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Explaining Deconversion from Christianity

A Study of Online Narratives

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Abstract

This article examines the written narratives from fifty former Christians. In these narratives, drawn from an online community of deconverts, the writers described their experiences with and explanations for leaving the Christian faith. Several themes emerged as to why they left, including: intellectual and theological concerns, a feeling that God had failed them, and various frustrations with Christians. The writers gave little mention to non-Christians as pulling them out of the faith. These narratives emphasized external, rather than internal, attributions for the deconversion. They also identified primarily “push” rather than “pull” factors as the cause of deconversion. While some narratives outlined the costs and benefits of deconversion, others told of seeking moral rightness regardless of the cost.

What is Religious Deconversion?

[1] Why do people leave religion? Researchers observed over 20 years ago that this question had not received its due attention (Brinkerhoff and Burke), yet religious departures continue to be studied less than other religious transitions even though an estimated one-third or more Americans drop out of religious participation or affiliation at some time during their life (Roozen; Uecker, Regnerus, and Vaaler). The United States displays high levels of religious mobility (Sandomirsky and Wilson; Sherkat), and leaving religion – “deconversion” – is one aspect of this mobility. In this article, we update the study of deconversion by examining the online narratives of deconverts from Christianity.

[2] The transition out of religion has been given different names in the research literature. These include: religious disaffiliation (Albrecht and Bahr; Brinkerhoff and Burke), leaving the church/faith (Need and De Graaf), apostasy (Altemeyer and Hunsberger; Brinkerhoff and Mackie), religious defection (Davidman and Greil; Wuthnow and Glock), drop outs (Albrecht and Bahr; Caplovitz and Sherrow; Hoge; Roozen), religious exits (Regnerus and Uecker), leaving the church (Need and De Graaf), and deconversion (Harrold; Jacobs). While subtle differences exist between these concepts, they are more similar than not. We use the term “deconversion” simply because of its association with the widely accepted term “conversion.”

[3] Definitions of deconversion have portrayed it as a break from both religious beliefs and affiliations. It is “the process of disengagement from two major elements of religion: belief and community” (Brinkerhoff and Mackie: 235). It is the “loss of faith and rejection of [religious] community” (Caplovitz and Sherrow: 31). One form of deconversion is forced and involuntary, e.g., cult deprogramming (Kim; Robbins and Anthony; Wright). Another form is voluntary withdrawal from religion (Jacobs; Uecker, Regnerus, and Vaaler). This study examines only voluntary withdrawals.

[4] The operationalization of deconversion varies by type of data. Quantitative studies typically identify changes in religious affiliation. For example, Need and De Graaf measured deconversion as no longer belonging to a church denomination. Likewise, Sherkat and Wilson measured it as no longer having a religious preference. Studies of adolescents sometimes identify it as a change in adolescents’ religious standing versus that of their family (e.g., Hadaway; Hunsberger and Brown; Smith and Sikkink). Qualitative studies, in contrast, typically use changes in self-identified religious status (e.g., Barbour). For example, Jacobs recruited subjects by advertising for individuals who defined themselves as having left an authoritarian religious movement. In this article we take this second approach and study individuals who identify themselves as former Christians.

Previous Research on Deconversion

Theoretical Perspectives

[5] Various theoretical perspectives have been applied to deconversion, with no single explanation predominating. One perspective views deconversion as social disaffiliation. For example, Bahr and Albrecht studied former members of the Mormon Church, and they concluded that leaving the church was the final stage in a long process of “drifting” away from the church.

[6] Ebaugh applied role theory to her study of former Catholic nuns, and she emphasized changes in organizational roles in bringing about deconversion. In particular, she found that nuns were leaving their orders in response to changes resulting from the Second Vatican Council. Some nuns left because they viewed the changes as too much; others as not enough.

[7] Brinkerhoff and Burke used labeling theory to explain departures from fundamentalist sects. In their analysis, labeling was a catalyst for, rather than the initial cause of, deconversion. After an individual did not follow the behavioral or attitudinal norms of the sect, he/she was labeled as a heretic. Then, the group “damned” the person, pushing

him/her to the outside of the group – an action that also emphasized the unity of belief within the group. In response, the heretic further distanced him/herself from the group, eventually leaving altogether. Hunsberger applied social learning theory to deconversion. Deconverts learned their religious attitudes and behaviors from their families and religious groups; however, they had overall less religious parents. As such, they learned their lesser belief from their parents, and were more likely to turn away from religion as they grew older.

What is Known about Deconversion

[8] While quantitative studies of deconversion have associated it with personal and demographic characteristics, family background, and religious experiences (e.g., Uecker, Regnerus, and Vaaler), qualitative studies have used deconverts' own description and interpretation of their experiences (Albrecht and Bahr). This literature has produced several themes in deconverts' explanations.

[9] One explanation cites intellectual doubt. As described by Mauss, this occurs with the “disbelief of certain central tenets of a religion, accompanied, presumably, by a belief in rival secular doctrines” (129). According to Bahr and Albrecht, previously fervent followers of Mormonism leave the church in part because of intellectual concerns. “They decided that Mormon teachings were false” (196). Brinkeroff and Mackie found that university students who leave religion expressed more intellectual doubt than did those who stayed. Likewise, Altemeyer and Hunsberger found that university students began deconversion by asking critical questions about the Bible and various church teachings.

[10] Another explanation regards social concerns. Mauss, in his observations of Mormons, linked deconversion to disintegrated social bonds, such as the loss or absence of close friends in the church. Similarly, Jacobs found that severing social bonds was a first step in leaving authoritarian religious movements. For example, individuals became disillusioned with leaders and experienced conflict with other group members. Barbour, in a study of deconversion in autobiographical literature, highlighted disaffiliation from the church community.

[11] A third explanation regards moral doubt: the perception that the church and its members are not living up to their own moral standards (Barbour). As Mauss wrote, some people leave the church because they believe that “regular church goers are hypocrites” and that “churches are interested only in money” (130).

[12] This paper builds upon previous research on this topic in several ways. One, unlike earlier research on deconversion, this paper examines respondent-described consequences of deconversion. Two, it updates the research literature on departures from religion, reviving a line of inquiry largely dropped ten years ago. Three, it takes advantage of a rich source of data – on-line narratives – that has not been analyzed previously.

Methods

Narrative Writers

[13] Several on-line communities exist to support people who have deconverted from Christianity. We chose one in particular because it attracted participants from a wide range of Christian experiences, and they posted rich, detailed descriptions of their experiences.

Though these data are publicly available, our University's Institutional Review Board has required that we not disclose the name of the site itself.

[14] The narratives were written in 2005. While the writers were not prompted for their ages, judging from the events in their lives – such as marriage, children at home, and on-going careers – most of them were between twenty and fifty years old. They were predominately middle- and upper-class, often mentioning college education and extensive career histories. Few writers identified their race or ethnic affiliation. Thirty-three writers were from the United States, ten from other countries, and seven did not specify. The Americans had no particular regional or state grouping, and the non-Americans came from Australia, the United Kingdom, continental Europe, and Canada.

[15] The narrative writers came from a variety of Christian backgrounds, including non-denominational Christian (8 narrative writers), Baptist (8), Pentecostal/Charismatic (9), Catholic (5), Evangelical (5), Methodist (5), and a few each from Lutheran, Presbyterian, Church of God, and Church of Christ. These denominational backgrounds, though not statistically representative of the United States and other Western Countries, provide some variation in Christian experience.

[16] While we study former Christians, evidence suggests that the causes of deconversion may be similar across religions. For example, Caplovitz and Sherrow, in a study of Protestants, Catholics, and Jews, concluded that “a striking finding of the study was that whatever determined apostasy in one religion had the same effect in the other religions” (185). As such, the explanations provided by ex-Christians in our study perhaps apply to deconversion from other religions as well.

[17] Most of the writers entered into Christianity as children or teenagers and left as young adults. Twenty-two of them became Christians at birth or early childhood, twelve in their teenage years, ten in their twenties, and two in their thirties. The age of deconversion ranged from 13 to 45 years old, with most leaving between the ages of 18 and 30, resulting in a median age of 25. This age pattern of deconversion is consistent with previous, quantitative studies (e.g., Need and De Graff; Roozen).

[18] Ideally, a study of deconversion would randomly sample deconverts from their larger population. This approach has not been taken, however, because of the absence of a suitable sampling frame. Previous qualitative studies have drawn convenience samples from more narrowly defined people groups, such as college students (Caplovitz and Sherrow), people in a given geographic location (Jacobs; Rochford, Jr.), or previous members of a specific denomination (Bahr and Albrecht). The narratives examined in this study have wide variation in terms of sample members' age, location, and religious background. This variation allows for stronger analysis of deconversion. As a trade-off, however, the sample is self-selected into the website and it has unknown sampling properties, and so its external generalizability, as with all convenience samples, is unclear.

[19] The narrative writers described their current beliefs in various ways. Sixteen labeled themselves as currently atheists and thirteen as agnostics. Six writers used general spiritual terms such as pagan or deist, and several defined themselves as “ex-Christians” or “former Catholics.” None joined other religions.

Narratives

[20] The written narratives ranged from 300 to 3,000 words in length, averaging about 1,200 words – about five or six double-spaced pages. They provided first-person accounts of the writers' religious experiences, from when they entered Christianity to when they left. The writers described the circumstances surrounding their deconversion as well as their explanations for it. This type of unstructured, qualitative data offers insight into the social psychological underpinnings of religious deconversion (Brinkerhoff and Burke). At the end of each narrative, most of the writers filled out a short survey regarding their gender, where they lived, the ages of their entrance and exit from Christianity, their previous denominational affiliation, and their current religious beliefs. This provided demographic information not always available in the narratives themselves.

[21] The emotional tone of the narratives varied widely. Most were neutral, simply describing events and reasons. Others conveyed anger, bitterness, or hurt toward Christianity – both as a belief system and as a community. A few narratives, however, expressed wistful longing for the relationships and the sense of security previously provided by Christianity.

[22] The personal narratives studied in this paper do reflect peoples' real-life experiences, but they are subjective accounts and therefore they are influenced by limited perception, selective memory, desire to reduce dissonance, and other factors that influence self-presentation. Yamane makes the point more generally in discussing the role of narratives in the study of religious experience. He writes that narratives are not objective measures of religious experiences; rather they are linguistic accounts of how the experiences are made meaningful for the person. Furthermore, these narratives were written in a social context, as the narrative-writers address themselves to fellow members of the on-line community. How they explained their own behavior might, in part, be influenced by what they have read in other narratives.

[23] Nonetheless, the narratives studied here have a real impact in people's lives because, as per the sociological axiom, what is defined as real becomes real in its consequences. Peoples' decision to leave religion is guided by their subjective perceptions and experiences, and so these merit study. As Bahr and Albrecht put it, what deconverts "perceived as real in their religious experience determined their reactions and subsequent reality, regardless of the accuracy of that which was perceived" (188).

Data Analysis

[24] We analyzed deconversion narratives using the principles of grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss). This analytic approach generates theory from data by creating concepts that explain peoples' behavior. Being inductive, grounded theory allows for the creation of deconversion explanations. Bahr and Albrecht identified the usefulness of grounded theory for studying deconversion because it focuses on "the individual's statements and actions regarding patterns, inconsistencies, intended and unintended consequences of action, meaning systems, assumptions" (187).

[25] Grounded theory involves several steps in coding data. The first step is "open" coding in which all concepts found in the data are identified. This represents the broadest level of analysis. The next step is "selective" coding, in which a tentative core of concepts are

identified and modified across individual accounts. Finally, “theoretical” coding brings together various concepts into larger theoretical hypotheses.

[26] As a group we worked in parallel. We each coded the narratives separately, and then met to discuss how we coded and why, working toward a common coding scheme. We then read the next group of narratives separately and came together to discuss our findings. We followed this pattern until we agreed upon both the conceptualization and application of our coding categories. Ultimately, this process required analysis of fifty narratives. By this point we had reached thematic saturation, such that additional narratives were no longer providing meaningful changes to our coding scheme. This process produced well-defined coding categories with high inter-rater reliability. We combined the coding categories into general explanations for why the narrative-writers left Christianity.

Explanations of Deconversion

[27] In the narratives we identified four general explanations for deconversion. The first three – intellectual and theological concerns, God’s shortcomings, and interactions with Christians – were mentioned by numerous narrative writers. The fourth – interactions with non-Christians – was mentioned by relatively few.

Intellectual and Theological Concerns

[28] In explaining why they left Christianity, the narrative writers frequently wrote of intellectual and theological concerns. In fact, a full two-thirds (32 of 50, 64%) of the writers raised these concerns, and some wrote of little else. They focused on three specific issues.

[29] Some writers contrasted Christianity negatively with other conceptualizations of knowledge, such as science, education, and everyday common sense. These comments, though used here to critique Christianity, would apply to any religion. One man, who participated in fundamentalist Christianity in his twenties and thirties, summarized this concern in writing that “for most of us, the battle was entirely within ourselves. It was a pitched battle between our faith and our reason, and eventually our reason just refused to be suppressed any longer, no matter what the potential consequences.” Succinctly, a former Baptist wrote: “Christianity is a disease. Education is the cure.”

[30] The writers sometimes experienced tension and anguish as they sought to reconcile their religious beliefs with other forms of knowledge – wanting to believe in one but unable to explain away the other. Ultimately they felt logically compelled, almost against their wishes, to reject Christianity. A young Hungarian man, describing his turmoil in trying to reconcile his education with his Christian faith, concluded that “sadly or fortunately, if one has the blessed talent of logical thinking, and the courage to use it on every idea one comes across, even if one’s whole previous life is built on that particular idea, then there is no choice [but to reject Christianity].” Another writer described a five-month process of evaluating all of his religious beliefs and assumptions. When he started this, he felt great ambivalence about rejecting Christianity in favor of more “secular, humanist” thought: “I was still not sure whether there was indeed a god or not, and I wanted so badly to believe.”

[31] More specifically to Christianity, numerous writers expressed concerns about the doctrine of hell and the existence of human suffering. Eternal punishment did not fit with

some writers' belief in a loving God, and so they viewed the existence of hell as evidence against the existence of a God worthy of devotion. A former Baptist and now self-described "open-minded deist" expressed the contradiction between hell and a God of love: "Would a loving father really not allow some people to have a chance and send them to hell for eternity? I don't think so!" Likewise, a former Christian missionary described the existence of hell as a major stumbling block in his ability to believe in God. It just did not make sense to him: "Why would God create the human race knowing we'd sin against him and many would thus spend eternity burning and suffering?"

[32] While most of the writers objecting to hell did so at a general, theoretical level, a few experienced it more personally, wondering why God would send people they loved to hell. One woman had a crisis of faith when her grandparents died. They had loved her deeply but had not believed in Christianity, leading her to ask, "what the hell kind of jerk was God if he'd condemn people like my grandparents?"

[33] The problem with hell was not its existence, per se, but its implied injustice. The writers did not understand, for example, why God would condemn people who had no access to Christian teaching. One writer asked, "why would God let a good Japanese person (who statistically will probably not be Christian) go to hell?" Likewise, they struggled with why God would condemn those who rejected Christianity but were deemed good people, such as the grandparents described above. None of the writers objected to hell for those who had truly done wrong in life – as one might object to the death penalty even for convicted murderers.

[34] Similar to objections about hell – suffering in the afterlife – some writers rejected God's allowance of suffering in the current life. One writer compared God to a negligent police officer: "What if a police officer sat and watched silently as a child was murdered even though he had the power to stop it?" Another writer recounted a debate he had had with his born-again stepmother. In this debate, he argued that suffering negated the possibility of a loving God. "Why is it necessary for us to suffer? So we can have free will? So let's say I 'freely' choose to believe in God, then my dad gets murdered or Kim [his wife] gets raped or you get run over by a car. How could I possibly believe that God loves me if these things happened to those I love?" Other writers focused on large-scale suffering, such as tsunamis, famines, and the 9/11 attacks.

[35] While these critiques focused on God's passivity with suffering, others emphasized his active role in suffering, especially as described in the Old Testament. A former Methodist, now in his thirties, wrote: "The turning argument for me was actually a story that is in children's Sunday school books – Noah's Ark. I started to really think about the fact that God pretty much killed the ENTIRE planet." Likewise a life-long Pentecostal characterized God's actions in the Old Testament as "atrocious after atrocious."

[36] Another concern regarded the Bible. Many writers condemned the Bible as inaccurate, offensive, and generally not believable. One writer described her familiarity with the Bible and linked it to her departure from Christianity. "When I was a child, I had the bible continuously fed to me. I had to read the bible, memorize bible verses and copy parts of the bible as a way of improving my handwriting. As a result, I became rather acquainted with the bible and as most people know, that can lead to atheism." Often writers keyed in on specific

stories in the Bible as particularly unbelievable. As one writer elaborated, “I find it amazing how people who literally believe in stories about talking donkeys, Noah’s ark, and dead people rising can look at me like something’s wrong with me for thinking rationally.” A few writers condemned the Bible so strongly that they identified its very existence as harmful. A former Catholic, who left the church at age 20, opined that “this superstitious nonsense has held back the progression of mankind. Science has all but proven that the Old Testament could not have happened. It is also fast proving that the New Testament is nothing but fiction.”

[37] It is not clear how well these intellectual and moral concerns map on to a rational choice perspective on religion. One could argue that they are implicitly linked to costs and benefits; for example, the forced acceptance of non-scientific ideas might pose a psychological cost. Likewise, the perceived injustice of hell might cause emotional distress. Nonetheless, in discussing these concerns, the narrative writers focused on issues of moral right and wrong rather than cost and benefits. They write as “truth-seekers” more than “benefit-optimizers,” taking perhaps more of a philosophical approach, rather than economic, to religion.

God’s Failures

[38] A second general explanation for deconversion involved interpersonal dissatisfaction with God. A total of 22 of 50 (44%) writers made such comments.

[39] Some writers believed that God existed, but they rejected him because he did not help them, especially in times of trouble. For example, a young man raised in a Baptist church had his first spiritual crisis when God did not answer prayers amid family difficulties. “The first time I questioned the faith was when my grandmother shriveled up in front of me for 6 month’s due to cancer. I was 13 & my mother & father [were] getting a divorce. My father told me I should have been aborted. I prayed to God but nothing fails like prayers.” Likewise, a woman raised in a Methodist household described her step-father as “cruel and abusive” to her, and she could not understand why “if God loves me, why won’t he protect me instead of letting this happen to me?” A former Roman Catholic lamented God’s inaction during the writer’s teenage years. “I prayed and prayed and things never got better . . . in fact they got worse. So I was like fine . . . this . . . if god can turn his back on me . . . I can do the same [i.e., turn his back on God].”

[40] In a variation of this theme, some deconverts lamented God’s inactivity amid spiritual difficulties. A man in his forties, a former elder at a charismatic church, described such a situation. “In my own life, no matter how much I submitted to ‘God’ and prayed in faith, ‘sin’ never seemed to leave me. Well, what’s the point of being ‘saved’ if you aren’t delivered from ‘sin’?” Likewise, a Southern Baptist, who was born-again at age 20 but rejected Christianity at age 31, wrote about the various good things that he felt God should give him: “God promises me a lot in the bible and he’s not come through. Ask and it shall be given. Follow me and I will bless you. I promise you life and promise abundance. Man should not be alone. I have a plan for you. Give tithe and I will reward you. All broken promises. This god lacks clarification. This god lacks faith in me. He wants my faith. I want his too.”

[41] These accounts speak of a broken relationship with God as one might talk about a marital divorce. They are emotional, bitter at times. Some writers emphasized the inequity of

their relationship to God. The writers did so much for God – praying, attending church, following God – but God did little in return.

[42] Other writers took a different approach to God's failures. They too sought God's help, but when they did not receive it, they concluded that God simply did not exist. A former member of the Assemblies of God church linked unanswered prayers and the existence of God as follows: "How many humble and totally selfless prayers offered up to and ignored by the imaginary skydaddy does it take for the average person to finally throw in the towel and say !!!!?" His answer: "Too damn many."

[43] Other individuals sought a tangible sign of God's presence. A young man, who was raised as a Pentecostal, but left at age 21, spoke of seeking signs from God. "There were many nights while in bed I would ask God to show me the truth, or give me some type of sign to show that he or she existed. These prayers would never be answered. So I would just go on with my life having doubts." Likewise, a former Baptist missionary wrote: "I've begged God to show himself to me and put an end to my inner torture. So far it hasn't happened and the only thing I know for sure is that I have unanswered questions." Another writer put it succinctly: "Jesus is no more real than peter pan. I was Christian for more than 15 years & never seen nor heard God."

[44] The narrative writers' descriptions of their frustration, hurt, and anger with God's failures fit squarely within a rational choice perspective. They felt as if they had done their part – praying, waiting, being faithful – but God had failed them or let them down. They expected certain benefits from God, such as answered prayers and his revealed presence, and they did not receive these benefits, causing them costly feelings of disillusionment, pain, and betrayal. These costs explicitly motivated their decision to leave their faith.

Interactions with Christians

[45] A third explanation offered by ex-Christians regards interactions with Christians. Most narrative writers (42 of 50, 84%) expressed some frustration with the beliefs and actions of Christians.

[46] The most frequently mentioned role of Christians in deconversion was in amplifying existing doubt. The writers told of sharing their burgeoning doubts with a Christian friend or family member only to receive trite, unhelpful answers. These answers, in turn, moved them further away from Christianity.

[47] A former Southern Baptist identified this tendency among Christians: "Christians have their PAT phrases for every little whim. . . Christians always use the word "faith" as their last word when they are too stupid to answer a question." Standard pat answers included extra- or non-Biblical statements such as: "God will never put more on you than you can bear," "God works in mysterious ways," "it was God's will," "your faith wasn't strong enough," "God wanted him in heaven," and "God is testing you – stand firm!" Such statements are not Biblical quotes, but common interpretations and understandings among Christians. One writer recounted, "I asked questions that no one else dared to ask, like 'What about all the starving people in the third world?' The answer I got was, 'They are just as culpable as we are.'"

[48] Ex-Christians were not only critical of fellow parishioners, but also of clergy's and church lay-leadership's failure to address the doubter's questions. One ex-Christian wrote: "And to top all of it off, I could get no satisfying answers to my questions (they call them sinful doubts) even from the pastors and elders. I was told not to read the bible to try to find problems, that was a sin." Another wrote, "When I raised questions about how Christianity compares to Judaism and other religions, the pastor was shocked. She basically insisted to me that Christianity was the be-all and end-all of religions." In sum, the absence of thoughtful answers and the lack of listening carefully to the questions were interpreted as both anti-intellectualism and a lack of empathy, leading the writers to feel trivialized.

[49] Christian hypocrisy was also mentioned occasionally. Some writers told of harm done to them by Christians. For example, a former Pentecostal Christian, and now self-described Hellenic pagan, spoke of her "mistake" in dating a Fundamentalist Christian and how she felt abused by him.

I also found out that he was an addict, and had lied about it. . . After being with this person, I felt spiritually raped. It has taken a *very* long time to get over the emotional and spiritual devastation the whole thing left behind. It was kind of surprising to me, how deeply it impacted me, but it makes sense in light of how willingly vulnerable I made myself to this person, based on how he initially presented himself. My experience with this person was what sealed the deconversion: after him, I was *definitely* not Xian. After him, I realized that if being Xian meant I had to be like him, I'd rather go to hell.

[50] Other writers commented on general, amoral behavior among Christians. One wrote that extra-marital sex was rampant in the church that he attended. "As long as you go church, you can have all the sex you want. I know this because I sat back in churches for 15 years watching people repent of Saturday's escapade on Sunday morning." Likewise, a former Roman Catholic wrote of an alleged theft by his Sunday school teacher. "They took a collection . . . (yes . . . they took a collection of money from a bunch of 7 year olds) I noticed the teacher/preacher slip all the money into her purse. I told my parents . . . and I never went back."

[51] Related to the theme of hypocrisy were remarks about rule enforcement. A former member of an Assemblies of God church recounted an incident regarding his smoking.

I was struggling with smoking at this time, and was sincere about wanting to quit. At a prayer meeting one Thursday night, I told the group of 5 men about my struggle with tobacco. They proceeded to tell me that smoking was sin (the body being "the temple" of the Holy Spirit and all), and that "god doesn't hear the prayer of a sinner." What happened next stunned me. As the men took turns praying, it came to be my turn, and as I began to say my prayers, they all got up and walked away from me!!!

[52] The interactions with Christians described above had a mixed fit with rational choice theory. Some described the narrative writers being ill treated by Christians, posing a psychological and social cost to religious participation – fitting well with rational choice theory. Others, however, described a reaction to hypocrisy, even when the individuals

themselves did not experience a direct cost from it. This negative reaction to hypocrisy is similar to the theological and intellectual concerns discussed above – focusing on right and wrong rather than costs and benefits.

Interactions with Non-Christians

[53] Because of the strong influence of peers and significant others in the process of conversion, we anticipated that non-Christian people would appear prominently in the stories of people leaving Christianity. Moreover, Christian teaching warns believers of the undermining influences of “the world,” raising the prospect that non-Christian friends, co-workers, and teachers would strongly influence deconversion. However, there were surprisingly few references to non-Christians leading the writers away from faith. We counted only eight. For example, one writer had a non-Christian friend loan him a book arguing against Christianity. Another had a family member who advocated against Christianity. More commonly, non-Christians were mentioned as supporting the writers after they had left Christianity. For example, the website from which we drew the narratives endorsed and supported the decisions of former Christians, but it did not seem to initially bring about these decisions.

[54] Why might non-Christians be mostly absent from these deconversion stories? One answer might be the insular social networks of some Christians, for several writers spoke of having had relatively few interactions or relationships with non-Christians. For example, a woman raised in the church wrote that she did not even know what the word “atheist” meant until she was in her twenties.

[55] The narrative writers rarely described individuals outside of the church as helping bring about their deconversion. Rather, they described new relationships with non-Christians (exemplified by their participation in an online community for deconverts) as the consequence, not cause, of changes in their beliefs. The role of social relationships in drawing the deconvert out of the church is less than might be expected from rational choice theories of religion.

The Consequences of Deconversion

[56] Once the respondents had deconverted, they faced various consequences, both negative and positive. In describing the aftermath of their deconversion, narrative writers described both costs and benefits of their decision. Many writers lamented the loss of social ties. One respondent lamented this when she wrote: “I miss my Christian friends, and my community, and I want to be accepted and loved by them again.” The social costs were especially high when they involved family. One respondent compared revealing his decision to his parents as akin to a gay person “coming out” to their straight parents. He wrote: “I had to face a more daunting and more real situation – and that was dealing with my Evangelical parents. Coming out as a non-believer or a follower of a different philosophy or religion, comes with the same stigma as being Gay/Lesbian/Bisexual/Transgender/Intersexed in this country.”

[57] Other respondents, though not many, discussed the loss of religious capital as a cost of deconversion. A young woman wrote of missing the comfort that she had previously found in her religious beliefs. “Since my deconversion I’ve been so depressed and insecure. I feel like all my security and hope died when I gave up on Jesus. I believed before that I had a

relationship with him, but I just can't believe anymore." Likewise, a former Catholic wrote that in leaving Jesus he had "lost a friend. One who gave everything up for me. I miss him so much, he was always there for me, but now I know that's not the case and at times I get down about it. I nearly cried the other day, but that's how powerful the teachings about Jesus were."

[58] More commonly than the costs of deconversion, the narrative writers emphasized the emotional and psychological benefits, especially the increase of personal freedom. One writer stated that: "the hardest part in opening my mind was breaking that chain that still bound me. The chain that is put in place from birth that religion is truth. But I broke it . . . and I am happier for it." Likewise, another writer stated that: "I became free. The burden of worrying if I will burn in Hell has been lifted." Interestingly, one writer, a former Pentecostal, explicitly linked the concept of religious capital and the benefits of deconversion. He wrote: "Soon after that I left the church, something had snapped in me after that night, I went home and like a machine, I grabbed all my Christian music, bibles, anything to do with Christianity and stuffed it in the garbage can. It felt so good to do, after that day I have been a free thinker, a free spirit, it feels so right." This passage suggests that the skills, experiences, and knowledge that constitute religious capital become redefined as a negative and serve as a motivation for leaving, rather than staying in, religion.

Conclusion

[59] We examined fifty autobiographical narratives written by former Christians. From them, we identified four general explanations for deconversion. *Intellectual and theological concerns* represented problems with the doctrine of Christianity or general belief in religion. These included favoring a scientific worldview, not understanding why suffering exists in this life or the next, and not believing in the Bible as divinely inspired. *God's failures* involved interpersonal dissatisfaction with God. He did not help in times of need. *Interactions with Christians* included various frustrations with Christians, as individuals or as a church. Christian friends and family would respond to doubts with pat answers or criticism. Christians' behavior would not match their beliefs. *Interactions with Non-Christians* involved a few references to non-Christians providing support and information during the deconversion process. In addition, the consequences of deconversion were described explicitly in terms of costs and benefits.

[60] Our findings fit well with some of the themes found in previous studies of deconversion. We found that intellectual doubt was a primary explanation for deconversion, as did Mauss, Bahr and Albrecht, Brinkeroff and Mackie, and Altemeyer and Hunsberger. We also found evidence of moral concerns with Christians – respondents feeling concern with moral hypocrisy, as did Mauss and Barbour.

[61] Previous studies of conversion (Stark and Fink; Leatham) have concluded that conversions are based primarily on social ties, and that the role of doctrine and theology is one of self-presentation rather than being a motivating factor for the decision. This might be different for deconversion, however. Most of the deconverts in this study actually left friends and family as part of their deconversion. Also, the deconvert, in contrast to the convert, has experienced months and years of religious training. As such, intellectual issues that arise regarding doctrine and theology might reasonably affect their behavior.

[62] Unlike previous studies, however, we found little evidence of deconversion resulting from broken social bonds. Sometimes the respondents expressed frustration that fellow Christians did not understand them during the deconversion process, but by-and-large they did not explain their decision to leave the faith as one prompted by broken social relationships. Many of the respondents did, however, point to a broken bond with God as a reason for their decision. Rather than having a falling out with fellow church members, they spoke of having one with God.

[63] We also observed that the respondents emphasized external, rather than internal, attributions for deconversion. Thus, people understand themselves as leaving the faith because of problems outside of themselves – with God, the Bible, or Christians. The occasional internal attribution comes with intellectual-based explanations, viewing oneself as being “too scientific” or “intellectual” to accept Christian doctrine. External attributions, such as these, serve to distance the person from responsibility for their decision since changing conditions prompted their decision.

[64] The respondents also did not refer to the demographic and personal characteristics, such as those identified in quantitative studies, when telling of their deconversion. Likewise, though they often mentioned family and religious background, they did not identify these as affecting deconversion. This difference in findings points to the complementary nature of quantitative and qualitative research, with each highlighting different aspects of deconversion.

[65] A striking feature of the narratives was the near absence of ambiguity in the accounts. With only one or two exceptions, the respondents spoke of their decisions as based in complete certainty and done without any regrets. The language used about Christianity as a religion was almost uniformly negative. This recasting of a decision fits well with studies of post-decisional cognitive dissonance reduction (Festinger). These studies have found that after a decision, no matter how agonizingly difficult, people will devalue the losing option as a way of reducing dissonance. If the decision is recast as abundantly clear, then there is less need to worry about having made the right decision. This same logic would apply to conversion narratives, which emphasize how difficult life was before conversion to religion.

[66] Significant portions of the deconversion decision were explicitly cast in terms of costs and benefits, as we might expect from a rational choice perspective. In particular, the deconverts described as costly their broken relationships with God as well as some of their interactions with Christians. Other portions of the deconversion narratives, however, did not emphasize costs and benefits. In particular, the deconverts cast various intellectual and theological concerns in terms of right and wrong. These accounts were more in line with Smith’s conceptualization of individuals as “moral, believing animals” – inherently concerned with what is moral, what is right and wrong, what is good and bad. One could integrate rational choice with an inherent sense of morality by assuming that “wrong” moral beliefs cause emotional hardships and dissonance. However, the narrative writers did not explicitly make this connection; in fact, they sometimes spoke of having to do the “right” thing even at considerable cost.

[67] In particular, the respondents emphasized predominately “push,” rather than “pull,” factors. Push factors repel people away from Christianity while pull factors attract them to a

different worldview. Some intellectual and theological concerns, or aspects of Christian doctrine such as hell, push people away from Christianity, while aspects of a secular, scientific worldview pull them. The other three explanations, however, operate almost exclusively as push factors. Christians are not usually drawn to other belief systems; rather they are put off by the Christian God. They are not lured away by non-believers; rather they are frustrated with believers. Deconversion, therefore, usually represents more of a desire to leave Christianity than an attraction to its alternatives.

[68] In terms of methods, our study has various potential drawbacks. Our sample of narrative writers, though diverse, is far from random. It over-represents young, well educated, and computer-savvy males. Perhaps we would have come to different conclusions, or at least emphasized our conclusions differently, with a more representative sample of deconverts.

[69] The narratives themselves, while offering in-depth, nuanced accounts of deconversion, raise issues of self-presentation. The writers did not just describe their lives, but also presented themselves to others, presumably in a positive manner. This may account for the emphasis on external attributions – portraying the narrative writer as not being at “fault” for leaving Christianity. As such, this article is best understood as a study of explanations for deconversion, which presumably relate to, but are not identical to, the underlying causes of deconversion.

[70] Finally, the use of narratives, rather than interviews, has its drawbacks. Though unprompted narratives allow writers freedom to communicate without interference from a researcher, they do not allow for probing or follow-up questions, as would an in-depth interview. As a result, any given narrative might not fully elaborate on a particular issue. We overcame this by finding other narratives that did go into more depth, but the ability to direct the narratives would have been helpful.

[71] These caveats notwithstanding, the narratives examined in this study fit reasonably well within a rational choice framework. This suggests that viewing deconversion as an instance of rational choice belongs in the analytic tools used in understanding this religious transition.

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