship - she just turned 86, in fact. She lives in Southern California - about an 8-hour drive from here.

Edd: If you don't mind me asking, have you connected with your father or anything like that?

SCI3: Well, no, interesting enough, what ended up happening, long story short. This was in 1990. The Myre side of our family, we had... we were estranged. It kind of started with my mom because my dad disappeared, and his siblings and mother said they didn't know where he was. I now believe that was true; they didn't know. Long story short - his brother, my uncle, I was back in [REDACTED], travelling there and I reached out to him, and he told me the police called him and said that my father had disappeared.

Well three weeks later he called me and said "well they found him [REDACTED]"; he was dead. This was [REDACTED]. My oldest sister and I, we went back for the memorial service, but I hadn't seen my father since I was 7 years old. I had no relationship with him at all.

But it was interesting going to the memorial because you learn a lot about someone you didn't know just by going to the memorial. So, there was some closure there for me, but it wasn't emotional for me at all because I never really knew the man.

Edd: did you experience any kind of ... other than the usual teenage angst... any sort of angst at being the only other guy in the house? Anything like that?

SCI3: Oh yeah that was tough, being the only male. Absolutely. Because, you know like with my friends, my buddies, and them having brothers... there was just a different, like, it was just different for sure. Just being around females only.

My mom dated, but she never really had anyone steady while I was growing up.

Edd: Okay... and then you said you went to junior college? Is that like the British version of university after High School?

SCI3: It's kind of like a steppingstone. At junior college they offer freshmen and sophomore years of college. You can get what they call an associate degree - which is a two-year degree.

Edd: Did you top that up for a full degree?

SCI3: I went two and a half years and then at that point I was 20 years old; I moved to [REDACTED]. So, I didn't finish and that's when I ended up learning about Scientology. But I ended up going back to school and finish when I was 33 years old and got my Business and Management degree - so there was a period there where I finally did get it.

Edd: Is that why you moved? Because of Scientology?

SCI3: No I moved because I had my sister and aunt live in [REDACTED]. I just wanted to do something different. As I said, at that point in my life I really wanted a change. So, I figured moving there and living in [REDACTED] and that would be a good change.

Edd: And what was it like after you moved? Did you find a social group quite quickly or did you immediately get involved in Scientology?

SCI3: No no, it was tough at first. I was living with my uncle and two cousins, and they were younger than me. At that time, they were 13 and 8 but I was living in the house in [REDACTED]. It was tough. You know? I was working, I got a job, I didn't have trouble getting a job but basically having no friends and starting over - it was a bit of a shock.

I was there for nine months and that's how I ended up learning about Scientology and got involved at that point after nine months of being in [REDACTED].

Edd: So, what was it that initially got you into Scientology? Did you seek it out independently?

SCI3: So, what ended up happening was that they would send out surveys in the mail. It was 100 question survey, so I filled it out. I had no idea who they were - I filled it out, mailed it in, and got a phone call from them. I went down there to see ... it was basically a personality test. As far as I know they still do it to this day.

It evaluates you on communication and different areas. I went in for the survey results and some of the things I agreed with for sure. I was super shy then, and it definitely affected my communication. So basically, what ended up happening was - so this is part of their process - if someone fills out a survey, they come in for an interview and get their results, and then they want to sign you up for training. That's what I ended up doing. It's what they called a "communication course" with training routines. I did the course, and I was like "wow. this really did help". It made me feel better and more comfortable and trying to break some of the shyness and you know, some of the issues with communication. That's what got me started in it.

Edd: What was the time span from starting that course to say, where you would define yourself as "I'm a member of this now and it's something I'm doing for me"?

SCI3: Yeah, you know, so the course from what I recall was ... my gosh, this is like 40/41 years ago... It was probably about two to three weeks. It was really a fun time in there because they had like 100 people doing different courses in there - communication courses, life kind of courses, it was really really a fun time in there. But it was probably two to three weeks for me to finish the communication course.

Eventually, what I ended up doing was, they had a training course around study and how to study. That one is a little

more intense - that one took me like six months to get through that. At that point I was pretty much committed to it. I thought, "okay, hey, this is good. I'm getting benefits out of doing this". Probably, during that first year, a lot of times what people end up doing is that they go in, maybe they do a communication course, they do something. A lot of people never do anything more after that. Whereas other people think "hey, this seems right for me - so let me try it and see what I get out of it".

Edd: Would you say you were still looking for community or friends at that point? would you say that that course helped you more people or...?

SCI3: Oh, it did! Certainly, I had friends out of Scientology - it did, either through my work or... you know... I had friends. That's what you did - you did work and then you went in for the training and that's pretty much where you were spending your time in life.

Edd: And what was that like? That initial moment of stumbling upon a community of people that were all likeminded doing the same course.

SCI3: It was exciting! It was really exciting. I was meeting ladies, and dating, and yeah... it was definitely an exciting time. It was what I needed; you know? really. being young ... you know, lots of energy. There was excitement to it for sure.

Edd: and did you have any, kind of, concepts of what Scientology was at this point?

SCI3: It was ... yeah you know the thing is in that first year, there was like some of the basic training, but where a lot of the members were ... they get a lot of benefits from what they call the auditing.

If you've talked with [Sci1], then maybe you know what this is, but basically, it's the counselling portion of it. There's [sic] various steps that are defined in it that you go through that helps you improve in your wellbeing. So that's the thing after that first year of doing the training courses - that's where I had my interest. Was to get the auditing, the counselling portion of it.

Then I did... probably in the second year, was when it really started. Where I started in the counselling portion.

Edd: Did you know what was being said about Scientology at the time?

SCI3: well at the time, it actually had better repute than it certainly does now... I mean, in the age of the internet everything gets out there pretty quick whether it's true or not.

At that time, they did have ... I didn't know, now you know, you can look back at the history and they had a lot of internal turmoil going on. But as far as being in the church and doing the training and the services - it was a pretty good, safe environment to be in. From when I got in in '79 through '83, it was a pretty... pretty good environment and then it changed after that. But up to that point I was doing the training and counselling services and it was working for me. Things were good.

Edd: How long were you in the Church of Scientology for? Are you still in?

SCI3: Well, here's the thing - there were two different periods. It was basically from I would say '79 to '86 was the first period. And then from '92 to '98 was the second period.

So, the '79 to '86 I was living in [REDACTED]. In 92-98 I was living in [REDACTED].

Edd: Okay... let's go with the first period. During that time, what would you say was the contributors to staying involved with the group at the time?

SCI3: Well, I was still getting a lot of benefits out of it. Both in terms of my feelings and how I felt spiritually, and life was going better for me. At that time, I met my wife, we got married in '85. She became part of the group for a while but then because of the changes that were going on in the church - effectively it was harassment of its members - we decided ... ermm, [sic]... by then we had started a family, we weren't living close to where the church was anymore; we had moved. By then we were living in 90miles away from it and so we, by '86, we weren't part of it anymore.

Edd: So, what were your feelings towards the Church of Scientology after you left?

SCI3: I just felt it had changed and it wasn't helping me anymore; wasn't aiding me. It was just harassment for money, for time, donations to their different causes. It just really got crazy at that time - it's pretty well documented about what happened during that period and I don't need to go through all that. But just for me, personally, what we were

experiencing, it just wasn't a place where you could get what you were supposed to get out of it anymore. It just changed.

In '86, actually, the founder of the church. He died. He had been a fugitive in the last few years anyway because the FBI and some of the church members had gotten arrested and they were in prison; they were looking for him. But he was in hiding and he passed away and after that point it really went bad. The people that took it over and all that. But like I said, when you're involved with anything, if you're getting things out of it that's great. But the moment it changes where [sic] you're not, you know, it was easy for us to not be a part of it anymore.

Edd: And interestingly, you went back in '91, so what led to you going back?

SCI3: Yeah, so, by then we were here in [REDACTED] and I was still in search of a lot of the answers for me. I felt like I had unfinished business. My hope in reconnecting was that a lot of the things that were going on, you know, had changed and were for the better. It seemed like it was at first, but then probably by ... I would say... I came back into it in '92... probably by '95 it just seemed like it hadn't changed. Some of the stuff I saw going on... [pause]

Edd: what sort of things were going on?

SCI3: Just more harassment for money, and just... you see, the thing is that it's enough... I had no trouble paying for any kind of training or counselling services. You know, there's benefit you're going to get out of it. But when they start harassing you for money for... they have this group called International Association of Scientologists and you just donate to it and they're involved in different causes which is fine, you know? But it just got to the point where it just was harassment like I said. It outweighed the benefits; it just was too much. A lot of people had left by then. But it was a personal choice on my part.

Edd: So, after leaving, what was your break away like the second time around?

SCI3: It was a phase out really. I finished what I needed to finish and that was it.

Edd: So, in terms of what you believe, do you still hold the beliefs of Scientology? without being connected to the church?

SCI3: Yeah, Yeah, I would say so. It certainly had an influence on my life and there were benefits from it. You know, the shyness which is mostly gone - I guess there's a little bit of it - but mostly in my youth, the 20s is a difficult period for a lot of people; for me it was. You know? now, you could say you get older you get wiser; well, not necessarily.

I certainly got the benefits from it. It's not so much a belief system... I guess you've got to believe in it if you're going to do it and apply it in your life. But the benefits from it I did get, and I'm glad for them that I did get those benefits.

The group itself and some of the things that they do as a group make it hard to be part of that group. There's a policy called disconnection. So, if you have a whole family that are Scientologists, if one of them get in trouble with the church, you're ordered to disconnect. The family members that are in good standing cannot talk to their son or sister or whoever. That's just not right. There's stuff like that that a lot of us... there's probably more people out of the church than are in it today because some of these policies.

Edd: Do you still practice?

SCI3: Well, I did with [Sci1] specifically, he trained me in some areas about 5 years ago. So yeah, there were some of the things that I learned from him that I have used in the last 4 or 5 years. But that's about it, in terms of some of the counselling techniques.

Edd: Are you involved in any religious community now?

SCI3: No, not really. I would say, for example, one of the people that I like, and I follow, and I've done some of his training is [REDACTED]. I don't know if you know who he is, but he lives here in the US and he's like an empath. He has amazing abilities. He uses it to help people; so, yeah there's different things and different things that I've read. "The Secret" and there's different books out there that deal more with the spiritual side.

Edd: in terms of the belief about Thetans and other stuff that you see in popular narratives about Scientology - what's your view on that stuff?

SCI3: Well, for me, what I would tell you is - and I'm not avoiding your question - but what I would say is that for me, the thing is where people argue Thetans, and the OT levels, Operating Theton levels, for me it was never about whether I believe it or not.

If I do the processes that are part of it, do I get benefit from it? The answer for me was yes. You do get benefit from it. If you don't believe it, you don't even have to believe it, but if you do these things: are you getting benefit? If you're not, then you shouldn't do it- why do it? why do anything if you get no benefit from it?

I think a lot of the things that Hubbard, in the 1950s, the research he did, the lectures he did, talk about the potentials of a Thetan, Operating Thetan, and it's interesting. You know... have we realised all those potentials? no. But it's interesting enough just to read about it and what he lectured about. So ... yeah, did I answer your question alright?

Edd: that was a great answer; I'm not looking for any answers in particular.

SCI3: yeah, I know I know, I just wanted to make sure I was answering them properly.

Edd: Yeah, you really did, I was just thinking of my next question. I guess my next question is slightly "curve ball". Lots of accusations get thrown around and lots of terms are used to describe what I would call minority religions - but obviously "cult" being the most popular term used in media, and then obviously as soon as the word "cult" is used there are terms like "brainwashing" and stuff like that. My question is: what's your comment on that in terms of your process of joining and what you personally experienced?

SCI3: I'm glad you bring it up because there's been a lot of discussion and even debate among ex-members and the church as to whether it's a cult or not. At first, I didn't think it was. But now, I can see that some of the most committed members of it - especially in the organisation but still in it - I can see where cult fits. They're so locked into it that they won't look at the internet or objectively look at any criticisms of it... and the moment you won't accept any evaluation or criticisms... and this goes way beyond religions...

I mean, here in the US, even the politics - you know, like Trump or Clinton - they're definitely cults associated with these politicians, right? So, they're just not open to any other ideas except "that's their person - that's who I support come hell or high water".

Yeah, I mean, there is truth, especially where members just won't accept any alternate views or at least inspect for themselves.

Edd: so, how would you define a "cult"?

SCI3: I would define a cult as a closed group in terms of thinking... yeah, it's a closed. It's made up its mind, and that's it. You know? Any criticism of it... in the case of the church, they just attack people, anybody that criticises it that they feel is a threat... I mean they go after with everything they've got. If they feel that you're a threat... I think that's true for any cult as long as they have money and power they can go after you.

Edd: The term "cult" is often associated with the term "brainwashing". Do you feel you were "brainwashed"?

SCI3: Nooo! [sic] I mean that's an interesting question because the brainwashing implies that...like think of a CIA story where someone is brainwashed to go assassinate someone, right? So, if you're brainwashed, then you're living a life that you're not in control of right? So, I don't, at least myself personally no. I don't think like that. The thing is, I don't judge people – "oh you're not this, you're not that, or because you have a different political view than me then you're wrong and I'm gunna [sic] destroy you". That's just not how I think. But brainwashing, in the way I define it, is if you've been brainwashed then you've lost a certain part of your life control of maybe all of it.

Edd: That's interesting. How did you feel at the time when you were in the Church of Scientology and going frequently? How did you feel you were perceived by others if you said to them that you were a Scientologist?

SCI3: At first, I did promote it and I did get other people into it, but then what happened with all of the... over the years and especially where it is now... the word itself is toxic to a lot of people. You know? So, I didn't, I did not disseminate in later years of it - it just is such a loaded ... people have already made up their idea about it.

I'll give you an example of something that happened to me. This was around, it wasn't that long ago, let's say around 2006. About 14 years ago. The church, what they do, is they find out where you live, and they send all their promotional materials to your house right? So, the next thing you know is a mailbox full of church literature. What ended up happening was one time, one of my neighbours who lived across the street ended up receiving my mail and saw the Church of Scientology on it. She wouldn't talk to me after that. And I used to talk to them, you know? Just neighbourly talk. Sometimes there were neighbour events. Nope, wouldn't talk to me. Just thought I was being associated with that was a bad thing - that's how bad it's gotten in what I've experienced with it.

Edd: when you experience things like that, did that make you feel like you didn't want to be involved?

SCI3: Well at that time I wasn't involved with it but the other thing was that my view is that I wasn't going to go to her and say I'm no longer involved with this. I didn't feel I had to do that, because you should just evaluate people on what you see not just solely on the fact that... oh they're in the church or use to be in the church, right? But you know... but to answer your question - that's what's happening and that's why in later years I did not disseminate. It was just too much to overcome. Just to even get someone to think about it.

Edd: And let's say I was joining the church now at an access level. What's your opinion of someone in that situation? Obviously, you've said the church is a bit closed, some people aren't open to being reflective, or rational in some respects. What's your opinion of people that join Scientology and the day-to-day church?

SCI3: Look, it's their decision. If new people go into it, that's their decision. They can ... whatever benefits they can get out of it then great, more power to them. I'm not out there to... I have no axe to grind with the church personally; I just don't. I got what I got out of it, I don't like what it became but that's just a personal choice of others. There are people, there are ex-members that are really fighting. They're just trying to destroy it, you know? For whatever reasons, whatever their motivations are, they're just against it so much. That's not me.

Edd: Why is that not you?

SCI3: Well, I think... you see I don't have any reason for it. Maybe they do have reasons. There might have been things like if they were on staff or in the Sea Organisation. That there was where really bad things that happened - maybe they've got an axe to grind with the church; but I don't. I was never on staff, I got what I got out of it. I don't know. For me personally, to live a life where you're trying to destroy something... you're obviously not a very happy person.

Edd: That's fascinating. It's really interesting... you've answered every concept I wanted to explore. I'll stop the recording here.

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