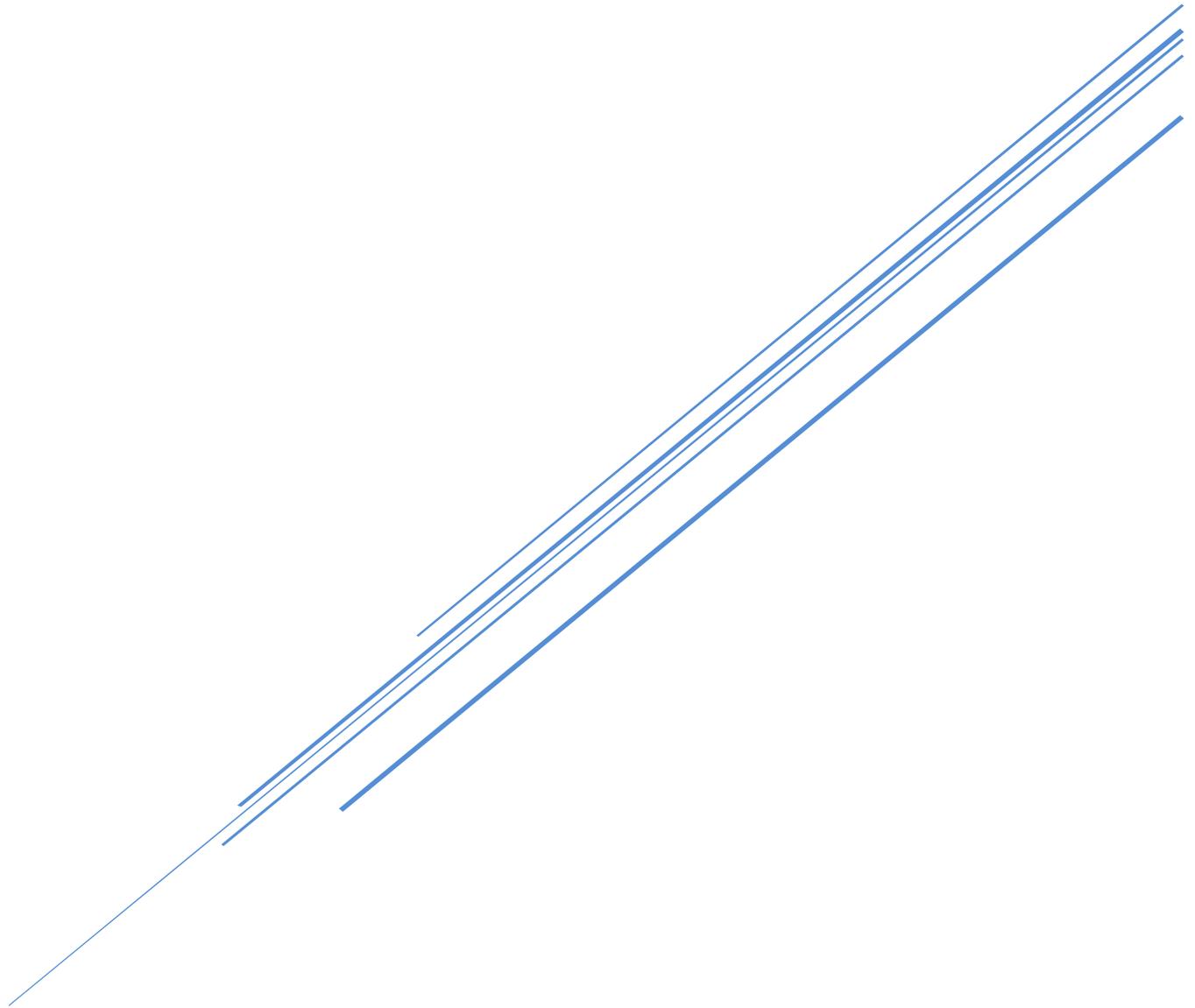


# Deconversion

Literature Review



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## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Introduction

For this review of literature on religious deidentification / deconversion we begin by providing seminal sources that describe what is happening respective to religious change. We then supply seminal literature in the social sciences relevant to, or which bears upon, issues involved in religious change, i.e., conversion and deconversion. Because deconversion from religious faith is a growing trend we focus significant attention on the nature and uniqueness of deconversion. Further, we provide a section relevant to our own interests as Christians focusing on deconversion from Christianity. Finally, we highlight recent, promising research helping to advance studies in religious change.

### What Is Happening?

The religious landscape in America is changing. The number of Americans affiliated with organized religion is declining, particularly among mainline Protestants and Catholics, while the number of religious “nones,” those who do not identify as religious, is steadily increasing (Hout & Fisher, 2002; Pew, 2015 & 2019). Drawing upon data spanning four decades, Voas and Chaves (2016) highlight that religious commitment has been slowly weakening generationally, each successive generation being slightly less religious than the one before. Women are more likely to be religious than men (Pew, 2016), men are more likely to show reduced religious belief (Norenzayan et al., 2012), and adolescent girls are more likely to be religiously affiliated than boys (Smith et al., 2002). The number of Americans who say belief in God is not necessary to be moral is slowly ticking up (Pew, 2017), as the influence of religious values, individually and socially, lessen (Norris & Inglehart, 2004). Young adults in America are significantly less

religious in a variety of ways than older adults (Smith & Snell, 2009). Religious decline is higher among those who engage in religiously suspect behaviors, notably premarital sex, and smoking marijuana, and among those who *do not* go to college (Uecker et al., 2007). Males with higher education are more likely to disaffiliate from religion (Baker & Smith, 2009), and deconversion is linked predominately to adolescence and young adulthood (Streib & Keller, 2004).

Despite evidence of decline in traditional forms of religion, Americans have not outgrown interest in the supernatural, the sacred, the spiritual, even the personal significance of religion as such. Many Americans yearn for an existentially significant spiritual path. The “spiritual, but not religious,” demonstrate great interest in personal religious experience, a felt need for the sacred, and seek to develop a vital spirituality exclusively based on non-ecclesial beliefs and practices (Fuller, 2001; Streib et al., 2009).

In the recent past, most U.S. teenagers did embrace some form of religious identity and were happy to accept the religion in which they were raised, even if they had a difficult time explaining what they believe, what the implications of their beliefs are for their lives, and what sociological forces influence their beliefs, attitudes, and religious practices (Smith & Denton, 2005). Contrary to popular belief, especially the beliefs of teenagers themselves, parents significantly shape their child’s immediate and long-term religious identity and commitments (Smith & Denton, 2005; Hunsberger & Altemeyer, 2006). Even among “emerging adults” (ages 18-29), the least religious adults in the United States today, religion is conceived positively, although mostly because of the practical benefits it bestows in the form of moral behaviors that help people to be good (Smith & Snell, 2009). This positive outlook on religion tends not to involve active seeking or sustained effort, and is best characterized by passivity, idleness, and religion and spirituality being construed as personal matters where “truth” is what seems right to

the individual. With so many competing claims on what is true, right, and good, it is best to remain open and tentative, keep religion as one option among many, and not get too committed (Smith & Snell, 2009).

More recently, a growing number of studies indicate that while religion in general may be looked at somewhat favorably, young people are leaving the Christian faith in significant numbers. The Barna Group reported in 2006, that 61% of young adults who were involved in church during their teen years were now spiritually disengaged. Supporting Barna's findings an Assemblies of God study reported that between 50% and 67% of Assemblies of God young people who attend a non-Christian public or private university no longer identify as Christians four years after entering college (Kingsriter, 2007). A similar study from LifeWay Research (2007) claimed that 70% of students will lose their faith in college, and of those only 35% eventually return.

In May 2009, sociologists Robert Putnam and David Campbell presented research to the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, that 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 to 40 percent, up from 5 to 10 percent only a generation ago (Dyck, 2010). That same year the Fuller Youth Institute's study, The College Transition Project discovered that current data seems "to suggest that about 40-50% of students in youth groups struggle in their faith after graduation" (Fuller Youth Institute, 2010).

The 2003, 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 (Bonderud & Fleischer, 2003). 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. On some campuses as high as 59 percent of students no longer describe themselves as "born again." (Pryor, 2007).

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 40 years. A third study by UCLA found that students across the U.S. are dissociating themselves from religion in record numbers. "The American Freshman" study revealed that nearly 28 percent of the 2014, incoming college freshman did 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 (Eagan, 2014). In 2015, The Pew Research Center conducted a study entitled "Choosing a New Church or House of Worship", wherein they asked participants to identify the criteria by which they choose their place of worship. Interestingly the survey revealed that "Roughly eight-in-ten religious "nones" say they were raised with a religious affiliation." This of course means that at nearly 80 percent of "nones" surveyed were at one time in a faith community before jettisoning it. In a 2016 survey titled "Exodus: Why Americans are Leaving Religion – and Why They're Unlikely to Come Back", researchers at the Public Religious Research Institute concluded that nearly 40 percent of young adults aged 18 – 29 are religiously unaffiliated (Cooper et al, 2016). That is nearly four times as likely as young adults only one generation ago. More troubling is the finding that 79 percent of young adults 18 – 29 who leave the faith and identify as a "none" do so during their teenage years. Those of previous generations did so much later. For example, those over 65 years of age who left their faith during their teen years numbered only 38 percent. The 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.” (Cooper et. al, 2016). Finally, the General Social Survey of 2019 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 individuals identifying as evangelicals dropped slightly from 23.9 percent to 22.5 percent of Americans. What this means is that statistically the two groups are tied (Burge, 2018). According to one commentator the “vast majority” of the “nones” surveyed “are ex-Christians, and most are under the age of 35 (Wallace, 2018).

### **Seminal Literature Relevant To, Or Which Bears Upon, Religious Change**

While evidence indicates religious decline in organized religion in the West, worldwide religion itself is going through change or variation, not decline (Stark, 1999). Even those who do argue that religion is in decline are quick to mention that a decline in religious affiliation and commitment to organized religion and traditional forms of religion are not signs of increasing secularization; religion continues to be a source of psychological comfort and social solidarity (Zuckerman, 2011). Davie (1990) agrees that religious decline is occurring generationally in Britain, but highlights the prevalence of continued “implicit religion,” where despite declines in regular attendance in religious institutions, religious *belief* persists. Along a similar line of theorizing, Taylor (2007) agrees there is decline in religious participation and identification in the West, but these declines do not point toward “a heat death of faith.” Rather, individuals seek meaning in other ways. The sacred and spiritual find “new placements” in relation to the individual and social life, and spiritual life recomposes in new forms and new ways, existing both in and out of relation to God (Taylor, 2007). Such changes in religion and religiosity underscore the need for theories that explain the nature of religious change, when and why

various aspects of religiousness rise or fall, or remain stable (Streib et al., 2009), as well as the process, mobility, variety, and recompositions involved in religious identity and change.

Phenomena involved in religious change, particularly in conversion and deconversion, have fascinated psychologists, theologians, and sociologists, but systematic programs of sophisticated research on conversion and deconversion are sparse (Paloutzian et al., 1999; Streib et al., 2009; Hood et al., 2018). Sociologists and psychologists have produced significant research to further understanding of religious change, and here we highlight some seminal and more recent research.

### **Religious Change: Conversion**

The concept of conversion has proven a rich field for research over the past 100 years. William James (1901) in his famous study, *Varieties of Religious Experiences*, understood conversion to be a kind of healing. The healing, as James understood it, was that of a sick, divided soul that sought healing and unification of personhood in religion. James distinguished between two kinds of conversion: volitional conversion, which is gradual, and instantaneous conversion. The Apostle Paul's conversion on the road to Damascus is the paradigm of the instantaneous conversion. James also identified four indicators of conversion that he called the "feelings which immediately fill the conversion hour:" a) a sense of higher control, peace, and harmony; b) a sense of perceiving truths unknown before; c) a sense of the newness of life; and d) an ecstasy of happiness (p.191). James commented,

If you should expose to a converting influence a subject in whom three factors unite: first, pronounced emotional sensibility; second, tendency to automatism; and third, suggestibility of the passive type; you might safely then predict the result: there would be sudden conversion. (p. 195)

James' understanding of conversion seems biased and reductionistic to many contemporary social scientists (Gooren, 2010). Furthermore, modern studies are skeptical about James' claim

that a conversion experience can change a person's personality (Rambo, 1999). Whether scholars hold James' theory in high regard today is beside the point. James' work was a landmark in conversion studies and is recognized as a classic in the field.

From 1962–1963 in Bay City, Michigan, Stark and Lofland (1965) interviewed converts to a small cult. They conducted extensive observations and in-depth interviews with the participants of the study, their families, co-workers, acquaintances, and those who were interested in the cult but never joined. They identified seven indicators of whether a person would convert or not:

1. The experience of enduring unresolved tensions.
2. Inability to resolve the tensions within a religious, problem-solving perspective.
3. Describing oneself as a religious seeker.
4. Encountering a cult at a turning point in life.
5. Creating an affective bond with one or more members of the cult.
6. Having extracult attachments neutralized; and
7. Exposure to rigorous cultic interpersonal interaction if one is to become a proselytizer (p. 874).

The most significant indicator determining conversion in the above schema is factor five: social connections. If the emotional bonds made with cult members were not as strong as those made with nonmembers, such as family and friends, then conversion was unlikely. However, if the emotional bonds made with cult members were stronger than those with nonmembers, conversion was likely to occur. In the years following their research, Starke and Lofland's process model has been critiqued by other social scientists, yet its impact on conversion studies has been significant. As Gooren (2010) pointed out, "The Starke/Lofland process model is quoted in almost all of the conversion literature" (p. 22).

An unpublished but influential dissertation by Mosely (1978) utilized structural developmental psychology to investigate religious conversion. The study began with an empirical investigation of religious conversion along with a social and psychological interpretation of what constituted conversion. William James' interpretations of conversion, along with Piaget's stages of genetic levels, were incorporated to flesh out Mosley's model. Mosley unpacked the structural developmental theory and outlined the implications for the scientific study of religion. Mosley concluded that conversions that included structural and content changes needed to be distinguished from conversions that were characterized by a change of content without a change in structure. If neither change in content nor structure takes place, but instead an individual experienced a renewed religious commitment, then that person has not had a conversion but rather an intensification experience. Shortly thereafter, Gillespie (1979) offered insights to the conversion process that have retained their value for contemporary conversion studies. Gillespie argued that religious conversion deeply alters the fabric of life from which the identity is formed, and actions originate. He identified conversion as a way to change identity and showed how a religious identity provided the foundation for wholeness. The majority of his research focused on the relationship between religious conversion and personal identity as it was worked out in the context of life and the social, psychological, emotional, and developmental arenas that constitute it.

Approaching conversion from a biblical perspective, Kasdorf's (1980) began with a look at conversion from a biblical perspective, then moved into conversion in terms of an ethnotheological perspective. Ethnotheology is the field that focuses on the interactions between biblical interpretation and the social sciences. Kasdorf addressed conversion from an exegetical point of view, then examined the empirical, experiential, and anthropological aspects of

conversion. He concluded that conversion does not follow a pigeon-holed pattern but may take a variety of forms. Kasdorf concluded the book with an appeal to making the gospel contextually relevant. In a like manner, Conn (1986) approached the subject from a biblical and theological perspective. Conn drew from theology, psychology, and philosophy in order to provide a critical basis from which to assess various conversion claims. He concluded that conversion is the movement toward self-transcendence. Self-transcendence is the psychological stance that is in contrast to both self-denial and self-fulfillment. A person must come to terms with who they are before they can transcend themselves and focus on others. That is when true self-transcendence occurs.

Johnson (1978) a Christian psychologist, integrated both theology and psychology into his study of conversion. He explained conversion from both psychological and biblical points of view, touching on the nature of conversion and the process and impact of conversion. He charted a course for future researchers by proposing what he called a psychotheology of Christian conversion, which would entail researchers taking advantage of the insights of psychopathology and applying them to the study of conversion.

Perhaps the most influential work on conversion in the last 50 years is that of Rambo (1993). At present, Rambo's work is the standard by which all conversion studies are measured. In the book *Understanding Religious Conversion*, Rambo put forward his theory of what the process of religious conversion looks like. Conversion begins with the context of conversion and moves to a crisis that precipitates the initial doubt and drift. It, then, moves to the quest for truth that often involves an advocate for the new faith who influences the convert leading to commitment and ending with consequences for the convert. This is one of the most important models of conversion constructed and deserves to be elaborated upon.

The context stage involves the entire sociopsychological history of the individual, “the total environment in which the conversion transpires” (p. 20). This includes their family history, education, cultural trends, and previous religious experiences. The crisis stage of the model is marked by the destabilization of the individual’s religious identity. The conversion to a new religion is preempted by a deconversion from the present religious stance (p. 44). At this stage, the potential convert is troubled by any number of experiences, which may bring about a sense of dissatisfaction or disillusionment. Experiences such as discovering one’s religious beliefs are false or that a trusted religious leader is guilty of impropriety are typical examples. The third stage, or quest, occurs when the potential convert intentionally seeks out alternative options to his or her present faith (p. 56). Encountering a member of another faith who is devout and active in his or her faith is the fourth stage of the model. If the encounter with the member is positive and the “right” potential convert comes into contact with the “right” advocate at the proper time and under proper circumstances, the potential convert may begin to consider the new path (p. 87). The fifth stage, interaction, transpires as the potential convert chooses to invest time with the new community of faith. This may take the form of attending religious services, partaking in rituals, or learning customs (p. 52). Rambo identified the sixth stage as the commitment stage. The potential convert becomes a convert and identifies with the new religion, perhaps in a formal way such as a ritual. They are now identified as being a member of the religion, and they take on all of the blessings and responsibilities that come with belonging (p. 124). The seventh and final stage, consequences, occurs as the convert begins to grow in the new faith. This may be in a formal discipleship course or informally by learning the ways of the new faith. Various consequences identified by Rambo included sociocultural and historical consequences along with psychological and theological consequences (pp.148–160). Rambo pointed out that there is a risk that the convert may find that the negative consequence of conversion outweighs the positive. In

such a case, if the disappointment is great enough, a crisis stage may occur, and the process may begin all over again (p. 170).

The work of Bucknser and Glazier (2003) is a collection of articles by numerous authors dealing with conversion from the perspective of anthropology and is comprised of three main sections. Section one focuses on conversion and social process; section two, on alternative ways of conceptualizing conversion; and section three, on conversion and individual experiences. Rambo summarized the literature on the study of anthropology and conversion in the afterword. His section is a very helpful and worthwhile read. Not all the articles in this book are equally valuable or have a high degree of relevance to deconversion.

Markham (2007) sought to understand conversion in light of cognitive science and Wesleyan theology. Committed to a non-reductive physicalism, Markham maintained that an understanding of humans as composed of body and spirit, dualism, is false. He argued that both science and Scripture point away from dualism to some kind of non-reductive physicalism that holds that human consciousness is the product of, but not reducible to, physical processes in the brain. This would seem to lead to determinism; however, Markham did allow space for moral free will, thus defining conversion as an event brought about by a responsible agent. He also saw conversion as more of a change in behavior and practice than merely the renewal of the inner man.

Dubious on prior theories emphasizing the role of *deprivation* (i.e., the tension or misery experienced when one lacks some contentment in life) as a single condition for explaining religious affiliation and conversion to religion, Lofland and Stark (1965) provide an important step in the literature on conversion. Although they drew from a small sample, which makes their findings difficult to generalize, they conceptualized conversion as a sophisticated, seven-stage

process involving predispositional factors (stress, doubt, personal crisis) and a social environment, which importantly and necessarily involves the building affective bonds characterized by intense interaction, through which conversion occurs. Heirich (1977) recognizes the influence of predispositional factors on conversion but is dubious on these being a sufficient catalyst for religious change. Drawing from religious tradition, he notes a wider set of causes and circumstances at work in cases of conversion, which include dealing with conflict between one's framework of beliefs and reality, dreadful circumstances, and moral failures that call into question grounded assumptions. Heirich underscores the influence of the social environment in the process of conversion, perhaps more so than predispositional factors, but finds social relationships were influential only for those individuals already oriented toward a religious quest (Heirich, 1977).

Lofland and Skonovd (1981) join psychology and sociology to address both sides of the conversion process – subjective, individual experiences and objective, social organizational dimensions – in the form of six 'motifs' of conversion. These six motifs (i.e., intellectual, mystical, experimental, affectional, revivalistic, and coercive), according to Lofland and Skonovd, sharpen our understanding of what is really happening phenomenologically in the individual during a conversion process, while empirically verifying how processes involved in conversion differ across cultures and change over time. Snow and Machalek (1984) survey the research on conversion, stress the need to identify features that cause conversion, but argue most research up to this time labels the stages of conversion without specifying the causal relationships responsible for conversion. They call for richer accounts of the nature of conversion that involve analyzing causal processes responsible for conversion in order to test for reliability and validity. They argue this is especially needed among new religious movements, where a

tendency exists for the group to brainwash the individual convert by reshaping a convert's understanding of his conversion (Snow & Machalek, 1984).

Concerned with an over-emphasis on “passive” and sudden instances of conversion where religious change is the result of some external force or social pressure upon the individual (e.g., Paul and the Damascus road), Richardson (1987) shifts the focus and conceives an alternative model of conversion with priority placed on the active subject who gradually makes meaning. The ‘active’ subject is one who goes through a *gradual* series of successive affiliations or “conversion careers” as he rationally acquires and tests new behaviors, which are then followed by the acceptance of beliefs. Also wanting to move beyond construing conversion as a unique and once-in-a-lifetime experience, Gooren (2007 & 2010) borrows from Richardson's model of “conversion careers” and emphasizes a life-cycle approach that constitutes various levels of participation and commitment which characterize religious change: pre-affiliation, affiliation, conversion, confession, and disaffiliation. Individual, organizational, and societal levels are interconnected and influence each level of religious activity (Gooren, 2007). Notable in Gooren's theory is the place of conversion, one level or cycle among others in the process of religious change, which affords him the ability to explore how religious activity changes over time.

Rambo (1993) utilizes these insights and says conversion is not an event, but best understood as a complex, gradual process of religious change involving a series of factors (i.e. people, events, ideologies, institutions, and experiences) that are interactive and cumulative over time, occurring in a broad historical perspective. For this reason, stage models provide a useful map for understanding the phases of a process that take place over time (Rambo, 1993; Rambo & Farhadian, 1999). Rambo (1999) also stresses it is beneficial to utilize diverse theories from a

range of academic disciplines in order to capture the complexity and variety of conversion processes.

From the field of psychology, Kirkpatrick (1990) advances understanding of the conversion process in establishing a correlation between adult attachment styles and the probability of conversion. Individuals with an insecure-anxious or insecure-avoidant attachment style are more likely than those with a secure attachment style to convert, supporting the idea that God may serve as a substitute attachment figure. Subsequent longitudinal studies (Kirkpatrick, 1997 and 1998) strengthen the idea that personality and religious conversion influence each other: certain types of personalities may be more prone to religious conversion, while religious conversion may have profound effects on personality *at the level* of adaptations, goals and strivings, and life purpose (Paloutzian et al., 1999).

Saroglou (2010) addresses whether personality traits are predictors of religiosity and finds two basic personality traits: Agreeableness (e.g., warmth and trust) and Conscientiousness (e.g., dutifulness and self-control), to be reliable predictors of *religiosity*, which he defines broadly in terms of transcendence in one's own life. Saroglou observes these two traits are universal and construes these traits as predispositions of religiousness that tend to produce and promote religious belief and prosocial attitudes and behaviors (e.g., altruism, empathy, helpfulness, etc.). However, in a series of neuro-imaging studies, Agreeableness and Conscientiousness failed as mediators to belief in God, challenging the notion these two personality traits are reliable predictors of religiosity, at least when religiosity and transcendence are construed as having theistic belief (Norenzayan, et al., 2012).

Interested in what draws an individual to religion and wanting to give an account for universality and variance in religion, Saroglou (2011) proposes a model that identifies four universal dimensions in religion, which allow for various cultural expressions. His “Big Four”

dimensions (believing, bonding, behaving, and belonging), which have underlying, interconnected psychological processes (cognitive, emotional, moral, and social), help to explain the draw to religion, religion's effects on individuals and society, and variation in religiosity over groups and time. Zinnbauer et al. (1999) draw attention to the complexity of religiosity by addressing psychological characterizations of "religion," "spirituality," and the "sacred" at the personal, social, and situational level in order to diffuse polarity between characterizations of "religion" and "spirituality," where organized religion is often pitted against personal spirituality. Understanding the "sacred," according to Zinnbauer et al. (1999), is critical for differentiating religious pathways of change and conversion from merely humanistic quests for significance, as well as for understanding the role of organized religion in helping to facilitate well-being and significance or undermining it.

From the field of sociology, "rational choice theory" (RCT), which broadly states that humans make choices in the interest of self-preservation to avoid pain and seek pleasure, has been used to explain underlying causes in religious change. Interested in the causes of long-term religious commitment and whether phenomena pertaining to commitment can be empirically verified, Iannaccone (1994) argues RCT best explains why *strictness* in religious organizations influences commitment. Strictness vets – it screens out people who lack commitment and stimulates participation among those who remain. Stark and Finke (2000) also draw upon RCT to propose that people choose the religion that best suits their needs. Relationships and friendships, and the life contentedness these relationships provide, are primary influences in religious change. Research by Loveland (2003) finds up to one third of Americans switch faith systems or denominations at some point in life. Also drawing upon the utility of RCT for explaining religious commitment, Loveland (2003) explains switching is due to perceiving a tangible benefit that satisfies a need, and a person will switch so long as the change includes no major disruption.

Smith (2003) is wary of reductionist theories of religion that treat phenomena which appear to be divine, supernatural, or sacred *as really only* about social class, gender, ethnicity, and social control. Religion, Smith argues, exerts pro-social influence on people not by happenstance or generic social processes, but precisely because of religions' particular theological, moral, and spiritual commitments. He suggests three conceptual dimensions for thinking about religion and phenomena involved in religious change, which can be systematized and empirically tested: moral order, learned competencies, and social ties (Smith, 2003).

Drawing from extensive data from the Add Health survey, Uecker et al. (2007) conclude social forces are vitally important in the religious lives of young adults. They found weak religious socialization from parent to child and religious privatization during adolescence to be significant contributors to religious decline when adolescents entered adulthood. According to Smith and Denton (2005), the evidence strongly suggests that parents are the single most important social influence on the religious and spiritual lives of adolescents, and this influence shapes affiliation and commitments later in life.

Self-categorization theory in the field of social psychology is helpful here to further understand the influence of social forces in the process of conversion, particularly in terms of individual assimilation to a group, and how an aggregation of individuals becomes a group. Turner et al. (1987) argue collective bonding and group identity is achieved when individuals go through a process of *depersonalization*, whereby individuals let go of their own perceptions, behaviors, and self-esteem in order to produce prescribed group behaviors and norms that define the individual as a group member. The group subsequently provides individuals with a sense of identity and assurance about their place and role in the world. Abrams and Hogg (1990) argue that group membership has the effect of reducing the individual's subjective feelings about uncertainty in life, at least in the areas of life deemed important by the individual. And Hogg and

Reid (2006) capture a salient feature in the process of individuals internalizing group norms: people in the group who are genuinely believed to be highly prototypical of the group (e.g., leaders) help to facilitate and make group norms more accessible to individuals who seek to internalize group norms. Similarly, Rambo (1993) highlights the importance of an “advocate,” someone who sustains the individual throughout the process of conversion.

More recently, empirical data suggests that religions have attributes that make them particularly well-suited to reduce feelings of subjective uncertainty (Hogg et al., 2010). According to Ysseldyk et al. (2010), religious group membership can provide immense cognitive and emotional value, crucial features in the formation of an individual’s self-concept, and religious groups are unmatched with other social groups in this regard. Yet this unique advantage also presents a liability to religious identity when identity is threatened through intergroup conflict (Ysseldyk et al., 2010). In a study involving 418 adolescents and emerging adults, Hardy et al. (2011) found individuals who participate in structured, normed religious communities tend to experience greater identity maturity than those who are less involved, which reinforces the influence of community in identity formation. Hardy et al. (2011) also inferred where community involvement tends to decline, which often happens as people age, potential benefits of these contexts for the individual may be compromised.

### **Religious Change: Deconversion**

The other trajectory of religious change, deconversion, even in the broadest sense of being a ‘loss or deprivation of religious faith’, involves a complex, gradual process that mirrors the process of conversion (Streib & Keller, 2004). The 1980s proved a fruitful period for research on religious exiting. Beginning in 1980, Roozen conducted an empirical study that

focused on life cycle and historical variation in the drop-out and reentry rates of churchgoers in the United States and the reasons for their departures. He found that the drop-out rate is highest among teenagers due to lessening of parental influence. Those over 50 who disengaged primarily did so for contextual reasons, such as moving to a new community, change in work schedule, etc. Surprisingly, Roozen's study records that up to 80% of drop-outs reengage with organized religion later in life. Another early study on religious disassociation was that of Brinkerhoff and Burke (1980) that pertained to the symbolic interactionist perspective known as labeling and its ability to shed light on the process of disaffiliation. The authors utilized a typology to articulate what they believed was occurring during the process of deconversion at the sociopsychological level. Using the types "Fervent Followers," "Ritualists," "Outsiders," and "Apostates," they attempted to demonstrate how tagging or labeling by those within the community (Fervent Followers), can contribute to the process of apostasy; this they defined as rejection of belief and communal identification.

One reason for the proliferation of research in the 1980s on religious disassociation can be attributed to public interest and, in some cases, concern over the many new religious movements [NRMs] then appearing in the United States. Skonovd (1981) interviewed 30 apostates from the Unification Church and 30 apostates from other NRMs. His approach differed from much of the literature of the time by focusing on the process that a person goes through as they lose their faith as opposed to who is likely to lose faith. In choosing to refer to the process of abandoning religious faith as deconversion, Skonovd became one of the first to use the term in the literature. In a second study Skonovd (1983) investigated former members of Christian fundamentalist churches, ex-Scientists, ex-Unification Church members, ex-People's Temple members, and various eastern groups. In doing so, he developed a six-stage model of the

deconversion process: a) precipitating crisis, b) review, c) reflection, d) disaffection, e) withdrawal, and f) cognitive reorganization. Skonovd's attempt to identify the process of deconversion was the one of the earliest in the field of deconversion studies.

In a massive study, Canadian psychologist Saul Levine (1984) interviewed over 800 members of NRMs over a 15-year period. He discovered that the majority of the members who joined the NRMs did so in order to establish personal autonomy and to rebel against parental authority. However, after a two-year period, most had left the movements and returned to more traditional lives. In a similar study, Stuart Wright (1984) examined 45 ex-members of NRMs to gain insight on their attitudes toward their former groups. He focused on defections as a major life transition but was careful not to assume that such transitions are always negative. Obviously, there are numerous consequences when joining and leaving a new religious movement, but Wright allowed the ex-members to speak for themselves; this produced some surprising results. For example, 67% of the participants said they were wiser for the experience, 9% said they were duped or brainwashed, and 7% were angry (p. 175). Furthermore, Wright discovered that defection from the group was often precipitated by a significant dissonance between the NRMs' promises and the results. Participants identified frustration at the lack of personal growth or the inability to change the world as initial reasons for considering leaving. However, the dissonance between promises and results was often not enough to motivate defectors. A number of participants cited the pull of social relationships as helping legitimize their decisions to leave. Despite their frustrations with the NRMs, several ex-members found it difficult to replace the relationships they once enjoyed within the groups. In fact, while they may have strongly critiqued the ideologies of their former beliefs, they also spoke fondly of the interpersonal relationships they experienced as members of the groups, which they found difficult to replace in the broader society.

In 1987, Wright again conducted research on religious leave taking by investigating 15 former members of Hare Krishna, 15 former members of the Children of God, and 15 former members of the Unification Church in order to determine the factors that caused the defections. As Streib (2010) noted, Wright's work demonstrated that either emotional or cognitive factors can trigger the deconversion process and that the process can be sudden or gradual, depending on factors unique to each case. Wright also discovered several reasons that accounted for member deconversion, including a) contact with the outside world, b) unsupervised friendships, c) lack of success in changing the world, and d) general disillusionment. A final but interesting discovery of Wright's work was the way in which people left the groups. The majority of those who left after one year did so with little or no fanfare, choosing instead to leave quietly and without direct confrontation. Those who were involved with the groups for more than one year, however, often departed in overtly hostile manners.

Along the same lines as Wright (1984), Jacobs (1989) studied 40 former religious Hindus and members of the Unification Church. Each had departed from groups dominated by highly charismatic leaders operating in a strong patriarchal environment. Each church also had high demands on devotees in terms of discipline and devotion. Jacobs found that the primary reasons for leaving were social disillusionment and disillusionment with the charismatic leaders. Furthermore, she discovered that, for meaningful and lasting deconversion to occur, all ties to the group leaders had to be severed. When that happened, the deconversions were characterized by the following chronological stages: a) initial separation, b) isolation, c) emotional upheaval, and d) the eventual reestablishment of new identities.

*Falling from the faith: Causes and consequences of religious apostasy*, an important volume of essays on religious disassociation, was compiled by Bromely (1988); it contributed to

the growing body of literature on religious exiting. Part one dealt with disaffiliation from traditional/mainline churches. Unfortunately, when addressing disaffiliation from Christian churches, Bromely's choice of language is imprecise. He includes Mormons and conservative Christians along with Episcopalians and Roman Catholics under the broad category of "mainline churches." Historically, however, Mormons have not been recognized as a Christian denomination due to their unorthodox beliefs. Furthermore, the term mainline commonly refers to liberal Protestant churches that often deny key doctrines of the orthodox Christian faith. Conservative Christians and Roman Catholics would not consider themselves members of a "mainline" church. If by "mainline churches," Bromely simply meant significant religious denominations, he might have chosen a term other than "mainline" to categorize the above churches. Part two of the book focused on disaffiliation from non-mainline churches, such as new religions and cults. Because Bromley chose to include research on disassociation from both NRMs and various Christian denominations, his work brought together for the first time, in one volume, research from both fields. This approach provided researchers with the context to compare and contrast the biographical changes that occurred between mainstream religious disassociation and fringe groups. The conclusion of the volume indicated that patterns of religious deconversion reveal a discernible reorganization of the role religion plays in society.

Although not a NRM, Mormonism in the 1980s remained outside the mainstream of American religious life. Religious disassociation among Mormons attracted the attention of Albrecht and Bahr (1989) who studied 40 former Mormons identified as belonging to several existing typologies, including: a) conversion, b) dropping out, and c) apostasy. Using Brinkerhoff's four categories of deconversion, they discovered that many deconverts were marginal members initially. The few committed Mormons who deconverted identified family

break up, intellectual problems with Mormonism, and the exclusive nature of Mormon theology as the causes for their migrations out of Mormonism. Commenting on the value of disaffiliation studies, Albrecht and Bahr stated, “We cannot say that one learns more from the disaffiliate than from the convert, but one learns different things, and sees both the individual in passage and the institution of origin in a different light” (p. 199).

In a related study to that of Barbour, Altemeyer and Hunsberger (1997) asked the question, “Why do some people turn to faith and others abandon religion?” (p. 212). A major discovery of this study is that 80% of students raised in homes where religion was strongly emphasized and practiced remained Christians. How parents reared their children is the most significant factor in preventing apostasy. This finding is in accord with what socialization theories and previous research predicted (Hunsberger, 1983). Yet, the primary focus of their research was not on those who retained their faith but on those who had either converted from a nonreligious background to a religious faith and those who had been raised in a religious home and had deconverted to a nonreligious point of view. Altemeyer and Hunsberger (1997) identified such persons as “amazing believers” and “amazing apostates,” respectively. They sought to understand how such a transformation could take place. They focused their conclusions on the “amazing apostates” because, out of the hundreds of participants, only two were identified as “amazing believers” in contrast to the 42 identified as “amazing apostates.” What they found confirmed Barbour’s first characteristic of deconversion. Despite being raised in highly religious homes, none of the “amazing apostates” could retain their faiths in the face of intellectual dilemmas. They each wrestled with what they saw as rational and empirical incoherencies of their faith and could not accept “pat answers” to their many questions. Consequently, they intentionally decided to abandon their faiths for a nonreligious path.

Uecker, Regnerus and Vaaler (2007), investigated the question of whether the secularizing effects of higher education along with the normative deviance and life course factors contribute to religious decline and disaffiliation in young adults. The authors pointed out that, although it is commonly thought that the college experience is a major cause of religious apathy among young adults, it may not actually be the case. To support this claim, they noted “an overwhelming majority (82%) of college students maintain at least a static level of personal religiosity in early adult life” (p. 1683).

Why is this? The authors offered several suggestions, including the fact that many young Americans are so “under socialized” when it comes to their religious beliefs that they would not recognize a challenge to them were they presented with any. Rather than looking to higher education as the primary cause for the decline in religiosity among young adults, Uecker, Regnerus and Vaaler pointed to alternative theories. Some evidence exists that the desire to carry on a lifestyle that is typically recognized as outside the bounds of the religious system was to blame. Consuming alcohol, sex outside of marriage, and use of recreational drugs were cited. Social factors related to the decline in religiosity included marriage, cohabitation, and parental status. Marriage, it seemed, affected religiosity in a positive way and acted as a hindrance to religious decline. The reason for this may simply be that marriage, like religion, is a social commitment, and a young adult who is prone to make one such commitment may also be prone to make others. Cohabitation, on the other hand, has a clear negative impact on the level of religiosity among young adults. The authors speculated that the reason for this might be in the fact that, unlike sexual relations outside of marriage, cohabitation cannot be done in secret. That being the case, young adults who chose to cohabit may either have anticipated or have experienced censure from their faith communities and have chosen to withdraw from it, or perhaps they had already shed their religious faiths and practices, which then allowed them to cohabit without cognitive dissonance. Regardless of which it is, cohabitation and decline in

religiosity among young adults are highly correlated. Finally, parental status was looked at as a possible contributor toward the loss of religiosity among young adults. What was discovered was that, in terms of their religious involvements, it made little difference whether or not the participants had children. This may seem counterintuitive given that a commonly offered reason for returning to a faith community by former defectors was because of their desires to provide positive environments for their children. However, the authors cited research that argued for school-age children, not infants and toddlers, as being the catalyst for returning to church. In the case of the respondents in the Uecker, Regnerus, and Vaaler study, those with children were young, college students with only infants and toddlers, not school-aged children.

Buxant and Saroglou (2008) looked at the mental health of participants during three stages of their conversions and subsequent deconversions from the new religious group: a) mental health before making contact with the new religion, b) mental health during their membership, and c) mental health after their departures. It is the last of those three that concerns this study, specifically the impact that leaving the group had both mentally and socially. Twenty (20) participants were selected from 10 NRMs, and the mean age was 44 years old. What Buxant and Saroglou found was that defection from a new religious movement was accompanied by social rupture for most ex-members. In the case of four participants, they severed their ties with parents who remained members. An unspecified number of members reported that, after leaving the group, they were harassed by current members who attempted to bring them back to the fold. The result of leaving the group manifested an individualization of faith for many participants who said that they could no longer enjoy a religious community. Moreover, they exhibit hesitancy in joining any group due to the negative socialization they experienced while members of their former religious communities. Out the 20 ex-members interviewed, only four have transitioned into another religious community of faith.

Like the process of conversion, the process of deconversion involves context, precipitating events, supporting activities, and participation and commitment (Hood et al., 2018). According to Barbour (1994), this complex process of religious change involves a series of phases and a variety of variables: intellectual doubt, moral criticism, emotional suffering, and disaffiliation from a community. Streib and Keller (2004) survey the literature on deconversion and suggest religious background and religious style significantly shape the kind of trajectory deconversion takes. Streib et al. (2009) provide empirical support for conceptualizing deconversion as a gradual, complex process full of interindividual differences that lacks any single over-arching narrative or causal factor. Personality and social influence (i.e., the strength of tradition in a religion) also significantly shape how the individual progresses through a process of deconversion (Streib et al., 2009).

In his study exploring deconversion with self-avowed atheists in Colorado, Smith underscores deconversion involving a gradual, complex process where individual narratives must be analyzed. He also observes unique, inherent difficulties in the process of deconversion to atheism. As a rejection and negation identity, atheism is constructed through articulating what one does *not* believe, which includes articulation of definable roles and behaviors (Smith, 2011). While the factors involved in leaving a religious identity may be clear, the factors involved in the identity atheists are now stepping toward are vague and require further understanding and explanation. In one particular study with atheists in the San Francisco Bay Area who deconverted from the traditional Judeo-Christian God, Hunsberger and Altemeyer (2006) also found deconverts to have a high level of felt clarity on the beliefs and organizations they are rejecting, including a surprisingly high level of dogmatism pertaining to their atheistic beliefs, which dumbfounded participants when this evidence was presented after the study.

LaDrew (2013) contributes to this growing body of research in deconversion, particularly in the case of “active atheists,” those who active socially and participate in atheist activism and become members of atheist organizations. He supports the notion that deconversion constitutes a process involving several and various pathways to atheism. This process is one of discovery, comprised of individual and social or collective factors (e.g., discovery of ideas, self-discovery, and discovery of a collective). In cases where the collective supplies group norms and practices for members and allows for individual expression, individual identity is significantly reinforced. Individual trajectories toward atheism cannot be fully understood in the absence of explaining the collective influence in the life of the individual (LaDrew, 2013).

Hunsberger and Altermeyer (2006) also found a single factor shared by all those interviewed in their Bay Area study: most of them had very little to no religious upbringing as children. Even if their parents or caretakers did believe in God, they showed little interest in God or religion per se. In two studies which have broad relevance for the influence of parents and educators in the underpinnings of religious identity, researchers found children, around the time of kindergarten, intuitively adopt purpose or a design-based, teleological understanding to natural objects in the world (Kelemen, 2004; Evans, 2001). Furthermore, in a series of studies exploring why belief in supernatural agents is widespread, Lanman and Buhrmester (2017) find a strong correlation between exposure to “credibility-enhancing displays (CREDs)” (i.e., exposure to those who “walk the walk” and not just “talk the talk”) and the acquisition of beliefs in supernatural agents. Notably, individuals exposed to high levels of religious CREDs by caregivers were especially likely to report belief in the existence of God, while those exposed to low levels of religious CREDs were most likely to report lack of belief in God.

While more work is needed to examine the generalizability of findings across ethnic and religious populations, recent scientific research comes to bear on irreligiousness, religious disaffiliation, and religious deidentification. At the individual level, as threats (e.g., poverty) to existential security lessen, religious *values* tend to decline (Norris & Inglehart, 2004); increases in existential security also tend to reduce motivations to attend religious services, which in turn causes decline in religious belief (Norenzayan & Gervais, 2013). Stark (2002) considers physiological underpinnings of irreligious commitments, specifically whether the draw to risky behaviors and corresponding high levels of testosterone, low levels of gray matter in the prefrontal cortex, and deficient levels of cortisol cause men to be less religious. Norenzayan et al. (2012) examined cognitive underpinnings influencing religious beliefs. They discovered that mentalizing deficits, i.e. cognitive impediments to forming mental representations, undermine the ability to form beliefs in God and other supernatural agents. Additionally, in a series of five studies, Norenzayan and Gervais (2012) discovered results that indicate analytic thinking promotes religious disbelief.

### **The Nature of Deconversion**

If there are studies on apostasy, disaffiliation, and leave taking – among other related terms in the literature – a natural question arises about what separates deconversion from the other related terms. For example, the terms disaffiliation, apostasy, disengagement, defection, and dropouts have all been applied to various forms of migration out of religious faith. The questions are then, to what do those terms refer, and how do they differ from the term deconversion? An examination of the studies employing the above terms reveals that those terms speak primarily to disassociation from a religious practice or community. For example, Gooren

(2010) utilized the term disaffiliation, defining it as “the process of detaching one’s involvement in an organized religious group” (p. 4). Hunsberger (1983), classifying apostates, described them as “individuals who, report being raised in a religious denomination but who later change their religious orientation to ‘none’” (p. 21). Similarly, Roozen (1980) characterized the term disengagement as the process of dropping out of active participation in a Christian religious community. Mauss (1969) used the term defection to refer “to the withdrawal from fellowship or activity by church members who have had some history of regular attendance and involvement in the church, not merely nominal affiliation” (p. 128). Finally, Caplovitz and Sherrow (1977) used the term dropouts as those who once identified with a particular faith but have not attended church in the last two years. While each of the above examples relates to the concept of deconversion, none sufficiently capture it. In fact, what the above terms reveal is that, according to the literature, the loss of faith is primarily determined by leaving a community of practice. However, deconversion involves much more than simply disassociation.

Among researchers today the term deconversion is preferred for at least two reasons. First, deconversion avoids the negative connotations found in some commonly used terms such as apostasy or defection. According to Streib (2009), such terms imply that the individual is to blame for “a break in loyalty” (p. 17). Second, Streib argued that the term deconversion suggests that deconversion has the same legitimacy as conversion while denoting conversion in the opposite direction. If such is the case, then both potentially have similar elements in biographical change. In that case the relationship between conversion studies and deconversion studies will prove to have a symbiotic relationship and each will contribute to the understanding of the other.

Despite the body of literature dealing with religious change identified above, studies on the nature of, reasons for, and process of deconversion are relatively new in the literature. But

they are growing. What, then, is the contemporary understanding of deconversion in the literature? Two scholars influential in conceptualizing deconversion are John D. Barbour and Heinz Streib. Barbour, in his seminal work *Versions of Deconversion* (1994), pointed out that, while there are “innumerable studies of the conversion narrative as a shaping influence on autobiography, deconversion has not been addressed” (p. 1). In an effort to rectify that problem, Barbour investigated religious deconversion autobiographies, which led to other religious faiths, atheism and agnosticism, and those who used deconversion as an explanation for personal experience or transformation. The most significant result of Barbour’s study was the identification of four basic characteristics documented in the deconversion experiences of different autobiographers. First, deconversion involves an intellectual component of doubt or denial of a belief system. Second, it is characterized as moral criticism directed at, not simply an aspect of the former faith, but the entire system and way of life. Third, it produces feelings of loss, guilt, and emotional upheaval. Fourth, deconversion is characterized by rejection of and disaffiliation from the former religious community. Barbour’s study was focused on how deconversion impacts the values and beliefs at the core of one’s being. He asked, “Can interpretation of deconversion be separated from analysis of whatever beliefs replaced the lost ones?” (p. 3). Barbour’s work has received wide acceptance among those who study deconversion and is cited in nearly every study on the subject.

Streib’s stature in the field of deconversion studies is due to his prolific and groundbreaking work on the nature of deconversion. His most significant work is a quantitative and qualitative study on deconversion involving cross-cultural research in Germany and the United States (2009). The research was based on over 100 narrative interviews from former members of either a new religious fundamentalist organization or a more mainline religious tradition. The results of Streib’s work contributed to the deconversion literature in two important

ways. First, he discovered that, although Barbour's characterization of deconversion was essentially accurate, it was incomplete. Streib found that, among deconverts, a neglected aspect of their deconversions was the role that religious experience had played. For many in Streib's study, the loss of meaning in religious experience contributed as much as, or was a precursor to, the intellectual problems. The loss of meaning of specific religious experiences may occur early in the deconversion process and may be as important for the process as intellectual doubts. This discovery should cause future researchers to look at the role religious experience plays in the lives of those who leave their faith. The second major finding in the study was the differences in the deconversion experiences of Germans and Americans. Streib found that deconversion narratives displayed four identifiable typologies: "the pursuit of autonomy," "debarred from paradise," "finding a new frame of reference," and "lifelong quests." For Streib, the "pursuit of autonomy" is marked by a search for "individuation and critical development of new perspectives in a long-term gradual process of stepping out and distancing" (p. 136) the self from one's religious hegemonic control. Those characterized by the "pursuit of autonomy" had a trajectory that led to a secular exit. The second type of deconvert Streib labeled are those "debarred from paradise" who had a deep, emotional connection to the faith that many had willfully adopted. Their deconversions are typically marked by the emotional stress of leaving a group self-identified as the sole guardian of the truth and removed from prevailing contemporary culture. Belonging to small, elite religious groups who saw themselves as the only true faith produced "high expectations and hopes which in the course of time were disappointed or abandoned" (p. 169). Streib identified "finding a new frame of reference" as the third typology. This typology exhibits a number of similar attributes, such as "searching and finding more intensity, guidance and structure in religious life" (p. 192). The majority of these deconverts left the mainline religious institutions in which they grew up and became members of another

religious perspective that is often oppositional in nature to the original perspectives. In many cases, deconverts in this category leave a religious practice, or “meta-story,” and adopt an equally comprehensive narrative (p. 193). Streib’s final typology is the “lifelong quest.” Lifelong questers are those who have deconverted from several religious communities because the communities did not meet their expectations or were not tolerant enough of their ongoing quests (p. 216). A consistent characteristic of life-long questers is that their search for truth emerges in adolescence and often leads to conversions to fringe religious groups, often multiple times. They exhibit low levels of commitment, and their deconversions are low key and low-tension affairs as they migrate out of whatever faith they had been inhabiting (p. 216).

A third conclusion was that deconversion needs to be distinguished from religious disassociation and disaffiliation. Streib says:

From this list of criteria it becomes obvious, but still should be noted explicitly that our understanding of deconversion radically differs from a simple way of identifying disaffiliation with termination of membership. Already our fifth criterion, disaffiliation from the community, does not exclusively evaluate membership and its termination – which eventually and in many cases is the outcome of deconversion, but “disaffiliation” can consist in a withdrawal from participation in meetings or in a retreat from observance of religious practices; this is especially important in regard to membership in religious orientations without formal membership such as Islam. Moreover, the variety of the five criteria aims at a more open and multi-perspective interpretation of deconversion. (p. 22)

Deconversion entails much more than disaffiliation. For Streib, deconversion is a multifaceted concept including the loss of religious experience, which can often lead to cognitive dissonance including doubt and unbelief, and a moral critique of the entire religious system and way of life, which precipitates an emotional upheaval that ultimately results in a disassociation from the former community. This study adopted Streib’s definition of deconversion and used it to characterize those participants who have migrated out of evangelical Christianity and adopted a form of explicit atheism.

The studies cited above have helped to circumscribe the concept of deconversion. As with most conceptual categories, it is difficult to list the necessary and sufficient conditions that constitute deconversion, but such is the case with many of our most useful concepts.

### **Uniqueness of Deconversion**

The phenomenon of religious conversion has proven to be a popular topic of study over the last 100 years. As previously mentioned, numerous authors have investigated the subject and advanced our understanding of the nature and process of conversion. Yet, according to Fazzino (2014), one result of this better understanding is that, even though the term conversion has garnered a conceptual expansion, it still does not distinguish conversion from other types of significant life change. Therefore, there is still the need for research on radical life change that is not reducible to conversion. In what ways, then, does deconversion distinguish itself from conversion? Are not the processes of deconversion and the factors that lead to it and characterize it largely understood as being the same as that of conversion? Are not all conversions preceded by a deconversion from a previous position? Whether it be adopting a religious faith from a position of non-belief or migrating from one religion to another, is not the subject merely converting from and converting to? Why is there a need for deconversion talk?

As noted above, the literature on conversion is broad and encompasses psychological, sociological, anthropological, and religiotheological elements. If deconversion is understood merely as a form of conversion, then much of the conceptual territory has been mapped, leaving little room for exploration. Such was the case at one time. A turning point of sorts came with the publication of Richardson's *Conversion Career Model* (1978). Richardson's model of conversion

made the following clear, that many people in an increasingly multicultural world chose to convert more than once in their lifetimes. Multiple conversions require multiple deconversions from previous faith commitments. This awareness of the conversion careers phenomenon and the aspect of deconversion which it presupposes was seen as a paradigm shift in theorizing about conversion that had significant implications for understanding deconversion (Streib, 2004) and opened the door for new research. As Wulff (2002) noted:

Further, when we take seriously the possibility that conversion is not necessarily a permanent and one-time event and “conversion careers” (Richardson, 1978) are an option, then deconversion “becomes a new phenomenon to be understood in its own right.” (Wulff, 2002, p. 55)

While it is the case that many deconversions are the result of converting to a new faith, that is not always the case. Fazzino (2014) persuasively argued that deconversion from a religious faith to atheism often lacks many of the typical characteristics of conversions that occur as one migrates between religions. Fazzino pointed out that, in the case of conversion experiences from no faith to faith or between religious faiths, migration narratives have an emphasis on turning to something. The turn is a positive one where the new “true” faith replaces the old and erroneous one. Such narratives also represent the first stage in a commitment to the new faith, which, it is assumed, will be followed by a natural progression in the faith. Furthermore, in such cases the convert has a known destination, which includes an ideology, a set of specific beliefs, and, more than likely, a community of practice to belong to. However, this is not the case with deconversion from faith to nonbelief. Migration narratives that emphasize turning from faith and lacking a substitute to fill the vacuum left by the loss characterize such experiences. They are often the culmination of a spiritual struggle that led to an ambiguous destination, thus not offering the deconvert a secure and stable environment in which to establish

an identity. Atheism, or any other form of non-belief, does not provide the deconvert with an identifiable set of beliefs to adopt or a community of practice to be a member of in the same way as converting to a new faith does. Moreover, for converts to a faith, the emotional response is often accompanied by positive experiences such as a sense of reliance on a higher power, a sense of assurance, and a feeling of ecstasy. For the deconvert, the emotional response is marked by grief and guilt along with rejection and alienation. In general, biographical trajectories of conversion narratives are focused on an emphasis on the new self, whereas for deconversion, they center on the loss of the old self. Finally, personal transformations among converts result in the end of doubting and produce liberation, religious conformity, and the suspension of analytic reasoning. For the deconvert from faith, the personal transformation produces eventual relief, an ongoing search for truth, liberation, religious resistance, and a stigmatized status.

### **Christian Deconversion.**

In the literature on Christian deconversion, several studies concentrated on the topic of deconversion in general. These studies did not identify reasons for deconversion, the process of deconversion, or typologies of deconversion. As such, they have little in common that united them other than their overall relation to deconversion from Christianity.

In an interesting and theologically informative study, Boldt, Roberts, and Whitaker (1982) investigated the process of deconversion among the Hutterites. Hutterites are a small group of Anabaptists that now exists only in North America. They are related to and similar to the Amish and Mennonites with one major distinction—they share all of their possessions. As an old order group that keeps itself separate from the “world,” the Hutterites battle against the temptations that the host society offers its members. A recent and powerful temptation to defect

from the Hutterite community is the appeal of evangelical Protestantism. A combination of dissatisfaction with Hutterite culture and the freedom provided by Evangelical churches were identified as the contributing factors to the large number of Hutterites leaving the colony and converting to evangelicalism.

A similar study to that on the Hutterites is found in the work of Stein (1997). Stein looked at religious defection through the eyes of the Shakers, a closed community of Christians in the early 1800s. He discussed apostasy from the perspective of the Shakers and attempted to show that what the Shakers considered apostasy should really be understood as people who were never committed to Shaker beliefs, but rather were either “trying them on for size” or merely using the Shaker community for what it could get from them. These “not so faithful believers” were never really believers.

Heinz Streib (2002) presented the results of a qualitative study commissioned by the German government concerning the converts to and the deconverts from fundamentalist Christian sects. Narrative interviews were conducted with a relatively small number of participants, producing two significant findings. The first was a typology of how people became Christian fundamentalists. Streib discovered three distinct fundamentalist biographies:

1. Those governed by tradition because they were born into fundamentalist families.
2. The mono convert who has a one-time conversion to fundamentalism from a different background; and
3. The accumulative heretic whose life is a tour through a number of different religious orientations, ending in fundamentalism.

Streib’s second significant discovery was an insight into the motivational impact of life themes that lead to or impede a fit between the convert and the setting of the group. A framework of

religious styles was then used by Streib to understand the formation and transformation of fundamentalist perspectives.

Christians who, at one point, identified with conservative evangelical denominations and subsequently left to become participants in the more theologically open and fluid movement typically comprise the emerging church. Philip Harrold (2006) studied deconversion to what is sometimes called the “emerging church”. Harrold’s work examined the trend among those in the emerging church to identify their religious migrations as a rejection of the contemporary church model. Harrold used Barbour’s model of intellectual doubt, moral criticism, emotionally charged metaphors, and narratives of disaffiliation as a guide to classify those who have deconverted from traditional churches to emerging churches. Brian McLaren and Doug Pagitt were highlighted as leaders of the emerging church. Despite the fact that this study did not deal directly with Christian apostasy, it is helpful for understanding the shift in thinking that is taking place among postmoderns and is relevant for understanding the leave-taking process in general.

Another category of research related to deconversion studies is that which seeks to identify the reasons people choose to deconvert from their faith. Research has primarily been directed at why Christians choose to leave their faith, but it is not limited to them. Caplovitz and Sherrow (1977) conducted an early study regarding the loss of religious practice. The study is both well-known and controversial among religious migration studies. The purpose of their study was to uncover the reasons for the deconversion of Jewish, Catholic, and Protestant college graduates in the 1960s and 1970s. Their conclusion was that disaffiliation, while related to leftist political leanings and commitment to intellectualism, was largely the result of rebellion toward parents. They also found that Catholic colleges no longer provided the barrier to apostasy that they once did, and deconversion at Catholic colleges was equal to that at Jewish and Protestant

schools. Bruce Hunsberger (1980) reevaluated the work of Caplovitz and Sherrow in order to determine if their conclusions were sound. Hunsberger questioned the conclusions of Caplovitz and Sherrow regarding rebellion to parents by pointing to methodological problems with the original research. He performed a similar evaluation of college apostates to discover if the original research conclusion was valid. The results from Hunsbeger's study were partially consistent with Caplovitz and Sherrow's contention that family relationships and youthful rebellion relate to apostasy, yet the results were not clear cut and differed enough to cast serious doubt on the original study.

Albrecht and Cornwall (1989) examined the impact of various life changes on Christian religious belief and behavior. They noted that the importance of one's church and one's religious faith increased as a result of positive life events. Likewise, the opposite is true, following negative life events. The significance of the study in terms of deconversion was due to the analysis regarding the negative impact that life events can have on one's faith. A significant number of negative life events can cause people to reconsider their faiths.

De Graaf and Need (1996) investigated the influences of a wide range of variables that raise the risk of Christian deconversion. The data were drawn from the 1992–1993 Dutch Family Survey and was empirical in nature. They found that parental education and marriage to a nonreligious spouse all significantly raised the risk of deconversion. Furthermore, the more education one has, the greater the risk of deconversion. The data also revealed that there is a higher risk of leaving the faith in the late teens if one lived in a secular society.

Richter and Francis (1998) conducted a further study on the precipitating causes of deconversion among Christians. In a mixed-methods approach that consisted of 27 interviews and 400 questionnaires, they discovered that many church-leavers still held on to their beliefs in

God even after leaving and stated that they were still involved in a “spiritual quest” (p. 38). The authors offered a common rationale for the loss of involvement in religious communities of practice. The eight reasons given can be grouped into four general categories: a) social change, b) change of values, c) critical life events, and d) childhood socialization. Streib was persuaded that the Richter and Francis study made a novel contribution to the literature of deconversion in that it attempted to account for changes in faith development in relation to disaffiliation (Streib et al., 2009, p. 48). Richter and Francis looked at the relationship between the faith stage of church attendees and the level of faith development of the churches they attended and “their possible common growth and advancement” (Streib et al., 2009, p. 48).

Garry Calver (2004) chronicled the stories of 14 young people who gave up their Christian faiths. The purpose of the research was to help readers understand the reasons why many in their late teens walk away from their faiths and what can be done to turn the tide. Calver’s study was intended to be utilized for pastoral purposes, for Christian leaders, and Christian teens who are struggling with their faith. It is not in any way an apologetic, but it could help adolescents make it through their teen years by informing them that they are not alone in their inner turmoil. Through interviews Calver identified many reasons given by Christian teens as to why they are tempted to leave the faith.

An important study in terms of identifying reasons why deconversion occurs among Christians was recently conducted by Wright, Giovanelli, and Dolan (2007). The authors of the study analyzed hundreds of autobiographical deconversion narratives posted to ex-Christian websites. Their findings are valuable because they are a primary source of narratives authored by those who posted their narratives to identify their reasons for abandoning Christianity. The four primary reasons identified by Wright, Giovanelli, and Dolan are the following: a) intellectual and

theological problems with Christianity, b) God's supposed failures, c) negative interactions with Christians, d) and positive interactions with non-Christians. The findings of this study are revealing and often not what traditional Christian apologetics is directed at. The authors made a recommendation for further study, to which this literature review will shortly turn; that is, the need to uncover what the process is of deconversion from Christianity to nonbelief.

Of the more recent offerings in contributing factors in Christian deconversion is Zuckerman (2011). Zuckerman's purpose was to contribute to the field of deconversion studies by filling in a gap in the literature. He noted that most of the studies on deconversion are based on empirical survey data and not on interviews with deconverts. In this work, he identified different kinds of apostates, which he labeled as:

1. Early and late apostasy.
2. Early adoption of the faith and rejection in teens and twenties.
3. Late adoption of religion in adult years and then abandonment late in life.
4. Deep and shallow apostasy, which refers to the levels of rejection and adoption of secularity; and
5. Mild and transformative deconversion, which highlights the degrees of commitment before deconversion.

The book contains various interviews with deconverts and concludes with a section addressing how and why people deconvert.

As Wright, Giovanelli and Dolan (2007) noted in their study of deconversion narratives posted on the Internet, there exists a gap in the literature in relation to the process of deconversion. This gap was indicated by Bromely as far back as 1988. Recently, several studies have been done that begin to address the process of deconversion. One such study was that

conducted by Sandomirsky and Wilson (1990), analyzing the process of disaffiliation. Their specific focus was the religious mobility among men and women. Their research resulted in constructing models intended to account for both apostasy and switching. What they discovered is that family status, such as having parents who did not share the same faith or marrying a spouse who lacks a religious faith, increases the likelihood of apostasy but not the likelihood of switching faiths. Moreover, men are more affected by family changes than women, resulting in men being more likely to deconvert than women. The results point to the importance of family in unlocking the nature of apostasy.

In a qualitative analysis of leaving Protestant fundamentalism, Brent (1994) constructed a general description of the process of deconversion. Brent listed seven stages in the process of deconversion: a) participation in the fundamentalist context, b) the initial disillusionment, c) tolerating the tradition, d) leaving the tradition, e) the emotion-laden aftermath, f) establishing new horizons, and g) living with problematic residue. Brent's research was conducted with the counseling profession in mind and suggested that therapists would do well to take his model into consideration when working with clients who are struggling with the process of deconversion.

Mahala's (2006) qualitative thesis, found that though agnostics do not seem to experience the same approbation that atheists do, there nevertheless are negative personal and social consequences. Most agnostics in the study chose to remain quiet about their losses of faith and subsequent ambivalence toward the existence of God so as to avoid social conflict. Nearly all the participants commented that their agnosticism was personal and did not feel the need to announce or proclaim it to those who were closest to them. Perhaps it is for that very reason that Christians who deconvert to agnosticism experience fewer social consequences than committed atheists.

Ross (2009) touched on the social impact of losing one's faith in Christianity in her doctoral dissertation. The purpose of her study was to focus "on the experience of losing faith rather than on the process of leaving one's religion" (p. 12). Specifically, Ross looked at the emotional and cognitive experiences of losing faith to provide counselors and therapists a better understanding of their clients' deconversion experiences. Ross discovered that some participants had positive social consequences due to their departures from Christianity and identifications with nonbelievers. One participant reported that he felt a "profound sense of deepening of relationships" as an atheist because he no longer felt obligated to convert his friends to Christianity (p. 149). For others, the benefits came in finding communities that allowed them to find genuine fellowship that was based on shared values and not on religious teachings they did not believe. Ross reported that most participants in her study tended to see the new social networks that they had become part of as superior to their old religiously based communities. However, not all or even most of the social consequences of deconversion were positive. Ross' participants described significant negative social consequences surrounding their deconversions from Christianity. Ross identified five categories where many of the negative consequences manifested: a) family of origin, b) spouses, c) children, d) friends, and e) the church community. In terms of negative social consequences involving families of origin, former believers commented that the relationships between themselves and their Christian parents and siblings were strained on account their new-found atheism.

Ross's participants reported that their deconversions caused great tension and stress in their marriages. In some cases, the marriages dissolved due to irreconcilable differences. Although it is not surprising that such a radical life change would threaten the marriage relationship, it is interesting that the participants reported that they felt dissolution was inevitable

given the “non-negotiable” nature of their new-found atheistic beliefs (p. 153). Consequently, if the marriage was going to survive, it was up to the Christian spouse to come to terms with the partner’s loss of faith and find some ways to deal with it.

Participants reported a variety of consequences in their relationships with their children as a result of their deconversions. For some children, the news that their parent had lost faith was devastating. For others, it was of little consequence because they themselves had also lost faith and were not troubled by their parents’ deconversions. Ross’ data on the social impacts on the parent-child relationships in the aftermath of deconversion is rather thin. Of Ross’ participants, only three had children, and all of the children were adults when their parents deconverted.

Many respondents spoke about the loss of long-standing friendships as a result of their deconversions. Some reported that they were hurt by the losses of their religious friends but could understand why the losses happened. The seismic shift that occurred regarding the foundation upon which the friendships were built made maintaining the friendships untenable. In some cases, it was the participants who distanced themselves from the believers; in other cases, it was the believers distancing themselves from the apostates. No one in Ross’ study seemed to be totally surprised by the impacts that their deconversions had on their friendships. In fact, one participant raised it as the primary reason why he waited so long to “come out” as an atheist (p. 155).

Ross’ participants described a variety of responses from their church communities. Amber experienced harsh judgment from her former church community. She was threatened with punishment from God and was called derogatory names. Amber’s experiences were extreme when compared to Ross’ other participants’ experiences, but they, too, received negative

treatment. Only in a small number of cases did the deconvert find an attitude of respect and concern that was perceived positively.

Smith (2010) investigated the process of constructing a new identity after relinquishing religious faith. Smith interviewed 30 Christian apostates who self-identified as atheists. From this experience, four major elements in the deconversion and identity-construction process were noted. First, the ubiquity of theism is the backdrop to deconversion. Because theism has such a significant influence in American culture, creating an atheist identity is always seen in contrast to what it is not. Second, the deconverts often questioned theism and found their doubts bolstered by others. Third, the deconverts rejected theism prior to identifying publicly as atheists, often a long time prior. Fourth, the final stage in the process is coming out publicly as an atheist. Smith's conclusions are consistent with the findings of others (Ross, 2009; Mahala, 2006; Fazzino, 2014; Downs, 2012).

Fazzino (2014) provided an in-depth look at the process of deconversion from evangelical Christianity to atheism. She approached her study from a phenomenological perspective in examining narratives of deconversion. Fazzino, a former evangelical, wrote as a researcher and an advocate for former Christians who now identify with some form of secularity.

Fazzino's study of 20 former evangelicals revealed that they tend to emphasize their "breaking away from the constraints of hegemonic Christianity rather than turning to secularity" (p. 1). Fazzino believed that it is important, therefore, to characterize exit narratives as deconversions because doing so changes them into a "necessary cultural repertoire" that encourages individuals to challenge the control of religion and allows for easier establishment in a community of nonbelievers (p.1). It is in concentrating on the negative aspects of religion, even after adopting secular worldviews, that deconverts form their identities.

Downs (2012) conducted a phenomenological study on the deconversion experiences of college students from Christianity to atheism. Downs focused on “the thoughts and feelings, the role of significant others and society, and the significance of various life issues in the process of deconversion” (p. 1). Downs’ study was concerned with whether the various personal and social challenges experienced by those who deconvert to nonbelief are satisfactorily addressed in higher education. The framework with which Downs approached the study was through the homosexual identity development model of Cass (1979). The parallels between atheist converts and homosexuals lie in the fact that they are both identified as being in the “visible minority” (p. 7). Cass identified six stages to the coming out process among homosexuals that Downs found relevant to the process of deconversion. Step one is identity confusion and is marked by feelings of being different, which produces high levels of anxiety. Identity comparison, the second stage, is characterized by a realization that one may be gay, which, in turn, produces feelings of isolation. Identity tolerance, the third stage, happens when the individual begins to accept that he or she is gay. Often at this stage in the process, a person will seek out others who are gay and no longer identify with the heterosexual majority. The fourth stage, identity acceptance, occurs when the gay person sees his or her homosexuality as positive. This, however, does not mean that the gay individual is prepared to present him or herself to the majority heterosexual society as gay. Pride and immersion into the gay community often characterizes the fifth stage of development known as identity pride. The final stage of identity development, according to Cass, is known as identity synthesis. Here, the private and public lives of the homosexual individual are merged and integrated with the rest of one’s identity producing a “more congruent self” (p. 8).

Downs' observation that identity formation among homosexuals offers insights into deconversion, particularly deconversion to atheism, appears to have merit. Indeed, parallels were found for each of the six stages of homosexual identity formation in the deconversion process to atheism. First-stage deconverts, like homosexuals, often reported identity confusion as they tried to make sense of who they were, believers or nonbelievers. Like homosexuals, atheists commonly reported feelings of isolation and anxiety, as they began to consider themselves atheists. Cass also found congruence between homosexuals and atheists in terms of self-acceptance and labeling. In this third stage, deconverts had come to acknowledge that they were a part of a social minority and had adopted the label of "atheist." In the fourth stage of deconversion, Cass discovered that, like homosexuals, atheists had come to believe that the label "atheist" is a positive term, despite not being ready to publicly identify as an atheist. In the fifth stage, deconverts were willing to identify publicly and, in fact, were proud of their atheist beliefs and associations. Finally, in the sixth stage, the public and private lives of deconverts were merged, and the bifurcation of the atheist self that existed in earlier stages was reconciled. That the Cass identity development model applies so well to both cases of identity formation suggests that it may prove a valuable tool not only in cases of homosexuality or atheism, but also for any life change where an individual moves from the visible majority to the invisible and often unaccepted minority.

Another subsequent study, conducted at the University of Wisconsin by Krueger (2013) on the relationship between deconversion and identity formation sought to investigate not merely the adoption of atheism as a worldview, but also "the individual's larger relation to religion and to religious identity" (p. 3). Krueger interviewed 16 atheists at a midwestern university between

18 and 22 years of age. She identified five phases of the deconversion process that related to an individual's adoption of the atheist identity. These stages included the following: a) detachment, b) doubt, c) disassociation, d) transition, and e) declaration. An interesting discovery was that social detachment might be a precursor to deconversion. Characteristic of the detachment phase, as identified by Krueger, was that the participants in her study reported never being closely connected to their previous religious communities and did not feel a strong inclination to maintain their beliefs in the face of encroaching doubt. For others in the study, the social alienation they experienced from their church communities allowed them to leave their religious commitments with fewer qualms than had they been socially embedded in the church communities. Krueger said:

Whether ties to their religious community were weak or nonexistent from the start or whether they were severed after an unpleasant experience, the individual is, at some point, detached from their religious community. Between lack of emotional investment in a religious identity and the weak social and emotional ties to their religious community, there is little to prevent these individuals from questioning the validity of religious belief and practice. (p. 4)

In the fifth stage, declaration, respondents "came out," as it were, to others, often those closest to them, which, in Krueger's terms, "finalized" their decisions. The decision to do so is not without consequence. For some, the disclosures were met with positive responses. Others experienced "intolerance, shock and disappointment" (p. 7). For Krueger, this step in the deconversion process is essential to taking on an atheist identity and is only complete when "the individual validates their atheist identity in social interaction" because it allows them to "locate themselves in the social landscape of American society" (p. 7). There are clear parallels in the conclusions of Krueger and Ross (2009), Downs (2010), and Smith (2013). The overlap in stages identified by the different studies provides a measure of confirmation that such stages do, in fact, exist for many who deconvert to atheism.

Hundreds, if not thousands, of first-person deconversion narratives can be found on the Internet. Websites such as [new.exChristian.net](http://new.exChristian.net), [richarddawkins.net](http://richarddawkins.net), [positiveatheism.org](http://positiveatheism.org) and numerous others act as online repositories for autobiographical deconversion narratives. The website [leavingchristianity.com](http://leavingchristianity.com) has links to over 100 deconversion websites, from ones that host general deconversion testimonies to those dedicated to the deconversion stories of former missionaries, nuns, and priests. One such website known, as The Clergy Project, is exclusively for pastors who have undergone or are completing the process of deconversion. Boasting a membership of over 450 pastors who no longer hold supernatural beliefs, The Clergy Project exists to provide a “confidential online community for active and former clergy who do not hold supernatural beliefs. It is a safe house where members can freely discuss the challenges, they face in leaving ministry and establishing a new life” ([clergyproject.org](http://clergyproject.org)). Beside websites hosting deconversion narratives, at the time of writing, there exist dozens Internet discussion groups that provide an arena for former Christians to dialogue with one another (See: *Leaving Christianity; Walk Away from Fundamentalism Forum; Recovering Ex-Christians Facebook Group; Exit Fundyism*). The Internet also provides access to a plethora of websites belonging to former Christians who are invested in seeking to deconvert Christians. John Loftus, a former pastor, and Christian apologist, writes a blog entitled “Debunking Christianity,” expressly to deconvert Christians by attempting to demonstrate Christianity is untrue. Loftus’ website is not unique; there are multiple websites hosted by former Christians, intent on deconverting their former brethren.

Online deconversion narratives have also been the source for scholarly research. Chalfant (2011) utilized them as the basis for his master’s thesis. As previously mentioned, Wright, Giovanelli and Dolan (2007) analyzed deconversion narratives online to find explanations for

deconversion from evangelical Christianity. A related study to autobiographical narratives found on the Internet is the work of Swanson (2009), who sought to identify how apostate organizations use the Internet. Swanson studied 10 Christian apostate groups and the manner in which they used the Internet. Swanson, “focused on the extent to which apostate Web sites identified, expressed, and justified their apostate intent; asked users to respond; and offered or promised rewards for user response” (p.3). The results showed that while evangelization and proselytization are aspects of the websites, the primary purpose was to disseminate information.

A noticeable component of most websites is the need to justify apostasy intellectually:

Most of the sites were perceived as framing apostasy as justified in search of revealed truth (8 out of 10 sites); as a necessary action to bring about spiritual or emotional satisfaction (7 out of 10 sites); or to bring about lifestyle improvement, support civil or human rights, or as politically necessary (8 out of 10 sites). Evaluators perceived only 2 of the sites to be framing apostasy as a response to a divine command; only 1 site seemed to frame apostasy as a means of avoiding punishment, hell, or damnation. None of the sites was perceived to frame apostasy primarily as a means of achieving intellectual satisfaction, as an economic necessity, or as a means of avoiding persecution from an opposed religious denomination. (p. 12)

Swanson leveled several criticisms at the use of the Internet by apostate / deconvert websites. Perhaps the most significant is that the websites (and those behind them) did not seem to be truly effective if they were actually seeking to deconvert current members of the religious organizations they were targeting. One way to become more effective would be if the websites would focus not only on problems of the religion in question, but also provide help and advice for those wanting to deconvert. Deconversion is more than an intellectual change; it is an upheaval to one’s entire life. Swanson maintained that if deconverts wanted to change the hearts and minds of those who read their websites, they must recognize that fact and provide personal and existential supports. Otherwise, those who deconvert will not be “pastored” into the new lifestyles for which they had advocated (p. 18).

## **Religious Change and Prosocial Behavior**

Lastly, we shift the focus to a seminal question in studies of religious change: does religiosity produce prosocial behavior, or behaviors concerned with the well-being and welfare of others? Galen (2012) calls into question the long assumed causal relationship between religiosity and prosociality that religiosity influences prosocial behaviors, such as helping. In studies that assessed prosociality in non-planned and spontaneous contexts, and where religious cues were not immediately relevant, no significant relationship between religiosity and prosociality was demonstrated. Another series of studies, however, demonstrated that implicit activation of god-concepts did increase prosocial behavior and decrease selfishness, even when the behavior was directed toward strangers (Shariff & Norenzayan, 2007). Additionally, Baumeister et al. (2009) found belief in free will, a religious and theologically pregnant concept, valuably supports prosocial behavior. Conversely, in the same study, inducing people to disbelieve in free will resulted in increased aggression and a reduction in willingness to help others. Norenzayan (2014) argues that religion does in fact do a good job of influencing prosocial behavior, but stresses religion is not *necessary* for morality and prosocial behaviors. Recent studies strengthen the idea that religious concepts may have a causal effect on influencing behaviors concerned with the well-being and welfare of others (Shariff et al., 2016). And in four related studies looking at the relationship between prosocial behaviors and meaning in life, Van Tongeren et al. (2015) found prosocial behaviors produce a sense of meaning in life; and when threats to meaning are presented to individuals, prosocial behavior is bolstered, not undermined.

## **Recent, Promising Research**

With the rise of the “spiritual but not religious” in America, Davis et al. (2015) provide research and tools on broad notions of spirituality that can be operationalized and measured. The

Sources of Spirituality (SOS) Scale provides a flexible and fluid measurement strategy for thinking about what spirituality is. Tong and Yang (2018), concerned with false assumptions regarding the “spiritual but not religious” as a homogeneous group, examine heterogeneous features of this group, provide helpful distinctions, and identify four distinct types within this group. Along similar lines, Van Tongeren et al. (2020, in press) address the complexity and diversity among those who do not identify with religion, and explain evidence that suggests importance cognitive, emotional, and motivational differences between religious *doers* (those who are formerly religious) and religious *noners* (those who were never religious).

Packard and Ferguson (2018) conduct 100 in-depth interviews with self-identified Christians and find bureaucracy and a narrow focus on moral proscriptions “push” people to disaffiliate from their religious congregation, while meaningful relationships and active participation in social justice help to “pull” people in. Thiessen and Wilkens-Laflamme (2017) corroborate evidence from (Hunsberger & Altemeyer, 2006; LaDrew, 2013) that exposure to religion as a child is strongly correlated with affiliation to or disaffiliation from religion later in life. Brandt & Van Tongeren (2017) draw upon tools in psychology to measure whether the highly religious and religious fundamentalists are uniquely prone to prejudice toward dissimilar groups and find that prejudice is not limited to these two groups. Prejudice is also found among those with low levels of religious belief, the nonreligious, and the nonfundamentalists.

Fisher (2017) builds upon previous work in deconversion and disaffiliation to provide a model for understanding the stages a religious individual may undergo during a transition toward irreligion, notably a move away from the Judeo-Christian tradition. Bullivant et al. (2019) help to advance studies in the growing field of nonbelief by exploring the many ways of being an

unbeliever and the implications and entailments of unbelief in their extensive, multi-year study that spans six countries.

Hui et al. (2015; 2017; 2018;) have produced an intriguing series of longitudinal studies on religious transition as it relates to psychological characteristics. In a 2015 study, *Psychological Predictors of Chinese Christians' Church Attendance and Religious Steadfastness: A Three-Wave Prospective Study*, they sought to discover if it were possible to predict which Christians will eventually leave their faith. To do so they recruited 932 Chinese Christians. They discovered that an individual who identified as a Christian but had not been attending church, who was a fulltime university student and who highly valued self-direction, stimulation, and power, while scoring low on extroversion was more likely to leave their faith. Hui et al. concluded that indeed there are factors that can predict deconversion. Furthermore, they suggest that those factors are not limited to being predictive but that they also likely play a causal role in deconversion.

In a related study, Hui et al. (2017) conducted a 3-year longitudinal study to understand the precursors of conversion and whether conversion would result in psychological changes. A logistic regression was conducted on 455 non-Christian Chinese to discover if baseline personality, personal values, and social axioms predict whether an individual would convert. They conclude there is little evidence that personality traits, social axioms, personal values can be used to predict conversion. Another way of saying this is that people of all stripes are likely to convert to Christianity regardless of their personality profile. As a result of these studies (2015; 2017) Hui and his colleagues have offered evidence that although there is not a set of values that can be identified which predict conversion to Christianity, there seem to be factors that do predict deconversion from it.

In 2018, Hui and his colleagues conducted a further study on deconverts from Christianity. The study sought to uncover psychological changes during faith exit in order to identify characteristics of professed Christians who would eventually leave the faith. 632 Chinese Christians were recruited for the three-year study. By the end of that time 188 had left the faith. Hui concluded that would be exiters had belief and value profiles that were more like those of nonbelievers than of believers. This implies that changes in beliefs and values may have begun a long time before faith exit. Those who left their faith scored lower on emotional stability, which has been shown to be correlated with being less religious. Exiters also had less trust in other people, less emphasis on fate control, tradition and benevolence and more emphasis on self-direction, stimulation, hedonism, achievement, and power. All of which are more like the profile of a nonbelievers / nonreligious individual than believers in terms of belief and values. The

Chan et al. 2020 study, *Causal Relationship Between Religiosity and Value*

*Priorities: Cross-Sectional and Longitudinal Investigations*, showed that religious affiliation predicted an increase in the value of tradition. Likewise, it showed a decline in self-direction, hedonism, and security after three years. This is consistent with the idea that religion causes changes in values. That religion causes changes in values shows that there is good reason to suspect bidirectional causality in terms of the relationship between values and religious commitment. This claim is directly relevant to the subject of deconversion.

*The Anatomy of Deconversion: Keys to a lifelong faith in a Culture That is Abandoning Christianity* by John Marriott (2020) is a comprehensive overview of the deconversion process. Through in-person interviews with former Christians and information gleaned from online deconversion narratives, Marriott gives insight into the context, causal factors, process, and impact of deconverting from Christianity. His previous effort, *A Recipe for Disaster: How Parents and Churches Prepare Individuals for a Crisis of Faith* (2018), concentrated on four

missteps made by leaders which play significant roles in faith exit. In this work Marriott catalogues numerous studies that highlight the fact that Christian deidentification is a growing trend.

[Literature Review Bibliography on the following page

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