

The Anatomy of Deconversion  
Keys to a Lifelong Faith in a Culture Abandoning Christianity

John Marriott

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## **THE ANATOMY OF DECONVERSION**

*Keys to a Lifelong Faith in a Culture Abandoning Christianity*



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ISBN 978-1-68426-201-4

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[CIP data]

Cover design by ThinkPen Design

Interior text design by Sandy Armstrong, Strong Design

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Abilene Christian University Press

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Abilene, Texas 79699

1-877-816-4455

[www.acupressbooks.com](http://www.acupressbooks.com)

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## Introduction

Writing about faith loss is not something I find enjoyable, but it is something that I think is important. When I first began researching faith exit, I did so out of curiosity. One night in graduate school, I happened to stumble across a website that hosted hundreds of deconversion narratives. I read them with a sense of both fascination and dread. Although I was aware that sometimes believers leave the faith, I was clueless about just how many Christians with a background like mine had done so. Ever since that night, I have spent a considerable amount of time researching why and how individuals leave the Christian faith. What I have discovered is that, by all indications, the number of individuals leaving the faith is growing at troubling rates. While I am not claiming that the church in the United States is in the midst of a deconversion crisis, it is clear that, for various reasons, individuals are leaving the faith in increasing numbers. It is incumbent on pastors and church leaders to understand why this is happening in order to appropriately respond to it. Presently, however, there exists very little analysis of faith exit among those who once identified as evangelical Christians and who now identify as nonbelievers of one sort or another. This book seeks to fill the gap that exists in the literature by providing an inside look at deconversion from the perspectives of those who have left the faith. What follows is the result of conducting numerous interviews with and reading hundreds of narratives by former Christians about why they left their faith, what the deconversion process was like, the circumstances that served as the context of their loss of faith, and the impact that deconverting has had on them, both negatively and positively.

The book is divided into three main sections. The first section addresses important philosophical and theological matters pertaining to deconversion. The focus is on discussing

questions such as what constitutes deconversion, what a Christian is, what it means to believe, what the gospel is, and whether a genuine Christian can commit apostasy. This section provides a necessary foundation for the rest of the book. Without having a handle on the relevant biblical material, we will not be able to form an appropriate strategy of response. One issue in particular that this section addresses is whether a truly born-again believer in Jesus can commit apostasy. Theologically informed Christians hold differing views on this. Regardless, I'm confident that the discoveries of this study are applicable to whichever theological position one affirms. That is to say, for my purposes of this book, it's irrelevant whether one believes in the perseverance of the saints or that salvation can be lost. The insights offered throughout the book on deconversion and the suggestions for averting it are applicable to whichever theological camp one is in.

The second section of the book examines the reasons, process, background conditions, strategies, and impact of deconverting. It is divided into eight chapters, each dedicated to one topic and grounded in the testimony of those who have left the faith.

Chapter Three provides a look at the main reasons that are cited by former believers for why they left the faith.

Chapter Four gives insight into the process of deconversion. In essence, it addresses the question, "What does the losing of faith look like?" This will be fleshed out by answering a series of sub-questions, including: How does deconverting from a faith compare with the process of converting to a faith? What are the stages of the deconversion process? What is the point of no return?

Chapter Five unpacks the religious background of participants. Several themes that emerged from personal interviews and online deconversion "testimonies" combine to reveal important aspects of the lives of former Christians. These themes reveal much about what often

underwrites the loss of faith. Furthermore, these themes raise important questions about what former believers have deconverted from.

Chapters Six and Seven reveal the many negative consequences that go along with faith exit. These range from the personal and social to the financial and vocational. Surprisingly, however, we will discover in Chapter Nine that, regardless of the negative consequences of losing their faith, the positive consequences were so meaningful that they made the negative consequences worth enduring. In Chapter Eight, the strategies employed by former believers in navigating the deconversion process are brought to the fore. This information is helpful in that it helps shed light on how former Christians go about forming new identities as unbelievers. As mentioned above, Chapter Nine addresses the positive impact of deconversion. It may come as a surprise to readers that former believers, for all of the negative consequences they endured as a result of losing their faith, uniformly testify that it was worth it for what they received in return. Again, this raises the question of what it was that believers deconverted from. How could someone know and walk with the Lord Jesus, who promised his followers a yoke that was easy and a burden that was light, come to the place where they were willing to lose almost everything to be set free from him?

The third and final section of the book, Chapters Eleven, Twelve, and Thirteen, shifts from a descriptive posture to a prescriptive one. Here, we will do three things. First, we will discuss how we can avoid setting up believers under our care for an unnecessary crisis of faith. Believe it or not, well-intentioned pastors and parents can and do place stumbling blocks to faith before believers; the more sensitive we are to what those are, the less likely we will be to do so. Second, we will consider practical ways that we can avert the shipwreck of faith by walking with those who are struggling to maintain their commitment to Christ. Third, we will look at ways to

cultivate a lasting faith by providing believers with a strong foundation upon which they can build their faith. It is my hope that, in doing so, we will be able to help believers construct a faith that endures, as opposed to one that will not.

I end the book in Chapter Thirteen with stories of hope. It is important to do so because too often, parents, spouses, and siblings can feel despondent when a loved one leaves the faith because they feel all is lost. However, that is not true. Although the stories of reconversions are not as voluminous online, they exist and are growing. These stories provide hope that just because a person walks away from their faith at one time in their life does not mean that they will continue to walk in that same direction. Sometimes they make U-turns. Knowing this can make all the difference in the world for friends and families of deconverts.

**PART 1**

***Theological Issues***

## Chapter One

### Deconversion: The Body of Evidence

#### Set for the Defense of the Gospel

At age eighteen, John Loftus made a decision to follow Jesus, and that decision radically changed his life. He notes that his conversion was so sweeping that there was “no one who knew me during my early years as a Christian who would say I was not on fire for God. I burned with a passion for the Lord. And for good reason; I believed God turned my life around.”<sup>1</sup> A problem teenager who was kicked out his high school several times, Loftus would go on to be arrested six times as a juvenile offender. As many often do in his situation, he turned to God for help.

Assuming it was God’s Word, he began reading the Bible and believed everything he read. He accepted Jesus as his savior and quickly got involved in a church youth group. To say that he was passionate about his faith would be an understatement. He went witnessing every weekend in the downtown core of his hometown of Fort Wayne, Indiana, including outside of a “couple strip joints and one gay bar.”<sup>2</sup> He would even go hitchhiking with the “express purpose” of witnessing to whoever picked him up.<sup>3</sup> In his words, he “witnessed to everyone almost all the time.”<sup>4</sup>

But Loftus wasn’t just all heat and no light. He was also passionate to learn about the faith that he so enthusiastically shared with others. He devoured Josh and Sean McDowell’s popular apologetics book, *Evidence That Demands a Verdict*, and many of Francis Schaeffer’s

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<sup>1</sup> John Loftus, *The Christian Delusion: Why Faith Fails* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2010).

<sup>2</sup> Loftus, *Christian Delusion*, 21.

<sup>3</sup> Loftus, *Christian Delusion*, 21.

<sup>4</sup> Loftus, *Christian Delusion*, 21.

more philosophical apologetic works. The result of his research was an overwhelming confidence that the Christian faith “could handle the attacks of all the critics” because he concluded that it was clear: “Christianity is true!”<sup>5</sup> Loftus eventually enrolled in a Midwest Bible college, where he gained a working knowledge of Scripture. After graduating, he took a position as an associate pastor at a church in Kalkaska, Michigan. Concurrently, he enrolled in and then graduated from an evangelical seminary with master’s degrees in theology and divinity. While in seminary, Loftus founded and edited the now defunct *Apologetics Quarterly: A Journal for Christian Studies*. In 1985, Loftus attended Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, studied under noted apologist William Lane Craig, and earned a master’s degree in theology. After graduation, he became the senior pastor at Angola Christian Church in Angola, Indiana. In Loftus’s own words, he “was a Christian apologist with several master’s degrees set for the express purpose of defending Christianity from intellectual attacks.”<sup>6</sup>

Today, Loftus is one of America’s foremost apologists—not for Christianity, however, but for atheism. No longer is he writing on behalf of Christianity but, rather, against it. Instead of witnessing on behalf of Christ, he is debating believers about the foolishness of being a Christian. Rather than editing an apologetics journal, he is editing a website that is intended to debunk Christianity. For various reasons, some intellectual, some personal, and some interpersonal, he came to the place, like many others, where he no longer believed in Jesus. He deconverted, and he now eagerly works to deconvert others.

If you are reading this book, it is likely that you know someone who, like John Loftus, left the faith. Likely, you are trying to understand how it is that someone who once believed the

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<sup>5</sup> Loftus, *Christian Delusion*, 21.

<sup>6</sup> Loftus, *Christian Delusion*, 13.

claims of the Bible, who was involved in a church, and who happily identified as a follower of Jesus could possibly walk away from it all. Perhaps they were in your youth group, congregation, or even family. And while the individuals you know who have left the faith may not have a story that is as dramatic as John Loftus's, it is likely no less confusing and discouraging. Sadly, John Loftus and those you may know who have left the faith are not a small group of outliers. Surveys and studies indicate that a growing number of Christians are not only leaving the church as an institution, but also Christianity itself.

### **By the Numbers**

Among websites advocating atheism on the Internet, there exists a large number dedicated to cataloging deconversion stories of former Christians who now identify as atheists. This may surprise you, but these testimonies number in the tens of thousands and are increasing.

Moreover, the testimonies range from those new to the faith and those who leave it soon after, including former pastors, former missionaries, and former seminary professors.

In the United States, the number of individuals who identify as having no religion is growing significantly.<sup>7</sup> The “nones,” as they are referred to, don't identify with any religion. They may be agnostics, atheists, or merely individuals who do not subscribe to any particular religious faith. For some, the lack of religious affiliation is the result of being raised in homes without any religious commitments. For others, however, it's due to a conscious decision to

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<sup>7</sup> A 2014 Pew survey reported that 22.8 percent of the population identified as having no religious affiliation, up from 16.1 percent in 2007. Thirty-three percent of them said they do not believe in God, and nearly 40 percent said that religion has no importance to them at all. Between 2007 and 2014, the percentage of those who identified as atheists nearly doubled, while the number of Christians dropped 7.8 percent (Protestants, Catholics, and mainline). <http://www.pewforum.org/2015/05/12/americas-changing-religious-landscape/>

leave the religion they once adhered to. It's interesting to note that as the number of nones goes up, the numbers of Christians decreases. In fact, those once committed to following Jesus are deconverting in record numbers and at record rates.<sup>8</sup> In a 2015 CNN article, Greg Smith, associate director of religion research at the Pew Research Center, said, "We've known that the religiously unaffiliated has been growing for decades. But the pace at which they've continued to grow is really astounding."<sup>9</sup> Let me give you a whistle-stop tour of the statistics as they relate to faith exit over the last eighteen years.

In 2002, the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) reported that it was losing 88 percent of its youth after their freshman year in college.<sup>10</sup> At the same time, 70 percent of SBC teenagers involved in church youth groups stopped attending church within two years of their high school graduation.<sup>11</sup> The Barna Group announced in 2006 that 61 percent of young adults who were involved in church during their teen years had become spiritually disengaged.<sup>12</sup> Supporting Barna's findings, a 2007 Assemblies of God study reported that between 50 percent and 67 percent of Assemblies of God young people who attend a non-Christian public or private

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<sup>8</sup> Drew Dyck, *Generation Ex-Christian: Why Young Adults Are Leaving the Faith and How to Bring Them Back* (Chicago: Moody Press, 2010)

<sup>9</sup> Daniel Burke, "Millennials Leaving Church in Droves, Study Finds," *CNN*, May 14, 2015, <https://www.cnn.com/2015/05/12/living/pew-religion-study/index.html>.

<sup>10</sup> "Family Life Council Says It's Time to Bring Family Back to Life," 2002 SBC Annual meeting, June 12, 2002, <https://web.archive.org/web/20190425104908/http://www.sbcannualmeeting.net/sbc02/newsroom/newspage.asp?ID=261>

<sup>11</sup> T. C. Pinckney, "We Are Losing Our Children," remarks to the Southern Baptist Convention Executive Committee, September 18, 2001, <http://ceanet.net/We%20Are%20Losing%20Our%20Children.pdf>.

<sup>12</sup> "Most Twentysomethings Put Christianity on the Shelf Following Spiritually Active Teen Years," Barna Group, September 11, 2006, <https://www.barna.com/research/most-twentysomethings-put-christianity-on-the-shelf-following-spiritually-active-teen-years/>.

university will have left the faith four years after entering college.<sup>13</sup> A similar study from LifeWay Research that came out the same year claimed that 70 percent of students lose their faith in college, and of those, only 35 percent eventually return to their faith.<sup>14</sup>

In May 2009, the Pew Research Center's Forum on Religion & Public Life presented research claiming that young Americans are leaving religion at five to six times the historic rate. They also noted that the percentage of young Americans who identify as having no religion is between 30 and 40 percent, up from 5–10 percent only a generation ago.<sup>15</sup> That same year, the Fuller Youth Institute's study, the College Transition Project, discovered that current data seems "to suggest that about 40–50 percent of students in youth groups struggle in their faith after graduation."<sup>16</sup>

A 2003 UCLA study titled "Spirituality in Higher Education" found that only 29 percent of college students regularly attended church after their junior year, down from 52 percent the year before they entered college.<sup>17</sup> A second UCLA study, "The College Student Survey," asked students to indicate their present religious commitment. Researchers then compared the responses of freshmen who checked the "born again" category with the answers they gave four years later when they were seniors. What they found was shocking. On some campuses, as much

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<sup>13</sup> Dayton Kingsriter, "Is the Lower Cost Worth the Higher Price?" General Council of the Assemblies of God, 2007, <https://silo.tips/download/is-the-lower-cost-worth-the-high-price>

<sup>14</sup> "Reasons 18- to 22-Year-Olds Drop Out of Church," LifeWay Research, July 7, 2008, <https://lifewayresearch.com/2007/08/07/reasons-18-to-22-year-olds-drop-out-of-church/>.

<sup>15</sup> Dyck, *Generation Ex-Christian*.

<sup>16</sup> "Sticky College Campuses," Fuller Youth Institute, December 12, 2011, <https://fulleryouthinstitute.org/articles/sticky-college-campuses#fn-1-a>.

<sup>17</sup> Kevin Bonderud and Michael Fleischer, "College Students Show High Levels of Spiritual and Religious Engagement," Higher Education Research Institute, UCLA, November 21, 2003, [https://web.archive.org/web/20040801012656/http://www.spirituality.ucla.edu/news/Spirituality\\_2003-11-21.pdf](https://web.archive.org/web/20040801012656/http://www.spirituality.ucla.edu/news/Spirituality_2003-11-21.pdf)

as 59 percent of students no longer described themselves as “born again.”<sup>18</sup>

Given what we know regarding the loss of faith among American young people, it will come as no surprise that the class of 2018 in the United States cares less about their religious identity than any previous college freshmen class in the last forty years. A third study by UCLA found that students across the United States are dissociating themselves from religion in record numbers. “The American Freshman” study reveals that nearly 28 percent of the 2014 incoming college freshmen did not identify with any religious faith. That is a sharp increase from 1971, when only 16 percent of freshmen said they did not identify with a specific religion.<sup>19</sup> In 2015, the Pew Research Center conducted a study titled “Choosing a New Church or House of Worship,” in which researchers asked participants to identify the criteria by which they choose their place of worship. Interestingly, the survey revealed, “Roughly eight-in-ten religious ‘nones’ say they were raised with a religious affiliation.”<sup>20</sup> This means that nearly 80 percent of “nones” surveyed were at one time in a faith community before jettisoning it. In a 2016 survey, ominously titled “Exodus: Why Americans are Leaving Religion—and Why They’re Unlikely to Come Back,” researchers at the Public Religion Research Institute concluded that nearly 40 percent of young adults age 18–29 are religiously unaffiliated.<sup>21</sup> That is nearly four times as likely among young adults only one generation ago. More troubling is the finding that 79 percent

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<sup>18</sup> J. H. Pryor et al., “The American Freshman: Forty-Year Trends,” Higher Education Research Institute, 2007, <https://heri.ucla.edu/PDFs/40TrendsManuscript.pdf>.

<sup>19</sup> Kevin Eagan et al., “The American Freshman: National Norms Fall 2014,” Higher Education Research Institute at UCLA, 2014, <https://www.heri.ucla.edu/monographs/TheAmericanFreshman2014.pdf>.

<sup>20</sup> “Choosing a New Church or House of Worship,” Pew Research Center Religion & Public Life, August 23, 2016, <https://www.pewforum.org/2016/08/23/choosing-a-new-church-or-house-of-worship/>.

<sup>21</sup> “Exodus: Why Americans are Leaving Religion—and Why They’re Unlikely to Come Back,” Public Religion Research Institute, accessed February 6, 2020, <https://www.prii.org/research/prii-rns-poll-nones-atheist-leaving-religion/>.

of young adults age 18–29 who leave the faith and identify as nones do so during their teenage years. Those of previous generations did so much later. For example, those over sixty-five years of age who left their faith during their teen years numbered only 38 percent. The stunning takeaway of the report is as follows: “Today, one-quarter (25 percent) of Americans claim no formal religious identity, *making this group the single largest “religious group in the U.S.”*”<sup>22</sup> Finally, the 2019 General Social Survey discovered that Americans with “no religion” now account for about 23.1 percent of the population. That is up from 21.6 percent just three years earlier. Over that same period, American individuals identifying as evangelicals dropped slightly from 23.9 percent to 22.5 percent. Statistically, this means that the two groups are tied.

More studies could have been included, but I trust they are not needed. It is indisputable—nonbelief in the United States is on the rise, and part of that is because the number of Christians leaving their faith is increasing. At present, there are no signs of this trend slowing down. Deconversion is on the rise, but just what is deconversion?

### **Defining Deconversion**

Not everyone who identifies as a none or who is religiously unaffiliated is a deconvert, but all deconverts, as I am using the term, are religious nones. By that, I mean that some religious nones never identified as a member of a religious community to begin with, so they had nothing to deconvert from. In other words, it’s conceivable that not a few religious nones were raised in homes that never identified with a particular religious tradition. Deconverts, on the other hand, at one time identified as believers and were part of religious communities, only to renounce those beliefs and their membership in those communities. How much of the rise of the nones is the

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<sup>22</sup> “Exodus: Why Americans are Leaving Religion” (emphasis mine).

result of deconversions from Christianity is hard to calculate, but according to one commentator, the “vast majority” of the nones “are ex-Christians, and most are under the age of 35.”<sup>23</sup> On top of that, for every convert to Christianity, there are four deconverts from Christianity who identify as religious nones.<sup>24</sup> What this tells us is that a good number of religious nones are not individuals who were raised in secular homes or inevitably drifted away from a nominal faith that they were only weakly attached to. Many nones are deconverts—those who have evaluated the Christian faith, found it to be wanting, and deconverted from it. It is these individuals who I am focused on in this book.

Deconversion is a type of religious transition. The process has been identified by a handful of different terms. Some of the more common terms are *dropping out*, *apostasy*, *faith exit*, and *religious disaffiliation*. Although the essence of what constitutes deconversion is fuzzy, there is enough overlap among the terms to make sense of what they mean. In each case, they involve the rejection of religious beliefs and disengagement from a religious community. In this book, the term *deconversion* refers to the rejection of Christian beliefs, disengagement from a Christian community, and having no religious affiliation.

Some might wonder if adding “none” to the definition confuses two different religious transitions: “deconversion from” and “conversion to.” The short answer is no, it doesn’t. While there is some truth to the claim that “every conversion to one position is a deconversion from another,” deconversion from a faith tradition to none is not the same as conversion. That’s

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<sup>23</sup> Warner Wallace, “Young Christians Are Leaving the Church—Here’s Why,” *Fox News*, September 9, 2018, <https://www.foxnews.com/opinion/young-christians-are-leaving-the-church-heres-why>.

<sup>24</sup> Cathy Lynn Grossman, “Christians Drop, ‘Nones’ Soar in New Religion Portrait,” *USA Today*, May 12, 2015, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2015/05/12/christians-drop-nones-soar-in-new-religion-portrait/27159533/>.

because there are a number of differences that characterize transitioning from a faith tradition and becoming a none that are quite different from converting to a faith tradition and becoming a believer. For example, conversion to a faith tradition nearly always includes adopting a comprehensive set of doctrines and becoming embedded in a religious community. That is not the case when one becomes a none, which lacks a comprehensive set of doctrines and an identifiable community.<sup>25</sup> Likewise, conversion to a religious faith is usually accompanied by both a sense of choice and a sense of great gain. Believers choose to become Christians—it is an act of the will, a commitment to a faith system that provides them with great spiritual gain. Not so with deconversion. Deconverts generally do not choose to leave their faith but find themselves having lost their faith. When this happens, it is not often immediately accompanied by a sense of gain, but of deep loss, both personally and socially.<sup>26</sup> There are more differences between deconversion and conversion, but for now, I trust that the point has been made. Deconversion is its own unique experience.

### **Anatomy Lesson**

I remember in high school dissecting frogs in biology class. The purpose of the assignment was to learn about the anatomy of reptiles. We would identify and then cut out the various organs, muscles, and skeletal parts of the frog and pin them to a tray with prefixed labels. It was both interesting and disgusting at the same time. Little did I know at the time that, in doing my dissection, I stood in a long line of scientists interested in understanding the anatomy of living things. The study of anatomy goes as far back as at least ancient Greece. Born in 335 BC,

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<sup>25</sup> Lori Fazzino, “Leaving the Church behind: Applying a Deconversion Perspective to Evangelical Exit Narratives,” *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 29, no. 2 (2014): 249–66.

<sup>26</sup> More will be said below about the positive impact of losing faith.

Herophilus of Chalcedon is often credited as the father of ancient anatomical study. He is one of the first people, if not the first, to complete systematic dissections for the purpose of understanding the makeup of the human body. He also carried out autopsies in order to chart the course of disease. His research shed new and important light on the brain, the eye, the reproductive organs, and the nervous system.

But Herophilus's work, as important as it was, didn't provide a comprehensive account of human anatomy. It moved the needle forward, but a complete picture of human anatomy was still lacking. That is until Andreas Vesalius came along. Vesalius, born in 1514 in Brussels, Belgium, began his academic career studying the humanities, but he eventually changed course and studied medicine at the University of Paris. It was there where he became enamored with human anatomy. Upon graduation and taking up a teaching position, Vesalius revolutionized the study of anatomy. Until that time, anatomy was taught primarily by studying the classical texts of ancient authors. Vesalius, however, was more hands-on. His preferred method was to have students dissect cadavers themselves. In 1543, he published his groundbreaking work, *On the Fabric of the Human Body*. It was the first comprehensive anatomical text based on the findings of firsthand accounts and illustrations of dissections. It even included three-dimensional models of organs. Vesalius had produced the first comprehensive anatomical account of the human body. His account was not the last word on the subject. There was much more to be discovered, and those who followed in his footsteps have done just that.

The study of deconversion can be compared to the state of affairs when Herophilus wrote his works on anatomy. Just as he studied important anatomical aspects of the human body and provided insight on them, so too have researchers provided some insight on the whys and hows of deconversion. But like Herophilus, they have yet to produce a comprehensive account of the

subject as a whole. What is needed is a work along the lines of Vesalius, a comprehensive account of deconversion, not just studies on its various parts. While I make no claims to be the Vesalius of deconversion, the book you hold in your hands is my attempt to provide a more comprehensive account of deconversion than has previously existed. It is not a study on one aspect of the loss of faith, but an anatomy of deconversions as a whole.

### **Says Who?**

The best way to discover the whys and hows of deconversion is to ask former Christians to share their stories. So, for several years, that's just what I did. I conducted in-depth interviews with individuals that shed light on the nature of their deconversions. In doing so, I gained insight as to why they lost their faith, the process of losing their faith, strategies that they used to mitigate the negative consequences of deconversion, and the various contexts within which their deconversions took place.

I interviewed roughly an equal number of men and women from across the United States. Their ages ranged from early twenties to midfifties, and all had identified as a Christian for varying lengths of time. Some were believers for only a few years, others for several decades. Each held beliefs that placed them within the broad scope of evangelical Christianity, which I define as including a conversion experience, a high view of the Bible as God's Word, a belief that salvation is mediated only through Jesus, and the belief that sharing the gospel is important. The group included a former seminary student, former pastors, a former church council member, a former worship leader, a former church intern, and former amateur apologists. The journey to unbelief for some was quick, almost instantaneous, while for others it took a number of years. Some experienced emotional difficulties as they let go of their faith, but most found it easy.

In order to understand and provide a robust portrait of deconversion, I had to first identify criteria by which I could identify former believers. There are many different sets of criteria that I could have chosen, but I settled on the following:

1. They had to have made a personal decision to follow Jesus Christ at one time.
2. They had to have been a member of an evangelical or fundamentalist church.
3. They had to have defected both institutionally and ideologically from Christianity. By this, I mean they must no longer accept that the fundamental beliefs of Christianity are true, and they must no longer attend a church.
4. They must identify as an unbeliever, which means they no longer affirm the claim that Christianity is true.

The individuals who met the criteria came from evangelical and fundamentalist church backgrounds from across the country and from varying degrees of conservatism, both in doctrine and in practice. For the purpose of this book, conservative evangelicals are the least conservative in doctrine and practice, compared to the other two (fundamentalists and hybrids of conservative evangelicalism and fundamentalism). Conservative evangelicals are primarily conservative when it comes to what they believe regarding the essentials of the faith. They are conservative in that they affirm the traditional doctrines of the historic Christian faith. Conservative evangelicals, at their best, tend to espouse an attitude of charity to other believers who differ on secondary and tertiary issues, but they stand firm on what they believe to be the essential teachings of the Bible. Typically, conservative evangelicals are ideologically to the right of popular culture when it comes to controversial social issues such as gender roles, the definition of marriage, and the legalization of marijuana. Practically speaking, conservative evangelicals espouse a mild separation from what is often called “the world,” the system of thought and behavior that is out

of sync with the teachings of the Bible and exemplified in the fashions of the current age. But conservative evangelicals are more accepting of consuming alcohol, going to movies, and styles of dress than their fundamentalist cousins. They seek to build bridges with the surrounding culture in order to reach it, and they are not afraid of incorporating various pragmatic means to do so.

At the opposite end of the spectrum are the fundamentalists. Fundamentalism arose in the early part of the twentieth century in response to challenges aimed at both the existence of God and the trustworthiness of the Bible. Characterized as a reactionary movement, theologian Roger Olson defines fundamentalism as follows:

The distinctive hallmarks of post-1925 fundamentalism are 1) adding to those essentials of Christianity non-essentials such as premillennial eschatology, 2) “biblical separation” as the duty of every Christian to refuse fellowship with people who call themselves Christians but are considered doctrinally or morally impure, 3) a chronically negative and critical attitude toward culture including non-fundamentalist higher education, 4) emphatic anti-evolution, anti-communist, anti-Catholic and anti-ecumenical attitudes and actions (including elevation of young earth creationism and American exceptionalism as markers of authentic Christianity), 5) emphasis on verbal inspiration and technical inerrancy of the Bible as necessary for real Christianity (including exclusion of all biblical criticism and, often, exclusive use of the KJV), and 6) a general tendency to require adherence to traditional lifestyle norms (hair, clothes, entertainment, sex roles, etc.).<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Roger Olson, “What Distinguishes Evangelical from Fundamentalist?” *My Evangelical Arminian Theological Musings* (blog), April 19, 2012, <https://www.patheos.com/blogs/rogereolson/2012/04/what-distinguishes-evangelical-from-fundamentalist/>.

The third group that emerged from the interviews was a hybrid of the conservative evangelicals and the fundamentalists. Some of the former Christians who shared their stories with me had church experiences that were evangelically conservative but had fundamentalist tendencies. This third group was predominantly characterized by the traits of conservative evangelicals with various strains of fundamentalism detectable in their stories.

Table 1.1 identifies the age, gender, location, and church typology of each participant.

Table 1.1  
*Participant Demographics*

<b>Name</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Location</b>	<b>Church</b>
Anne	30–35	Female	Las Vegas, NV	CEF
Charlene	40–45	Female	Richmond, VA	CEF
Christopher	30–35	Male	Fullerton, CA	CEF
Cindy	45–50	Female	Simi Valley, CA	CEF
Dale	30–35	Male	Seattle, WA	CE
Dave	30–35	Male	Garland, TX	F
Derek	30–35	Male	Fort Smith, AK	F
Donald	25–30	Male	Walnut, CA	CE
Douglas	40–45	Male	San Francisco, CA	CE
Frank	40–45	Male	Grove City, PA	CE
Jill	40–45	Female	San Francisco, CA	CE
Kristen	35–40	Female	Seattle, WA	CEF
Kyle	25–30	Male	Irvine, CA	CE
Lauren	35–40	Female	Las Vegas, NV	CE
Marcus	20–25	Male	Los Angeles, CA	CE
Martin	40–45	Male	Las Vegas, NV	CEF
Mitch	20–25	Male	Irvine, CA	CEF
Rachel	50–55	Female	Durango, CO	F
Sam	50–55	Male	Durango, CO	CEF
Steve	25–30	Male	Nashville, TN	F
Shelley	45–50	Female	Seattle, WA	CEF
Tim	50–55	Male	Fargo, ND	F
Trina	40–45	Female	Los Angeles, CA	F
Wayne	35–40	Male	Houston, TX	CE

*Legend:* CEF = conservative evangelical with fundamentalist tendencies, F = fundamentalist, CE = conservative evangelical

Since writing my doctoral dissertation on the subject of deconversion, I have read hundreds of deconversion “testimonies” and have continued to engage in both the academic study of faith exit and informal discussions with former believers.<sup>28</sup> As I have done so, my understanding has grown. I now have a better insight into the major reasons why people lose their faith, what the deconversion process is, what experiences set up believers for a crisis of faith, and what the impact of deconverting is. As a result, I have come to the conclusion that there is good reason to hope that we can avert the kind of crisis that often leads to the loss of faith. Preventing deconversion isn’t simply a matter of having good answers to hard questions, nor is it the result of doing church the “right” way. It is more complicated than that, but it is possible. In this book, my goals are to:

- Provide you with a comprehensive understanding of the reasons, process, background conditions, and impact of deconversion
- Offer you insights on how we can avoid setting up believers for a crisis of faith that can lead to a loss of faith
- Provide suggestions on how to come alongside those in the throes of a serious faith crisis and how to provide them with helpful guidance in order to avert spiritual disaster

### **The Way Ahead**

I invite you to keep reading and investigating the anatomy of deconversion. Join me in thinking about a daunting challenge that everyone in ministry will eventually have to face. In doing so, I

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<sup>28</sup> John Marriott, *A Recipe For Disaster: Four Ways Churches and Parents Prepare Individuals to Lose Their Faith and How They Can Instill a Faith That Endures* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2018).

believe you will come away with a greater understanding of the phenomenon, become aware of the mistakes made by well-meaning Christians that often set up believers for a crisis of faith, and become better equipped to help those who are clinging to faith.