

Chapter 1

A Tale of Two Christians

*A man is like a novel: until the very last page
you don't know how it will end.*

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Leap of Faith

ON A WARM EVENING in Gothenburg, Sweden, in August of 1995, Jonathan Edwards sprinted down the triple jump runway and leapt into history. That evening, he shattered the world record in the triple jump, not once but twice, and in the process broke the 60-foot barrier with a jump of 18.29 meters. It was unbelievable, a superhuman performance. Edwards immediately became the toast of the athletics world. The International Amateur Athletics Federation, the governing body of track and field, named him Track and Field Male Athlete of the Year, and the BBC honored him as Sports Personality of the Year. But the British press took note of something else about Edwards that they found almost as fascinating as his athletic accomplishments—the level of commitment he had to his Christian faith.

Growing up the son of an Anglican vicar and a very devout mother, Edwards adopted the faith of his parents at an early age. At six years old, he gave his life to Christ. Edwards's mother, Jill, recalled, "With all the children, we read the Bible to them at night and prayed until they were old enough to read it for themselves. One evening, Jonathan asked a question and I said to him, 'You need to have asked Jesus to come into your life for that to be true.' Jonathan said, 'Oh, I've done that. I did that the other day.'"¹ So began

1. Folley, *A Time to Jump*, 34.

Jonathan Edwards's journey of faith, a faith that would be the guiding force for every area of his life, including athletics.

Being raised in a devoutly Christian home meant that Jonathan was subject to his parents' religious convictions. One of the convictions that his parents firmly adhered to was their belief that Sunday was a day of rest. As such, they were staunchly against playing games, watching television, or even cooking food on what they considered "the Sabbath." Of course, that also meant any sporting event that happened to be on Sunday, Jonathan could not take part in.

Just as Edwards had embraced his parents' Christian faith as a child, he naturally accepted their belief about the sacredness of Sunday as well. As he matured into adulthood, his religious commitment deepened and formed the core of his identity. Although he did change some of the beliefs he inherited from his parents, he continued to believe that Sunday was a day of rest. Though it would mean that he would miss out on chances to further his athletic success, Edwards's commitment to his conviction was resolute. So firm was he, that he wouldn't compromise even though it might have cost him the opportunity to compete on the world's largest stage. In 1988, Edwards passed up an opportunity to qualify for the Seoul Olympics because the trials were held on a Sunday. He said at the time:

I see my Christian life as the most important thing, and I realize that I have to make certain sacrifices . . . I was brought up in a Christian family and happen to believe the Sabbath is holy. I feel this has given me a chance to demonstrate the sincerity of my Christian beliefs and to show other people just how important Christianity is . . . Athletics is not everything to me, but my faith is.²

Although he eventually was named to the team by the British Athletic Federation and competed in the Seoul Olympics, three years later he would sacrifice his hope of athletic glory for his beliefs. In 1991, he chose not to compete in the triple jump at the World Championships in Tokyo because it was being contested on Sunday.

After winning the World Championship in Gothenburg and smashing the world record, he became an instant celebrity. But, the British press wasn't quite sure what to do with him, as Edwards was more comfortable in the athletes' village playing his guitar and leading worship choruses for the other Christian athletes than speaking to reporters about his athletic accomplishments. Edwards was the real deal. He "walked the talk" and he "talked the walk." He was the closest thing to Eric Liddell, the beloved Scotsman

2. Folley, *A Time to Jump*, 57–58.

and Olympic track and field champion who refused to run on Sunday, that Great Britain had seen since Eric Liddell himself. In a country relentless in digging up dirt on its celebrities, it was no small thing that the British press seemed as impressed with the character of Edwards's life as they were with his athletic exploits.

Four years later in 2000 in Sydney, he won the crown jewel of track and field glory, the gold medal at the Olympics. He followed that up with another gold medal at the World Championships in 2001 held in Edmonton, Alberta, Canada. But, as the saying goes, all good things must come to an end, and in 2003, Edwards, the greatest triple jumper in history, retired. No one else even comes close. He was Olympic, World, European, and Commonwealth Games champion. He not only was the world record holder, but also had five of the six longest jumps in history.

After retirement from athletics, Edwards transitioned into a second career as a television personality working mainly for the BBC as a sports commentator. However, it was his role as the host of the BBC's "Songs of Praise" program that elevated him to the status of a national Christian personality. Debuting in 1961, "Songs of Praise" is one of the longest running television programs of its kind in the world and is the BBC's flagship religious broadcast. As host, Edwards was one of the most famous Christians in all of Great Britain.

Today, Jonathan Edwards is an atheist. In February of 2007, Edwards announced that he had lost his faith. In an interview with *The Daily Mail* he said, "I just stopped believing in God."³ Not only had he stopped believing in God, he removed himself from the Christian community. "I don't go to church anymore, not at all,"⁴ he revealed. Astonishingly, he claimed, "I don't miss my faith. In many ways I feel more settled and happier in myself without it."⁵ Being a Christian had been the core of who Jonathan Edwards was. His faith had been of greater importance to him than fame, athletic success, or wealth. How was it that someone who was willing to miss both the Olympics and the World Championships out of his fidelity to Christ could just stop believing in him? But he had. The face of Christianity in Great Britain had deconverted.

What explains why a highly successful, famous athlete like Jonathan Edwards would renounce his belief in Christ, something that was so dear to him for his entire life? Some will suggest that it was his success that contributed to his loss of faith. While it's conceivable that such a thing could happen,

3. Daily Mail, "I've Lost My Faith," line 9.

4. Daily Mail, line 11.

5. Daily Mail, lines 14–15.

in the case of Edwards it doesn't seem likely. Edwards's success peaked in 1995, and he did not lose his faith until 2007, four years after he retired from athletics. If success is to blame, it had a long gestation period, taking over twelve years before it birthed unbelief in his heart. Perhaps it was the opposite of success, an experience of failure, that caused him to apostatize? But that explanation is even more unlikely. Edwards knew what failure and disappointment were like long before he had success on the track. He had gone through periods of illness that sidelined him from competing, missed out on participating at the World Championships, and went through bouts of bad jumping, and yet none of that caused him to even question his faith, let alone jettison it. If the above explanations don't answer the question of why Jonathan Edwards lost his faith, what does? What could possibly cause one of the most famous Christians in England to become one of the most famous atheists in England?

Daniels in the Skeptics' Den

On the edge of the Sahara Desert in the country of Niger, live the Daza people. The Daza are a nomadic group that has traditionally lived by herding cattle, goats, and camels. While some individuals live in towns, most Daza continue to live as they have for hundreds of years, in tents near pasture for their animals. The Daza are not a large people group, numbering approximately 500,000. All in all, the Daza are easy to overlook. So what was it that caused Ken Daniels to leave the comforts of his home in North Carolina and move to Niger in order to connect with them? It was the fact that none of the Daza had ever heard the gospel. Ken Daniels was committed to changing that by doing whatever it took to bring the good news of God's plan of salvation to them.

Growing up in Ethiopia as the son of missionaries, Ken Daniels knew what a life of committed service to Christ looked like. His father, a Baptist pastor, traveled to Ethiopia in the early 1960s to work as a construction engineer for a major missions organization. It was there that he met Ken's mother, who was also a missionary. She began her missionary career as a nurse riding through the mountains of Ethiopia to treat the needy. She led Ken to faith when he was four years old. Ken recalled:

One of my earliest memories is of a frightening nighttime thunderstorm when I was four while on furlough in California. I called to my mother, who came and comforted me, assured me Jesus would protect us, and invited me to ask Jesus into my heart. Trustingly, I prayed a prayer to accept Jesus as my

personal savior. I don't know how much this decision affected my life at such an early age—I couldn't claim a dramatic conversion from a profligate life, though I did understand I was a sinner and needed to accept Jesus's sacrifice to take away my sins so I could be with God.⁶

Despite making a profession at such a young age, over the years, Ken's life began to show signs of what looked like spiritual fruit. When he was only ten years old, he read through the entire New Testament and half of the Old, a feat many adult believers have never managed to accomplish. But, it was an experience during ninth grade that would change his life. After watching the missionary movie *Peace Child*, Daniels was convinced that God was calling him into missionary service to an unreached people group. Further, he believed that God not only wanted him to take the gospel to those who had never heard it, but that he should translate the Bible into their language. And so, in the ninth grade, Ken committed himself to that end.

In his remaining years of high school, he distinguished himself as a serious Christian who demonstrated a zeal for God that was unlike that of any of his fellow students. After graduation, he attended seminary to receive further training and then joined the mission organization Wycliffe Bible Translators. However, before heading to the mission field he was required to take linguistics courses in North Dakota and Texas. With those behind him, he and his wife Sherry left for Belgium where they would learn to speak French, the official language of Niger. After stops in Switzerland and Cameroon for more training, they finally arrived in Niger in 1997.

For fifteen years, Ken Daniels had been committed to his goal of bringing the gospel to an unreached people group. In the process, he earned two college degrees, spent time in two language schools at opposite ends of the country, and served in various ministries in the local churches he attended. Seven years into their marriage, he and Sherry had lived in eighteen different places for at least one month or more in six different countries. They traveled extensively throughout Canada and the United States to raise financial support despite having to do so while pregnant or with toddlers in tow. When they arrived in Niger, they had three children in cloth diapers at the same time, and running water was unavailable during the daytime.

What would motivate someone to endure such a long and arduous journey to a place that offered no financial reward, was devoid of western comforts, and would likely produce so little fruit for his labor? To Ken Daniels the answer was simple:

6. Daniels, *Why I Believed*, 18.

On the basis of Paul's theology, we believed that those who die without hearing and responding to the gospel will not be saved: "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved." How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them? And how can they preach unless they are sent? As it is written, "How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!"⁷

Ken Daniels counted the cost and concluded that the benefit of saving souls outweighed whatever it would cost him. The rigors of study, the sacrificing of western comforts, the sense of alienation that comes with being in a radically new and different culture, and the toll it would take on his wife and children were worth it. In light of eternity, what isn't worth sacrificing in order to bring the good news to those who have never heard it? And so, after years of preparation, planning, and sacrifice, Ken Daniels began his work as a Wycliffe missionary, intent on translating the Bible into the language of the Daza people. However, Daniels never did translate the Bible for the Daza because before the missionary had an opportunity to do so, he had come to the conclusion that the Bible was not the word of God and that the story it told about God was untrue. Ken Daniels, a committed believer from the time he was four, had lost his faith and renounced Christ. He had deconverted. Today he lives back in the United States, is employed as a computer programmer, and identifies as an atheist-leaning agnostic.

How could such a thing happen? Ken Daniels didn't grow up in an unbelieving home that eventually wooed him back to his unbelieving roots. On the contrary, he was thoroughly socialized into the Christian faith by committed parents. He didn't go off to college and lose his faith because of the teaching of an atheist professor. Instead, he went to a Christian college and seminary. He didn't deconvert in a bar in Amsterdam, but on the mission field serving God. Nor is there any hint of sin or moral failing in his life that might prove to be the explanation for why he lost his faith. Yet, that is exactly what happened. How does a committed missionary, a man who was willing to sacrifice so much for the cause of Christ, lose his faith?

Although the stories of Jonathan Edwards and Ken Daniels are shocking, sadly they are not all that uncommon. People who once professed allegiance to Jesus can and do renounce their faith. In fact, Edwards and Daniels are just the tip of the iceberg when it comes to individuals who once identified as committed Christians and now no longer do. Former

7. Daniels, *Why I Believed*, 27.

pastors, missionaries, worship leaders, evangelists, apologists, and others once in full-time Christian ministry today identify as deconverts. This raises two questions: Why does deconversion happen, and what can be done to prevent it?

A Lost Cause?

There are many reasons offered by both deconverts and faithful believers for why individuals leave the faith, yet none rise to the level of being an actual cause of deconversion itself. As Phil Zuckerman has pointed out, subjective reasons for the loss of faith of an individual are not necessarily objective causes that account for the phenomenon of deconversion. While the reasons individual apostates give for *their* deconversion are causes for *them*, they are not necessarily objective factors that would cause anyone else to deconvert. Most people who experience problems with the Bible, or disappointment with God do not eventually deconvert. Zuckerman adds, “The best that one can safely conclude when it comes to the subjective reasons . . . is that they may increase the likelihood of a person’s eventual rejection of religion.”⁸ In other words, there is no single issue that can be identified that necessarily leads to deconversion.

Cause for Concern

Where then does this leave us? If there are no identifiable, objective causes of deconversion, it seems all we are left with are innumerable personal reasons that may increase the likelihood of one particular individual deconverting. The task of addressing each and every possible reason that any given individual may encounter that will prove lethal to his faith becomes impossible. For every individual there can be equally as many unique reasons capable of sinking their faith. If this is the case, it leaves little hope of discovering a theory that can meaningfully respond to the problem of deconversion in general. That’s tragic, because failing to do so will only result in an increase in deconversions, which are already occurring at record rates. Studies show that people who once identified as followers of Jesus are deconverting from their faith, leaving the church, and no longer identifying as Christians in record numbers and at record rates. The data indicates the fact that we are on the verge of a deconversion epidemic.

8. Zuckerman, *Faith No More*, 165.

In 2001, the Southern Baptist Convention reported they are losing between 70 and 88 percent of their youth after their freshman year in college. Of SBC teenagers involved in church youth groups, 70 percent stopped attending church within two years of their high school graduation.⁹ The following year, the Southern Baptist Council on Family Life also reported that 88 percent of children in evangelical [Baptist] homes leave church by the age of eighteen.¹⁰

The Barna Group announced in 2006 that 61 percent of young adults who were involved in church during their teen years were now spiritually disengaged.¹¹ 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 university will have left the faith four years after entering college.¹² 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.¹³

In May 2009, Robert Putnam and David Campbell presented research from their book *American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us* to the Pew Forum study on "Religion and Public Life," in which they claimed 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 between 5 and 10 percent only a generation ago.¹⁴ That same year, the Fuller Youth Institute's study "The College Transition Project" discovered that current data seems "to suggest that about 40 to 50 percent of students in youth groups struggle to retain their faith after graduation."¹⁵

The 2010 UCLA study "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.¹⁶ 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

9. Pinckney, "We Are Losing Our Children," lines 4-5.

10. Walker, "Family Life Council Says It's Time to Bring Family Back to Life," line 4.

11. The Barna Group, "Most Twentysomethings Put Christianity on the Shelf."

12. Kingsriter, "Is the Lower Cost Worth the High Price?"

13. Lifeway Research, "Reasons 18- to 22-Year-Olds Drop Out of Church."

14. Dyck, *Generation Ex-Christian*, 40.

15. Fuller Youth Institute, "The Sticky College Campuses," lines 13-14.

16. Astin and Astin, "Spirituality in Higher Education."

answers they gave four years later when they were seniors. What they found was shocking. On some campuses as high as 59 percent of students no longer described themselves as “born again.”¹⁷

Given what we know regarding the loss of faith among American young people, it will come as no surprise that America’s Class of 2018 cares less about their religious identity than any previous college freshman class in the last forty years. A third study by UCLA found that students across the U.S. are disassociating themselves from religion in record numbers. “The American Freshman” study reveals that nearly 28 percent of the 2014 incoming college freshman do not identify with any religious faith. That is a sharp increase from 1971, when only 16 percent of freshman said they did not identify with a specific religion.¹⁸

Those are scary statistics, and they tell us something that we ignore to our peril. Unless the church is willing to take a hard look at why so many young, college-aged people are losing their faith and leaving the church, it will lose an entire generation. Without a general theory that successfully accounts for deconversion, we will be left unequipped to respond.

Cooking Up a Storm

A Recipe for Disaster maintains that there is a general theory that sheds light on the loss of faith. I maintain the best way to understand deconversion is not to seek specific reasons for deconversion, but rather to think of it as the product of a combination of factors that together often lead to deconversion. The subjective, personal reasons often cited by former believers for their loss of faith may be necessary but they are by no means sufficient to account for their deconversion. These reasons are only one factor in a complex mixture that often results in apostasy, but others are needed too. A helpful way to think about it is to consider the process of deconversion as similar to that of baking a cake. Baking a cake requires three things: a combination of specific ingredients, the manner in which the ingredients are prepared, and the environment in which the prepared ingredients are baked. The same is true for deconversions. Like a cake, deconversions are the result of particular ingredients, a method of preparation, and an environment where the prepared ingredients are baked. In everyday terms, we refer to this combination of ingredients, preparation, and environment as a recipe. In the case of deconversion, it is *A Recipe for Disaster*.

17. UCLA Graduate School of Education and Information Systems, “The College Student Survey.”

18. Eagan, et al., “The American Freshman.”

Ingredients

Ingredients supply the raw material for a recipe. Without them there is no final product. Substitute a different ingredient and you will get a different outcome because many ingredients have a special function in the baking process. For example, baking powder—the combination of baking soda and acid—is responsible for making the batter or dough rise. Leave out the baking powder and you will have a very flat cake. *A Recipe for Disaster* also has important ingredients as can be seen in the stories of Edwards and Daniels.

On the surface, Edwards's and Daniels's journeys to apostasy appear quite different. One was a wealthy, famous athlete living out his faith under the scrutiny of the white-hot spotlight of the British press; the other, a relatively poor linguist, known only to family and friends, laboring in obscurity in the middle of Africa. But, appearances are deceiving. Their individual journeys out of the faith have much more in common than what we can see on the surface. When one looks deeper, it becomes clear that both deconversions include the same five ingredients, which are all provided by the individual deconverts themselves.

Ingredient 1: Deconverts Tend to Have Above Average Intelligence.

First, both Edwards and Daniels are quite intelligent. Had Jonathan Edwards not succeeded at athletics, he may have had a future as a scientist. Growing up in England, he attended private school, where he was at the top of his class in most subjects. He earned top grades in math, physics, chemistry, Latin, French, and German and was rewarded with admission to the University of Durham, where he studied physics. After graduation, he worked in the cytogenetics laboratory at the Royal Victoria Infirmary in Newcastle, analyzing chromosomes. He also was a keen Bible student who intended to attend seminary after his athletics career ended. Likewise, Ken Daniels is very bright. He graduated from Le Tourneau University with a dual degree in computer science and engineering. He then attended graduate school studying theology and after that, two language schools in order to learn to read the Bible in the original languages. Mastering enough Hebrew and Greek to translate the Bible into a language that one has to first learn isn't a job for a sub-par intellect! Today he works as a software developer.

That both Edwards and Daniels are bright isn't surprising. Studies show that atheists in general and deconverts in particular tend to be quite

intelligent.¹⁹ Psychologists at the University of Rochester conducted a meta-analysis of sixty-three studies on the relationship between religion and intelligence dating back to 1928. They discovered that fifty-three of those studies found that the more intelligent a person is, the less likely he is to be religious. Only ten of the studies found that highly intelligent individuals are more likely to also be religious. The explanation offered by the researchers for the negative relationship between intelligence and religiosity was that intelligent people believe that “religious beliefs are irrational, not anchored in science, not testable and, therefore, unappealing.”²⁰ Testimonies of deconverts overwhelmingly confirm that explanation. Over and over again, assertions that Christianity is “unscientific” and “contradicted by sound reason” appear in deconversion narratives as catalysts for the loss of faith.

In 1921, Lewis Terman, a psychologist at Stanford University, began a study to examine the development and characteristics of highly intelligent children throughout the course of their lives. To do so, he created a cohort of 1500 students with IQs above 135 at the age of ten.²¹ Data was collected on the students throughout their entire lives. Information on matters of college education, income, career, marital status, number of children, and several other categories was amassed over the course of ninety years. In the process, the study achieved the status of being the longest running longitudinal study in the world. As of 2011, participants were still being studied, although the number had dwindled down to only a few remaining individuals. Terman’s study has provided other researchers a wealth of data on a multitude of categories related to highly intelligent individuals. Two researchers, Robin Sears at Columbia University and Michael McCullough at the University of Miami, took it upon themselves to review the data as it related to the level of religiosity exhibited by the highly intelligent participants of Terman’s study.^{22 23} They each concluded that the members of the cohort turned out to be significantly less religious than the general public despite the fact that over 60 percent of the students reported being raised in “very strict” or “considerably” religious environments.²⁴ Raised religiously, the highly intelligent children dropped their religious beliefs at some point in later life at a much higher rate than those of average intelligence.

19. Intelligent here means: possessing the ability to reason, plan, solve problems, and think abstractly.

20. Bates, “Atheists Have Higher IQs,” lines 19–20.

21. Terman and Oden, *Genetic Studies of Genius*.

22. Holahan and Sears, *The Gifted Group*.

23. McCullough and Brion, “The Varieties of Religious Development,” 78–89.

24. Terman and Oden, *Genetic Studies of Genius*, 116.

The Hunter College Elementary School for the intellectually gifted, in New York, conducted a similar study.²⁵ Graduates of the school between thirty and fifty years of age with IQs over 140 were surveyed about their religious commitments. The study uncovered that only 16 percent of the intellectually gifted graduates had maintained any religious faith by the time they had reached middle age. They, like the gifted individuals in Terman's study, had very little use for religion in their lives. Other studies could be cited, but the above are sufficient to make the point that the more intelligent one is, the less likely he is to be a person of faith.

The findings that high intelligence and atheism are related also seem to be true of the relationship between high intelligence and deconversion. Between 1994 and 1995, 4,000 incoming freshmen at two Canadian universities were surveyed concerning their religious beliefs. The purpose of the study was to find those students who identified as either former believers or former atheists and discover what factors played major roles in their religious transitions. One of the more remarkable findings of the study was that deconverts from religion—but not converts *to* religion—typically ranked as above-average students. Moreover, the reasons offered by deconverts to account for their loss of faith were almost always intellectual problems with religious teachings, while converts to religion nearly always cited emotional, rather than intellectual, reasons for adopting religious faith. Of those who deconverted, 65 percent were straight-A students who spoke of being in the top of their classes, being placed in gifted classes, and getting high grades with little work. Thirty percent of deconverts were above average, garnering, B's and B+'s. Only 6 percent were C, or average, students.²⁶

Like the unbelievers in the above studies, deconverts are no slouches when it comes to being smart. They may not have been geniuses like those in the Terman study, but they were above average in their intelligence. Although it may not be true for all deconverts, in general, atheists—including those who were once believers but have renounced their faith—are above average in intelligence.

Ingredient 2: Possessing the Personality Trait of Being Open to New Experiences.

One of the central areas of psychology over the past century has been the development of personality theory. Personality theories are models that seek to shed light on the psychological structure of individuals. Although there

25. Sobotnik et al., *Genius Revisited*, 6.

26. Altemeyer and Hunsberger, *Amazing Conversions*, 121–22.

are numerous theories, the idea that there are five personality traits that are largely assumed to be inherited and remain stable over time is shared by many personality psychologists. These traits play a major role in determining who we are as individuals. Interestingly, it turns out deconverts, when tested, consistently score high in one of the five traits. That trait is *openness to experience*. Those who score high in *openness to experience* tend to be individuals who are intellectually curious, possess aesthetic sensitivity, and often hold non-conformist attitudes. Whereas those open to new experiences enjoy novelty, variety, and unpredictability, those who score low regarding *openness to experience* favor routines, predictability, and structure. Such individuals find comfort in the traditional beliefs of their community and are unlikely to question or change them.

Research shows that deconverts are willing to seek out experiences and ask questions about the world and their faith even though it may lead to actively questioning their beliefs.²⁷ Not only are they willing to seek experiences and ask questions, they're willing to seek answers from sources that are not disposed to confirming their faith. Individuals open to new experiences want to "hear both sides," as it were. Those who remain faithful believers, on the other hand, are inclined only to seek answers from sources that will confirm what they already believe. They seek out pastors, religious authorities, and parents but do not look to sources outside of the safe confines of their faith tradition.²⁸

Openness to experience is a major contributing factor in deconversion. There is ample evidence that being open to new experiences negatively affects belief in God. For example, a study by Harvard researchers found that those who score high in *openness to experience* are less likely to believe in God.²⁹ And a survey conducted by the Center for Inquiry concluded that being open to experience is the single most important factor that distinguished those who considered themselves religious from those who did not.³⁰ Heinz Streib of the University of Bielefeld in Germany, the world's foremost authority on religious deconversion, claims that his research shows that openness to experience, more than any other psychological trait, is the most significant factor in predicting deconversion.³¹

27. Altemeyer and Hunsberger, *Amazing Conversions*, 18–19.

28. Altemeyer and Hunsberger, *Amazing Conversions*, 18–19.

29. Shenhav et al., "Divine Intuition: Cognitive Style Influences Belief in God," 423–28.

30. Galen, "Profiles of the Godless," 41–45.

31. Streib et al., *Deconversion*, 92.

Not surprisingly, there is a strong negative correlation between *openness to experience* and *Religious Fundamentalism*. It makes sense that those scoring high on the Openness to Experience scale would likely be unsatisfied with fundamentalist and conservative religions that maintain their teachings are absolute truth and thus unchanging. They would also naturally bristle at the claim by fundamentalists that there is no value in dialoguing with other religious traditions since they are opposed to the truth of the Bible.³² Their openness to experience would also lead them to re-examine their social, political, and religious values. Additionally, their intellectual curiosity is likely to cause them to investigate the limits of the traditions they were socialized into, in ways that those lacking the trait do not.

What this implies is that even though at one time former believers might have embraced fundamentalist or conservative versions of Christianity, they don't seem to be fundamentalists by nature. Though they may embrace the faith for long periods of time— usually beginning at childhood—eventually who they really are breaks through in a rejection of fundamentalism and the authoritarianism that accompanies it.³³ Because those open to new experiences are willing to question beliefs and exhibit intellectual curiosity, it should come as no surprise that such individuals also place a high value on rational inquiry. Disinclined to accept the Bible as their unquestioned authority, they look to their own reasoning ability as the criterion by which they evaluate truth claims. For some this can deepen their faith, but for others it leads to their undoing.

Though Jonathan Edwards and Ken Daniels have not taken personality tests, I suspect if they did they would score high Openness to Experience. We see evidence of this in their deconversion stories. This comes through in Edwards's life clearly when he retells the story of what first caused him to question his faith. While filming a documentary on the life of the apostle Paul, he was intrigued by the suggestion from liberal scholars that Paul's Damascus Road experience was best explained as an epileptic seizure rather than an authentic religious experience. That suggestion planted the seeds of doubt in Edwards. For the first time, he began to ponder not only the question of Paul's encounter with Jesus, but all of the questions that for years he had been too preoccupied with sports to think about and had just taken for granted on the authority of the Bible.

It was as if my twenty-plus-year career in athletics, I had been suspended in time. I was so preoccupied with training and competing that I didn't have the time or emotional inclination

32. Streib et al., *Deconversion*, 79.

33. Streib et al., *Deconversion*, 79.

to question my beliefs. Sport is simple, with a simple goal and simple lifestyle. I was quite happy in a world populated by my family and close friends, people who shared my belief system. Leaving that world to get involved with television and other projects gave me the freedom to question everything.³⁴

For years, Edwards's intellectual life was in neutral due to his focused concentration on triple jumping. But, once that phase of his life was over, he suddenly found himself open to "question everything." Could it be that his preoccupation with athletics suppressed an aspect of his personality that came to the surface once he had the time? It appears likely. Edwards acknowledges as much when he speaks of the inner turmoil he experienced resulting from his retirement. When Edwards retired, he went through somewhat of an identity crisis.

But when I retired, something happened that took me by complete surprise. I quickly realised that athletics was more important to my identity than I believed possible. I was the best in the world at what I did and suddenly that was not true anymore. With one facet of my identity stripped away, I began to question the others and, from there, there was no stopping. The foundations of my world were slowly crumbling.³⁵

The result of his identity crisis was a wholesale quest to discover who he was and what he really believed. Had he not been open to new experiences, it is likely that he would have continued to neglect such questions, remaining content in his faith. As he searched for answers to his questions, he left the borders of his Christian community, not simply seeking to have his beliefs confirmed by consulting Christian apologists, but he subjected his belief to what he calls "analysis." In the end, he concluded, "When you think about it rationally, it does seem incredibly improbable that there is a God."³⁶

Ken Daniels's journey is very similar to that of Edwards. He too experienced a crisis event that caused him to reconsider and critically analyze the Bible.

My own journey away from Christianity began within as I reflected on the contradictory elements in the Bible, and on the conflict between fundamentalist Christianity and my observations of the real world. It was only after my doubts began that I undertook to read materials written from a skeptical

34. Syed, "I've Never Been Happier," lines 72–78.

35. Syed, "I've Never Been Happier," lines 60–65.

36. Syed, "I've Never Been Happier," lines 85–87.

perspective, and I quickly became struck by the magnitude of the evidence corroborating my initial doubts. Doubt cannot be imposed from the outside; it must begin from within.³⁷

Daniels, like Edwards, was open to subjecting his faith to critical inquiry. His intellectual curiosity led him to question what he believed were contradictory elements in the Bible along with re-evaluating how his faith related to the real world. He was unwilling to ignore what he believed were problems with both the Bible and his Christian experience. Others, less inclined to being open to experience, would likely have shied away from pursuing solutions. Instead they would have likely chosen to trust that there was an answer that supported their faith, if they even noticed such problems in the first place. It is important to note that he locates the catalyst for his journey in his own inquisitive nature when he points out, "Doubt cannot be imposed from the outside; it must begin from within." And, like Edwards, he too subjected solutions to his problems to rational analysis. Instead of looking to Christian authorities alone, he sought insight from a "skeptical perspective" that presented distinctly anti-Christian answers. In deciding the truth, Daniels, like Edwards, was no longer content to submit his reason to a religious authority, such as the Bible, but looked to his own autonomous reason as the best criterion by which to evaluate truth claims.

To summarize, deconverts are characterized by being open to experience. Being so inclined leads them to investigate the claims of their own religious tradition. In seeking answers to the questions they have about their religious tradition, they actively look to those within and without. Not willing to locate authority in external sources such as religious leaders or the Bible, they locate it internally, subjecting the claims of the Bible to the bar of their own reason.

Ingredient 3: A Low Tolerance for Fundamentalist and Right-Wing Authoritarian Attitudes.

Third, as previously mentioned, studies show there exists a strong negative correlation between *openness to experience* and being attracted to both *religious fundamentalism* and *right-wing authoritarianism*.³⁸ The Religious Fundamentalism scale measures a particular style of adhering to religious beliefs that include: 1) there is one set of teachings that is inerrant and reveals the essential unchangeable truth about humanity and God; 2) that this

37. Daniels, *Why I Believed*, 13.

38. Altemeyer and Hunsberger, *Amazing Conversions*; Streib et al., *Deconversion*.

essential truth is fundamentally opposed by forces of evil the righteous must oppose; and 3) that those who believe and follow this truth have a special relationship with God.³⁹ The Religious Fundamentalism scale measures religious openness. Deconverts tend to strongly disagree with the above fundamentalist statements much more than faithful in-tradition believers do.⁴⁰ Deconverts are open to questioning and challenging the narrowness of the above three claims. Conversely, faithful in-tradition believers affirm the unique nature of their faith tradition and maintain that it is both necessary and completely sufficient for securing eternal happiness. Closely related to the Religious Fundamentalism scale is the Right-Wing Authoritarianism scale. The Right-Wing Authoritarianism scale measures three factors: 1) authoritarian submission, defined as a high degree of submission to authorities perceived as legitimate leaders in society; 2) authoritarian aggression, defined as a general aggressiveness directed at others, especially when positively sanctioned by established authorities; and 3) conventionalism, defined as a high degree of adherence to social conventions and cultural traditions.⁴¹ In relation to the Right-Wing Authoritarianism scale, Altemeyer and Hunsberger discovered that former believers had an average score of only 93.7, much lower than the sample mean of 123.8. Most of these scored in the bottom quarter of the overall authoritarianism scores scale. Faithful believers, on the other hand, averaged 173.3, well above the sample mean. Furthermore, half of faithful believers scored as high on the scale.⁴² What these numbers tell us is that former believers are the kind of individuals who are much less inclined to be members of institutions that they perceive as “right-wing authoritarian” in nature. Faithful in-tradition members of conservative Christian churches, however, tend to exhibit an affinity for right-wing authoritarian institutions. Such individuals have been described as “authoritarian followers.” Altemeyer and Hunsberger define authoritarian followers as those who “tend to be the truest believers in their religions, the most faithful church-attenders, the most frequent prayers, the most dutiful Scripture readers.”⁴³ It should be easy to see why those scoring high concerning *openness to experience* will almost certainly have little affinity for religious traditions that they perceive as doctrinally narrow or requiring submission to strong leadership.

39. Streib et al., *Deconversion*, 61.

40. Streib et al., *Deconversion*, 76.

41. Streib et al., *Deconversion*, 61.

42. Altemeyer and Hunsberger, 209.

43. Altemeyer and Hunsberger, 236.

It is unclear whether Edwards and Daniels possess the psychological traits of low tolerance for *religious fundamentalism* and *right-wing authoritarianism*. Their pre-deconversion Christian experience seemed to display a certain amount of tolerance for both. Edwards and Daniels each came out of conservative Christian traditions tainted with fundamentalism and right-wing authoritarianism. They appeared to have felt at home in these traditions, at least for most of their time in them. After abandoning their faith, however, each has made comments that indicate they reject not only their former beliefs but their former way of thinking. Edwards has said about his Christian experience, "I think I was probably quite narrow-minded and fundamental in my views and a bit of a scary person."⁴⁴ He went on to tell Sky News. "I believed that what I believed was the truth. Some of those extremes I feel slightly embarrassed about now."⁴⁵ Daniels, too, expresses criticism with his former way of looking at the world. He criticizes his church for not encouraging him to read more broadly and think critically about his beliefs: "In all my years of faithful church attendance, Bible studies, Christian college, missions training, and seminary, I do not recall one sermon, not one injunction encouraging me to examine my faith critically."⁴⁶ He also is quite clear about his displeasure for fundamentalism, now that he no longer identifies as a Christian.⁴⁷ In contrast to his days as a fundamentalist, he now considers himself a freethinker and has openly criticized a number of fundamentalists and their positions on his blog.⁴⁸ The question is: Does Edwards's and Daniels's intolerance of fundamentalism reveal an aspect of who they were, even as Christians, that lay dormant until they deconverted? Or, is their change of attitude toward their former fundamentalist, authoritarian tradition a result of their loss of faith? Regardless of whether Edwards and Daniels score low on the two measurements, studies show that a prominent personality trait of former believers is that they do consistently score low in their appreciation of *religious fundamentalism* and *right-wing authoritarianism*.

44. Brooke and Turvill, "I've Lost My Faith but I Am Happy," 21–22.

45. Brooke and Turvill, "I've Lost My Faith but I Am Happy," 23–24.

46. Daniels, *Why I Believed*, 66.

47. Daniels, *Why I Believed*, 65–98.

48. www.kwdaniels.com

Ingredient 4: An Inability to Process and Reconcile Difficulties with Their Faith.

In his classic work *Stages of Faith*, James Fowler identified six developmental stages that individuals advance as their faith matures. According to Fowler, faith is the fundamental means by which individuals relate to and engage with the world. Fowler defines faith as the “universal quality of human meaning making.”⁴⁹ In other words, faith describes the underlying meaning making process that all people employ. Faith, then, is the means by which an individual makes sense of the world. As such, all people possess faith and express it by indwelling a story that attempts to make sense of the world. How that faith develops and matures is the focus of Fowler’s project.

Stage 1 generally occurs around preschool. At this stage, ideas about God are largely absorbed from the adults in a youngster’s life. Due to their young age, individuals at this stage cannot think abstractly nor can they distinguish between reality and fantasy. Their faith is the result of being socialized into the rituals of their community; it is not a thought through set of ideas. The second stage begins to develop in school age children. Their faith and beliefs about God are more logical than those of persons in stage 1. They are able to make distinctions between fantasy and reality but will take many of the stories and symbols of their faith very literally. As individuals move into adolescence, they usually transition into stage 3. At this stage, an individual’s belief system is largely taken for granted. That is, they do not realize that their belief system is one of many possible takes on the world. For them, it is just a description of the way things are. Little reflection or critical analysis occurs at stage 3, and authority rests largely with religious teachers. Fowler maintains that most individuals in traditional churches are at and remain at this stage for their entire lives.

Stage 4 is characterized by a more reflective approach to one’s faith. Individuals at stage 4 ask questions about what justifies the teachings and authorities that provide the foundation of their faith. Rather than vesting authority in external sources, the individuals attempt to harmonize and make sense out of discrepancies and apparent contradictions in their faith that they have become aware of. It can be a time of intellectual and emotional upheaval due to unresolved doubt and the insecurity that it generates. It is here that the believer reaches a crisis point. Once he has moved through stage 3 to stage 4, there is no going back to stage 3 and its naiveté, but neither is it possible to remain in the turmoil of stage 4. One must find a way to retain faith and move to the fifth stage or let go of the faith altogether.

49. Fowler, *Stages of Faith*, 31.

For those who manage to progress to stage 5, faith survives but is now marked by an ability to live with the apparent contradictions and ambiguities that stage 4 had raised, without needing a solution to them. Doing so allows an individual to return to a sense of emotional security. However, this time it is with a more authentic personal faith that is more nuanced, able to survive despite the tensions that exist. At stage 5, the believer is capable of living in the gray and not needing the degree of coherence in his faith that was sought at stage 4.

It is clear that Edwards and Daniels managed to progress to stage 4 in the development of their faith. Their stories illustrate that each arrived at the place where they could critically reflect on what they believed. But once at stage 4, they could not overcome the tensions and difficulties that reflecting on their faith commitment produced. Each had serious periods of reflection on what he believed and why, but neither was able to find enough coherence to retain his faith. Neither could they return to the third stage. Since remaining perpetually at the fourth stage is practically unlivable, Edwards and Daniels were ultimately forced to either live perpetually in limbo at stage 4, or renounce their faith. What they could not do was return to the third stage and live according to teachings they no longer found believable. What was it that pushed them towards apostasy and kept them from progressing to stage 5? It has been suggested that a fifth personality trait might be the culprit; a significant number of atheists tend to be more tolerant of ambiguity and uncertainty than religious believers.

Ingredient 5: A High Tolerance of Ambiguity and Uncertainty

A personality trait consistently associated with atheists is that they score higher in tolerance of ambiguity and uncertainty than religious believers.⁵⁰ This has led to the belief among researchers that a person who has low tolerance of ambiguity and uncertainty fits better within a dogmatic religious system. The reason being that dogmatic systems of thought provide nice, neat, black and white answers about complex issues and this is attractive to those with low tolerance for ambiguity. Conversely, those who are more tolerant of ambiguity and uncertainty find such systems of thought confining, simplistic, and unworthy of their allegiance. Therefore, individuals who recognize that life is often not lived in the black and white of dogmatic religious certitude, but rather in the grey of uncertainty are less likely to be able to affirm a system of thinking that requires them to deny the complexities

50. Wink et al., "Religiousness, Spiritual Seeking, and Personality."

that they see. Although there are at present no longitudinal studies that demonstrate this, it is likely that deconverts are by nature more tolerant of ambiguity than those who remain religiously steadfast, rather than it being a personality trait they have acquired since their deconversion.⁵¹ If so, it is reasonable to assume that when such individuals attain Fowler's fourth stage of faith development and become aware of the ambiguity and uncertainty that exists within their faith, they will feel a tension between themselves and the expectations of their religious community. They cannot return to the dogmatism and naiveté of stage 3, but they may either assume that they have to in order to be a "biblical" Christian or at least be expected to by their community. Given their high tolerance for ambiguity and uncertainty, such individuals can perceive their situation as somewhat akin to being presented with an ultimatum; either ignore the ambiguities and uncertainties they have become aware of in their faith system and return to stage 3, or abandon their faith to save their intellectual integrity. At work in the background of this dilemma is the assumption that to be a real or biblical Christian, there is a large body of beliefs and practices that must be affirmed, and affirmed with a great deal of psychological certainty. Unable to do so, given their high degree of tolerance for ambiguity and uncertainty, future deconverts may feel they have no other choice but to abandon a faith they believe they must be certain about.⁵²

51. Saroglou et al., "Values and Religiosity."

52. A recent longitudinal study by Hui et al. (2018) tracking 632 Christians over three years suggests three further "ingredients" that appear to be common to deconverts. What sets the study apart from all others is that it provides information on personality traits and personal values held by individuals who identified as Christians *before* they deconverted. This is important because it allowed researchers to determine if the traits and values of deconverts were preexisting or a result of their loss of faith. No other studies have collected data on individuals both while they were Christians and after they left the faith. All previous studies have only collected data on deconverts after the fact. Doing so leaves open the possibility that the values of former believers are a result of losing one's faith, not a factor in contributing to deconversion. After three years, 188 individuals of the 632 in the study had left their faith and no longer identified as being Christians. The individuals who lost their faith scored higher in valuing power (defined as social status, prestige, and dominance over others), self-determination (understood as autonomy), and stimulation (understood as seeking new and novel experiences, excitement, and life changes). These findings are not surprising, since numerous previous studies have associated nonreligious individuals with the above values. What makes the findings of the study so interesting is that these characteristics are not just consistent with those who are nonreligious, they act as predictors of who will lose faith. Individuals who score high in the above values are more prone to lose their faith than those who score low. Researchers concluded, "In terms of values, although they were still professing their Christian faith, the would-be exiters put less emphasis on conformity, tradition, and benevolence (values that have been espoused by many Christians) and more on self-direction, stimulation, hedonism, achievement, and power. All in all,

What then was it that made it so difficult for Edwards and Daniels to manage to get past the difficulties they encountered at the fourth stage of their faith development? It's impossible to say for sure, but I propose that a clue may lie in the way that Edwards and Daniels were "prepared." In other words, a major factor in their deconversion may be how their families and/or their Christian communities socialized them into the faith. I suggest this because it is clear from stories of other deconverts that the manner in which many have been socialized into the faith made it very difficult to push through to stage 5, leaving only deconversion as a live option.

Preparation

A recipe is more than just a list of ingredients. It also includes instructions on how the ingredients necessary to make the dish are to be prepared. Preparation is as important as the ingredients themselves in the outcome of a recipe. Having the correct ingredients is necessary, but not sufficient, for creating any dish. In order to have the dish be a success, the ingredients need to be prepared correctly. If they aren't, the end result can be anything from a dish that is mildly unappealing to deadly. In Japan, one of the most celebrated delicacies is the puffer fish. However, if not prepared correctly, the puffer fish is lethal. If the fish is not prepared correctly, even a tiny drop of the toxin resident in the skin of the fish can leave diners paralyzed. Fully conscious, they will die of asphyxiation as they lose the ability to breathe. Because the potential for disaster is so great, Japanese chefs must go through extensive training and be officially licensed to prepare it. In order to make sure they have prepared it correctly, they are required to eat a piece of the fish before it is served. But it's not only exotic foods like

the would-be exiters already had a belief and value profile that mimicked more the nonbelievers than the believers." It is easy to see how individuals who once identified as Christians but who highly value their own autonomy, social status, control, and new and novel experiences would not fit well in a religious system that emphasizes obedience, submission, personal sacrifice, and tradition, which are incompatible with pursuing status and power. I have chosen not to include these values in the list of ingredients in the *Recipe for Disaster* for two reasons. First, all of the participants were Chinese citizens with varying degrees of Christian socialization. Some were new converts, others were Christians for a significant time, but little information was provided regarding their church background. I am focused on North American believers from conservative evangelical and fundamentalist church communities. It is unclear at this point whether the findings of Hui et al. (2018) are transferable to the focus of this book. Second, the study has yet to be corroborated by further research. Until they are, the findings, although quite possibly accurate, are at this point speculative. If such turns out to be the case, it will prove to be an important discovery in the list of ingredients that make up *A Recipe for Disaster*.

the puffer fish that require proper preparation, even such mundane foods as rhubarb, kidney beans, and almonds have dire consequences if eaten without being properly prepared.

Reading the narratives of deconverts reveals that not only do they share similar personality traits, but that those ingredients were prepared in such a way that they combined to produce a mixture that tilted the scales toward producing a deconvert rather than a disciple. The character formation, experiences, expectations, and assumptions that were passed on to them laid the groundwork for their eventual departure. If deconverts provided the ingredients in the recipe, then who did the preparing?

Running through the stories of Edwards, Daniels, and other former believers is a common thread, and that is that former believers claim they lost their faith because they became convinced Christianity was false. Edwards and Daniels, for their own reasons, came to the conclusion that the story the Bible tells is untrue. They found it impossible to believe anymore. When this happened, they felt they had no choice but to leave their faith since they could not make themselves believe something they had become convinced was false. In other words, deconverts are highly committed to truth and integrity. They would not simply ignore what they discovered in order to maintain their religious commitments. What accounts for this deep commitment to truth and integrity in the lives of Edwards, Daniels, and other deconverts?

Ironically, the answer is their spiritual formation. Psychologists Bruce Hunsberger and Bob Altemeyer point out that:

For all of their lives deconverts were told their religion was the true religion and they had to live according to its teachings. Were they not being implicitly told that truth was even a more basic good than even their religious beliefs, that the beliefs were to be celebrated because they were truth? Furthermore, all the training in avoiding sin and being a good person “on the inside” would have promoted integrity. You have to be good and true, through and through. That’s what counts. If this teaching succeeded it would produce a person who deeply valued truth and had deep-down integrity. The religion would therefore create the basis for its own downfall, if it came up short in these departments.⁵³

Deconverts not only place a high value on truth and integrity but also have a number of assumptions and expectations about their faith that play a major role in their loss of faith. If you read enough deconversion stories, you’ll

53. Hunsberger and Altemeyer, *Amazing Conversions*, 120.

notice the same objections appear over and over again. The thing about objections is that they presuppose certain beliefs and attitudes that give the objections their force. Former believers have a lot of expectations and assumptions about God, the Bible, and Christianity. When those assumptions and expectations are unmet, the result can be a crisis of faith. For Daniels, it occurred when the Bible didn't match up with what he believed it had to be. For Edwards, his crisis came when the existence of God didn't meet his assumptions about what constituted a rational belief. Behind every objection is an assumption or expectation of the way things should be, but aren't. Sometimes those assumptions are justified. Other times they are not.

Where did former believers get their assumptions and expectations about God and the Bible? From the same place they received their commitment to truth and virtue, their evangelical training. Conservative evangelicals and fundamentalists hold and consequently pass on assumptions and expectations about the faith that are understood to be nonnegotiable. Some of these assumptions and expectations are explicitly taught while others are caught. Many believers never question these assumptions and expectations. Deconverts, on the other hand, inevitably find at least one critical assumption or expectation of Christianity to be either false or unmet. If they have been taught that the unmet expectation is essential to the Christian faith, it only makes sense that they would conclude that Christianity is false. The question that needs to be asked is whether the assumptions and expectations that many deconverts harbor about Christianity really are essential to it. If they aren't, then, tragically, they were set up for a spiritual crisis by the very faith communities that birthed them.

Cooking

Like an oven that bakes the prepared ingredients of a recipe into a cake, the secular age acts like a pressure cooker, shaping and molding us into adopting its view of reality. Individuals who identify as Christians and are intelligent, open to experience, care about truth, have low tolerance for right-wing authoritarianism and religious fundamentalism, and have unmet expectations and negative experiences are particularly susceptible to the toll the secular age can have on faith. Sometimes the result is a loss of faith.

Heating changes food. Proteins coagulate, starches gelatinize, sugars caramelize, water evaporates, and fats melt. Cooking is chemistry; the process of applying heat to a combination of ingredients forges it into something different. But, not all heat sources produce the same results. There are some contexts that are more conducive to baking a cake than others. No one

would be happy with the result that came from putting the prepared ingredients for a cake into a microwave oven for baking. Likewise, no one would enjoy a cup of coffee warmed up in a deep fryer. The environment where the ingredients are cooked makes a difference in the outcome.

We no longer live in the Middle Ages, and for that we should all be glad. The convenience and comfort of modern life, not to mention medical advances, make life in the twenty-first century much easier in many ways than the life in the eighth century. One exception to that is having a robust religious faith. Life in the twenty-first century makes that much more difficult. That's because the socio-cultural context we live in powerfully impacts what we believe. It provides the environment where the prepared ingredients in *A Recipe for Disaster* are baked, resulting in apostasy.

In the Middle Ages, belief in God was nearly universal throughout Europe because it was reinforced by the dominant social institutions of the day. The courts, royalty, universities, and, of course, the church all presupposed the existence of God and the truth of Christianity. When everyone you know assumes the truth of Christianity, believing comes easily. Times, however, have changed. Edwards, Daniels, and the rest of us live in a culture in which believing in God is increasingly difficult because Christianity is no longer afforded the status as the official story underwriting our culture. We no longer live in an age where it is nearly impossible *not* to believe in God. On the contrary, we in the West live in an increasingly post-Christian society. By that, I mean the hegemony of Christianity is waning, particularly among social institutions that are located at the center of cultural production. While the grassroots of American society may be quite religious, the elites at the top of powerful social institutions are not, and it is their influence that makes the difference.

As a result, secularists, not the church, are increasingly in control of and write the "official" definition of reality. The narrative shaping culture is no longer that of the Bible but a cocktail of modern Enlightenment rationalism and scientism. The result is that religious expression and belief are marginalized and excluded from public discourse, the legal system, and the political process. Whereas the West once looked to the Bible as the criterion of truth, progressive secularists view that period in western civilization as intellectually immature, reliant on religious superstition and stories to account for what they otherwise couldn't. Today, we "know" better. The steady progress of science leaves little need to appeal to God as an explanation of natural phenomena. But, even if it did, it certainly wouldn't be the God of the Bible who seems to behave in such a petty and barbaric manner. No enlightened, educated, objective modern could believe, let alone place any authority in, the writings of a Bronze Age nomadic tribe and their God.

Religious belief may have been okay for our unenlightened ancestors, but it should play no role in shaping society today. Science and reason are the tools for shaping society in the Secular Age.

Admittedly, the secular narrative is more felt than articulated. To be fair, few progressive secularists would likely express their beliefs as explicitly as above. That's because, like Christians in the Middle Ages, the secular narrative resides at the foundational presuppositional level of their worldview. It is an "unthought" taken for granted of how things are. Only when it is brought to the surface and analyzed does it become explicit. Regardless of whether it remains at the taken-for-granted level or is explicitly acknowledged, the secular narrative is the primary force setting the intellectual and cultural agenda in the West.

Of the three parts in *A Recipe for Disaster*—the ingredients, the preparation, and the environment where the cooking takes place—the preparation is most important in preventing deconversion, at least as far as parents and church leaders are concerned. Parents and church leaders can do little about the personality and psychological traits of their children and those they minister to. Nor can they do much to alter modern secular culture. In fact, the typical strategy employed by evangelicals and fundamentalists in response to contemporary culture has tended to only contribute to deconversion. The one aspect of the recipe that parents and church leaders do have control over in the spiritual formation of their young people is the assumptions and expectations that they pass on to them. For that reason, the majority of this book will focus on the four main ways parents and church leaders participate in the loss of faith and will offer suggestions on how to avoid them.

Recipe, Not Reasons

Deconversion is the undoing, the reversal, or the making of no effect one's religious conversion. It is a renouncing of one's allegiance to a particular set of beliefs or to a religious community. Some of the most outwardly committed and apparently sincere followers of Christ can and do deconvert from Christianity. Christians understandably desire to know why. Deconverts themselves point to problems with the Bible, conflicts between science and faith, the problem of evil, and disappointment with God along with many more reasons for their deconversion. But none of those reasons alone is enough to do the trick. Likewise, Christians, in an attempt to explain away deconversion, can be quick to level shallow and insulting accusations at former believers. Often former believers are accused of deconverting because

they are either in sin (or at least want to be), are not spiritual enough, are too worldly, are becoming too educated, or worst of all, they were never true believers in the first place. But once again, such reasons do not sufficiently explain the deconversion phenomenon. Worse yet, instead of shedding light on the problem of why individuals lose their faith, they act as a hindrance by offering simplistic explanations that largely absolve the church from any liability. The truth is much more complex and turns out to be contrary to what many believers might expect.

The deconversion of Edwards, Daniels and others can best be understood by thinking of them as the product of a recipe. Recipes consist of three elements: ingredients, preparation, and an environment where the prepared ingredients are baked. In a similar way to how a cake is the outcome of a particular set of ingredients and preparation, so too are deconversions. However, in the case of the deconversion recipe, the outcome is never as certain as it is for a recipe for German chocolate cake. Rather, it is better to consider “the deconversion recipe” as analogous to what is often referred to as a “recipe for success.” In *Outliers*, Malcolm Gladwell identified the key ingredients in achieving success in any given endeavor.⁵⁴ Gladwell found that despite what many think are the key factors in success—skill and knowledge—in reality other more surprising factors were more important. He maintained that three factors were essential in any recipe for success: good timing, persistence, and cultural background. Of course, Gladwell never promised that his recipe for success was a guarantee of success. Even if you follow Gladwell’s recipe for success to the letter, there is no guarantee you will be a professional hockey player, world-class ballerina, or Nobel Prize-winning scientist. But, your likelihood of doing so increases significantly. The same is true for the deconversion recipe; there’s not a guarantee that it will produce an apostate. But, follow it and the likelihood of deconversion significantly increases.

Recipe for Success

If we understand the ingredients, preparation, and environment that constitute the deconversion recipe, we can address the growing trend of deconversion from Christianity in a productive manner. To discover what those are, we will look at those individuals whom we would least expect to renounce their faith: pastors, worship leaders, seminary graduates, biblical studies professors, and apologists. We will discover the methods of preparation that such individuals have in common. We will identify the

54. Gladwell, *Outliers*.

recipe for disaster that so often leads to deconversion. In doing so, we will be better prepared to answer the question of why apparently committed believers lose their faith and, perhaps more importantly, what we can do to foster faith that endures.