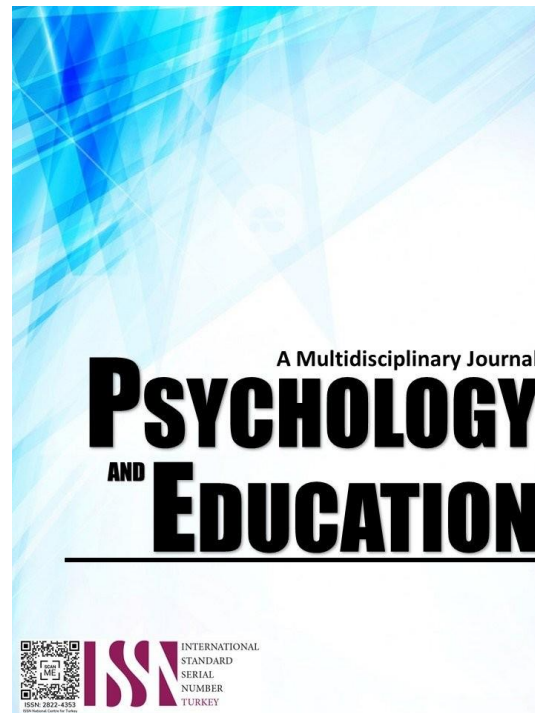


**COGNITIVE METAMORPHOSIS: EXPLORING THE LIVED EXPERIENCE  
OF FILIPINO ATHEISTS IN THEIR JOURNEY FROM BELIEF  
TO NON-BELIEF**



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# Cognitive Metamorphosis: Exploring the Lived Experience of Filipino Atheists in their Journey from Belief to Non-Belief

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## Abstract

This qualitative research highlighted the lived experiences of individuals transitioning from believers to atheists in the Philippines, a country deeply influenced by religious perspectives. The study employed a phenomenological approach and had six participants who were residents of Quezon City, Rizal, Cavite, Pasig City, Cavite, and Makati City. The study identified 10 superordinate Themes using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), highlighting the intricate nuances of the participants' experiences. These themes included: Religious Influences of Schooling, Family, and Personal Curiosity; Influence on Personal Morality and Skepticism; Experiencing Dissonant Texts, Actions, and Conversations; Inward Dilemmas due to Social Fear, Rationality, and Moral Ambiguity; Intersecting Influences from Local, Global, and Digital Environments; Sexuality, Hypocrisy, and Personal Beliefs; Contradictions in Religious Teachings Lead to Atheism; Shared Viewpoints Affirmed Personal Views; Disputations in Shared Circles Lead to Personal Discovery; Unfolding of Identity through Personal and Social Dynamics. The process of moving away from religious beliefs and embracing atheism was a multifaceted journey that involved numerous factors. One's upbringing in a particular religion, combined with personal exploration, societal pressures, and exposure to a variety of viewpoints, all played a role in shaping individual convictions. The study explored the process of how Filipino atheists converted from believers to atheism, and what factors influenced their journey towards atheism. The study emphasized the role of cognitive dissonance, interpersonal contacts, societal support, and social dynamics in shaping individuals' belief systems. The study also highlighted the challenges faced by Filipino atheists, including those related to sexuality and hypocrisy within religious contexts. Overall, the study shed light on the complexities of religious conversion and de-conversion and the importance of social support in shaping individuals' beliefs and identities. Ultimately, becoming an atheist required a thorough introspection that was shaped by internal and external variables, resulting in a redefinition of one's identity and a change in beliefs.

**Keywords:** *lived experience, Filipino atheists, belief, non-belief*

## Introduction

Navigating the intricacies of a subjective societal landscape proves to be a formidable endeavor, particularly for those deviating from prevailing norms. The challenge intensifies when one transcends the bounds of religious conformity, prompting an exploration into the origins of human existence and the substantiation of religious teachings. The shift from being religious to becoming an atheist reflects a change in thinking, influenced by both personal reflections and psychosocial factors. In the realm of cognitive shifts, the transition from religiosity to atheism signifies a deviation from established norms, stimulated by a cognitive restructuring that interconnects individual perspectives with societal influences. This metamorphosis involves a complex interplay between logical questioning and the overall social milieu, revealing the details of how beliefs are shaped.

Examining the transition from religiosity to atheism is essential for unraveling the complex interplay of individual thought processes and societal influences, shedding light on the psychological and sociocultural factors that shape belief systems in diverse and evolving contexts. Atheism is a transcendent worldview that cuts across national and cultural boundaries. It is characterized by the categorical absence of or deliberate rejection of belief in deities. Gaining an understanding of this phenomenon advanced larger conversations about social norms, human cognition, and the contemporary evolution of belief systems.

In this regard and as stated by Pérez and Vallières (2019), the influence of centralized faiths was diminishing in the Western world, and statistics indicated that a rising proportion of people are deconverting, or giving up their religious convictions. However, the psychology of religion addressed little to no attention to this issue. Deconversion took place gradually for each member in the immediate setting of family, the local community, and the larger cultural environment of society at large.

In the context outlined by Harmon (2021), obstacles to the development of religious beliefs were intricately woven into the psychological fabric of close interpersonal ties with family, friends, and coworkers. Furthermore, these challenges extended to the broader psychological landscape shaped by sociological influences, creating a complex interplay between personal relationships and overarching societal frameworks.

As it was, Halafoff and Gobey (2019) investigated if young Australians truly had a "whatever" attitude toward varying faiths and were uninterested in religion. They looked at InterAction, an Australian youth organization that included young people of different religious and non-religious backgrounds. They discovered that it did, and this study offered fresh perspectives on how the identities and religious convictions of young people can affect their interactions with others. This may have applicability outside of Australia as well.

The Philippines is indeed a highly religious country. However, it is interesting to note that despite the changing landscape of religious beliefs, there seems to be a lack of attention given to atheists in psychological literature. In connection to Aldama's scholarly work in 2020, the Philippines persisted as a nation deeply rooted in religious practices.

Statistical data regarding religious affiliations indicates that Christianity commands the adherence of over 90% of the population, while approximately 1% identifies as non-believers, as reported by the Philippine Statistics Authority (PSA, 2019). Despite the evolving religious landscape, there was a conspicuous dearth of attention accorded to atheists within academic literature. The formation of an atheist identity was confronted by a distinctive social milieu, necessitating a thorough examination of the intricate processes involved in identity construction. This study posited that an exploration of the nuanced phases in the development of an atheist identity was crucial for a comprehensive understanding of atheism, given its marginalized status within the broader religious discourse.

Examining the transition of atheism in the Philippines provided a valuable lens through which one can understand the nuances within the diverse community. This exploration added depth to the ongoing conversation about freedom of belief and cultural diversity, revealing the intricate connections between internal cognitive conflicts and external societal influences on the development of atheistic belief. Recognizing and comprehending the experiences of atheists in the Philippines underscored the complexity inherent in the shift from being a believer to adopting an atheist stance. By scrutinizing this transition, we gained insights into the diverse worldviews and evolving beliefs within the country. This exploration enriched an understanding of the multifaceted nature of cultural diversity, offering a glimpse into the experiences and nuances associated with moving away from traditional belief systems. The significance of this lay in refraining taking a stance, but in appreciating the varied paths individuals journey as they navigate their transition from belief to atheism in the Philippines.

This research aimed to shed light on the experiences of individuals in the Philippines who transitioned from being believers to atheists, within a deeply religious societal context. Through an exploration of personal narratives, the study sought to uncover the psychological conflicts inherent in this transition and the formation of atheist identities within the broader social milieu. It advocated for a nuanced understanding of the intricate processes involved in revealing the transitional journeys of atheists in a multi-religious setting, thereby contributing to a deeper comprehension of how individuals evolve from religious belief to atheism.

The concept of cognitive metamorphosis was utilized to describe the profound shift in beliefs and mental frameworks experienced by individuals as they transitioned from believers to atheists. It underscored the significant transformation in perception and thought patterns accompanying this journey, indicating a substantial departure from previously held religious convictions. This notion encapsulated the intricate identity-related and psychological changes that occurred as individuals moved from a state of belief to non-belief.

## Research Questions

The focus of the research centered around an exploration of the discovery process undertaken by Filipino atheists. It aimed to answer the central question:

1. What is the essence of the lived experiences of Filipino atheists as they transitioned from being believers to atheists?
2. How do atheists describe their experience as they transitioned from being believers to atheists?
3. What themes emerge from the testimonies of transitioning from believer to atheist?
4. Based on the findings of the study, what program may be proposed?

## Methodology

### Research Design

A qualitative research design was applied in this study. A qualitative research design was used to analyze this study because it aimed to include Filipino atheists who formerly adhered to different religious beliefs before adopting a non-religious disposition. As articulated by Tenny (2022), qualitative research stands out as a research methodology delving into and offering profound perspectives on real-world issues. In contrast to the numerical data acquisition or intervention-driven approaches inherent in quantitative research, qualitative research serves to formulate hypotheses and delve deeper into the exploration and comprehension of quantitative data. This method entailed the collection of firsthand accounts, perspectives, and behavioral insights from participants, addressing inquiries regarding the processes and rationales rather than focusing on numerical quantities.

Further, the participants were expected to describe their transformations from religious to non-religious worldviews, as well as the influences and factors that contributed to the transition. The primary research data consisted of their responses, which were gathered through a validated, semi-structured interview questionnaire, in connection with their real-life experiences. Semi-structured interviews are regarded as a harmonious blend of structured and unstructured methods, offering a balanced approach to data collection. This method enabled researchers to obtain dependable information while also uncovering unforeseen insights through comprehensive user feedback (Dovetail Editorial Team, 2023). Employing this strategy in the study facilitated an in-depth exploration of the subtleties and complexities encountered by participants during their shift from belief to atheism.

In addition, the researcher used phenomenology, which is a research investigation of an individual's comprehensive descriptions of his

or her lived experiences. According to Ho and Limpaecher (2022), this employed phenomenological research methodologies to comprehend the inherent characteristics of a phenomenon by investigating the perspectives of individuals who have undergone it. This method was commonly utilized for examining firsthand experiences, delving into the intricacies of human thought processes, and broadening a researcher's insights into a given phenomenon. Utilizing this approach in the investigation enabled a thorough examination of the nuances and intricacies faced by participants as they transitioned from embracing a belief system to adopting atheism.

The study employed the Interpretative Phenomenological Approach (IPA) as a qualitative research method to delve into the real-life experiences of Filipino atheists. This approach focused on identifying commonalities in the experiences of these individuals to gain insights into the phenomenon under investigation. This research considered this method suitable for exploring the unique aspects of the experiences of the participants, as it allowed for an in-depth examination of the pertinent details. As per the findings of Love et al. (2020), Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) emerged as a qualitative thematic methodology originating in psychology and grounded in an idiographic philosophy. This approach directed attention toward the individual's subjective and lived experiences.

In the study process, data were collected within the participant's environment through interviews, involving the use of field notes and audio recordings.

### Participants

The study selected participants based on specific criteria: (a) they must be Filipino individuals who have transitioned from religious convictions to adopting a non-belief position, (b) openly identify as atheists, (c) and be willing to openly discuss their experiences.

Six individuals were selected for participation in this exploration, with no consideration given to their age, economic status, and gender. In adherence to the Data Privacy Act, the names of the participants were not disclosed to safeguard their anonymity and protect their personal information. This measure was implemented to address the sensitive nature of the topics under examination, ensuring utmost confidentiality and compliance with privacy regulations.

*Table 1. Participants of the Study*

<i>Participant</i>	<i>Age</i>	<i>Previously Followed Religion</i>	<i>Province/Location</i>
S	23	Roman Catholic	Quezon City
A	33	Roman Catholic	Rizal
B	27	Roman Catholic	Cavite
C	29	Roman Catholic	Pasig City
D	46	Roman Catholic	Cavite
E	30	Roman Catholic	Makati City

Participants in this study were carefully chosen based on selection criteria that matched the research goal of exploring the stories and experiences of Filipinos who had transitioned from theistic to atheistic beliefs. These people represented a group of people whose experiences typically go unnoticed and underrepresented in discussions on Philippine culture.

A homogenous, purposeful sampling technique was used to identify individuals who precisely matched the study's aims to generate an adequate group of participants. Volunteers were sought out from an atheist Facebook community. Additionally, the researcher worked with the group administrator, who directed a participant call through an assigned post.

### Instruments

This research aimed to explore the personal journeys and experiences of atheists who have undergone a transition from various religious beliefs to a non-religious perspective. To achieve this, the researcher employed semi-structured interviews, allowing for flexibility in the conversation while adhering to an interview schedule. This approach enabled a deeper understanding of the participants' thoughts and social context.

The research utilized a set of ten guiding questions in the semi-structured interview process, categorized into their corresponding clusters. These questions had been carefully designed to facilitate the collection of meaningful information and insights from college atheists and agnostics. The participants in this study played a central role as experts in their own experiences, ensuring that they had ample opportunity to share their stories and perspectives.

### Procedure

This research aimed to gather firsthand narratives from individuals who openly identify as atheists and have undergone a transition from various religious beliefs to a non-religious perspective. Participants were encouraged to share their journeys, elaborating on the influences and factors that played a significant role in guiding them through this transition. The study sought to provide a comprehensive understanding of the diverse paths taken by individuals as they transition from religious to non-religious worldviews.

The research commenced by rigorously validating the research instrument and meticulously selecting participants for the forthcoming interviews. Subsequently, a comprehensive request letter was disseminated across various platforms, including Facebook groups affiliated with Atheism associations and organizations, aimed to solicit valuable insights.

In the pursuit of ethical research practices, a consent form was crafted to obtain informed agreement from the participants. This document elucidated the purpose of the research, sought permission for the collection of necessary data, and underscored the voluntary nature of participation. Participants were assured that their confidentiality was strictly maintained, and any information shared was handled with the utmost sensitivity and discretion.

Furthermore, the consent form emphasized the researcher's commitment to ensuring the well-being of participants. It explicitly stated that their beliefs would be acknowledged without judgment, and measures were implemented to safeguard against any potential risks associated with their participation. The researcher was dedicated to fostering an environment where participants could freely express their perspectives, and their contributions were treated with respect and professionalism throughout the research process.

To facilitate the interview process, the researcher leveraged digital platforms such as Facebook Messenger, incorporating its video and audio call features. These tool aimed to enhance convenience for participants. The primary objective was to gather data through a validated, semi-structured questionnaire during the interview.

Before the formal interview, a pre-interview session was conducted to ensure a clear understanding of the informed consent process. This session included discussions about potential risks and emphasized the participants' freedom to withdraw from research at any point. Additionally, during this pre-interview phase, specific criteria were clarified to ensure participant homogeneity. Individuals eligible for the study were Filipino atheists who had undergone a transition from diverse religious beliefs to a non-religious perspective.

The main interview was scheduled following the pre-interview and adhered to a semi-structured format. This approach allowed flexibility while maintaining a standardized set of questions. Subsequently, recorded interviews were transcribed. Following the transcription, member checking was held to inquire if the participants had any concerns about sharing specific information. Subsequently, any identified concerns were addressed to ensure participant comfort and confidentiality.

During the actual interview, this study engaged in in-depth conversations with the six participants at times that were most convenient for them. The purpose of this qualitative interview was to delve deeply into the participants' experiences, thoughts, and emotions. This approach provided both the researcher and the participants with the flexibility to thoroughly explore the topic in a comfortable manner. The interviews were conducted virtually, and the participants' responses recorded in audio format. Additionally, the researcher-maintained field notes as a secondary means of data storage. These notes were taken while listening to the participants' responses and captured important details, including their expressions, tone of voice, and emotions. Subsequently, the researcher informed the participants about any necessary follow-up steps and organized the collected information accordingly.

### **Data Analysis**

The researcher diligently recorded every interview verbatim after gathering the necessary information from the semi-structured interviews. Following that, comparable responses from the Filipino atheists who were interviewed were carefully evaluated and arranged into themes, codes, and clusters. It came to light that the best method for this qualitative research endeavor was to use Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). By incorporating the theoretical frameworks presented in the first chapter, this research has been organized for an interpretive phenomenological examination. IPA enabled a detailed examination of the complex experiences of each case before proceeding to more general observations, exemplifying an explicitly language-based approach. IPA was particularly helpful in resolving complicated, perplexing, and psychologically sensitive questions that occurred during the interviews, demonstrating its value in qualitative research.

The researcher utilized Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) in addition to the frequently employed method of thematic analysis for the investigation of the qualitative data. The six steps of reflexive thematic analysis were outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006), as cited by Campbell et al. (2021), and they provided an outline for the entire process, which included familiarizing oneself with the data, generating codes, constructing themes, reviewing prospective themes, defining and labeling themes, and finally, producing the report.

### **Ethical Considerations**

In this study, the participants were assured that their privacy and security were of utmost importance. The researcher actively considered potential challenges that may arise during the research process and took measures to address critical issues, including maintaining confidentiality, protecting personal privacy, and safeguarding identities.

After participants had been provided with comprehensive information regarding the importance of the study, pertinence, objectives, and how data will be collected, they were informed that their participation was entirely optional. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any time. It was also emphasized that their decisions regarding whether to participate in the data collection process will not influence how the researcher interacts with them.

The study exercised extreme caution to avoid any offensive or biased language in the questions that could potentially distress the participants. Ensuring the safety and privacy of the participants was paramount, and their identities remained completely anonymous to the reader. This guaranteed that all data and information collected for the study were handled with the utmost confidentiality, and only the researcher had access to the participants' records.

The researcher was committed to strictly adhering to the comprehensive protocols delineated in the Institution's Research Manual, ensuring meticulous compliance with the established ethical principles and guidelines. In pursuit of upholding the highest standards of ethical research, the researcher was dedicated to meticulously following the prescribed procedures for conducting interviews, primarily through virtual messenger calls. This unwavering commitment was aimed at safeguarding the well-being and security of every single participant involved in the study during this period. Furthermore, proper credit was attributed to other writers and researchers who have contributed to this study.

## Results and Discussion

The data acquired for this investigation are analyzed and explained in this chapter. This phenomenological study aimed to examine the process of discovery undertaken by Filipino atheists. The data collected from the investigation of Filipino atheists' experiences and their exploration of similar experiences provided were among the methods of inquiry. Consequently, the research was guided by the central question:

**Central Question: What is the essence of the lived experiences of Filipino atheists as they transitioned from being believers to atheists?**

Subsequently, the tables presented responses addressing the Corollary Question. Corollary Question Number 1: How do atheists describe their experience as they transitioned from being believers to atheists?

The tables following each corollary question contained responses derived from ten (10) questions, selected from six (6) Filipino individuals who underwent a transition from being believers to atheists in the Philippines.

**Interview Question Number 1: Could you tell me about your religious background and upbringing, and how it has influenced your beliefs and perspectives?**

During the interview, Participant S, openly identified as an atheist, responded with a sarcastic smile and smirk when questioned about his religious background, which seemed incongruous or irrelevant to him. The inquiry into his religious upbringing, accompanied by references to doctrines and religious education, elicited a sense of irony or amusement from the participant, given his lack of belief in religious tenets. His facial gesture, including touching his face, appeared to be a natural way to gather his thoughts, signaling a subtle discomfort or skepticism towards discussing a topic that has personal significance.

Participant S further elucidated that his exposure to religious doctrines primarily occurred within the educational framework of his Catholic school, where passing religious education classes was requisite for grade progression. The observed smirking behavior during this discourse implied a hint of sarcasm or disbelief, reflecting his amusement or irony regarding the significance attributed to these doctrines, particularly within an educational context.

*Table 2. Annotated Exemplars on the Religious Background and Upbringing of the Filipino Atheist*

<i>Participant</i>	<i>Responses</i>	<i>Researcher's Observation</i>
Participant S	It wasn't my parents and family members yung nag- introduce, it was the school... So dun yung doctrines kasi dun sa school namin since Catholic school siya merong religion subject. So yun na yun If you don't pass that subject hindi ka Level up sa next grade level so you have to pass that subject, so ayun dun yung mga doctrines nila.	Participant S has a sarcastic smile and smirked, even touching his face with his hand, while explaining how he was introduced to certain doctrines through his school's curriculum.
Participant A	Ayun, yung family ko religious talaga siya. Kasi yung family ko Catholic, Catholic kami. So ngayon, nung bata ko nag-aaral ako sa Lasalle. So ang Lasalle is Catholic country, ay Catholic country, Catholic school. So lahat ng tinuturo sa amin ay syempre puro Catholic...Doon ako unang, doon ako unang nag-question eh...So, naalala ko nung na wala pang internet nun eh, merong mga memes ngayon yung hinahawan ka ng pare tapos tumutumba.	Participant A began speaking with a firm yet relaxed voice, but as he started sharing irregularities in his previous religion, his tone changed. It grew louder, and there was a hint of irony in his expression.

However, Participant A's tone shifted as he recalled questioning his faith for the first time during this period. His initial firm and relaxed voice transitioned to a louder tone, accompanied by a hint of irony in his expression. This change in tone suggested a shift in emotion as he reflected on his past religious experiences.

In this regard, Tervo-Niemelä (2021) found that among all young adults, around one- third drifted further from faith and roughly one in seven grew closer to it during the transition to adulthood. Young people who were exposed to other significant influences in their lives their beliefs formed and persisted even in situations when they were not raised religiously at home. Those without a religious upbringing at home mentioned the confirmation time and grandparents as factors that aided in their spiritual development, and they mentioned schools as a source of general.

**Interview Question Number 2: In what ways did your religious beliefs contribute to your sense of identity?**

Table 3. *Annotated Exemplars Highlighting How Filipino Atheists' Prior Religious Convictions Shaped their Perception of Self*

<i>Participant</i>	<i>Responses</i>	<i>Researcher's Observation</i>
Participant C	I think one of the biggest things was, I was conservative at that time. And judgmental. So, it was more negative talaga. I would say, parang mas naging judgmental ako before, na parang, hindi naman sa parang, uy, masama kang tao. Parang ganun. If you do a certain act, or a certain sin, hindi ko naman iniisip na you're a bad person. But it's more of like, I feel like God's gonna get disappointed with you because you're doing this.	While speaking calmly, Participant C smirked sarcastically.
Participant D	Okay, um, it's, I get, parang, yeah, that's a bit of a hard question din. Kasi nga, I get what you mean, pero ang, ang ano ko, ang effects nun sa akin, medyo, kind of insecure din ako. Na parang, teka, there's something not right. Everyone believes in this, pero parang, na ano ko, napilitan ako to question at an early age. Na, there's, yung identity ko, nagiging parang, ano, um, kind of, unsecure, not insecure, parang unsecure ako sa what's going on.	Participant D frowned, held his head, and constantly looked up while giving his answer.

Participant C maintained a calm demeanor but accompanied his words with a sarcastic smirk. This nonverbal cue suggested a certain level of self-awareness or irony as he reflected on his past attitudes. It indicated that he may now see his previous beliefs or judgments in a different light, perhaps recognizing his limitations or biases, as he reflected on the impact of his religious beliefs on his sense of identity, noting a shift from conservatism and judgmental attitudes to a more nuanced perspective. He acknowledged that he used to be conservative and judgmental, particularly in his views on certain behaviors or sins. However, he clarified that his judgment was not necessarily about labeling individuals as bad people but rather about feeling disappointed on behalf of God.

Meanwhile, participant D talked about how he had felt inadequate about his identity and religious convictions. He admitted having doubts about his views when he was young, which made him feel unsure of who he was. Participant D appeared to be pondering intensely while trying to express what was on his mind, as seen by his frequent gazing up, clutching his head, and frowning. Significant internal struggles about their identities and religious beliefs were experienced by both participants. While Participant D's body reactions may suggest a deeper emotional problem associated with doubting his religious identity, Participant C's smirk may imply a certain measure of detachment as he reflects on his prior views.

Considering the preceding claim, Pauha et al. (2020) claimed that a significant trend influencing the religious landscape of the West is the rise in atheism or the belief that there is no God. The number of atheists has increased along with scholarly interest in them, yet many questions remain. The results demonstrated that deconverts are more likely than lifelong atheists to maintain a low degree of religious or spiritual identity.

### Interview Question Number 3: What specific situations or events prompted you to reevaluate your religious beliefs?

Table 4. *Annotated Exemplars of Crucial Occurrences that Led Filipino Atheists to Step Back from their Religious Convictions*

<i>Participant</i>	<i>Responses</i>	<i>Researcher's Observation</i>
Participant S	Even if religion is good in theory, yung tao yung sumira sa akin, so, parang doon na ako nag-re-evaluate...So, I tried different beliefs, and they all have the same common denominator. Yung tao yung sumira.	Participant S responded with a sarcastic laugh, using various hand gestures, with one hand placed on the table and the same hand occasionally touching his face while speaking.
Participant E	Pero, ayun, the school decided to... decided to... side with the guy who pulled a gun on me. And then, I'm thinking, ayun, this is a Catholic school. Why would you side with him... Parang, I would rather choose to side with people who are doing their best to be the best versions of themselves rather than people who are so quick to cast judgment on them. So, I think that's also one of the main reasons why I decided not to sort of identify with them.	Participant E consistently ran his fingers through his hair and touched the back of his head, occasionally looking upwards and into the distance. He maintained a serious expression whenever addressing the camera, conveying his sentiments in response to the question.

Participant S shared how he began reconsidering his religious beliefs as he distinguished a gap between the ideals of religion and the reality of human behavior. He pointed out that although religion promotes goodness, he noticed instances where people did not act in line with these principles. Eliciting a sarcastic laugh and frequent hand gestures hinted at his frustration with this discrepancy. Participant S appeared to be disappointed and frustrated by the contradiction between religious principles and ethical conduct. His sarcastic and irritated response conveyed his dissatisfaction with the circumstances. The act of touching his face seemed that he was feeling intense emotions while discussing this topic, perhaps indicating a sense of disappointment or disillusionment.

Interestingly, Participant E mentioned a particular event that happened at his Catholic school and made him doubt his religious convictions. He expressed feeling betrayed by the school's decision to support someone who had mistreated him, despite the school's asserted adherence to Catholic values. Throughout his explanation, he appeared serious and frequently touched his head, which

conveyed that he was deeply affected by the situation. Participant E offered an appearance of being deeply troubled by what had happened at his Catholic school. His head-touching actions conveyed a state of profound contemplation and grief resulting from the encounter, prompting him to reconsider his religious views. These nonverbal cues indicated the emotional weight of his experience and the significance it held for him in reassessing his religious beliefs.

Pérez and Vallières (2019) attested to the feelings of Participants S and E, which pointed out that the three main components of the ensuing deconversion paradigm are personal development, criticism and dissatisfaction, rationality, and inquiry. These categories, which are closely related but distinctly separate, stand for intellectual stimulation, moral and ethical evaluations of religion, and resolving personal difficulties, in that order. For every participant, deconversion happened gradually within the interpersonal settings of familial relationships, community, and the larger cultural context of society.

Cuayzon (2022) emphasized further the previous argument by pointing out that while children are constantly told about the advantages of religion, as we become older, we begin to question our own beliefs. Having grown up in a religious environment, the author learned firsthand how religion and the concept of The Almighty limit and imprison people in their current circumstances. Also, growing up in a religious home where they were able to watch the coins flipped over, atheists have witnessed firsthand how unfair religion is to people in life.

#### Interview Question Number 4: Can you describe any internal conflicts you faced during this transition?

Table 5. *Annotated Exemplars Illustrating the Inner Turmoil Filipino Atheists Encountered as They Undertook the Shift to Atheism*

<i>Participant</i>	<i>Responses</i>	<i>Researcher's Observation</i>
Participant D	Parang, it's a normal sa akin, again, scientific na to have doubts. Parang, it's a fairy tale. Ganun sa akin. Parang, I had an early conclusion na it's just a fairy tale.	Participant D expressed his viewpoint with conviction, implying a strong sense of resolution in his convictions.
Participant S	Kasi, if the school is teaching this and this and this like God loves everyone, God let you have personal choice, etc., etc...So why is that being letting... Letting you...I mean, letting humans hurt other humans without provocation? Just out of their personal whim.	With frequent ruminating and sarcastic smiles, Participant S appeared to be thoroughly immersed in the discussion and was exhibiting indicators of reflection. The breadth and depth of the transition to atheism for Filipino atheists are indicated by this behavior, which pointed to a deep internal conflict and a critical reevaluation of previously held views.

Participant D expressed his strong belief in his discovered atheistic viewpoint. He highlighted a fundamental shift in perception by characterizing religious beliefs as "fairy tales" and seeing religious narratives through the lens of skepticism and objectivity. "It's just a fairy tale" conceals a thorough reconsideration of long-held beliefs, marked by a rejection of metaphysical explanations in favor of scientific knowledge. Participant D's persistent conviction in this viewpoint alludes to the settlement of internal disputes, arguably stemming from a synthesis between rationality and previous perspectives on religion.

Meanwhile, Participant S's response explored the inner conflict brought by the contradictions between religious doctrine and reality as it is seen. Participant S criticizes the moral inconsistencies in the teachings of religion, especially about the topic of evil and human suffering, by presenting a series of rhetorical questions. The question "Why is that letting humans hurt other humans without provocation?" encapsulates an overwhelming sense of existential agony and moral outrage, emphasizing the contradiction between the unpleasant facts of human existence and the proclaimed kindness of the divine. The constant introspection and caustic tone of Participant S testify to a profound dissatisfaction with conventional theological justifications, which is suggestive of unaddressed inner problems and persistent existential uncertainties.

As they reveal light on the emotional and cognitive processes behind the participants' answers, the researchers' findings in both situations offer valuable context. Following their conversion to atheism, Participant D's expression of conviction highlighted a sense of closure and mental clarity. On the other hand, Participant S's introspection indicated an unresolved conflict and doubt that followed his rejection of religion.

Considering this, Dodd and Dostoevsky (2022) argued how the lack of empirical evidence for the divine is frequently the deciding factor in arguments questioning the rationality of religious belief. Additionally, they emphasize how elements like the expenses of religious practice and preexisting beliefs might influence the role of faith and the threshold for choosing atheism. This implies that there are several circumstances in which choosing atheism could be a reasonable decision and that costs and past convictions may have an impact on the decision's threshold.

Furthermore, Skurzak (2022) captured how growing skepticism and empiricism—like those of M.E. de Montaigne—had a significant impact on the rise of atheism in modern times. Both tendencies, which questioned metaphysical cognition and, in particular, D. Hume's concept of causation, led to the rejection of the available evidence for God's existence. Extreme criticism of religion and the question of the existence of the Absolute was inspired by the ideas of the Enlightenment, which emerged in the eighteenth century and placed an emphasis on the autonomy of man and the necessity to free him from the authority that imprisoned him.

Notably, people rarely argued themselves entirely to belief or unbelief in God; more commonly, they have already crossed a particular threshold before they begin to make such arguments—or at least, before they have reached their conclusion. We ventured to begin the conversation with the idea that atheism (or theism) is a way of finding oneself in the world, a characteristic of experience that is perhaps first affective rather than thetic (Horner & Romano, 2021).

### Interview Question Number 5: What are the external factors, like societal influences, that played a role in your journey towards atheism?

Table 6. *Annotated Exemplars Highlighting External Forces that Contributed to the Journey of Filipino Atheists*

Participant	Responses	Researcher's Observation
Participant B	Siguro, na-strengthen ng uncle ko. So, last time yung uncle ko, nagulat na lang ako, hindi ko alam na ganon din siya. I was thinking na religious siya. So, ang uncle ko, I could say, pag naguusap kami, I think, nakatulong din. Ganun din ako sa kanya.	The contemplative and deliberate responses from Participant B reveal an informed approach and a strong commitment to his convictions. His surprise at learning of his uncle's atheism suggests that his path toward atheism was influenced by his family, leading him to reevaluate his presumptions.
Participant D	So, mas na-expose ako sa other kids din na no one's, and that school, no one's, it's a good school, it's a public school, pero, no one's talking about religion. And I have, I felt so relieved. So, mga puti, mga blacks, mga, even a few Asians, very, very few. Pero, I got exposed to so many different people na, nobody's bothering about si, ano, no one's forcing you to believe anything...a few of my titas na open din. Kasi nga, again, nasa, ano sila, ah, nasa hippie generation sila.	Participant D vividly recalls the multicultural and nonreligious environment of his school. His lively manner and instinctive response demonstrate a sense of validation and emancipation. His interest in the subject suggests that he is open to atheism, which is a relief for him and has gained him immense acceptance, especially among his family members from the hippy generation.

To elicit remarks from Participant B, it was intriguingly shocking to discover how crucial familial connections contributed to the determination to switch sides and become atheists. The influence of interpersonal interactions on forming individual attitudes is suggested by his astonished reaction upon finding that his uncle shared comparable viewpoints. The participant is committed to his atheistic perspective as seen by his thoughtful rumination and expressive display of views. Participant B's deliberate and contemplative responses demonstrate a well-informed and unwavering approach to his convictions. His profound shock upon discovering his uncle's atheism implies that his path toward atheism was heavily influenced by his family, ultimately leading him to reevaluate and challenge his preconceived notions. It emphasized the integral role of interpersonal relationships in forming philosophical perspectives and the power that family plays in forming an individual's worldview.

In addition, it should be noted that Participant D's response emphasized the impact of societal influences on his journey toward atheism. His encounter with a public school free of religious indoctrination gave him a sense of comfort and liberation from social pressures. His exposure to a variety of cultural backgrounds strengthened his doubts about religion and encouraged tolerance for other points of view. The participant conveyed a sense of liberty from cultural standards by his enthusiastic expression of what he experienced. He emanates an aura of approval and liberation with his lively demeanor and intuitive reactions. His interest in atheism suggests that he is open to it, which has earned him considerable acceptance, particularly among his family members from the hippie generation, and this is a source of relief. On top of that, it pointed out how social settings shape an individual's ideas, emphasizing the worth of peer acceptability and cultural diversity in the individual's journey toward atheism.

Shipley and Arweck (2019) highlighted the growing scholarly interest in the junction of youth and non-religion, particularly about the growth of young representations of non-religious identities, which aligns with the conclusions offered by Participants B and D. This volume brings together new studies that explore the connections between youth, diversity, and nonreligious ideas. It does this by connecting diverse methodological and geographical viewpoints.

It records the range of ways in which young people express their beliefs and nonreligious stances, together with the social and environmental contexts that influence these stances. These settings encompass family dynamics, educational institutions, and religious communities as social contexts.

### Interview Question Number 6: What are the specific instances where your actions or experiences conflicted with your previous religious beliefs?

Table 7. *Annotated Exemplars of the Faith-Experience Dissonance of Filipino Atheists*

Participant	Responses	Researcher's Observation
Participant D	I've seen you going to masses, pero sa labas ng, alam kong you're not a good person, mas ganun naman nakikita ko. And ano, those telling me, mga ibang relatives na telling me stuff, alam ko naman di sila na good person, pero they're very religious.	Participant D concluded a profound critique while immersing himself in deep reflection.
Participant B	Yung iba sa mga palasimba, sila pa yung nakikita ko na,	Participant B exhibited an assertive demeanor when



let's say, Simba ngayon pag uwi, aawayin yung lahat.

expressing the views he holds, and he additionally provided pragmatic occurrences with scrutiny.

A profound remark was provided by Participant D, who noted the hypocrisy of the practices of religion. He witnessed people attending mass, yet there were disparities between their outward acts of religious devotion and the way they lived inside. The scrutiny of the discrepancies between doctrines of religion and actual experiences was apparent in Participant D's statement. This demonstrated Participant D's capacity for self-reflection and reflective remarks about his environment, pointing to a complex moral and religious philosophy. In his concluding remarks, Participant D demonstrated a deep level of introspection and self-examination, as well as an in-depth moral and religious philosophy.

He conveyed a keen understanding of the differences between moral behavior and religious commitment, implying a critical analysis of his upbringing and experiences.

The discussion gained more depth from Participant B's response, which focused on interpersonal disputes that occur within religious communities. He related stories of people who actively participate in religious activities acting in discordant ways, such as fighting or attacking someone. Participant B demonstrated a proactive mindset and insightful observation by presenting realistic events with scrutiny and a forceful approach. His emphasis on interpersonal conflicts in religious communities reveals a readiness to question accepted norms and assumptions, demonstrating a deep comprehension of the complexity of religious interactions.

Considering the observations, Block (2019) stated that a significant portion of young British Columbians abruptly rejected churches during the 1960s, viewing them as irrelevant, hypocritical, and patriarchal. These rejections were frequently purposefully framed as generational opposition. Many people waited until later in life, when family and cultural pressure to believe had lessened, before coming out as open or affirming atheists. British Columbian youth were at the vanguard of broader tendencies of dechristianization and secularization in postwar Canada, both in their sudden rejection of organized religion and their more gradual departure from religious belief.

**Interview Question Number 7: How did these cognitive conflicts contribute to your decision to embrace atheistic principles?**

The response from Participant C demonstrated a thorough understanding of the critical analysis of religious writing, especially the Bible. He cited apparent errors in the Bible's history and human origins narrative to demonstrate his skepticism and intellectual curiosity. His analogy to human history, which spans trillions of years, suggests that he recognizes scientific ideas and leans toward evidence-based thinking. The researcher noted a significant emotional reaction in the form of disdain, which he interprets as coming from frustration or disillusionment with religious beliefs that contradict his knowledge of the world in science.

While Participant C's frequent disdain indicates annoyance with inconsistencies between religious beliefs and scientific understanding, his enthusiastic response reveals a profound commitment to evidence-based reasoning, as seen by his critical interpretation of religious texts.

*Table 8. Annotated Exemplars Displaying How Cognitive Dissonance Aided in the Transition of Filipino Atheists*

<i>Participant</i>	<i>Responses</i>	<i>Researcher's Observation</i>
Participant C	So, I have, like, a ton of arguments back then. I remember, like, reading the Bible tapos, like, ang daming inaccuracies dito. Like, this didn't seem correct. Sasabihin ninyo na 2,000 years ago lang yung Bible or yung world, pero like, we've been here for trillions of years na, and yung lineage ba yung tamang term, like, homo sapien yung pinaka micro- organism niya, like, hindi lang siya ganyan.	When responding to the question, Participant C displayed conviction and enthusiasm, but also occasionally elicited looks of disdain.
Participant D	So one of the sciences na very simple to even a kid would understand guys, is that, is that all these religions, of course, mostly Catholic, even Muslim, sa ganun, they're saying na they're the one religion. If you don't believe, you're going to hell. Dahil lang hindi ka pinanganak doon, you're going to hell kasi hindi ka in-expose eh.	Participant D exhibited intense enthusiasm while eliciting responses, even showcasing books that highlighted secular viewpoints.

In addition to the points, the reaction from Participant D is notable for its ardent backing of secular viewpoints and its robust rejection of religious exclusivism. His criticism of religious concepts and their repercussions was evident in his remark about different religions asserting exclusivity and threatening to punish disbelieving parties. His argument was delivered straightforwardly, which may have been an attempt to explain difficult concepts in a way that would be understandable to a wide audience. The presentation of books featuring secular opinions and the researcher's observation of intense enthusiasm demonstrated a proactive engagement with atheist literature and a purposeful endeavor to enlighten others about alternate viewpoints. With a proactive involvement with atheist literature and forceful criticism of religious concepts, Participant D demonstrates a personal dedication to secularism and resistance to religious exclusivity, motivated by a desire for social justice and intellectual freedom.

Given the previously mentioned observations, it is advisable to integrate the insights outlined by Ecklund and Johnson (2021) regarding the recurring themes evident in the writings of New Atheists: firstly, they prioritize science as either the sole or superior method of knowledge acquisition; secondly, they evaluate religion through the lens of scientific evidence and typically find it lacking; and thirdly,

they characterize religion not merely as incorrect but as pathological and potentially hazardous. Thus, New Atheism exhibits a strong association with both science and antagonism toward religion.

On top of that, LeDrew (2019) claimed that the secular group known as Modern Atheists has been attempting to establish a scientific foundation for rejecting religion and its impact on public affairs for the last 20 years. The New Atheism's criticism of the social sciences, which was rejected as relativistic and aimed to replace it with evolutionary psychology and neuroscience, was a prominent aspect of its methodology. It looked at New Atheism's stance considering the historical split between naturalistic and socialistic perspectives on religion. It made the case that modern atheism was essentially a political endeavor to support the authority of an ideological definition of "true" science and the experts who represent it. The New Atheism was a reaction against the perceived deterioration of universalistic standards of knowledge and morality in an increasingly pluralistic Western cultural context, while it was usually viewed as a backlash against religious fundamentalism. It investigated the relative fall in the relevance of the social sciences in popular atheist discourse through a reading of key New Atheist writings in connection to the historical evolution of modern atheism. In some significant ways, it has moved away from its foundation in progressive social justice organizations and ideals and toward a more libertarian stance.

### Interview Question Number 8: How have specific social groups, groups of individuals, or particular people impacted your atheistic perspectives?

Table 9. Annotated Exemplars Illustrating How Societal Factors Influenced Filipino Atheists' Secular Viewpoints

Participant	Responses	Researcher's Observation
Participant C	To be honest, yung internet at YouTube lang talaga. Mm-mm. Kasi ayun nga eh, parang I've never really met anyone else who is an atheist. And we talk about religion. And iba naman yung parang religious activity, religion, church, to the personal relationship of God.	Participant C paused before answering, reflecting deeply on the question before responding.
Participant B	Siguro yung tito ko lang, yung kapatid ko, not sure kasi if she would identify talaga as atheist. But wala siyang paniniwala... So, I learn more on yung mga groups, Facebook, FB page. Diyan ako nakakakita ng mga atheist din, kasi nakakakita din ako ng mga arguments doon.	Participant B thought carefully about his responses and expressed them clearly, showing that he was firmly committed to his opinions.

The response from Participant C highlighted the significant influence that the internet and YouTube platforms have on the formation of atheistic beliefs among Filipinos. His declaration that he has never met another atheist in person brought attention to how uncommon these views are in his social connections. This seclusion may be a result of the Philippines' predominately Catholic religious environment. The significant pause that Participant C made before answering indicates that he is a very cautious and reflective person when it comes to sharing his atheistic viewpoints. His actions suggest that he is thinking carefully and seriously, which is probably because he doesn't often interact with other atheists in their social networks. The pause indicates the need for mindful thought since, given the predominately Catholic religious milieu in the Philippines, Participant C might feel alone in his convictions. This isolation may cause him to become more conscious of the importance of being careful when expressing his opinions.

Relationships have a significant role in forming opinions, as seen by Participant B's mention of familial influence—specifically, his uncle and sibling—as possible sources of exposure to atheistic viewpoints. However, his sibling's lack of clarity about identifying as an atheist point to a lack of clear labeling or open discussion about atheism in their household. Social constraints or cultural conventions that forbid openly disagreeing with religious views may be the cause of this uncertainty, which makes people who are doubting or rejecting their faith feel alienated. Furthermore, Participant B shows a great commitment to their atheistic ideas by giving considerable thought to and clearly expressing their opinions. Participant B expresses his exposure to atheistic views with confidence, even though there may be some ambiguity surrounding his sibling's identification as an atheist.

This is especially true when it comes to familial influences such as his uncle. The ambiguity surrounding their sibling's identity, however, raises the possibility of cultural or familial barriers that could prevent candid conversations about atheism. Proactive involvement with atheistic discourse is suggested by Participant B's dependence on online communities such as Facebook groups, indicating a readiness to seek out like-minded others and engage in intellectual conversations. This action emphasizes how important virtual environments are in giving people a place to connect and voice marginalized ideas in societies where those viewpoints could be stigmatized or suppressed. Taking into consideration the details of the mentioned observations earlier, Dilmaghani (2019) demonstrated the relative reach of well-known atheist public figures among various Canadian secular groups is evaluated using data from Google Trends on the volume of searches for these persons. A large amount of data taken from the Canadian General Social Surveys from 2005 to 2016 is added to the user query data that is mined from Google Trends. According to the data, the existence of strictly seculars, who act as a stand-in for atheists, is positively connected with the reach of well-known atheists. According to this preliminary research, prominent atheists most likely "preach to the choir," appealing to people who share their beliefs but excluding others who have similar but divergent perspectives on religion and spirituality.

Concerning the lack of offline atheist communities for support and conversation, Aldama (2020) carried out research on the difficult task of rejecting the central tenets of theism in an overwhelmingly religious society, highlighting the fact that this transition to atheism is not a relatively quick decision but rather an extended process. Being an atheist requires navigating a different social milieu to form this kind of identity.

**Interview Question Number 9: In what manner did these influential communities or groups shape your outlook on atheism?***Table 10. Annotated Exemplars Showing How Discussions in Shared Circles Help Filipino Atheists Make Personal Discoveries*

<i>Participant</i>	<i>Responses</i>	<i>Researcher's Observation</i>
Participant D	Very questioning family. It's not just me. My, my siblings are, they question everything. My parents question everything. So, ano din, mga, mga literally rebelde sila... I have to mention my wife na, agnostic din siya na If any, I'm, I'm even more closer with my mom, I can ask her directly, na ano. Pero, syempre, she doesn't want to say directly, pero she, I, I can open up na, mom, ba't ang kulit na mga ganito? Mga gaya, ah, ba't ganyan lang talaga? Pero ano, tingin mo, so, it's mostly my mom na I can ask na without her telling, hala ka. Walang ganoon talaga. She's very, ano, liberal talaga. It's more of, ano, questioning. Parang, ikaw, ano tingin mo?	Participant D passionately and spontaneously shared his feelings, expressing them with unwavering conviction.
Participant B	Pero yung mga way how they argue doon sa mga premise or ano statement ng mga atheists na they don't use yung mga fallacies and hominem na nakikita ko, ah, teka, meron tong point. Yung mga answers yung mga atheists eh, may point eh...So, yun, nakakatulog sa akin na mas nag-share eh, mas naiintindihan ko ang atheism.	Participant B pondered his responses thoughtfully and conveyed them clearly, reflecting a strong conviction in his viewpoints.

Participant D's insightful responses reveal that family dynamics—specifically, the culture of questioning that permeates the family—have a substantial impact. The milieu of intellectual curiosity and resistance against conventional standards instilled by his highly inquisitive family is well conveyed by Participant D. This upbringing fostered a sense of autonomy in the formation of views in addition to a skeptical perspective. The participant's agnostic wife is mentioned, which draws attention to the diversity of viewpoints even in intimate relationships and adds to a deep discussion on existential issues. The fact that Participant D relies on his mother as an ally highlights the significance of family ties in addressing existential questions. The enthusiastic and spontaneous disclosure of Participant D highlighted the significance of familial factors in forming personal perspectives on atheism.

Meanwhile, Participant B considered how his idea of atheism has been shaped by the intellectual discourse that occurs within atheist communities. The participant observed a difference in the quality of arguments made by atheists, pointing out the absence of abusive language and erroneous reasoning. This discovery implied that atheist communities have a profound understanding of the concepts of logical reasoning and critical thinking. The focus placed by Participant B on the importance of well-reasoned arguments suggests a dedication to intellectual rigor and openness in atheist conversations. Participant B's faith in the intellectual virtues of atheism is further reinforced by the researcher's observation of the participant's rigorous discussion and well-articulated statement.

As demonstrated by the observations, it is not unexpected that research on unbelief, or the lack of religious faith, follows a similar pattern given the extensive examination of religion in terms of evolutionary processes, which explains many of its dynamics as forms of adaptation or exaptation. It is commonly acknowledged that social structures change over time and that, since the modern era, secularization and atheism have expanded through adaptations and variants. Fundamentally, unlike many other social and cultural phenomena, atheism and unbelief grow into their own interpersonal spaces and are formed by comparable dynamics (Oviedo, 2019).

**Interview Question Number 10: How did your social interactions and affiliations influence your transition towards atheism?***Table 11. Annotated Exemplars Demonstrating How Personal and Social Variables Did in the Identity Formation of Filipino Atheists*

<i>Participant</i>	<i>Responses</i>	<i>Researcher's Observation</i>
Participant B	Na strengthen niya... So paano siya nakaka- influenza? It's strengthens. Ayun yung masasagot ko doon sa tanong ngayon. Yung my social interactions and affiliation, It's strengthens.	Participant B reflected deeply on his answers and articulated them with clarity, demonstrating a firm belief in his perspectives.
Participant C	Siguro kasi ayoko ma-experience na yung baho. Yung ka b***** na ng Christian Church. And so it made me want to veer away from that. And that was my main goal lang actually. But watching those YouTubers na pinapanood ko, that they made me...Or they helped me realize na, oh... Walang Diyos or there's no God. Siguro ganun. And it made me feel to myself.	Participant C hesitated briefly, allowing the weight of the question to settle in his mind before carefully crafting a response. He also used strong language to express his frustration, including curses.

The response from Participant B revealed a strong correlation between social interactions and the validation of his atheistic beliefs. Participant B showed that he recognized the impact of social interactions and group dynamics on personal beliefs by recognizing how these factors shaped his outlook on atheism. The clarity and conviction with which he articulated his beliefs testify to a thorough and reflective approach to identity construction. Participant B's conviction may be strengthened by the acceptance and encouragement he received from atheist structures and groups. His capacity to clearly state his position may also be an indication of self-awareness and conviction, which may have been developed through interaction with others who have similar perspectives on religion and atheism.

Strong feelings are conveyed in Participant C's response, as seen by his use of explicit language and expression of annoyance toward

organized religion—especially the Christian Church. His intention to avoid the perceived hypocrisy frequently associated with religious institutions suggested that this intense reaction was certainly the result of undesirable events or perceptions related to these institutions. Participant C's transition to atheism appeared to be fueled by an array of exposure to alternative viewpoints through online media and disillusionment with organized religion. His response carried a lot of emotional weight, which highlighted the complex interplay between personal and social factors in forming his identity as an atheist within the distinctive Filipino context.

Based on the previously noted observations, Lü (2019) argued that despite the seeming logical incongruity in the double identity, the way that religion and atheism are both embraced and contested, but differentially, in symbolic representation by media outlets facilitates the Chinese's self-identification as an atheist and simultaneously believing/behaving as a religionist. The author demonstrated how the relative meanings and locations of atheism and religion in the symbolic domain of media representation in reform-era China are configured and reconfigured about the tonal uses, the interplay of secularization and desecularization trends over time, and the framing of religions.

Meanwhile, under Participant B's observations, Harmon (2021), for example, noted that constraints to fostering faith can come from both the immediate effects of close relationships with family, friends, and coworkers, as well as the larger context of societal and cultural factors. According to studies on religious conversion, Christian apologist John Dickson's claim that "we often like the ideas of the people we like" was accurate. Beliefs and concepts that aligned with our identity, goals, and location drew us in. However, the acceptance and propagation of ideas within our social context may influence our perception of reality, particularly if such ideas have become generally accepted, unsupported, and taken for granted.

### **Corollary Question Number 2: What themes emerged from the testimonies of transitioning from believer to atheist?**

The themes derived from the semi-structured interviews conducted with study participants are delineated as follows:

The researcher gathered testimonies from Filipino atheist participants and identified several key themes within the manuscript. These themes included: Religious Influences of Schooling, Family, and Personal Curiosity; Influence on Personal Morality and Skepticism; Experiencing Dissonant Texts, Actions, and Conversations; Inward Dilemmas due to Social Fear, Rationality, and Moral Ambiguity; Intersecting Influences from Local, Global, and Digital Environments; Sexuality, Hypocrisy, and Personal Beliefs; Contradictions in Religious Teachings Lead to Atheism; Shared Viewpoints Affirmed Personal Views; Disputations in Shared Circles Lead to Personal Discovery; Unfolding of Identity through Personal and Social Dynamics.

Within the exploration of Filipino Atheists' experiences in the deeply religious context of the Philippines, the study delved into themes representing their transition from religious belief to openly identifying as Atheists. These themes, symbolically arranged in a butterfly effect, mirror the study's goal. The butterfly metamorphosis serves as a metaphorical representation, capturing the gradual progression of engagement, interaction, and collaboration, as well as the exchange of insights and ideas drawn from the testimonies of Filipino Atheist participants. Emphasizing that the journey into atheism is not a swift or straightforward decision, but rather a profound transformation, this metaphor reflects a process marked by questioning, growth, and ultimately, liberation from prior beliefs.

A journey of introspection, development, and ultimately liberation was needed to make the shift from religious belief to atheism, similar to how a caterpillar becomes an exquisite butterfly. The phases of the butterfly's transition reflected the study's themes, emphasizing the richness and complexity of the participants' experiences as they overcame both personal and societal obstacles to embrace atheism. This metaphor underscored that the journey towards atheism is not sudden but rather a nuanced and evolving process, echoing the complex psychological conflicts inherent in belief transition within a deeply religious context like the Philippines.

The phases of a butterfly's metamorphosis are employed to symbolically depict the gradual shift that people in the deeply religious Philippines undergo when they transition from religious belief to atheism. Starting in the Egg Stage, which was similar to the emergence of a butterfly, people are shaped by their family, education, and upbringing, which creates the foundation for future change. The Hatching stage, which came next, denoted the beginning of individual doubt about religious ideas. As people advanced, they came across Early Caterpillar Feeding, which involved interacting with contradictory religious texts and experiences that compelled more investigation. During the Mid-Caterpillar Stage, people experience internal conflicts as they attempt to reconcile rationality, moral ambiguity, and societal expectations. The Late Caterpillar Stage was characterized by people navigating the intersections of influences from digital, global, and local settings. These influences shaped their viewpoints and destroyed the accepted norms. Before the Chrysalis Formation, people struggled with questions of self-identity, adhering to social norms, and reconciling differences between their stated and true opinions. The turning point, which was represented by the Chrysalis Formation stage, was the abandonment of previous convictions and the acceptance of atheism as a result of inconsistencies in religious doctrine. The Metamorphosis Initiation stage, which emerged from the chrysalis, involved the sharing of personal experiences with other atheists to reinforce ideas. Following this, the Metamorphosis stage represented the conversations and ideas that occur in atheist groups and promoted personal development. At the end of the process, the "Butterfly Emergence" represented the formation of an integrated identity influenced by personal introspection and social interactions.

### **Interview Question Number 1: Could you tell me about your religious background and upbringing, and how it has influenced**

## your beliefs and perspectives?

### Theme A

#### Religious Influences of Schooling, Family, and Personal Curiosity

The responses provided by the participants consistently revealed the importance of various factors on their religious upbringing and beliefs; this was identified as Religious Influences of Schooling, Family, and Personal Curiosity. Their religious backgrounds were greatly influenced by their educational experiences, close familial connections, and their inherent curiosity.

Commencing with the primary sub-theme of Religious Indoctrination Through Education, several participants described their early exposure to Catholic beliefs and practices because of studying in Catholic schools. It emphasized the significant impact that educational institutions have on the formation of people's identities and religious beliefs. The participants' accounts of being fully immersed in religious instruction and practices in school settings demonstrated the important role that educational institutions play in passing down religious values and beliefs from one generation to the next. As Participant S pointed out, "It wasn't my parents and family members yung nag-introduce, it was the school... So dun yung doctrines kasi dun sa school namin since Catholic school siya merong religion subject. So yun na yun If you don't pass that subject hindi ka Level up sa next grade level so you have to pass that subject, so ayun dun yung mga doctrines nila", highlighting the widespread impact of Catholic education on the childhood that served as the main hub for religious indoctrination. This implied that religious socialization could be effectively facilitated by educational institutions, which could establish attitudes and beliefs in students that they carried into adulthood.

Another sub-theme that appeared was the Influence of Family Dynamics, emphasizing the relationship between religious socialization and familial customs. The participant testimonies demonstrated how religious views were passed down through the generations and how frequent church attendance was an example of familial practices that support the development of religious identities in children. Participants testified about their experiences going to church regularly with their families, showing that religious socialization was greatly influenced by family customs and traditions. As a testament, Participant B stated that "So, parang pinaka-formative years pa lang talagang pinapasok na sa akin yung religion. So, siguro isa sa mga memory stories, my father, mag sisimba kami. Kasi even my grandfather ay taong simbahan", highlighting the way that religious views are passed down through families across generations.

Additionally, when participants described moments of intellectual inquiry and skepticism regarding their religious beliefs, the sub-theme of the Initial Experience of Questioning highlighted a significant component of religious indoctrination. This underlined the conflict that exists in religious environments between promoting independent thought and upholding religious doctrine. The first experiences of doubting and considering their religious ideas critically were reflected in the participant's narratives.

Participant D pointed out "Pero pag kami lang ng parents ko, medyo in-encourage kami ng parents namin to be, to question, actually. Not directly ha, not sinasabi na huwag ka maniwala dyan. Mas sinasabi, okay, what do you think? So, it's a very healthy, intellectually na, and we grew up with so much books na, yun, ang daming psychology books, ang daming Eastern philosophy". Participant E, on the other hand, talked about his bad experiences, as stated "And, then, ayun, it was this born-again Christian program, and I hated it. Every second of it, I hated na, like, the school administrator would use it as a means to judge people, like, cast doubt. And, ayun, a lot of the PACEs or schoolwork, these were blatant born-again Christian propaganda. Parang, isn't that the whole point of schooling? To learn not what to think, but rather how to think? So, feeling ko talaga was, if a lot of Christian-based schools are like this, or any Christian, supposedly Christian-centered places had this thinking, what's the point? So, I don't know if it makes sense, but, ayun, I really couldn't, I really couldn't stand na a lot of these religious institutions, to teach people how to think as opposed to what to think", which expressed displeasure with the judgmental and authoritarian attitudes he witnessed in some religious institutions. This demonstrated the conflict that existed in religious education settings between promoting critical thinking and enforcing conventional concepts.

The participants' experiences corresponded with Festinger's cognitive dissonance theory, which posited that individuals experienced psychological discomfort when their beliefs and actions were incongruent. Festinger's concept of cognitive dissonance had been a profoundly influential theory in social psychology, as noted by Harmon-Jones and Mills (2019). Cognitive dissonance in the context of spiritual formation can occur when people come across contradicting facts or experiences that go against their previously held beliefs. For instance, as Participant E attempts to reconcile his upbringing with his recently acquired skepticism, cognitive dissonance may have resulted from his bad experiences with religious education.

Additionally, Tajfel and Turner's Social Identity Theory elucidated how individuals derive their sense of identity from participation in social structures like religious communities. This theory detailed the cognitive processes and social contexts that drive intergroup behaviors (McLeod, 2023). Social identity theory was supported by the participant's experiences, which show how interactions in familial and educational environments develop religious identities.

Following the foregoing assertion, Tervo-Niemelä (2021) discovered that, of all young adults, about one-third moved away from the faith, and about one in seven drew closer to it as they entered adulthood. However, even in circumstances when they were not taught religiously at home, young people's ideas could still grow and endure if they were exposed to other significant influences in their lives. For those without a religious upbringing at home, the confirming phase and grandparents in particular were important for their spiritual

growth; schools were noted as a general source of spiritual guidance.

The Religious Influences of Schooling, Family, and Personal Curiosity theme from the participant narratives, which encompassed the influence of family dynamics, the first experience of questioning, and religious indoctrination through education, align with Tajfel and Turner's social identity theory as well as Festinger's cognitive dissonance theory. The complex processes of religious socialization and identity development that Tervo-Niemelä's (2021) study emphasized are explained by these ideas. Tervo-Niemelä's results, which showed that young adults' faith was changing, and that education and family dynamics played a big role, were consistent with Festinger's theory, which held that people feel uncomfortable when their beliefs did not match their experiences. Furthermore, Tajfel and Turner's social identity theory illustrated how people obtained their religious identities from social structures such as their families and schools, reflecting the participants' experiences

## **Interview Question Number 2: In what ways did your religious beliefs contribute to your sense of identity?**

### **Theme B**

#### **Influence on Personal Morality and Skepticism**

As a result of the participants' views on how their religious beliefs affected their moral compass and influenced their skepticism or conflicted identity, Influence on Personal Morality and Skepticism emerged as the main themes. The responses taken together demonstrated the significant influence of religious teachings on the development of people's morals, worldviews, and sense of self.

A key component of many religious teachings was shown in Participant S's emphasis on the fundamental precept of love—even for one's adversaries. He expressed, “Moral compass, yes. I guess yung pinaka-mabigat na teaching was love everyone, even your enemies. That's why I have this very naive viewpoint of the world of seeing the good in people even if it's not there”. This understanding provided him a with sense of naivety about seeing the good in others, especially in times of trouble. Comparably Participant A emphasized the ethical principles that form the basis of behavior guidance offered by Catholic teachings, such as the prohibitions against stealing and murder. He stated, “Kasi, meron namang mga moral ano ang Catholic na tinuturo na maayos. Kunwari, huwag kang magnakaw, huwag kang pumatay, ganon”. The responses provided resulted in the emergence of a vital sub-theme identified as Moral Guidance and Worldview.

However, Participants B and D provided further insight into the doubt and perception of identity confusion that arose from religious doctrine, which was noted as a Skeptical and Conflicted Identity. Participant B recalled having doubts about his faith while in college. He mentioned, “My religion, yung Catholicism. I would say na nagamit ko yun or naging part yun. Kasi more on, nakilala ko yung sarili ko o college na ako eh. College na ako. So, ah, kasi, pala, medyo, nag karoon ako ng doubt. Pero nawala pa sa akin yun. Kasi, hindi na matay ang father ko. Well, pinatay”. These doubts were partially alleviated by personal circumstances, but they later returned after suffering a loss. This emphasized how intricately one's identity was shaped by the interaction of one's religious beliefs and life experiences.

Moreover, Participant D asserted that his religious convictions have made him feel insecure and have caused him to question his identity, which may have fostered critical views. He stated, “Ang effects nun sa akin, medyo, kind of insecure din ako. Na parang, teka, there's something not right. Everyone believes in this, pero parang, na ano ko, napilitan ako to question at an early age. Na, there's, yung identity ko, nagiging parang, ano, um, kind of, insecure, not insecure, parang insecure ako sa what's going on”. This suggested that while religious teachings may provide moral guidance, they may also engender feelings of uneasiness, especially when individuals feel under pressure to live up to preconceived notions.

By recognizing both the benefits of practicing Catholicism and its susceptibility to individual distortion, Participant E's perspective added depth. He relayed, “So, as I mentioned previously, I like Catholicism in practice. Kaso nga lang, it's more of how a lot of people distort it”. This showed a degree of disdain toward institutionalized religion and represented a critical position toward the interpretation and application of religious teachings.

It is apparent from viewing the theme and sub-themes through the lens of Festinger's Cognitive Dissonance Theory that people may feel psychologically uncomfortable when their actions or views conflict with what their religion teaches. As seen by Participant B's journey of uncertainty and apprehension, this dissonance may induce initiatives to make sense of contrasting concepts or conduct.

On top of that, Tajfel and Turner's Social Identity Theory sheds light on how a person's religious affiliation affects their sense of self. The participants' experiences with skepticism and identity conflict served as a powerful reminder of how social identity shaped attitudes, behaviors, and beliefs in religious societies.

Wong Chin Foo, an early Chinese American writer for the North American Review, stressed the importance of religion's moral code in guiding relationships and activities, according to Fong and Jeung (2020). He argued that Chinese "heathenism" emphasized a strong moral foundation for youth and expressed doubts about some tenets of American Christianity, most notably the idea of God's foreknowledge. The significant number of Chinese Americans who identified as religious nones today may be attributed to these historical viewpoints, especially Wong's skepticism toward religion.

The work delves into the examination of how moral principles, religious convictions, and skepticism interact in various cultural settings.

The assertion made by Wong Chin Foo, which was noted by Fong and Jeung (2020) regarding the moral code that governed religious relationships and behaviors was consistent with the theme of Influence on Personal Morality and Skepticism, which emphasized how religious teachings influenced people's values and worldviews. Furthermore, Wong's skepticism regarding some facets of Christianity was similar to the experiences of skepticism and confused identity, in which people struggled with uncertainties arising from their religious convictions.

### **Interview Question Number 3: What specific moments or situations prompted you to reevaluate your religious beliefs?**

#### **Theme C**

#### **Experiencing Dissonant Texts, Actions, and Conversations**

As it captured the participants' experiences with contradicting information, behaviors, and dialogues inside religious contexts, the theme of Experiencing Dissonant Texts, Actions, and Conversations emerged. The participants vividly described instances when they encountered inconsistencies that made them reconsider their beliefs. This dissonance created a cognitive tension, prompting them to reevaluate their beliefs.

The Reading Dissonance from Biblical Texts was one of the initial sub-themes that unfolded. Participants identified inconsistencies between the Bible's descriptions and scientific discoveries and expressed skepticism about interpreting it figuratively. Participant A highlighted the lack of biblically listed species in the fossil record. He disclosed, "Umpisa palang, Genesis, basahin mo palang, ang dami na niyang mali. Ang dami-dami ng mga species na sinabi sa Bible na ni isang fossil dito walang makita", which implied a discrepancy between scientific data and biblical stories. Participant B raised additional concerns about the Bible's prescription of traditional gender roles. He shared, "So even if tignan natin, the Bible itself, yung lamang pa din yung lalaki dun eh. Diba? Pag tinitignan natin, kailangan ng mga babae ganito lang, ganyan lang. I don't believe sa ganon... Bible itself, yung context nun, sobrang luma na", which pointed out a discrepancy between its ideas and contemporary viewpoints on gender dynamics and equality.

The impact of interpersonal interactions on participants' religious evaluations is examined in further detail in the Subordinate Theme, Witnessing Dissonance from People's Actions. It is clear from the participants' testimonies that other believers' actions have a big impact on how they see their faith. Participant S's disappointment with religious organizations of different denominations emphasizes how encountering hypocrisy regularly can weaken one's religious conviction. He asserted, "My life's greatest joy is people. And my life's greatest grief is also people. So, even if religion is good in theory, yung tao yung sumira sa akin, so, parang doon na ako nag-re-evaluate kasi, well, sure, not everyone's perfect, no? Pero, like, the fact na ayaw na nilang i-try to reconnect, rekindle, doon na ako nag-question na, are they even followers? Are they even believers? Or baka sila ay hypocrites lang? So, and this has not happened with the Roman Catholics lang, no? I've been to Born Again, Protestantism, Christian, and even the Mormons. So, I tried different beliefs, and they all have the same common denominator. Yung tao yung sumira. Sa akin. And not really the religion itself". In a similar manner, Participant B's observation of hypocrisy among people claiming religious devotion drew attention to the disparity between stated convictions and real behavior. He narrated, "Okay. So, started nga po kasi grade 6. Medyo nawala pa naman siya sa'kin. Bumalik yung religion. Kaya lang yung father ko, murdered. So bakit nga naisip na gawin siya sa father ko na nagtatrabaho siya ng maayos?... Even sa mga taong palasimba, sabihin na natin. And actually, I don't know. Yung iba sa mga palasimba, sila pa yung nakikita ko na, let's say, si Simba ngayon pag uwi, aawayin yung lahat. Backstab dito, backstab doon, paninira dito, paninira dyan.... So, parang isa yun sa mga nagpatong-patong na sakina, ano ito, teka lang, bakit parang yung teaching, iba na dun sa nangyayari".

Furthermore, the influence of interpersonal communication on the formation of religious beliefs was emphasized in Hearing Dissonance from People's Answers. The diverse responses to existential questions about death, for example, showed how different interpretations within the same religious community could plant doubts. As mentioned by Participant D, "Anyway, when she died, um, yung funeral, yung, yung wake, nasa, mismong bahay namin, hindi nasa labas. So, the whole time, nakita ko yung body niya.... I was six nun, six years old. So, bata pa ako, pero I kept on telling ko, saan siya, saan siya napunta? Ba't siya natutulog?... So, iba-iba yung answers nila.. Yung tita ko, isa pang hippie yun, isa pang tita ko, said something strange na, she's floating up in the air. And, parang, kasi hippie rin. Tapos, yung parents ko naman,... Uh, we don't know. Yung parang, very cracking, we don't actually know, but, you won't see her anymore. So, yun ang, ano sa akin, people had different answers... Kinuha ni God yung gano'n. So, that's one of the very first things.... I know ang fact na, she's there and she'll never come back. So, parang yun na yung parang, I had doubts. Whatever you're saying, nasa, ano siya, she's down there, she's gone, she's not waking up anymore. So, very specifican sa akin. Tapos, ano rin, um, yun, aside from that, even my brother, parang, mas ano siya, mas rebelde pa yun sa akin, sa rebelde na family. Tatanda ko, yun, mga eight siguro kami. Every day, every day we pray. Parang naging habit lang na ano. Pero, one day, one night, he said out of the blue, I'm not praying anymore. Hindi naman totoo. Okay? Very straightforward na gano'n. And he was three years older than me, yung older brother ko. So, ako rin, parang napaisip ako noon, na ito, someone finally said something na very definite sa kanya. Ako, mas nagduda ko, pero, ano, tumahimik lang ako". Also, the participant's observations regarding his sibling's refusal to pray highlighted the way that overt challenges to long-standing religious customs could provoke reflection and uncertainty.

Examining the above concepts through the framework of Festinger's Cognitive Dissonance Theory (1957), the participants experience mental anguish because of the discrepancy between their beliefs and the realities they observe. This feeling of dissatisfaction is triggered by their interactions with dissonant texts, actions, and conversations. They are motivated to find a solution to this tension by reassessing

their religious beliefs or changing their way of life to reduce cognitive dissonance.

Additionally, Tajfel and Turner's Social Identity Theory clarified how participation in particular faith groups alters people's religious identities. The reflections provided by the participants highlighted how their relationships with different groups influence how they view themselves and other people. One may reconsider their religious identification or decide to leave the group entirely as a result of the conflict that arose from differences between the conduct of its members and the principles that these groups claimed to uphold. Pérez and Vallières (2019) noted that the following deconversion paradigm consisted of three primary elements: rationality, inquiry, and personal development as well as criticism and dissatisfaction. These closely connected but distinct categories stood for settling personal problems, moral and ethical assessments of religion, and intellectual enrichment, respectively. Each participant experienced deconversion gradually within the larger cultural context of society, as well as within the interpersonal settings of community and household ties.

Cuayzon (2022) highlighted the previous point even further by pointing out that although children were indoctrinated into the benefits of religion, as they get older, they start to doubt our convictions. The author discovered firsthand how religion and the idea of The Almighty confined and caged individuals in their current circumstances, having grown up in a religious milieu. Additionally, atheists had firsthand experience with the injustice religion inflicted on individuals because they grew up in a religious home where they watched the coins turn.

#### **Interview Question Number 4: Can you describe any internal conflicts you faced during this transition?**

##### **Theme D**

##### **Inward Dilemmas due to Social Fear, Rationality, and Moral Ambiguity**

The overarching theme that surfaced from the participants' answers centers on Inward Dilemmas due to Social Fear, Rationality, and Moral Ambiguity. Participants' reflections on their challenges with rationality, moral inquiry, and societal acceptance during their shift from religious beliefs brought the matter to light.

Since they deviated from religious norms, the participants revealed a profound Fear of Social Rejection and Ridicule. As evidence of the persistent social stigma against non-religious people, Participant A described the prejudice and bullying he experienced after disclosing his atheistic views. He divulged, “noong una kasi, talagang pag-i-tease ka talaga, at nakarating na mga tao, narinig nila yung explanation mo, talagang idiscriminate ka talaga nila. Discrimination talaga”. This was also acknowledged by Participant B, who noted that “The fear na ma ridicule ako. Kasi nabanggit nyo nga, hindi ganun ka-accepted ang atheism ka sila eh. Diba?”. Furthermore, Participant C conveyed “kasi I was in an all-boys Catholic school nung high school... how are they going to deal with me? Are they going to judge me because I do not believe, not just in their God, but like in any gods”, demonstrating the widespread impact of social conventions on individual convictions.

Furthermore, as participants struggled with skepticism regarding religious narratives, the idea of Embracing Rationality Over Faith arose. As indicated by Participant D, “Parang, it's a normal sa akin, again, scientific na to have doubts. Parang, it's a fairy tale. Ganun sa akin. Parang, I had a early conclusion na it's just a fairy tale”, which described a change of belief towards a more rational and scientific viewpoint by highlighting religious teachings as little more than fairy tales. Comparably, Participant E highlighted “That's one of the main reasons why I choose not to... identify with any one religion... I choose to listen to science and facts first... if my beliefs are wrong... at the same time, new evidence comes to light, then, that's what I listen to... But at the same time, a lot of religion is based on faith. You can't really measure that”. This conflict between the doctrines of religion and reason emphasized the significance of science and empirical data over faith-based views for atheists.

When participants confronted ethical dilemmas, Questioning Morality Within Religious Frameworks also emerged as a sub-theme. When presented with the conflict between religious teachings on love and free will and the reality of human cruelty, participant S described feeling cognitively disoriented. He mentioned, “the cognitive dissonances started when...Ayun, I was getting bullied in grade school and elementary. Kasi, if the school is teaching this and this and this like God loves everyone, God let you have personal choice, etc., etc...So why is that being letting... Letting you...I mean, letting humans hurt other humans without provocation? Just out of their personal whim”. To address this internal struggle, participant C went on to discuss how accepting their identity as gay led to a decline in religiosity and skepticism about the influence of religion on society. He affirmed, “Parang, I would always relate this to my acceptance of being gay. Kasi like, ayun eh. Kasi as I accepted myself more, bumaba ba yung religiosity ko. So, parang as time went on, I would be like parang non-religious. Tapos like, oh, religion is actually not good for society”. This emphasized how difficult it was for participants to resolve their inner conflicts as they dealt with ethical dilemmas in religious settings. Their observations underscored the conflict that exists between moral ideals and religious ideas, emphasizing the necessity for people to make sense of their beliefs and ethical values.

Understanding the experiences of the participants can be gained by examining the themes and sub-themes through the facets of cognitive dissonance theory. Following the cognitive dissonance theory, people seek comfort by changing their attitudes or behaviors when they feel uncomfortable with their conflicting beliefs or activities. Participants in this situation struggled with views that contradicted both their own values and religious teachings, which caused them to experience cognitive dissonance.

Dodd and Dostoevsky (2022) presented the argument that disputes challenging the rationality of religious belief typically come down to the absence of factual support for the divine. They also highlighted how factors such as the costs associated with religious activity and prior beliefs may impact the significance of faith and the threshold for deciding to become an atheist. This suggests that there are several situations in which deciding to become an atheist could be a fair choice and that expenses and prior convictions could influence the threshold for that choice.

### **Interview Question Number 5: What are the external factors, like societal influences, that played a role in your journey towards atheism?**

#### **Theme E**

#### **Intersecting Influences from Local, Global, and Digital Environments**

The participants' journeys towards atheism were influenced by Intersecting Influences from Local, Global, and Digital Environments. Through their reflections, the participants illuminated how their atheistic perspectives were shaped by global events, scientific knowledge, familial origins, socioeconomic and cultural influences, exposure to varied cultures, and representations in digital media.

As demonstrated by Participant B's perspective on familial ties, early ideas were shaped by Family and Social Environment, which also had an impact on interpersonal interactions. Participant B highlighted the influence of familial interactions, as he stated, "So, last time yung uncle ko, nagulat na lang ako, hindi ko alam na ganon din siya. I was thinking na religious siya. So, ang uncle ko, I could say, pag naguusap kami, I think, nakatulung din. Ganun din ako sa kanya". Additionally, Participant D mention that "So, mas na-expose ako sa other kids din na no one's, and that school, no one's, it's a good school, it's a public school, pero, no one's talking about religion. And I have, I felt so relieved. So, mga puti, mga blacks, mga, even a few Asians, very, very few. Pero, I got exposed to so many different people na, nobody's bothering about si, ano, no one's forcing you to believe anything". This emphasized how exposure to various ideas in local settings, including educational institutions, can help shape an individual's worldview.

The role of Scientific Explanations in challenging religious beliefs was equally significant, as noted by Participants S and D. To illustrate, Participants S mentioned that "Biology talaga. Like, humans have biological urges that coincide with the nurture of religion. Yung mga teachings of religion, di ba? Kasi... Especially now that I'm above 18 years old. Pupunta na tayo dun sa sexual marketplace. And we are assigned our sexual market value. So yung cliché na phrase na God's perfect timing na mahahanap mo yung partner mo for life, etc. etc.". On top of that, Participant D asserted that "Exposure to books, science books, all that, na we really look at... So, um, yung ano ko, yung dad ko rin, um, ang sort of guru niya si Osho, he was popular back in the 70s. Talagang intellectual giant yan na indian. Na, anyone reads it, talagang mind-blowing siya". The act of reading along with being presented with information from science, particularly in the biological sciences, fostered critical thinking skills and led many people to question the doctrines of religion.

Global events and societal issues, such as the conflict in Israel and Palestine and prejudice against the LGBT community, which Participant E and Participant A, respectively, brought up, made people wonder about the moral standing of religious organizations and their positions on social justice issues. To shed light on this, Participant E noted that "The whole Israel-Palestine conflict, despite the fact that like, there are Jewish people and Christians defending the actions of Israel because, supposedly, it's stated in both the Bible and the Torah, Israel had the rights to the land better... The continuous discrimination of the LGBT community". Along with that, Participant A relayed "Ang mga, ang number one na inaano ng mga religious, actually, mga ano ba, mga bakla. Ano pa ba? Usually yun lang eh. Ano pa ba? Ang mga hate ng mga religious. Pag-isip pa nga, ano ba yung mga hate ng mga religious? Number one na nakakaano ng discrimination, actually, yung mga bakla. Eh, actually, dapat ganito yan. Dapat may gay rights, dapat may gay rights, dapat may gay marriage". The participants' views of religion were affected by these outside occurrences, which also made them more skeptical of religious teachings.

As Participant C and Participant B discussed, Social Media Representation offered a platform for discussions that questioned conventional religious ideas and exposed people to atheistic ideologies. Participant C mentioned that "Most of it talaga ay sa internet. And I was really into watching atheist YouTubers. And, parang, just listening to their perspective, um, narealize ko rin na, parang, okay, yes, it does make sense. And doon ko rin narealize yung, um, parang doon ko rin, doon din bumaba ba yung, ah, religiosity ko". Similarly, Participant B disclosed "So, I learn more on yung mga groups, Facebook, FB page. Yan ako nakakakita ng mga atheist din, kasi nakakakita din ako ng mga arguments doon". Participants were able to critically assess their ideas and investigate opposing viewpoints by interacting with atheist content online.

The responses highlighted the way various factors from different environments intersected and interacted to shape the participants' beliefs. Intersecting Influences from Local, Global, and Digital Environments emerged as a central aspect because it captures the complex nature of the influences on the participants' journey towards atheism. In the context of social identity theory, people obtain knowledge of themselves from relating to certain social groups, and to preserve a beneficial social identity, they may adhere to the expectations and values of the groups they belong to. In the case of atheism, people may associate with online or offline atheist communities to publicly declare their rejection of religion and obtain encouragement from like-minded people.

The growing scholarly interest in the intersection of youth and non-religion, especially concerning the formation of young expressions of non-religious identities, was highlighted by Shipley and Arweck (2019). It narrated how young people's views on religious and

nonreligious issues reveal themselves, as well as the social and environmental contexts that influence these viewpoints. Urban, suburban, and rural environments comprise the spatial aspects of these settings, which include family dynamics, educational institutions, and faith-based groups as social contexts.

### **Interview Question Number 6: What are the specific instances where your actions or experiences conflicted with your previous religious beliefs?**

#### **Theme F**

#### **Sexuality, Hypocrisy, and Personal Beliefs**

The participant's narratives were impacted by Sexuality, Hypocrisy, and Personal beliefs on highly personal elements of identity and belief systems that frequently interact in complex manners. A vital component of human existence, sexuality plays a significant role in the identity of many people. However, religious ideologies frequently imposed certain sexual standards and moral codes, which could cause conflict and tension for people whose experiences did not conform to these teachings. It was also noted that hypocrisy contrasting convictions in religion showed how people noticed differences between religious organizations' or communities' actions and the values they upheld. Additionally, the conflict between organized religious rituals and individual autonomy was further highlighted by the disparity between personal views and practices of religion.

The discussion revolving around Sexuality vs. Religious Doctrine is raised by participants, who express sentiments of uncertainty, guilt, and confusion about their sexuality in light of their religious convictions. For instance, participant C discussed "I guess yung sexuality. I think that's the biggest thing. I remember nung timing, even like, believing na parang, oh, this is a sin or against. Parang, bakit ganun? Why am I having these feelings with my boy classmates? Parang, why am I thinking na, why am I having homosexual thoughts? Mga ganun. Eh, bawal nga to kay God". This participant's statement indicated internal difficulty as he acknowledged his sexual orientation as gay but felt that his religious convictions condemned it. A sense of disconnect and self-doubt resulted from this internal conflict, which emphasized the contrast between internal feelings and outward religious teaching.

Hypocrisy VS. Religious Principles also came to light, showing how people see differences between what religious figures or communities do and what they believe to be true. Participants D and B talked about the religious people they have seen who appear dedicated on the outside but behave contradictorily in their private lives. As an illustration, Participants D disclosed "I've seen you going to masses, pero sa labas ng, alam kong you're not a good person, mas ganun naman nakikita ko. And ano, those telling me, mga ibang relatives na telling me stuff, alam ko naman di sila na good person, pero they're very religious". In addition, Participant B stated that "Yung iba sa mga palasimba, sila pa yung nakikita ko na, let's say, Simba ngayon pag uwi, aawayin yung lahat". Feelings of disappointment and skepticism about religious organizations or teachings may result from this dissonance.

Added to that, the conflict between personal freedom and formalized religious rituals is brought to light through Personal Beliefs vs. Religious Practices. The testimonials of participants S and E about opposing or doubting religious practices that they find difficult to reconcile with their personal experiences or beliefs are shared. To illustrate, Participant S noted that "Kasi praying was like a habit thing kasi sa school kasi namin we pray every start of the class, every end of the class, before meals, after meals, before dismissal. Tapos mayroon pang angelus, eh. Yung every tanghali. The angel of the Lord declared unto Mary, blah, blah, blah. So, praying was not sparse. It was very frequent. So, ayun, hindi ako nagkulong sa dasal, so to say. So, that's where it started. Yung I stopped going to masses and then I would grunt and complain kapag pipilitin akong magsimBa". On top of that, Participant E mentioned "Whenever my mom says, like, oh, we need to go to church, like, I choose not, I choose not to debate with her or tell her why I don't feel church is necessary". This contradiction highlighted the difficulty of balancing one's internal beliefs with the outward standards set by communities or religious institutions.

The participant narratives have a profound connection to the cognitive dissonance theory, which states that people seek resolution or alignment when they feel uncomfortable with their conflicting beliefs or practices. To make sense of conflicting ideas about sexuality, hypocrisy, and personal opinions in contrast to religious teachings, people who are suffering spiritual cognitive dissonance may feel emotional distress and questioning.

Regarding the above-mentioned findings, Block (2019) highlighted that a considerable portion of millennials in British Columbia in the 1960s quickly separated from churches, considering them to be irrelevant, hypocritical, and oppressive. These denials were frequently presented as a purposeful generational stand. Many chose to become open about their atheism or to declare it later in life, once the demand from family and society to fit in had diminished. Through their sudden rejection of organized religion and their progressive retreat from religious convictions, British Columbian youth were early adopters of broader tendencies of dechristianization and secularization in postwar Canada.

Furthermore, Self (2022) offered several explanations as to why morality is driving young, white persons without religious affiliations away from Christianity. Because of their morality, which includes rejecting the institutions that have contributed to recent church abuses and scandals, feminism's rise, and the LGBTQ+ movement's rising popularity and normalization relative to some white Christian churches' anti-gay stance, Generation Z is abandoning Christianity and becoming religiously unaffiliated.

### **Interview Question Number 7: How did these cognitive conflicts contribute to your decision to embrace atheistic principles?**

## Theme G

### Contradictions in Religious Teachings Lead to Atheism

Responses from the participants revealed a clear pattern of Contradictions in Religious Teachings Leading to Atheism. Every participant's story illustrated how they struggled with contradictory experiences, teachings, or beliefs inside their religious framework, which eventually caused them to doubt and reject religious doctrine in favor of atheism.

Participant B began by expressing a profound internal dilemma regarding the morality of actions prompted only by religiously ingrained fear; religious doctrine and personal conviction conflict, causing cognitive dissonance. He narrated, "Sa akin kasi, nagkaroon ako nung, tama ba ito? If gagawin ko isang bagay out of fear dahil sa religion ko, tama ba yun? Parang ganun.... if yung bang kayang personal ng pakiramdam or religion paniniwala ay hindi inclined sa akin, hindi ko na ba siya dapat tulungan?... Tapos sabi ko, ano pagkakaiba nito sa, ano pinakaiba nito sa amin? So, doon nagdududa ako.

So, nagkaroon ako ng mga, ano na, teka lang. Sabi ko, gusto kong fair sa lahat. So, maging fair sa lahat. So, I would interact, I would interact as me. Hindi guided by religion". The participant's aspiration for fairness and authenticity in their interactions suggests that they should match their behavior with their principles instead of following demands from outside religions.

The exploration of Participant E into the sources of religious concepts, particularly the Catholic Church's position on abortion, exemplified a critical analysis of religious teachings. He mentioned offhand, "I researched about the origin of why the Catholic Church had this stance against abortion in the first place So I knew that the RH bill was

something the country needed. Pero ayun, um, because, ah, despite the fact that the separation of church and state is supposed to be a thing in the Philippines, it's nonexistent". The fact that religious beliefs had an impact on politics and society in addition to individual belief systems emphasized how prevalent they were. The limitations and inconsistencies within religious teachings were made clear by the contrast between religious doctrine and societal requirements.

The story of Participant S illustrated the psychological repercussions of interpersonal disputes in religious communities. He shared, "My life's greatest grief is also people. So, yung nga, taong sumira sa akin sa religion. Tapos, meron pa silang ganang i- gaslight ako na ako pa ang may kasalanan. I'm like, I'm not about to play this game with you. Okay. Yung mental gymnastics was fucking insane". Cognitive dissonance could lead to psychological distress, which could be exemplified by the feeling of being mistreated and blamed for having doubts about religious beliefs.

A logical method of assessing religious beliefs was shown by Participant C's investigation of contradictions found in religious texts, in which he stated "So, I have, like, a ton of arguments back then. I remember, like, reading the Bible tapos, like, ang daming inaccuracies dito. Like, this didn't seem correct. Sasabihin ninyo na 2,000 years ago lang yung Bible or yung the world, pero like, we've been here for trillions of years na, and yung lineage ba yung tamang term, like, homo sapien yung pinaka micro-organism niya, like, hindi lang siya ganyan.... But, I would say, my main argument is, if we're being an atheist, would be, especially for the Christian perspective of a God, if you claim to be all-powerful and all-knowing, bakit hindi mo yung prove sa akin?". Religious beliefs were called into question when scientific data and historical errors were acknowledged. The participant's reservations about religious assertions, especially those about the presence of an all-knowing, all-powerful deity, were indicative of a critical examination based on factual data. The reading of secular documents by Richard Dawkins and other authors, as Participant D has done, has caused a cognitive shift toward skepticism and reason. As he relayed, "Yung mga kilalang mga atheists na... I read them. I read the reasoning na mas na, ano, mas na na-clear up... Yung mga books ko, some of them, kasi Richard Dawkins. So mga kilalang, even mga kilalang writers na, ano, nandito e. So one of the sciences na very simple to even a kid would understand guys, is that, is that all these religions, of course, mostly Catholic, even Muslim, sa ganun, they're saying na they're the one religion. If you don't believe, you're going to hell. Dahil lang hindi ka pinanganak doon, you're going to hell kasi hindi ka in-expose eh". The acceptance of religious exclusivity and the proclamation against disbelief that carried eternal damnation highlighted how oppressive doctrines of religion could be. The participant's rejection of religious indoctrination pointed to a desire for independence from religious restraints and intellectual autonomy.

When people encounter contradicting ideas, experiences, or teachings within their religious framework, they often experience a state of cognitive dissonance, which is reflected in the emerging concern of contradictions in religious teachings leading to atheism. Festinger's theory of cognitive dissonance explains how people seek cognitive consistency when their beliefs and behaviors are inconsistent, which frequently leads to a shift in dispositions or perspectives

Taking into account the observations, it is advisable to incorporate the understandings provided by Ecklund and Johnson (2021) about the recurrent themes that were present in the writings of New Atheists: (1) they emphasized science as the only or best means of acquiring knowledge; (2) they assessed religion using scientific evidence and generally concluded that it was deficient; and (3) they defined religion as not only false but also pathological and possibly dangerous. As a result, New Atheism showed a strong dislike of religion and a strong connection to science.

Blechsmidt (2019), on the other hand, investigated the local diversity of organized nonreligion in the Philippines by concentrating on the relationship between the Filipino Freethinkers (FF) and the Philippine Atheists and Agnostics Society (PATAS), two recently founded organizations, and the Catholic Church. A discussion of the FF and PATAS members' criticism of the public debate on

reproductive health (RH) policies, which lasted for ten years, served as an illustration of the latter's strong position in Philippine society and its effect on politics. This encapsulated both organizations' multifaceted, controversial, and constantly changing connection to religion—their collective non-religiosity—based on empirical study and anthropological description. It served as an example of the value of the relational approach to nonreligion and provided the foundation for a more comprehensive comparative analysis of nonreligious institutions and occurrences.

Furthermore, LeDrew (2019) claimed that although New Atheism is typically seen as a protest religious fundamentalism, it was a response to the perceived decline of universalistic norms of knowledge and morality in an increasingly diverse Western cultural setting. It read important New Atheist texts about the historical development of modern atheism to examine the relative decline in the social sciences' importance in popular atheist discourse. It has shifted significantly toward a more libertarian position, moving away from its roots in progressive social justice organizations and ideas.

### **Interview Question Number 8: How have specific social groups, groups of individuals, or particular people impacted your atheistic perspectives?**

#### **Theme H**

##### **Shared Viewpoints Affirmed Personal Views**

Shared Viewpoints Affirmed Personal Views served to validate and strengthen atheistic perspectives, underscoring the significant influence of social validation and support on personal beliefs. People who identify as atheists find comfort and empowerment in connecting with others who have traveled a similar path of skepticism or doubt. Their viewpoints were validated by this common experience, which showed that they were both valid and worthy of consideration. In addition, the discussion and intellectual exchange that characterized these societies helped people become more aware of and comfortable with their atheistic worldview. By exchanging arguments, supporting data, and counterarguments, participants strengthen their beliefs and expand their understanding. Atheist social networks were also an essential source of tolerance and social support, particularly for people navigating mostly religious situations. People could truly express their atheistic identities in these societies without worrying about being rejected or judged. The sense of acceptance and validation provided by atheist social organizations continues to be a significant influence in developing and sustaining atheistic attitudes, despite the possible worries of prejudiced confirmation and feedback loops.

Participant B stated that “So, I learn more on yung mga groups, Facebook, FB page. Diyan ako nakakakita ng mga atheist din, kasi nakakakita din ako ng mga arguments doon”, which reinforced that connecting with like-minded people on Facebook pages and groups, emphasizing the significance of finding like-minded individuals on Facebook pages and groups in which they may engaged in dialogue and discovered arguments in favor of their atheistic views. This demonstrated how Interactions in Online Communities influenced and strengthened individual opinions. Participant C similarly mentioned “To be honest, yung internet at YouTube lang talaga. Mm-mm. Kasi ayun nga eh, parang I've never really met anyone else who is an atheist. And we talk about religion. And iba naman yung parang religious activity, religion, church, to the personal relationship of God. Wala akong masyadong maano kasi with like other atheists. Pero yung mga nabanggit na mga YouTubers, parang they can be considered to somehow strengthen and solidify the transition to eventually becoming an atheist”. This implied that exposure to a variety of arguments and points of view through internet platforms could greatly aid in the development of an atheistic position.

On the other hand, the influence of Personal Beliefs of Close Persons was also highlighted. Participant B mentioned “Siguro yung tito ko lang, yung kapatid ko, not sure kasi if she would identify talaga as atheist. But wala siyang paniniwala”, pointing out that their atheistic viewpoint might be influenced by their lack of religious convictions. Indicating how personal connections may both support and validate one's values while also acting as a contrast to conventional religious norms, Participant D stated “My wife is agnostic, and we don't talk about religion much, pero we see the hypocrisy din. And she also hates going to mass. So, if there's a person, siya yung, ano, helpful sa akin na, ah okay, at least I married someone na, na hindi religious”. These responses showed how social group interactions—both online and offline—as well as personal relationships played a role in shaping and perpetuating individuals' atheistic viewpoints. One's atheistic beliefs were greatly strengthened and validated by the acceptance and reinforcement of common opinions in various social settings.

The processes involved in the development and upholding of atheistic viewpoints are explained by the Social Identity Theory. This implies that people's identities are shaped in part by the social groups they are a part of. When it comes to atheism, people can grow a feeling of self and community among atheist online and offline communities. Their social group connection as atheists helps to separate them from adherents of other religions and validates and supports their beliefs. Consequently, people may feel encouraged to uphold and strengthen their atheistic identities by continuing to participate in secular societies and adhere to atheistic principles. Within the framework of social identity theory, being a part of an atheist social community helps people feel more like themselves and validates their atheistic beliefs.

Considering this, Aldama (2020) conducted a study on the challenging undertaking of rejecting the fundamentals of theism in a society that leans heavily toward religion, emphasizing the fact that this shift to atheism is an extended procedure rather than a decision that can be made quickly. To develop this kind of identity, one must navigate a distinct social context as an atheist.

Interestingly, Harmon (2021) pointed out that obstacles to establishing religion might come from the immediate effects of close relationships with family, friends, and coworkers as well as the larger framework of societal and cultural influences.

### **Interview Question Number 9: In what manner did these influential communities or groups shape your outlook on atheism?**

#### **Theme I**

##### **Disputations in Shared Circles Lead to Personal Discovery**

It was evident from the participants' statements in the Disputations in Shared Circles Lead to Personal Discovery that their experiences within particular communities or organizations have resulted in a transforming effect on how they viewed atheists. People were prompted to reflect deeply and reconsider their religious beliefs as a result of these discussions, which also acted as catalysts for significant reflection. This theme emphasized the substantial influence of peer support and shared experiences on allowing intellectual transformations, shedding light on the critical role that social dynamics and group discourse play in influencing an individual's path toward atheism.

The Arguments through Online Platforms as Catalyst, offered an avenue for people to get involved in stimulating discussions and sharing ideas, challenging conventional religious narratives, and standing for atheistic perspectives. Participants were able to reevaluate their beliefs and embrace atheistic viewpoints by being presented with logical arguments and evidence-based conversations. As stated by Participant B, “Pero yung mga way how they argue doon sa mga premise or ano statement ng mga atheists na they don't use yung mga fallacies and hominem na nakikita ko, ah, teka, meron tong point. Yung mga answers yung mga atheists eh, may point eh...So, yun, nakakatulog sa akin na mas nag-share eh, mas naiintindihan ko ang atheism”, emphasized the significance of participating in conversations and discussions in online atheist networks. It indicated that the arguments put forth by atheists were logical and free from fallacies, which promoted a better comprehension of atheism. This showed that the participant's journey toward atheism was aided by exposure to rational and clear arguments within atheist groups. Participant C additionally disclosed “Lumalabas yung baho nila. And so, most of these YouTube... or most of these atheist YouTubers, they grew up Catholic or they grew up Christian. And so, they would also talk about yung mga baho ng Christian church, from what I remember. And so, doon nag-propagress yung... ay doon, parang, nagkakaroon ako ng disdain against, um, the church. And... they would also give, like, arguments against yung mga...um, reasons why there is a God”, which pointed out the impact of atheist YouTubers who criticized religious establishments and offered proof against the existence of God. These influences were crucial in molding the participant's contempt for organized religion by highlighting the alleged defects and contradictions in religious doctrine.

Furthermore, a Person's Family and Personal Skepticism had a big impact on the beliefs they held about religion. The familial context in which Participant D was raised encouraged questioning, which made it possible to explore different viewpoints without worrying about criticism or punishment. He relayed, “Very questioning family. It's not just me. My, my siblings are, they question everything. My parents question everything. So, ano din, mga, mga literally rebelde sila... I have to mention my wife na, agnostic din siya na. If any, I'm, I'm even more closer with my mom, I can ask her directly, na ano. Pero, syempre, she doesn't want to say directly, pero she, I, I can open up na, mom, ba't ang kulit na mga ganito? Mga gaya, ah, ba't ganyan lang talaga? Pero ano, tingin mo, so, it's mostly my mom na I can ask na without her telling, hala ka. Walang ganon talaga. She's very, ano, liberal talaga. It's more of, ano, questioning. Parang, ikaw, ano tingin mo?”. The person in question felt more empowered and autonomous in creating his own beliefs because of this familial support. Participant D ascribed his curious and skeptical disposition to familial factors. He felt supported in exploring different viewpoints since they grew up in a home that encouraged the interrogation process. A rejection of traditional religious beliefs resulted from the openness and curiosity that this home environment propagated.

The simultaneous presence of these factors emphasized how complex the path to atheism is, influenced by both internal and external elements, such as upbringing in the family and online groups. We can learn more about the intricate processes underlying religious deconversion by investigating the relationship between personal experiences and societal interactions.

More understanding of the participants' experiences can be gained by analyzing these narratives through the lenses of social identity theory and cognitive dissonance theory. When faced with contrasting religious teachings and information that went against their beliefs, the Filipino atheists who were interviewed felt cognitive dissonance in the setting of religious deconversion. Furthermore, the participants in the religious deconversion observed a change in their social identity when they transitioned from religious communities to atheistic conversations, in line with social identity theory. Feelings of acceptance and approval from the atheist community may accompany this shift, strengthening the atheist's identity and convictions.

In the statement made by Oviedo (2019), given the thorough analysis of religion in terms of evolutionary processes—which explained many of its dynamics as forms of adaptation or exaptation—it was not surprising that research on unbelief, or the absence of religious faith, followed the same pattern. Social systems did, after all, evolve with time, and secularization and atheism have grown through adaptations and variations since the modern era. Atheism and disbelief were fundamentally different from many other social and cultural phenomena in that they emerged from similar dynamics and matured into their own interpersonal spaces.

### **Interview Question Number 10: How did your social interactions and affiliations influence your transition towards atheism?**

#### **Theme J**

## Unfolding of Identity through Personal and Social Dynamics

Responses from the participants in Unfolding of Identity through Personal and Social Dynamics showed the complex process of self-discovery amid atheism. They illustrated the various ways in which social interactions and personal development influence people's perceptions of themselves. From establishing significant restrictions in response to a challenging religious experience to gradually adjusting religious people to their lives under cautious constraints, each phase signified a negotiation between one's own beliefs and the pressures of society. Narratives concerning religious upbringing and close family ties also highlighted the conflict between claiming one's independence and following social conventions. Individuals who engage in this intellectual investigation and search for non-religious significance demonstrate a deep-rooted drive for self-definition.

The sentiments of Participants S and D were noted about the Establishing Boundaries in Social Circles. The story of Participant S highlighted how, in reaction to religious trauma, one initially sets up strict personal boundaries. He relayed, "I would have a stance na every time na matutrauma ako ng religion, I would stop talking to all people associated with that religion. Like, outright cut. Pero, over time, uh, I started to relax a little bit and let, let religious people into my life. Pero, may strong boundaries na yun. Like, strong fences and everything. Like, whenever they start giving me religious advice, blah, blah, blah, I'd say, stop right there. I'm not gonna listen to this. So, usually, they stop naman". These barriers were then gradually reduced although one still maintains a strong position when it comes to talking about religion. This illustrated how crucial it was to establish limits to safeguard one's mental and emotional health while simultaneously making space for development and acceptance. According to Participant D's account, "Or even mga pamangkin ko, mga, they also grew up sa Catholic, ano, I don't, yun medyo sinabi ako na sila na, I have, hindi talaga ako, ano, part of that", which highlighted that religious upbringing and familial relationships play a major role in the creation of identity, leading to a conscious decision to distance oneself from religious rituals despite expectations from family members. This demonstrated the conflict that exists between personal opinions and cultural or familial conventions as people claimed autonomy over how they defined themselves.

Regarding their openness about their atheism and how their social groups, including family and coworkers, have welcomed and respected them, participants D and B addressed Social Acceptance and Validation. The perspective of Participant B highlighted how societal validation and acceptance played a crucial role in forming an atheist's identity. He narrated, "Alam ng mga tao dito sa amin that I am an atheist. Even my higher-ups, they know. Sinabi ko nung una, atheist po ako eh. And they respect. Walang naman sabi sa akin, bakit? O walang naman sabi na wag kang ganyan. Kaya I'm very open ako. Nakatulong sa akin yun". The affirmative reaction from superiors and peers created a feeling of community and strengthened the person's self-assurance in their convictions, demonstrating the influence of outside validation on the formation of an identity. Participant C additionally stated "And so it made me want to veer away from that. And that was my main goal lang actually. But watching those YouTubers na pinapanood ko, that they made me...Or they helped me realize na, oh... Walang Diyos or there's no God". This emphasized how important social validation and acceptance were for creating a feeling of comfort and belonging regardless of one's beliefs or lack thereof.

The narratives of Participants E and C, who discussed how their experiences outside of religion, personal readings, and philosophy have contributed to their development as individuals, demonstrated the significance of Personal Growth through Exploration. Through philosophical inquiry, Participant E stated "I found more solace in, ah, reading about, ah, René Descartes, about other philosophers. I, I learned more about what it means to be a more ethical person, what it means, and what it means to be a more mentally balanced individual because of, not because of, ah, religion but rather because of, ah, personal experience or personal readings or more of, like, I chose to expand my horizons talaga", which he found comfort and broadened their perspectives, whereas Participant C relayed "And it made me feel to myself. Siguro mas internal na to. Rather than mas... Rather than yung sa social. Pero parang it made me realize na... If I wanna do good... Or it made me realize na parang... I should do good because I don't wanna harm another person. Or I wanna make sure na there's no effect yung ginagawa ko sa isang person. And I don't wanna do harmful things because it's going to affect another person negatively. So... It made me feel more empathic, I would say...", which he developed empathy and a moral compass separate from religious doctrine. This emphasized the idea that there are a variety of paths outside of religion that lead to personal development.

Particularly in the context of faith-based trauma, Festinger's Cognitive Dissonance Theory is crucial as individuals negotiate the tensions between their own convictions and social expectations. Setting strict boundaries at first was a coping mechanism for the pain arising from the contradiction between their identity as atheists and their prior religious experiences. These boundaries, however, eventually loosen throughout social encounters, indicating a negotiating process driven by the need for social connection even in the face of persistent discomfort. This negotiation supported Festinger's theory that people try to minimize cognitive dissonance by acting in a way that is consistent with their beliefs, even if that means gradually redefining their boundaries.

On the other hand, Tajfel and Turner's Social Identity Theory clarified how individuals' sense of self is closely related to their involvement in social groups, especially when they react to social and familial constraints. The story of Participant D served as an example of this, showing how religious background and familial ties had a big impact on identity development and how people purposefully distanced themselves from religious activities to claim their own identity. This withdrawal showed an attempt to fit in with the atheists, a separate social group, as a response to what they see as an imbalance between their personal convictions and family expectations. Furthermore, by illustrating the significance of social group participation in strengthening and confirming personal convictions, Participant B's experience highlighted the significance of social validation and acceptance in forming one's identity as an atheist.

Lü (2019) investigated how religion and atheism interact in media portrayals, with a focus on China during the reform era. Lü emphasized how media sources constructed and reframed the meanings of atheism and religion, despite the seeming contradiction of having both atheist and religious ideas at the same time. This procedure made it easier for people to identify as atheists while continuing to practice their religion. Through its reflection on changing secularization tendencies, tone shifts, and religious framing across time, symbolic representation in the media aided in the negotiation of identity.

Religious conversion required cognitive knowledge in addition to social acceptance, existential trust, and radical life transformation within a lived reality. While some scholars viewed social factors as crucial in changing root reality, others identified cognitive dissonance, intellectual congruence, and grounded conviction as crucial components in the conversion process. The question of whether belief content was a genuine and testable aspect of religion and religious conversion as opposed to being solely deceptive psychologically, or socially motivated arises if religion offers meaningful explanations for ultimate reality (Harmon, 2019).

### **Corollary Question Number 3: Based on the findings of the study, what program may be proposed?**

A thorough strategy for addressing the specific challenges faced by people going through such an enormous life transition is to support Filipino atheists who were transitioning into a society where religion was highly valued. The approach sought to alleviate the cognitive dissonance and social dread that were frequently encountered during this transition by offering tailored psychological support and cultivating a sense of community.

The main objective was to provide easily accessible mental health services that were tailored to the needs of atheists who were attempting to navigate the challenges involved with leaving religion behind. Creating therapy plans that addressed their psychological needs, educating experts on problems related to religious deconversion, and offering prompt assistance through hotlines and internet resources were some examples of what this entailed. These initiatives played a critical role in supporting people in resolving internal conflicts and overcoming departure-related anxiety.

### **Conclusions**

In the phenomenological study on the lived experiences of Filipino atheists as they transitioned from being believers to atheists, ten (10) themes emerged.

These were, Religious Influences of Schooling, Family, and Personal Curiosity; Influence on Personal Morality and Skepticism; Experiencing Dissonant Texts, Actions, and Conversations; Inward Dilemmas due to Social Fear, Rationality, and Moral Ambiguity; Intersecting Influences from Local, Global, and Digital Environments; Sexuality, Hypocrisy, and Personal Beliefs; Contradictions in Religious Teachings Lead to Atheism; Shared Viewpoints Affirmed Personal Views; Disputations in Shared Circles Lead to Personal Discovery; Unfolding of Identity through Personal and Social Dynamics.

Under the first theme, the results showed how people's religious identities and beliefs were shaped by the complex interactions between religious influences derived from family relations, education, and personal curiosity. The participants' recollections of early religious indoctrination through schooling demonstrated the significant influence of institutions of learning on their upbringing. At the same time, family traditions and practices became important means of passing down religious beliefs from one generation to the next and creating an atmosphere of continuity and identity within families. Moreover, the participants shared their moments of skepticism and intellectual inquiry, emphasizing the conflict that exists in religious settings between the freedom of thought and the doctrines of religion. These observations highlighted the different paths that people took to establish their views and the complexity of religious indoctrination. The participant narratives parallel with more general sociological ideas, implying that social structures and cognitive processes play a crucial role in the formation of religious identity. This provided insights into how faith develops dynamically and the various factors influencing people's religious paths.

Within the second theme, the investigation of themes about the impact of religious convictions on individual morality and skepticism demonstrated a complex interaction between personal convictions and social norms. The reflections of the participants underscored the significant influence of religious instruction on moral guidance and the emergence of worldviews, with a particular focus on values including love, ethical behavior, and identity development. However, there is a noticeable underlying force of uncertainty and identity conflict due to differences between doctrines of religion and personal experiences that coexist with these profitable impacts. This conflict highlighted the complexity of religious identity creation, and the difficulties people encounter in reconciling their faith with their daily experiences. It is mirrored in stories of uncertainty and insecurity. Furthermore, the critical viewpoints that the participants held towards organized religion illuminated the diversity of views and the possibility of distortion in religious activity. These results represent the significance of understanding and managing the complexity inherent in belief systems and are consistent with larger societal discussions regarding the influence of religion on personal values. Upon examining historical viewpoints, such as Wong Chin Foo's doubts about specific facets of Christianity, similarities with current experiences of uncertainty and skepticism become apparent, indicating recurring patterns in the relationship between religion, ethics, and individual identity.

Regarding the third theme, the interactions of participants with discordant texts, behaviors, and conversations in religious situations revealed an intricate structure of cognitive conflict that caused them to reflect deeply on their beliefs. Using interactions with disparities between scientific understanding and biblical narratives, participants engaged in a reflective analysis of sacred texts and the

development of conventional gender roles. In addition, the impact of interpersonal relationships was noteworthy, since it cast doubt on the credibility of religious institutions and ideas when one observed hypocrisy among believers. Doubts and uncertainties are exacerbated by the various ways that existential problems are interpreted within religious groups. All of these concepts come together to create an elaborate network of cognitive dissonance that forces people to reevaluate their identities and religious views. The narrative highlighted the multifaceted nature of religious deconversion by incorporating elements of intellectual inquiry, moral analysis, and personal development. The journey towards challenging strongly held beliefs is depicted as a transforming process impacted by cultural standards and personal experiences, ranging from childhood indoctrination to adult skepticism. The participants' thoughts emphasize the detailed connection among faith, identity, and existential analysis, provoking thoughts about how religious belief is changing in modern society.

In the fourth theme, it highlighted the internal conflicts brought on by moral ambiguity, rationalism, and social fear exposing an ongoing and wide-ranging struggle among people adjusting to changes in their religious beliefs. Participants struggled with the widespread fear of social rejection and mockery when they deviated from religious norms, which led to discrimination and harassment. This fear is made worse by a rising tendency for people to value rationality over faith when they face skepticism about religious stories and give more weight to factual data and scientific research. Furthermore, ethical dilemmas inside religious frameworks cause people to critically examine moral principles in contrast to religious doctrines, which causes cognitive dissonance and makes people reevaluate their own beliefs. Reflections from the participants illustrate the complex connection between belief systems, social dynamics, and ethical issues, emphasizing how difficult it may be to balance personal ideals with societal norms and religious beliefs. These results imply that further research is necessary to fully understand the factors impacting how people create beliefs and navigate moral frameworks in modern society.

Concerning the fifth theme, multifaceted relationships between the Local, Global, and Digital Environments that shaped atheistic journeys highlighted the narratives provided by the participants. The narratives provided by the participants highlight the multifaceted relationships between the Local, Global, and Digital Environments that shaped their atheistic journeys. Family relationships and social interactions were crucial in the local context; experiences included everything from familial disclosures of common atheistic beliefs to the security of varied, secular learning contexts. Simultaneously, exposure to scientific explanations encouraged the questioning of religious teachings and critical thinking, especially in the biological sciences. Reflections on the moral standing of religious groups and their involvement with social justice concerns have been sparked by global events and societal issues, such as discrimination against the LGBT population and the Israel-Palestine conflict. In addition, the digital sphere—especially social media and online forums—offered platforms for interacting with atheistic ideas, encouraging critical evaluation of one's own beliefs and investigation of alternative perspectives. These results highlighted personal experiences and larger sociocultural circumstances, illuminating the multidimensional nature of influences on the development of atheistic behaviors.

About the sixth theme, examining sexuality, hypocrisy, and personal convictions about religious ideas presented a significant challenge for a great number of people. A profound contradiction between internal feelings and external religious beliefs was evident in many of the narratives, leading to feelings of confusion, guilt, and detachment. Participants struggled with the moral rules imposed by their religious beliefs and their intrinsic sexuality, frequently feeling conflicted or condemned. Furthermore, the disparity between religious leaders' actions and the principles that they advocate for fosters disillusionment and mistrust of organized religion. Also, the conflict between institutionalized religious practices and personal autonomy is apparent, as people express difficulty finding a way to reconcile their convictions with the rituals that religious institutions impose. These stories demonstrate a widespread cognitive dissonance in which people attempt to bring together opposing ideas and end up feeling distressed and reflecting on their lives. Social trends also support a larger movement away from organized religion, motivated by moral concerns and a rejection of the institutionalized oppression and hypocrisy seen in religious institutions.

Focusing on the seventh theme, the participant stories highlighted a deep conflict with the contradictions present in religious theory, which finally resulted in the rejection of religious belief in favor of atheism. They struggled with ethical dilemmas brought on by fear caused by religion, feeling cognitive dissonance when religious rules conflict with personal beliefs. Furthermore, their profound evaluations showed the inconsistencies between religious doctrine and societal norms, underscoring the pervasiveness of religion's effect on both politics and personal views. The psychological consequences of questioning religious principles are reflected in interpersonal conflicts that arise within religious societies. In addition, analyzing religious texts and reading secular literature reveals a desire for intellectual independence and a break from the teachings of religion. Collectively, these stories highlight how difficult it can be to navigate religious systems and how deeply contradictions can affect people, ultimately pushing people to look for consistency and truth outside of established religious paradigms.

Addressing the eighth theme, the significant influence of interpersonal interactions and societal validation on an individual's beliefs was highlighted by atheistic perspectives. As an avenue for discussion and intellectual exchange, interactions in online communities and exposure to a variety of online arguments were of the utmost importance in forming and solidifying atheistic viewpoints. Personal ties also played an important role in shaping an atheistic position; these relationships were especially important when it came to close family members or partners who were either religiously orthodox or not. For those navigating primarily religious surroundings, atheist social networks provide acceptance and support, a sense of community, and empowerment. The process of converting to atheism is shown as being intricate, profoundly embedded in social and cultural circumstances, and requiring an exploration of one's identity in a

primarily theistic culture.

Relating to the ninth theme, the use of online forums and discussions in shared circles as catalysts for self-discovery revealed a deep relationship between social interactions and personal ideas. The narratives provided by the participants show a journey towards atheism that was marked by logical conversation and encouragement from peers. It became apparent that a family's influence was crucial in creating an atmosphere of inquiry and independence that resulted in a rejection of conventional religious ideas. These stories demonstrate how the journey toward atheism is multifaceted and influenced by both outside factors and inherent characteristics. The results provide a more evolutionary explanation of unbelief, showing atheism and disbelief as the result of society.

Covering the tenth theme, examining one's identity in the context of atheism revealed an intricate journey influenced by social and personal factors. The stories shared by the participants showed an ambiguous method of self-exploration characterized by the balancing of convictions against social constraints. Creating boundaries arose as a coping mechanism; they were inflexible at first but eventually give way to permitting personal development while upholding a firm position on religious discourse. The conflict between autonomy and social norms was highlighted by the impact of familial ties and religious upbringing, which could lead to deliberate choices to disassociate oneself from observances of religion. Atheists' identities are significantly shaped by social validation and acceptance, which also strengthens their sense of self-worth and sense of community. It is emphasized that, regardless of religious teaching, personal growth through nonreligious inquiry provides an avenue to ethical development and empathy. By redefining meanings and reflecting shifting secularization tendencies, how atheism and religion are portrayed in the media supports identity formation. The conversion process ultimately entails existential trust, social acceptance, and cognitive knowledge, which raises concerns regarding the authenticity of belief content and its significance in religious conversion.

The following recommendations were developed by the researcher considering the emerging themes that the study highlighted:

Provide methods of psychological support. To cope with the emotional challenges and cognitive dissonance that come with transitioning from believing to atheism, participants necessitate easily accessible mental health assistance. This assistance can improve general mental health and well-being by easing emotions of resentment, confusion, and anxiety regarding social situations. Experts from mental healthcare are typically necessary throughout the transition from belief to atheism since it frequently entails significant psychological stress and social pressure. The establishment of community-based counseling and support groups led by licensed psychologists and counselors can provide the required validation and assistance. To create and deliver these services, mental health organizations, educational institutions, and nonprofits should work together to make sure they are accessible and culturally responsive.

It is important to promote secure venues for open discussion where people can freely speak their religious and nonreligious views without fear of retaliation or condemnation. These environments are necessary for participants to develop a sense of belonging, lessen feelings of loneliness, and promote respect and understanding between people of different religious backgrounds. Establishing safe spaces can help provide the affirmation and social support that are essential for mental wellness. Local government agencies, secular organizations, and community leaders may organize frequent events, discussion groups, and online forums where people can express their ideas and experiences in a non-judgmental and encouraging setting. These secure environments need to be established to encourage honest communication, empathy, and emotional support

Address stigmatization and prejudice. It is necessary to put in place both social and constitutional safeguards to prevent harassment and discrimination against atheists. These safety measures are necessary for participants to lessen stigma and promote an inclusive society. Atheists can feel less afraid and discriminated against if they have legal protection and societal acceptance, which improves their psychological safety and well-being. Advocacy groups and human rights organizations should push for anti-discrimination laws that specifically protect atheists. Atheists' psychological well-being can be improved, and societal prejudice can be decreased by launching public awareness initiatives to educate the public about atheism.

Promote Public Awareness and Media Representation. To clear up misconceptions and preconceptions, atheism must be accurately and constructively represented in the media. To improve public perception and acceptance of atheism and improve participants' social and psychological well-being, this improved representation is necessary. The study shows that society's views and the development of personal identity are greatly influenced by media portrayals. Public relations agencies, media outlets, and organizations that support atheism have to work together to create content that truthfully portrays atheism and emphasizes the experiences of atheists. By lowering social stigma and promoting the mental well-being of atheists, public awareness efforts can help advance a fair and compassionate understanding of atheism. These issues can be resolved to greatly enhance the social integration and psychological health of Filipino atheists, promoting a more accepting and understanding society.

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