

Handbook of Leaving Religion

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Handbook of Leaving Religion

Edited by

Daniel Enstedt
Göran Larsson
Teemu T. Mantsinen



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Leaving Religion: Introducing the Field

Daniel Enstedt, Göran Larsson and Teemu T. Mantsinen

In 1968, the *New York Times* published the sociologist Peter Berger's now famous prediction about the coming decline of religion worldwide. In this context, Berger stated that the remains of religion in the twenty-first century would consist of religious believers "likely to be found only in small sects, huddled together to resist a worldwide secular culture" (Berger 1968: 3). People around the world were, in short, expected to leave religion altogether as their societies became modern. It was not a question about *if* the change would occur, only a matter of time. More than 30 years later, in 1999, Berger revised his earlier claim and instead declared the world as *deseccularised* (Berger 1999). He is, however, far from alone in criticising, or even dismissing, the century old secularisation thesis, where modernisation of a society goes hand in hand with secularisation.¹ Even though *leaving* religion – that is the focus in this handbook – has, from time to time, been associated with irreligiosity, agnosticism, and atheism, and, in particular, modernised Western predominantly Christian countries, it can very well also be about leaving one religion from another, or even changing position within the same religious tradition, for example when orthodox Chassidic Jews becoming reformed, liberal Jews (see, for instance, Davidman 2015).

In 2015, PEW Research Center published the report *The Future of World Religions*, where the overall global tendencies, at least until 2050, are about growth of religion. Around the world, religious population is increasing according to the prediction – the Muslim population will grow significantly, and in 2070 Islam will be at the same size as Christianity, that is around one third of the world population – and only a small percentage of the world's population are expected to be disaffiliated or non-religious. Leaving out a critical discussion about the accuracy of this study and its methodological problems, one of the factors analysed in the statistically based projection was "religious switching,"

1 See for instance Toft, Philpott and Shah, *God's Century. Resurgent Religion and Global Politics* (2011). Before Berger's 1999 article many scholars in religious studies has contested the secularisation thesis, even though the secularisation thesis was generally accepted in the social sciences and in the public debate, not the least in Western Europe.

that is religious change on an individual level. Even though religious switching has “a relatively small impact on the projected size of major religious groups in 2050” (PEW Research Center 2015: 45), it may have an effect on different regions around the globe. Mobility between religions and non-religion is also related to various regions and global processes, such as, for example migration flows. That means that even though many people will be switching in, out and between religions up until 2050, the total number of religious adherents around the world will not be affected in a significant way. Switching out of a religion in favour of a non-religious position also seems to be more prevalent in the US and Europe than other parts of the world (see also the prognosis made by Stolz et al. 2016).² The decrease of Christian population in the Western countries is also, in part, related to a question of declining role of family in cultural transmission of religion (Need and De Graaf 1996). Social factors are important in both staying in and leaving religion. However, this and other factors, such as, for example, pedophilia scandals in the Catholic church, can also result in leaving religious institutions or declining attendance rather than religiosity in general (Bottan and Perez-Truglia 2015).

However, in more recent times, new theoretical and methodological approaches have emerged and there is a growing interest in deconversion and various forms of leaving religion studies, but still we think that it is difficult to get a comprehensive introduction and overview to these studies. For example, in so-called cult studies, the main definition of leaving religion has been apostasy (Bromley 1998). Other definitions of exits, or people exiting, concentrate usually on describing the exit process or deconversion (Richardson, van der Lans and Derks 1986; Streib et al. 2009). Whilst the term apostasy (Greek: *apostenai* – to stand away of something) can be viewed negatively, at least as an invective used by a religious groups or individuals to define a defector (Larsson 2018a), it has also been used in research to characterise people who leave religion and then become a part of the critique directed towards the same religion, or simply be understood as any position outside the religious group of origin. There are, according to John D. Barbour, four basic characteristics of deconversion autobiographies. “Deconversion encompasses,” Barbour writes, “intellectual doubt, moral criticism, emotional suffering, and disaffiliation from a community” (Barbour 1994: 2). Not all of these aspects are expressed in every deconversion narrative, and the emphasis can also be put in various ways. On the basis of previous research, Phil Zuckerman stipulate three dimensions of

2 See also PEW’s report about so called “Nones,” the religious disaffiliated part of the population: <http://assets.pewresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/11/2012/10/NonesOnTheRise-full.pdf>. Accessed 28/5/2018.

apostasy, that is “early/late, shallow/deep, mild/transformational [that] manifest themselves in various combinations” (Zuckerman 2012: 8).³ In addition, studies on leaving religion have also been examining the motifs and reasons, the processes and consequences of leaving religion.

Although one could argue that the study of leaving religion is a neglected topic in the academic study of religions it is hard to define what “leaving” entails. While the study of conversion is a relatively well researched topic (from James 1902 to various handbooks, such as, for example, Rambo’s and Farhadian’s *The Oxford Handbook of Religious Conversion*, 2014), surprisingly few studies have put focus on the fact that conversion implies that the individual moves from or leaves one position – say a Christian identification to another religion – but what the process of leaving entails is often hard to isolate or reduce to one factor. For example, even after a formal divorce a person still holds (good, bad, painful, happy or indifferent) memories of his or her former spouse. It is likely that this observation also holds true for many individuals who have decided to leave a religious belonging or other social formations (for example political parties, gangs, an addictive lifestyle, etcetera). Behaviours rooted in moral codes and religious teachings (especially if they have been adopted at a young age) tend to colour the life of the individual even though he or she has taken a new path. Sometimes the former belonging can be a source of anger and it can provoke a strong need to demonstrate that the earlier life was wrong (see, for example, Larsson 2016). For example, the change to something new can be expressed by the help of a novel vocabulary, but also by putting on “different” clothes (for example the veil, or by growing a beard, or by shaving), adopting new behaviours and to take up another sexual identity. Food, clothing and sexual orientations seems to be strong markers of identity and they are often used for expressing one’s attitude towards the society and one’s religious belonging. In a sense we are all coloured by our former belongings, identities and experiences, if we are to believe Helen Ebaugh’s analysis in *Becoming an Ex: The Process of Role Exit* (1988).

Since the World War II and the adoption of the Declaration of Human Rights by the United Nations, individuals in most parts of the world have been given the possibility and freedom to change and abandon a religious life. This is stipulated in Article 18:

Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom,

³ There are several different definitions of apostasy in the research literature. See Zuckerman (2012: 4–13) for a brief overview.

either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance.⁴

This right is, however, not always respected and to leave a religious life can often be associated with social costs (exclusion), personal grief (the loss of friends and relatives) or even personal risk and threats (see, for example, Larsson 2018a). That so-called apostates – that is those who have actively left a religious tradition by embracing a new religion, or lifestyle, or those who have been accused of apostasy because of their lifestyle, or interpretations of a specific religious tradition – can put themselves in a dangerous position in many countries outside of Europe, North America and Australia is evident (see, for example, *International Freedom of Religion Report* 2017). That individuals who leave Islam are more likely to suffer from persecutions and threats than individuals who leave many other religious traditions today is well-documented and many countries dominated by Muslim traditions are also prone to execute so-called apostates (for example Iran, Sudan and Saudi Arabia) (Larsson 2018a). However, it is inaccurate to argue that the question of leaving religion is only a matter that concerns Islamic traditions and Muslims theologians, on the contrary. As this handbook sets out to explore, the question of leaving a religious tradition is a common question and a potential problem within all religious traditions in both past and present. To draw up a line between insiders and outsiders and to argue that one's interpretation of the religious tradition is right and that one's opponents are wrong (for example by calling the other group heretics, or apostates) is therefore a general pattern that is found in all social formations that make use of a religious vocabulary. This is, for example, the case in the bloody wars in present day Syria and Iraq. Whilst the Islamic State (ISIS) argues that their opponents – may they be Shia Muslims, non-Muslims, atheists or just Sunni Muslims who do not follow or accept the claims made by the Islamic State – are labelled as apostates, the critics argue that it is the followers of the Islamic State who are the evildoers and by their thoughts and actions they “prove” that they are not proper or “true” Muslims (Larsson 2017). The proclivity to make up real or imagined boundaries between insiders and outsiders, or so-called heretics and orthodox, is well-documented in the history of religions. However, in earlier studies these processes and tendencies are rarely studied as part and parcel of conversion, deconversion, leaving religion, and apostasy. The change of a religious orientation is also closely related to the question of who has the power and authority over religious interpretations,

4 Retrieved from <http://www.un.org/en/universal-declaration-human-rights/>. Accessed 30/5/2018.

and the possibility for the individual to break free from established norms and values.

Whereas the right to change one's attitude towards a specific religious tradition and switch to a new belonging or a novel lifestyle is an individual freedom and legal right in Europe, this is not always the case in non-western countries. Because of political and economic structures (that is weak states that do not provide equal opportunities for all citizens), the possibility of changing one's religious belonging is often closely related to matters such as family, class, gender and tribe. To change religion or to abandon a religious lifestyle could therefore be linked to material and legal aspects and not only philosophical or dogmatic questions. However, over the last decades, the question of freedom of religion has also been put under much pressure in Northern and Western Europe and the right to change religion is often met with critique and strong reactions. This reality is often experienced by individuals who convert to Islam (see, for example, Inge 2017), but also by individuals who leave Islam after they have migrated to Europe and gained a new citizenship. Both those who leave and those who enter a religious tradition are therefore likely to be in a vulnerable position and indications of hate crimes and discrimination are sometimes reported in relation to conversion processes (*Främlingsfientliga handlingar* 2014; Larsson 2018b). However, the data for these types of crimes are difficult to estimate, and it is likely that these types of crimes are underreported, and that hate and discrimination is more common than we think. This is a topic for future research. While the large majority of individuals who attain a new attitude and lose interest in their former religious tradition, it is also likely that some individuals can join or be used by those who are interested in criticising a specific religious group. Thus, it is not unusual to find former ex-Muslims among those who are strong critiques of Islam (Larsson 2016; Enstedt and Larsson 2013), but former members in so-called religious sects or new religious movements are often recruited by the so-called anti-cult movement (see, for example, Foster 1984; Wright 2014; Wright and Ebaugh 1993). While an individual could have suffered from and experienced physical or psychological violence when they belonged to a specific religious group, it is not hard to understand that an individual also could have good reasons to criticise one's former belonging. For example, in order to make a rational explanation for earlier behaviours and belongings it is also necessary to distance oneself from the ex-position and one way to do so is to publicly frown upon one's former religion. A new identity is constructed also by how a person relates to their past.

As fieldwork and interviews with, for example, ex-Muslims have shown (Enstedt 2018) it is common to seek other ways out from a religious tradition. Losing and gaining new interests and to fade out from a religious life seems to

be a common way out. Compared to the public critiques this group of ex-members seldom feel that they have a need for criticising their former belonging. For example, as shown by Enstedt (2018), it is clear that many ex-Muslims are still coloured by their former religious identity, not the least when it comes to difficult questions such as drinking alcohol or eating pork. Even after they have distanced themselves from their Islamic identity, they can feel uneasy when they eat pork or drink alcohol after they have embraced a non-Muslim identity. The endurance of some cultural habits is strong especially if they have a positive effect in coping difficult situations, such as joining new groups or facing stress, bringing safe structure in transition. For example, an ex-Pentecostal might start speaking in tongues even when they do not believe in such ritual anymore, when confronted with a stressful situation (Mantsinen 2015).

As this handbook tries to demonstrate it is important to address the obvious fact that theologians (no matter of religious tradition) have never had one single and unanimous understanding of how to define apostasy, orthodoxy or heresy, and this is also often true when it comes to the question of leaving. To put it differently, what does it entail to leave a religion? Should the “heretic” or apostate be defined by his actions or his thoughts, is it necessary to publicly denounce a religious tradition to be looked upon as a defector, or is it enough that a theologian defines an individual as an apostate to make him or her an outsider? Furthermore, how should an apostate, or an individual who leaves a religious tradition, be looked upon by his or her co-religionists and even more importantly, how should he or she be treated? Should such an individual be punished by the believers, or is the punishment up to God? Should the punishment be earthly or is it expected to happen in the next life? Does a change of religion have an impact on the individual’s social status and legal rights? For example, what happens if the apostate is married and has children? These and other questions are often related to religious dogmas, but also to practical and legal matters as illustrated in several chapters included in this handbook.

1 Disposition

The following handbook on leaving religion consists of three parts covering: (1) Major debates about leaving religion; (2) Case studies and empirical insights; and, finally, (3) Theoretical and methodological approaches. Part 1 in the handbook deals mainly with the so-called World Religions and the aim is to provide the reader with an introduction to key terms, historical developments, major controversies and significant cases within Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism. Part 2 includes case studies that illustrates

various processes of leaving religion from different perspectives, and the ambition is that each chapter should provide new empirical insights. The chapters in this part contains a background, an overview to previous research, a description of the available material and the goal is to present new results within this field of study. Contrary to the first part of the handbook, the case studies in Part 2 are contemporary and the large majority are based on original fieldwork. Compared to this part, Part 3 discuss, present and encourage new approaches to the study of leaving religion by bringing in theoretical and methodological viewpoints. Thus, each chapter introduces theoretical and methodological perspectives as well as new findings, and objectives are to suggest how leaving religion can be studied in the future.

To make the handbook as user-friendly as possible we have used the same subheadings for all chapters included in Parts 1 and 3. However, in Part 2 the structure is less fixed and because of this there are some variations in the organisation of the chapters in this part of the handbook. The length of the chapters has been restricted in order to make the book a user-friendly and easy reference tool to use when reading upon the subject of leaving religion or for planning research on this or related topics.

As the readers of the handbook will notice there is a fair amount of research on the questions of apostasy and heresy in Islamic and Christian traditions as well as on leaving various new religious traditions in contemporary times, but similar data for Hinduism and Buddhism and ancient times are generally much more meagre. This should not be read as an indication that these traditions or time periods had no individuals who left or stepped outside of their religious traditions. On the contrary, it rather suggests that researchers have not paid enough interest to traditions like Hinduism and Buddhism or ancient times. A related issue is that scholars of religion often approach their subject through their (Western) cultural lenses, when determining who is religious and affiliated with a religious tradition. This can lead to challenges of detecting and understanding leaving Religion when there is no resignation or clear distinction between social belongings. One overarching goal of the handbook on leaving religion is to remedy this problem of limited scope and as editors we hope that our compilation of texts will stimulate future research, not the least when it comes to other traditions than Christianity and Islam.

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PART 1

Historical and Major Debates



Leaving Hinduism

Clemens Cavallin

1 Introduction

To know whether you have left a country or not, it is essential to know where the border is. Such a demarcation of territory is contingent in the sense that the demarcation could have been drawn elsewhere; and probably has been. Sometimes, the borders are first drawn on a map to create the country in question and then are implemented later. Sometimes, however, the boundaries grow organically through centuries of warfare and cultural negotiations and follow the natural terrain of rivers and mountains.

The notion of Hinduism as a world religion has both this artificial, neat character and the fuzzy boundaries resulting from the accumulation of religious ideas, practices, and cultural traits over millennia. As Knut Jacobsen remarks in his introduction to *Brill's Encyclopedia of Hinduism*, Hinduism “does not refer to a homogeneous religious tradition but a conglomerate of rituals, religious narratives, art, music, institutions, traditions, theologies, artefacts, and activities” (Jacobsen 2013). Therefore, leaving “Hinduism” is both easy and exceedingly challenging.

Adding to the difficulty of locating the borders of Hinduism—of knowing when one has actually left it behind—the modern notion of Hinduism is closely bound up with British India, from its inception in the seventeenth century up to its 1948 division into the dominions of Pakistan and India (Gottschalk 2012: Ch. 5). The partition of British India in accordance with the so-called two nation theory—which held that Indian Muslims constituted a separate nation—led to massive amounts of people crossing the border to be on the “right” side of the religious divide and to clashes in which eighteen million people were displaced and several hundred thousand, if not a million, died (Talbot 2008: 420). That is, religious identity became connected to a physical border, which, when drawn, forced those on the ground to align themselves accordingly. With over ninety percent of all Hindus living in India (in 2010, 94%, Hackett 2015), this territorialisation of Hindu identity is a crucial point in discussions of contemporary Hinduism. As Leela Fernandes remarks,

...both the secular state and the Hindu nationalist movement attempt to enforce a model of religion that takes the form of a fixed territory where changes in religious membership that would involve a movement between religions is restricted or severely curtailed.

FERNANDES 2011: 111

According to such an integral connection between religion and territory, leaving Hinduism for religions such as Islam or Christianity undermines one's Indian citizenship, while Buddhism, Jainism and Sikhism are Hindu; that is, they have their origin within the Indian subcontinent.

This understanding of being Hindu is even enshrined in article 25 of the Indian Constitution:

The reference to Hindus shall be construed as including a reference to persons professing the Sikh, Jaina or Buddhist religion, and the reference to Hindu religious institutions shall be construed accordingly.¹

It is, therefore, in the interest of the state to make it as hard as possible to leave the religious identity that is connected to nationhood. For this purpose, many Indian states have introduced special laws, the so-called Freedom of Religion Bills, criminalising conversions that are induced through force or fraudulent means (Richards 2017: 156–277). However, this is not only a recent phenomenon, as such laws were already in place in some princely states before independence (Jenkins 2008: 113).

Such an ethno-nationalist understanding of religious identity sees religion as part of an integrated whole and considers religious conversion as a form of ethno-apostasy (Phillips and Kelner 2006) or de-nationalisation (Jaffrelot 2011b: 155), affecting culture and social belonging. It is thus important to keep in mind that “Hinduism is not a voluntary association like Christian churches are, with members and non-members. Rather, people are born Hindu; leaving Hinduism is quite difficult” (Spinner-Halev 2005: 36; see also Barua 2015).

In the following discussion, I will focus on the modern period, as the anxiety of people leaving Hinduism has, naturally, grown in tandem with the emergence and consolidation of the notion Hinduism itself during the nineteenth century and with the introduction of a nationwide census (Jaffrelot 2011b: 146);

1 Part III. Fundamental Rights. Art. 25. Explanation II. At India.gov.in, *National Portal of India*, “Constitution of India,” https://www.india.gov.in/sites/upload_files/npi/files/coi_part_full.pdf. Accessed 10/10/2017.

for example, a discussion of leaving Vedic religion in the middle of the first millennium BCE would require quite a different set of parameters.

2 Key Terms

Obviously, in a discussion of leaving Hinduism, there are many important notions that can be highlighted, some of which are highly contested, but here we can only cursorily treat those of extra interest for this chapter. In addition, the most crucial of these notions is, of course, the word Hindu, which is of Persian origin. The word first denoted the people living in the area of the Indus River, which flows from north to south through present-day Pakistan. With the increasing presence of Islam in the Indian subcontinent from the eighth century CE, it also came to refer to the religious beliefs and practices of the non-Muslim peoples living to the east of the Indus. However, the derivative, Hinduism or Hindooism, was coined only towards the end of the eighteenth century to refer to the religion of the Hindus. It was, for example, prominently used by Hindu reformer Rammohan Roy in 1816 (Lorenzen 2006: 3).

Towards the end of the same century, the fear of Hindus decreasing in their own homeland due to Christian missions and higher Muslim birth-rates led to the creation of the *Śuddhi* (*shuddhi*) ritual. *Śuddhi* literally means “purification” and was used by the organisation Arya Samaj for (re)converting—mainly—Muslims and Christians to Hinduism. Recently, reconversion rituals have been organised as part of *Ghar Wapsis*—literally “homecoming”—that is, campaigns by Hindu nationalist organisations in which Muslims and Christians (re)convert to Hinduism. A central anxiety in the discussion of leaving Hinduism and conversion centres around the question of caste (*jāti*)—that is, the many thousands of endogamous groups that make up Hindu society. *Jāti* needs to be differentiated from the *varṇas*, the four social classes already mentioned in the Vedic scriptures: priests, warriors and rulers, merchants and agriculturists, and, finally, servants. Those belonging to castes outside of the *varṇa* system were previously called untouchables, as they were considered ritually unclean and hence untouchable by those belonging to higher castes. The word preferred at present is Dalit (oppressed), who make up at least sixteen percent of the Indian population (approximately two hundred million people). The legal term is scheduled castes, and individuals belonging to such castes are eligible for specific positive discrimination that is provided by the government.

The concept of an apostate within Hinduism is, in one sense, not clearly connected to orthodoxy, or right faith, as the range of accepted viewpoints on any question, even that of the ultimate makeup of the universe or the nature

of the godhead, is broad indeed. However, the conceptual pair of *āstika* and *nāstika*—that is, those who affirm and those who deny—separates the Hindu orthodox from the heterodox, mainly in their respective affirmation or denial of the Vedic scriptures. Therefore, Buddhism is *nāstika*—not based on its denial of an ultimate creator God but due to its rejection of the Vedas and, with it, the priestly class in charge of its safekeeping, the Brahmins (Aklujkar 2014). However, for many modern Hindu nationalists, the notion of Hindu also embraces Buddhists, as the focus is not on religious doctrine and revelation but on national identity.

3 Historical Developments

To apply the notion of Hinduism to the religious beliefs and practices of the Vedic period (roughly 1500 to 500 BCE) is misleading. It was only during the beginning of the first millennium CE that the classical form of Hinduism (or Brahmanism, Bronkhorst 2017) emerged. In the early Vedic period, for example, the later central beliefs of reincarnation and liberation had not yet been formulated. These developed in the later Vedic period within so-called *śramaṇa* movements—that is, individuals and bands of ascetics and meditation practitioners seeking liberation from the bondage of the material world (Olivelle 2005). Of these movements, two proved vital enough to become long-lived religions of their own—namely, Buddhism and Jainism. When the Mauryan emperor, Ashoka (who ruled over most of the territory now belonging to modern India and Pakistan), converted to Buddhism in 263–260 BCE, Buddhism received support from the first “Indian” state (Bhandarkar 1957: 24).

The *śramaṇa* challenge to the Vedic religion concerned the rejection of Vedic scriptures, animal sacrifices, the caste ideology, and the pre-eminence of the Brahmins, who responded by incorporating the ideology of the renouncers within a society-affirming framework that had a focus on social duty—that is, *dharma*. Second, they emphasised the notion of a supreme God, towards which devotion (*bhakti*) in the form of a temple cult was the proper attitude (though such devotion was also due to minor gods). Eventually, Buddhism was reabsorbed into its Hindu matrix, while Jainism continued to exist as a minor religious tradition.

The next major trial of the Hindu religious traditions began when Muslim armies arrived in the Indian subcontinent in the eighth century, and when, from the twelfth century on, they established their rule over northern—and later southern—India. A radical and sometimes profitable way of leaving the Hindu *dharma* (that is, religion and social duties) became available in this way

(Robinson 2007b). Even when in power, Buddhists had shared basic religious and social assumptions with Hindus. Islam, on the other hand, was a clearly different and, occasionally, more intolerant religious and political alternative. One exception was the Moghul emperor, Akbar (1542–1605), who abolished the special poll tax for non-Muslims and even constructed a new syncretistic faith for his Indian empire (Kulke and Rothermund 1998: 147).

During the Moghul Empire (1526–1857), another potential avenue for leaving Hinduism grew in strength: Christianity. The religion began in India in earnest after the arrival of the Portuguese (1498) and the introduction of Catholic Christianity in Goa and other coastal areas from the sixteenth century on (Robinson 2007b). Though Syrian Christians had already arrived in the first century CE, they never achieved political control, and their converts were well integrated into the social and cultural conditions of southern India (Robinson 2003: 39–41). The Portuguese, on the other hand, used their power for active missions in their territories. These were never very large, and the more substantial Christian challenge came with the growth of British India in the nineteenth century, which brought with it a combination of protestant Christianity and modernity, prompting a Hindu reaction and, finally, a struggle for independence.

Christians, however, never managed to convert Hindus in the numbers that Muslims did. At present, only two to three percent of the population in the Republic of India is Christian (approximately 24 million persons).²

With the growth of a Hindu diaspora, beginning in the nineteenth century, another concern about leaving Hinduism emerged; namely, that of maintaining the culture, religion and ethnic identity of one's home country or region while living far from South Asia (Vertovec 2000: 102f). The crucial question is, once again, the relation of Hindu religious traditions to territory, though not all Hindus come from India; for example, in Norway and Germany, the majority of Hindus are from Sri Lanka (Jacobsen 2004: 159; Luchesi 2004).

With Western converts to and subsequent reverts from Hinduism, the basic issues are obviously different. Such acts of leaving Hinduism have mostly been treated as part of the controversies surrounding new religious movements; for example, ISKCON (the International Society of Krishna Consciousness movement) founded in New York in 1966. Converts entered into small alternative religious groups in which contact with surrounding societies was minimised. To then leave, to revert or move on to another spiritual path, could be a painful,

2 In the census of 2001, the percentage was 2.3, http://censusindia.gov.in/Census_And_You/religion.aspx, accessed 11/10/2017.

even traumatic experience, as seen, for example, in the following personal account of a witness:

It's hard to imagine an experience more wrenching, more potentially disorienting, than leaving a spiritual community or tradition to which one has devoted years of one's life. To lose faith in a comprehensive system of ideas that have shaped one's consciousness and guided one's actions, to leave a community that has constituted one's social world and defined one's social identity, to renounce a way of life that is an entire mode of being, is an experience of momentous implications.

GELBERG 1998

Interestingly, however, in the United States, ISKCON has changed since the 1990s due to the increasing presence and membership of diaspora Hindus. The movement's major task is now, therefore, to gain conversions to Krishna Consciousness from, "educated professional Indians rather than white counterculture 'seekers'" (Berg and Kniss 2008).

4 Major Controversies

Even more problematic, from a Hindu standpoint, than individual conversions is proselytisation—that is, the active seeking of converts, which, in India, is mostly done by Christian and Muslim groups (see, for example, Bauman 2014). Hindu nationalists consider proselytisation not only an attack on the Hindu religion but also an attack on the Indian nation (Misra 2011: 372f; Sarkar 2007; Richards 2004: 90).

Traditionally, one could not convert to Hinduism, but in the nineteenth century, *śuddhi*—a ritual for returning to Hinduism—was crafted by the revivalist organisation, Arya Samaj (Jaffrelot 2011b; Sikand 2007). The ritual is, however, controversial in the case of some tribal groups, who, before becoming Christians, were animists with no Brahmin priests, castes or worship of the main Hindu gods (Jaffrelot 2011a: 205f). The Arya Samaj version of Hinduism was that of a modern reform movement denouncing mainstream Hinduism, with its worship of idols in temples, pilgrimages and traditional understanding of castes.

In recent years, Hindu nationalist organisations, such as the Hindutva organisations RSS (Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh) and VHP (Vishwa Hindu Parishad), have staged such (re)conversions as part of larger programmes, so-called *Ghar Wapsi* (homecomings), in which thousands of Christians and

Muslims return to Hinduism (Vandeveldt 2011). These are the source of intense controversy and sometimes scandal, as in 2014, when a *Ghar Wapsi* campaign claimed that it had converted over fifty Muslim families to Hinduism even though a commission later concluded that the Hindu nationalist group had tricked the families with promises of houses and ration cards and that the families remained Muslim (Mishra 2015).

Underlying the controversies of conversion in India is the tension between religion as a social belonging and the principle of individual choice and freedom, which influenced the Indian constitution and its secular profile, in contrast to Pakistan, which was founded on the idea of religion as the basic criteria of nationhood (Verma 2017).

In India, the traditional system of social classification is that of caste, and it is therefore natural for a caste group to change religion as a community, or at least as families. A freely choosing individual is not the principal unit. In its struggles with the pernicious aspects of the caste system, such as untouchability and discrimination, India has instituted large-scale programmes of affirmative action towards castes classified as Scheduled Castes and Other Backward Classes (Jodhka 2012: 130f). However, the state only recognises castes within Hinduism, Buddhism, and Sikhism, which means that if someone—or a whole caste group—leaves Hinduism for either Islam or Christianity, he or she loses the right to be included in programmes of affirmative action such as quotas of government jobs or access to higher education and, at the same time, their social situation does not improve (Stephens 2007). However, there is also discrimination based on caste in Christian churches and among Indian Muslims (Waughray 2010: 347). The Indian state acknowledges caste identity among Buddhists, although Buddhism does not recognise caste (Samarendra 2016).

The recognition of caste is a sensitive topic, as being a Dalit is, of course, a strong incentive to leave Hinduism because in doing so, one thereby escapes one's oppressed position in the caste hierarchy. As a result, Hindu organisations and movements have considered a reform of the caste system to be a vital issue for over a hundred years now (Dwivedi 2012: 118f). Nevertheless, it has proven difficult to change the basic structure of caste ideology; the most favoured approach has, therefore, been not to abandon caste altogether but to introduce meritocratic principles. This approach constitutes a fundamental challenge to caste as a category based on endogamy and to the rules restricting contact across caste boundaries. To move caste towards the notion of occupation and to encourage intermarriage is, in a sense, to abolish caste itself (Ahuja 2015).

Another factor complicating the issue of leaving Hinduism is that there is not a uniform civil law code in India but rather a division of personal law

along religious lines (Hindu, Muslim and Christian). From a legal point of view, the notion “Hindu” covers Jains, Sikhs and Buddhists; leaving Hinduism and ceasing to be Hindu is thus not the same thing. On the other hand, becoming Muslim, for example, means that one enters a new legal framework regarding issues such as inheritance and divorce (Ghosh 2009).

5 Major Controversies and Significant Case Studies

Interestingly, ecumenically oriented figures such as Mahatma Mohandas Gandhi (1869–1948) saw conversion in a bad light. To him, all religions were fundamentally equal and true but were interpreted by imperfect human beings (Sharma 2014). Hindus should, therefore, remain in their native religion and try to become better Hindus, not leave for another religion, which he considered socially destructive (Fernandes 2011: 117):

After long study and experience, I have come to the conclusion that (i) all religions are true; (ii) all religions have some error in them; (iii) all religions are almost as dear to me as my own Hinduism, in as much as all human beings should be as dear to one as one’s close relatives. My own veneration for other faiths is the same as that for my own faith; therefore no thought of conversion is possible.

Quoted in DABHOLKAR 1992: 23

However, this stance was complicated by the question of caste and the limits of reform. To what degree was the caste system an integral part of the Hindu religion? How much could it be reformed? And why not leave for another more egalitarian religion if reform should prove unfeasible?

Gandhi did not want to abolish the principles of caste but preferred the Vedic model of four basic social classes, the *varṇas*. He wrote:

Hinduism does not believe in caste. I would obliterate it at once. But I believe in varnadharma, which is the law of life. I believe that some people are born to teach and some to defend and some to engage in trade and agriculture and some to do manual labour, so much so that these occupations become hereditary.

Quoted in FERNANDES 2011: 116

Dalits, or *harijans* (children of God), as Gandhi called them, were outside the four *varṇas* and considered ritually unclean and thus untouchable. Gandhi

wanted to end all discrimination of the Dalits, but he did not want to abolish the system that tied specific occupations to certain groups. In the case of the Dalits, these were the most unclean and despised of professions. He also thought, according to Leela Fernandes, that “lower-caste Indians did not have the capacity to make autonomous religious decisions and were in effect being duped by missionaries into converting” (Fernandez 2010: 118).

Another leader of the struggle for Indian independence, Bhimrao Ambedkar (1891–1956), held the opposite view (Coward 2003). Being himself a Dalit but having studied abroad and completed one Ph.D. at Columbia University and another one at the London School of Economics, he argued for the total abolishment of castes, including *varnas*, and their connection with specific occupations. In a speech that he never had the opportunity to give, he maintained that Gandhi’s cultivation of goodwill towards Dalits was of no value; to strike at the root of the system, intermarriage must be practised, though it was unlikely to succeed (Ambedkar 1936). At that time, his critique of the social injustices of Hinduism had become so radical that the same year he decided to leave his native religion. Twenty years later, in 1956, and two months before his death, Ambedkar made real his decision and converted to Buddhism at a mass rally with several hundred thousand Dalits joining him (Tartakov 2007: 192). In this way, he founded a new form of Buddhism called Navayana, which counts several millions of adherents today (Zelliot 2015).

6 Major Texts

In 1923, while imprisoned on the Andaman Islands, Vinayak Damodar Savarkar wrote *Hindutva: Who is a Hindu?* For him, the essence of Hindu-ness was intimately connected to the territory of India; Hindus were those who thought of (and loved) India as the land of their ancestors and the place where their religion was born. This meant that all religions having their origin on the Indian subcontinent were Hindu. Together, they were part of a Hindu civilisation (“a common culture”). However, to be Hindu, Indian ancestry was also essential; that is, “having common blood,” in this way forming a Hindu race (regulated by the caste system, Savarkar 1969 [1923]: 85) and a nation requiring a Hindu state. According to Savarkar, to leave Hinduism for a “foreign” religion (for example, Islam or Christianity) would thus be to reject one’s nation. Indian Muslims may have Indian ancestry and love India as their fatherland, but

...they cannot be called Hindus in the sense in which that term is actually understood, because, we Hindus are bound together not only by

the tie of the love we bear to a common fatherland and by the common blood [...] but also by the tie of the common homage we pay to our great civilization—our Hindu culture, which could not be better rendered than by the word Sanskriti...

SAVARKAR 1969 [1923]: 91f. See also SAVARKAR 1969 [1923]:100f

On the other hand, Western converts to Hinduism also failed to become Hindus even if they loved India and embraced its Sanskrit culture because, according to Savarkar's understanding, they lacked the common blood.

The "Annihilation of Caste" was a speech by Ambedkar, which he never delivered because of its strong criticism of Hinduism; it was instead published in 1936. In it, Ambedkar claimed that conversion to Hinduism was impossible because of the organisation of Hindu society into castes and that the only way to end caste discrimination was to destroy such a religion of law and oppression.

And I say there is nothing irreligious in working for the destruction of such a religion. Indeed I hold that it is your bounden duty to tear off the mask, to remove the misrepresentation that is caused by misnaming this law as religion. This is an essential step for you. Once you clear the minds of the people of this misconception and enable them to realise that what they are told is religion is not religion, but that it is really law, you will be in a position to urge its amendment or abolition.

AMBEDKAR 2014 [1936]: 307

Instead, he put forward a modern ideal in which nothing was stable except the values of liberty, equality and fraternity, which he later made part of his new form of Buddhism (to which he converted shortly before his death in 1956).

7 Key Figures

Dayananda Sarasvati (1824–1883) was a nineteenth century reformer of Hinduism who wanted to go back to a form of Vedic monotheism and therefore rejected medieval Hindu beliefs and practices such as temple worship, the mythologies of the great Hindu gods and pilgrimages. In 1875, he established the organisation Arya Samaj for this purpose. He also introduced the idea of *śuddhi*—that is, (re)conversion of people to Hinduism, and he was active in creating a unified Hindu identity through, for example, cow-protection campaigns and arguing for the use of Hindi as an official language (Datta 2012).

Mahatma Mohandas Gandhi (1869–1948) was an Indian lawyer, trained in Britain, who took up work in South Africa before coming to India and becoming one of the central figures in the fight for independence. He was assassinated in 1948 by Nathuram Godse, a Hindu nationalist, because of his work towards reconciliation between Hindus and Muslims. For Gandhi, conversion was unnecessary because religions were equal roads to the same goal. Hindus should, therefore, work to uplift of those on the lowest rungs of the caste hierarchy, not leave their religion.

Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar (1891–1956) came from an untouchable caste and fought throughout his whole life for the civil rights of Dalits. In 1947, he became the first law minister of the independent India and chairman for the drafting of the Indian constitution. In 1956, shortly before his death, he converted to Buddhism, together with several hundred thousand followers, as he saw no hope of abolishing caste discrimination within Hinduism. In contrast to Gandhi, conversion was thus, for him, a strategic move to improve the situation of Dalits.

8 Conclusion

To leave Hinduism is a complicated affair in several respects. The first difficulty is the fuzziness of the notion of “Hinduism,” which means that one can, in principle, worship any divine being, hold widely divergent beliefs regarding the makeup of the universe, and even practise radically different rituals but still remain under the generous canopy of Hinduism. Both in the Indian constitution and within some forms of Hindu nationalism, Hindu has an even broader meaning than Hinduism, encompassing all major religions originating in the Indian subcontinent. Nevertheless, this notion excludes Christianity and Islam, two religious traditions that have a long history and deep roots in the Indian subcontinent. This is of importance, as Indian personal law is divided along Hindu, Christian and Muslim lines.

A further complication is that Hinduism entails not only a religious identity in the sense of membership in a religious organisation but also strong forms of traditional social belonging connected to caste. To leave just the “religion” and not one’s social role and identity is therefore difficult. The underlying idea common both to Mahatma Gandhi and to Hindu nationalists was that conversions are unnatural and mostly the result of material inducements or fraud. Religion is something into which one is born, not something one chooses.

This ethno-nationalist understanding of Hinduism is operative in the decision of many Indian states to introduce religious freedom bills that control

and restrict conversions. In this way, the territorially, ethnically, and culturally bounded nature of Hinduism is marked. This question is different for Hindus who live in a diaspora in which the original social and cultural environments of Hindu traditions are weaker and laws against conversion are mostly absent. Hindu individuals and communities continuously face the choice of trying, as much as possible, to uphold what is perceived as the original cultural and ethnic character of the religion through only marrying within the group, keeping up the Indian language in question, keeping traditional choices of food and other cultural practices; in this way, they affirm the view of Hinduism as a religion that one cannot leave without leaving one's "natural" social belonging. Alternatively, one can try to develop a form of Hinduism that is separate from Hinduism's original Indian cultural matrix, thus moving towards a universal religion that is not dependent on "common blood" or the sacred nature of the territory and culture of the Indian subcontinent.

A third option is that suggested by Ambedkar; he denounced Hinduism for its entangled nature of social, cultural and religious aspects (its integral character). Ambedkar decided that it was almost impossible to reform Hinduism and that the only way, at least for the marginalised, to achieve social equality and spiritual liberation, was to leave. Therefore, the issue of leaving Hinduism warrants closer inspection that is composed of several parts: leaving being Hindu, leaving India, and leaving Hinduism. The difficult question is what Hinduism would be after having ceased to be Hindu and having left India behind.

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Leaving Buddhism

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1 Introduction

Leaving Buddhism is a theme seldom addressed in Buddhist studies. Buddhism is generally perceived as a tolerant religion and followers are encouraged to scrutinise the Buddhist teachings and are free to leave the Buddhist faith. Buddhism does not sanction violence against apostates, there is no formal religious pretext for apostasy and Buddhism has not developed a concept of apostasy. However, for people who do apostasies from Buddhism, the worst consequences they suffer tend to be negative reactions from the family, including the risk of being ignored and shut out from family and community activities.

The Buddha's (c. 480 BCE–c. 400 BCE)¹ attitude to apostasy is represented by an account of a meeting with one of the Buddha's attendants Sunakkhatta. He was a disciple of the Buddha, but after a while he became dissatisfied with the Buddha's practice and decided to renounce the teacher and his teaching. Sunakkhatta came to the Buddha and said: "Lord, I am leaving you, I am no longer living by your teachings." The Buddha responded to this declaration by asking Sunakkhatta following questions: "Did I ever say to you; come, live by my teachings?" Sunakkhatta: "No Lord." The Buddha: "Then did you ever say to me that you wished to live by my teachings?" Sunakkhatta: "No Lord." The Buddha: "That being the case, who are you and what are you giving up, you foolish man?" (*Digha Nikaya*, III 2–3). Sunakkhatta's defection occurred when the Buddha was eighty years old and that was his last year in life (Batchelor 2015: 172). Neither in this case nor others did the Buddha suggest that apostates should be punished.

The Buddhist traditions are so wide, diverse and multiplex that it often makes sense to refer to Buddhism in the plural form (see Strong 2015). Buddhism(s) is broadly divided into Theravada, Mahayana and Vajrayana traditions and these traditions are historically evolved and culturally embodied. Because of the great diversity within the Buddhist traditions, this chapter on

1 The exact dates of Siddhartha Gotama Buddha's birth and death are uncertain. Heinz Bechert and Richard Gombrich (1991) dating is c. 480 BCE–400 c. BCE, but the traditional dating is often eighty years earlier.

apostasy in Buddhism focuses mainly on the oldest tradition, Theravada Buddhism. It deals with Buddhist monks and nuns who have left or been expelled from the Buddhist congregation, *sangha*. It gives examples of lay people who left Buddhism and converted to Christianity and deals with what could be called forced or ascribed apostasy.

2 Key Terms

Buddhism has no specific word for conversion. However, in the Buddhist collection of Middle-length Discourses of the Buddha, *Majjhima Nikaya*, a new convert to Buddhism describes himself as having “gone over to the discipleship,” *savakattam upagato*, of the Buddha (Nanamoli 2015: 486).²

From the time of the Buddha right up till today people both express their intention to become Buddhists and mark their entry into the Buddhist faith by taking the three refuges, *tisarana*: I take refuge in the Buddha. I take refuge in the Dhamma (the teachings of the Buddha). I take refuge in the Sangha. This statement is said three times as a reaffirmation that the person is sincere and committed. Lay people receive the five Buddhist precepts from the ordained community: To refrain from killing, stealing, lying, using intoxicants and improper sexual conduct (Harvey 2000: 66–79). For lay people there are no formalities to leave Buddhism and they simply cease receiving the Buddhist precepts and taking refuge in the triple gem: Buddha, Dhamma, Sangha.

The *sangha* was originally a fourfold congregation of; Buddhist monks, *bhikkhu*, nuns *bhikkhuni*, laymen, *upasaka*, and laywomen, *upasika*. Today the *sangha* consists of the ordained community and in Thailand the *sangha* refers to the congregation of monks. Many Pali and Sanskrit terms have been incorporated into the local languages for example the *bhikkhu*, *bhikkhuni* and Buddhist terms used in this chapter are Pali terms and used in Theravada Buddhist countries. Women have never been included in the Thai Buddhist *sangha*. The *sangha* is male and has a hierarchical structure and includes every village and monastery in Thailand. Lay people and monastics have commonly had close bonds (Samuels 2010). Lay people give donations, *dana*, and support the ordained community on a daily basis with food and other necessities. The *sangha* cares about the lay community and provides teaching and guidance for the laity, and it is significant that the renouncers are a “field of merit” for lay people (Harvey 2013: 314).

² Most Buddhist terms are given in their Pali spellings.

In Buddhism, a person generates *kammic* fruitfulness by his or her own deeds. The monastic life is acknowledged as a generally higher level of virtue than lay life. The monastics has the best environment and support to develop under the guidance of the Buddhist teachings and disciplinary rules (Harvey 2000: 89). Being excluded from the *sangha* is a punishment and forced apostasy. It means leaving the monastic life and that includes access to ordination.

The ordination ceremony marks a person's entry into the *sangha*. Buddhist ordination has two steps: first *pabbajja*, going forth, and second *upasampada*, higher ordination as fully ordained monk or nun, *bhikkhu* or *bhikkhuni*. The monks' ordination ceremony is led by a monk appointed by the *sangha* as qualified to be in charge of ordinations, *upajjhayo*. An ordination for nuns, *bhikkhuni*, is led by a long-standing and qualified nun, *pavattini* (Horner 1990: 138–139). A so-called dual ordination is required for the ordination of *bhikkhuni* and that means that a *bhikkhuni* aspirant must ask both the female and the male *sanghas* for ordination (Holt 1999: 140–142). Ordaining monks and nuns without the right to do so has severe consequences (Gethin 1998: 87).

Newly ordained monks and nuns should spend at least the next five years in “dependence,” *nissaya*, on their teacher who will train them and introduce them to the norms of monastic life. According to the *vinaya* (monastic rules), if a monk or a nun wishes to return to the lay state, he or she only has to inform his/her fellow monks or nuns of that decision, formally disrobe before them and leave the monastery. In practice, in all Buddhist countries, monks who disrobe (other than those who are temporarily ordained) are looked upon with considerable disapproval (Thanissaro 1994).

A person's fortune and misfortune in life, including leaving Buddhism, are explained by *kamma*. The Pali word *kamma* means action and in the Buddhist doctrine refers to a person's intentional mental, verbal or bodily acts. The intentional actions are believed to result in a person's state of being. Also in the Thai usage, the consequences of morally relevant actions of the past, including past lives, explain a person's contemporary life. The Thai concept of religious merit, *bun*, is used as a motivation for living according to the Buddhist precepts and a lack of *bun* is the reason, for example, for leaving Buddhism.

3 Historical Developments

Buddhism comes from an Indian renunciation tradition and the most important carriers of the Buddhist ways and practice are the *sangha* with its monks and nuns who transmit the teaching (Gethin 1998: 85). Approximately a hundred years after the death of The Buddha, Siddhartha Gotama, certain

differences arose in the *sangha*, which gradually led to the development of a number of monastic groups (Harvey 2013: 2). However, all Buddhist traditions trace their ordination-line back to the early Buddhist groups. Theravada means the teachings of the elders and this tradition is particular about keeping the early Buddhist teaching and the focus is on attaining enlightenment, *nibbana*, by using *dhamma* as the guide for living. Theravada is practised by the majority of the population in Sri Lanka, Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar and Thailand. Theravada is characterised by a psychological understanding of human nature, and emphasises a meditative approach. The three trainings of ethical conduct, meditation and insight-wisdom are central.

Around the beginning of the Christian era Mahayana Buddhism developed. In contrast to Theravada Buddhism, Mahayana Buddhism is more of an umbrella body for a great variety of schools found in China, Korea and Japan. Mahayana followers made alterations in the Buddhist texts and interpretation of the *suttas*, discourses, and the *vinaya*, discipline rules. They rejected certain portions of the Buddhist canon which had been accepted in the Buddhist First Council held in 400 BCE, just after the Buddha's death. The third tradition, Vajrayanam, is a form of Buddhism that is predominant in the Himalayan nations of Tibet, Nepal, Bhutan, and also Mongolia. Buddhism first appeared in Tibet in the seventh century but it did not take root and it was not until the eleventh century the Vajrayana Buddhism was established and developed into lineages. The names of the four major Tibetan Buddhist lineages are Nyingma-pa, Sakya-pa, Kagyu-pa and Gelug-pa.

Buddhism is believed to have come to what is now Thailand as early as 250 BCE (Harvey 2013: 199). Since then, Theravada Buddhism has played a significant role both culturally and socially. Buddhism has been widely adopted as a state sponsored religion and an organised way of social life by the majority of people living in Thailand. Thai Buddhism is formally divided into the Mahanikai and Thammayut Orders.

The Buddha established an ordination lineage for women but when the Theravada *bhikkhuni* ordination lineage was considered broken it was no longer possible for women to be ordained in the Theravada tradition. However, women had access to ordination in the Mahayana tradition. A global *bhikkhuni* movement was founded in the 1980s and since the late 1990s the *bhikkhuni* ordination has been revived and it is possible for women to receive ordination in the Theravada tradition. *Bhikkhunis* are not recognized by the Thai *sangha* and monks who have ordained women in Thailand have been forced to leave the Thai *sangha* (Kabilsingh 1991: 45–46). Women are excluded from the Thai *sangha* but local Buddhist nuns, *mae chis*, have existed in Thailand for centuries. *Mae chis* have a subordinated position at Thai temples and have during

recent decades begun to take advantage of their position outside the *sangha* and established their own nunneries and created better circumstances for themselves (Falk 2007).

One example of the strength of the Thai Buddhist *sangha* became evident in the aftermath of the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami where religion became important for the survivors' recovery (Falk 2015). Communities in the tsunami-hit areas in Asia were predominantly Muslim, Buddhist or Hindu, and religious organisation of all kinds raised enormous amounts of money and went to the affected areas to distribute aid. Among them, there were some evangelical Christian groups who tried to exploit the disaster for their own gains, through proselytising, which exacerbated existing religious conflicts or created new ones (Falk 2015: 144–145).

4 Major Controversies and Significant Case Studies

In Thailand some of the major controversies have resulted in cases where Buddhist monks have been forced to leave the *sangha*. The controversies have been over issues that violate the Thai Buddhist legislation and that have concerned the Theravada Buddhist teaching, political actions involving monastics, unlawful financial issues, ordination without having been appointed preceptor by the *sangha*, and giving women novice and higher ordination.

During the Cold War, monks were accused of collaboration with Communist rebels which was a threat to national security and Phra Phimontham (1901–1992), the abbot of Wat Mahadhatu, was defrocked and imprisoned (Jackson 1989: 100). Buddhadasa Bhikkhu (1906–1993) was also subject to similar allegations from the Thai government (Ito 2012: 180, 185). Phra Bodhiraksa (born 1934) the founder of the Buddhist group Santi Asoke left the *sangha* and that led to serious controversies and punishment from the *sangha* (Heikkilä-Horn 1996: 60–67). They were perceived as apostates. Another longstanding controversy is between the Buddhist movement Wat Phra Dhammakaya temple and the Thai *sangha*. The temple is accused of money laundry, illegal land transactions, corruption and for introducing elements from Mahayana Buddhism, which is against the Thai Buddhist legislation (Scott 2009: 129–156).

One major controversy that the Thai *sangha* has had to handle over the last decades is about ordaining women. In 2001 the first Thai woman received *bhikkhuni* ordination from Theravada monks and nuns in an Asian country. The *bhikkhuni* movement is a global movement and has been successful in re-establishing the *bhikkhuni* ordination. In recent decades increasing numbers of women have received *bhikkhuni* ordination especially in Sri Lanka but

also in Thailand. Thai monks who give women *bhikkhuni* ordination risk being expelled from the *sangha*. Before the revival of *bhikkhuni* ordination some Thai women went abroad and received *bhiksuni* ordination in the Mahayana tradition. Returning to Thailand as *bhiksunis* they were perceived as having apostasised from Theravada Buddhism and were considered belonging to the Mahayana tradition.

One of the most important and venerated religious reformers was the monk Buddhadasa Bhikkhu (1906–1993). Buddhadasa did not leave Buddhism but he left “mainstream” Buddhism, the way Buddhism was understood and practised in central Thailand. He reconceptualised fundamental Buddhist concepts and developed a role quite independent of the *sangha*. Buddhadasa was critical of what he saw as mainstream Buddhism and in the 1960s and 1970s, he was accused of being a communist, as were many of the wandering monks, *thudong* monks. Buddhadasa lived in the south of Thailand, and was probably saved by living and teaching far from the centre of power in Bangkok and by his increasingly broad, non-politicised popularity (Swearer 1999: 216–217). He had also a great network of people from other religions and he was engaged in interfaith dialogues.

The temple Wat Phra Dhammakaya, in Thailand and abroad, has raised enormous sums of money over the years, and is one example of *phuttha phanit*, a term that has been used since the late 1980s to define commercialising Buddhism (see Kitiarsa 2008). Wat Phra Dhammakaya has succeeded in attracting well-off followers from all over Thailand, but they have not accomplished creating peace in their own neighbouring area. There have been disputes over land-tenure and compensation between Wat Phra Dhammakaya and nearby land-renting farmers in 1985–1989. The Wat Phra Dhammakaya movement is today still highly controversial. The temple has been under investigation for having misused the temple funds and the Abbot was suspended because of criminal charges against him and the temple. The Dhammakaya is also accused of violating the Theravada Buddhist teachings and claims that *nibbana* is a permanent heaven is contrary to the understanding of Theravada Buddhism, although that idea is found in some Mahahayanist groups (Scott 2009: 135–136, 146–149).

The Dhammakaya temple has been embroiled in a money laundering scandal and its founder has refused to meet the police for questioning. Former abbot Phra Dhammachayo (born 1944) faces charges of conspiracy to launder money and receive stolen goods, as well as taking over land unlawfully to build meditation centres. The Thai police have raided the main temple complex on several occasions but without result. The leading monk Dhammajayo has not been found in his quarters. The monk is on the run from more than 300 charges,

including a multibillion accusation of money laundering. He was stripped of monastic rank by the Thai King in March 2017 and he risks being imprisoned (Bangkok Post, 6 March 2017).

The Buddhist group Santi Asoke's members have left the *sangha*. They distinguish themselves from "mainstream" Thai Buddhists by living in communities of *dhamma* families that include monks, nuns and male and female lay people, very much like the original ideal *sangha*. Santi Asoke was set up as an independent Buddhist temple and had serious disagreements with the Thai *sangha* authorities, Maha Thera Samakhom. They led to the prosecution of the founder and leader Phra Bodhiraksa. In June 1989, he was brought to court and sentenced to leave the monkhood. It was the regional monastic leaders who called for Phra Bodhiraksa to be defrocked, and the Thai *sangha* initiated legal proceedings against him for violating the *vinaya* and distorting Buddhist principles. He was even incarcerated for a period. He escaped formal defrocking after voluntarily changing the colour of his robe from brown to white (Heikkilä-Horn 1996). Santi Asoke is also controversial for ordaining women as ten-precept nuns known as *sikkhamats*, similar to novice *bhikkhunis* (Heikkilä-Horn 2015).

Giving women *bhikkhuni* ordination has been a major controversy not only in Thailand but also in other Asian countries. Charsumarn Kabilsingh, later Dhammananda Bhikkhuni, was the first Thai woman who received Theravada *bhikkhuni* ordination in Sri Lanka. She was well known before her ordination for advocating women's rights to full ordination. Her ordination created a commotion and there were attempts to make her life as a *bhikkhuni* impossible (Falk 2007). Currently there are about one hundred seventy-five Thai *bhikkhunis* and *bhikkhuni* ordinations have also taken place in Thailand. Since 1928 it is forbidden for Thai monks to ordain women as *bhikkhunis* and Thai monks who are involved in *bhikkhuni* ordination risk being defrocked and expelled from the *sangha*. The rule was established after two young sisters had received novice *bhikkhuni* ordination from a Thai monk (Kabilsingh 1991: 45–48). That incident inspired the *sangha's* supreme council to pass an order forbidding any monks from giving women novice or full ordination as *bhikkhuni*, and that rule is still valid.

Voramai Kabilsingh also called Ta Tao Fa Tzu (1908–2003) was a journalist and become a *mae chi* in 1954 when her daughter Chatsumarn (mentioned above) was 10 years old. She established Songdhammakalyani Monastery in Thailand and in 1970 Voramai Kabilsingh went to Taiwan and received *bhiksuni* ordination in the Mahayana Dharmaguptaka lineage. Chatsumarn Kabilsingh grew up with her mother at the nunnery. She went abroad for higher education, later she married, had children and became a professor at a top university

in Bangkok. Throughout her professional life she worked for Buddhist women's right to *bhikkhuni* ordination. She had long planned to live an ordained life after retirement and before she was ordained she carefully considered in which tradition she should ask for ordination. She wanted to be accepted as a *bhikkhuni* in Thailand and therefore she wanted to be ordained in the Theravada lineage. Her mother was a Mahayana *bhiksuni* and she saw that she had many supporters but no followers as a result of being ordained in the Mahayana tradition. In the end of 1990s it was open for women to receive *bhikkhuni* ordination in Sri Lanka and Chatsumarn Kabilsingh decided to seek novice ordination there (Achakulwisut 2001). However, the Thai *sangha* still persists in not recognising her ordination and her status as a Theravada *bhikkhuni*. For Chatsumarn Kabilsingh, now Dhammananda Bhikkhuni, the debate about the continuation of the *bhikkhuni/bhikkhuni* lineage is academic. She said: "What I'm trying to prove is that during the Buddha's time there was no Mahayana or Theravada, and ordination was given to women, period (Janssen 2001)."

This part ends with a case study about Thai lay people who left Buddhism in the wake of the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami. All kinds of Christian missionaries operated in the affected areas after the tsunami. Some Christian groups came to provide aid, whereas some came to convert. Survivors from the hardest-hit area told about their experiences of being approached by Christian missionaries. They had been offered money and material aid if they left Buddhism and converted to Christianity. Some survivors agreed to convert, others said they did not want to "sell their Buddhist faith" which is very much the base of their identity. Those Buddhist survivors who had converted and thereby received money and material goods in return were looked upon as corrupt and their neighbours were disappointed and said they had lost their respect for them. The Buddhist temples were still open to the converts but the converts were forbidden by the Christian priests to listen to the Buddhist monks and partake in Buddhist ceremonies. That was something that the Thai Buddhists found strange. The conversion created divisions within those small villages and a lack of trust between the converts and lay people occurred (Falk 2013: 41–42).

Both monks and lay people explained the conversion as the converts' lack of *bun*, religious merit. To be Buddhist is considered as signifying being meritorious, and converting or leaving the ordained state was seen as that person's "good merit" had come to an end. The majority of the Thai Buddhist monks in the tsunami hit areas also used *kamma* to explain the situation and they kept a low profile in relation to the great influx of Christian missionaries. They did not express any resentment against Christian priests or those Buddhist followers who converted. The majority of Buddhist monks interviewed by me in the tsunami hit area had a relaxed attitude towards conversion. One monk from

the Asoke group who had come to assist the survivors explained that Buddhism does not prohibit anyone who comes to do good deeds. Accordingly, the conversion to another faith is not a problem if laypeople find that it is beneficial (see Falk 2013; 2015).

However, Christian missionaries traded aid for faith and the conversion of Buddhists to Christianity made not only divisions at the village level but it also created rifts within families. A study on Thai Buddhist women in the north-east of Thailand who converted to Islam reports difficulties in relation with their families. The convert survivors from the tsunami in the south of Thailand and women who had converted to Islam in the north-east experienced the same difficulties of not having the permission from their new religions to attend Buddhist ceremonies. Thai cultural values prescribe that daughters and sons should be at their parents' funerals, to show that they respect their parents. Children are severely judged by others if they do not do so. But Muslims cannot attend Buddhist services, and the converts are caught in a bind between two value systems (Charoenwong et al. 2017: 125).

Lay people leave Buddhism for different reasons and in the post-tsunami situation forced conversion of Buddhists to Christianity has resulted in the exclusion of converts from their community-based, as well as family-cantered, Buddhist ceremonies and activities that would have probably helped them as their culturally accepted coping methods.

5 Major Texts

Buddhist texts are commonly divided into canonical and non-canonical texts. The canonical texts are believed to be the actual teachings of the Buddha. The Tipitaka, the Pali canon, is considered the earliest Buddhist teachings and recognized as canonical in the Theravada tradition. The Tipitaka is divided in three groups of teachings, sometimes called the three baskets and it was transferred orally, being and written down about 300 BCE. The Tipitaka, includes the Vinaya pitaka, that deals with the discipline rules for monks, nuns, and guidelines for the interaction between the *sanga* and laity. The Sutta Pitaka, contains the Buddha's teachings on doctrine and behaviour, with a focus on meditation techniques. Abhidhamma pitaka is about advanced teachings and higher knowledge of Buddhist philosophy and psychology.

The Buddha's view on apostasy mentioned above is from the Sutta Pitaka, found in the Digha Nikaya that is one of the five collections (*nikayas*) and an assembly of long discourses. The text is in the *Patika Sutta: About Patikaputta the Charlatan* (Walshe 1995: 371–378).

There are two translations to English: *Dialogues of the Buddha* translated by T.W. and C.A.F. Rhys Davids (1899–1921), in three volumes. Published by the Pali Text Society and *Thus Have I Heard: The Long Discourses of the Buddha* translated by Maurice Walshe (1987, 1995).

Buddhadasa Bhikkhu's work was based on extensive research of the Pali text Canon and commentary, especially of the Buddha's Discourses (*Sutta Pitaka*), followed by personal experiment and practice with these teachings. His publications are huge and some of his most well-known books are: *Handbook of Mankind*, *Heart-wood from the Bo Tree*, *Keys to Natural Truth*, *Mindfulness with Breathing*, and *Paticcasamuppada: Practical Dependent Origination*.

Some major work for analysing the position of women in Buddhism, that give a background to why women have "left" their Buddhist tradition and sought other ways to access ordination are: *Women Under Primitive Buddhism* by Isaline Blew Horner (1930) which is a major historical work on laywomen and monastics based on canonical literature including the Vinaya Pitaka (Basket of Discipline). *Buddhism After Patriarchy, A Feminist History, Analysis and Reconstruction of Buddhism* by Rita Gross (1993) is another important book that surveys the part women have played in Buddhism historically and completes the Buddhist historical record by bringing in women who usually are absent from histories of Buddhism. *Women in Buddhism: Images of the Feminine in the Mahayana Tradition*, by Diana Y. Paul (1979) offers a number of highly interesting Buddhist texts concerned with Mahayana Buddhism. *First Buddhist Women, Poems and Stories of Awakening* by Susan Murcott (1991) traces the journey of the first Buddhist women from the *Therigatha*, the earliest known collection of women's religious poetry. *Bhikkhuni Patimokkha of the Six Schools* by Chatsumarn Kabilsingh is a key work that contains translations of one of the oldest texts of the Buddhist canon and compares the different Buddhist schools.

6 Key Figures

Buddhadasa Bhikkhu, lay name Nguam Phanit, (1906–1993) is regarded as one of the most influential modernisers of Thai Buddhism (Jackson 2003; Ito 2012). He was born, in Chaiya District, Surat Thani province in southern Thailand. His father was of second-generation Thai Chinese (Hokkien) ancestry and his mother was Thai. Buddhadasa renounced lay life when he was twenty years old. He studied the Buddhist doctrine in Bangkok but was disappointed with the urban temples and how the temples were managed. He returned to Surat Thani and established Suan Mokkhabalarama (The Grove of the Power of Liberation) in 1932. He left what the Thai *sangha* represented, and abandoned

ritualism and the internal *sangha* politics. Buddhadasa developed a role independent of the religious hierarchy and reformed basic beliefs, values, and practices (King 1996: 402). His new interpretations of central Buddhist concepts such as *kamma* and *nibbana* were not in line with the orthodox Thai teachings and challenged the *sangha* (Ito 2012: 16). He integrated modern views and a distinctive forest tradition and his interpretation of canonical texts attracted an educated following among lay people. Buddhadasa's Buddhist interpretation has constituted a contrast to supernatural formulations of Buddhism that legitimate wealth and power with reference to *kammic* explanations. He reconceptualised fundamental Buddhist concepts and he described central Buddhist concepts differently from the traditional Thai understanding.

Bodhiraksa, lay name Mongkol "Rak" Rakpong, was born in 1934 in Ubon Ratchathani province in Northeastern Thailand to a Sino-Thai family. Before he was ordained, at the age of thirty-six years, he had been a composer of popular music and a television celebrity. In 1970 he received ordination in the Thammayutnikai, one of the two Thai Buddhist "sects" (*nikai*). He resigned from the Thammayutnikai and three years later he was re-ordained in the other "sect" Mahanikai. Phra Bodhiraksa openly criticised the Mahanikai monks for eating meat, magic practices and consumerism. The group distinguished themselves from other Thai Buddhist groups and provoked criticism from the *sangha*. In 1975 Phra Bodhiraksa and his group left the state *sangha* organisation and established Santi Asoke as an independent group. The group has subsequently seen regarded as "outlawed." He reinterpreted the Pali canon and the established Buddhist scholars blamed him for misunderstanding and misinterpreting the Buddhist scriptures. In 1988 the members of Santi Asoke were accused of being heretics. In 1989 a trial started that the Asoke group was not Buddhist and there was an ongoing court case against Bodhiraksa and his group for seven years (Heikkilä-Horn 1996). Most threatening to the *sangha* was probably Bodhiraksa's action of ordaining monks and novices without being officially designated as having this right. Those activities together with his claim to have attained enlightenment are offences for which a monk can be expelled from the order (See Taylor 1989: 117–118; Keyes 1999: 24). Many saw the trial as a conflict between a corrupt *sangha* seeking to uphold its entrenched power and an ethically strict Buddhist renunciate aiming to purify and revitalise the religious order (Jackson 1997: 78). Bodhiraksa points to the possibility of a modern Buddhism without the *sangha*.

Bhikkhuni Dhammananda, lay name Chatsumarn Kabilsingh was born in 1944 and was brought up in Nakhon Pathom in Thailand. Her father was a politician and member of parliament and ordained later as a Theravada monk. Her mother was a *bhiksuni* and since Chatsumarn was ten years old she had lived

in the temple. Chatsumarn Kabilsingh received her Master of Arts in religion from McMaster University in Canada and received her doctoral grade in Buddhism from Magadh University in India. She married, had three sons and six grandchildren. Chatsumarn taught for twenty-seven years at Thammasat University in Bangkok, Thailand, at the Department of Philosophy and Religion. She has published widely on gender and Buddhism. She sought early retirement from the university in 2000 and she also resigned from the Thai television where she had been working with Buddhist programmes for many years (Achakulwisut 2001; Yasodhara 2001: 17). In 2001, she received *samaneri* (female novice) ordination and in 2003 she received higher *bhikkhuni* ordination, *upasampada*, in Sri Lanka. She is the abbess of Songdhammakalyani Monastery in Nakhon Pathom, Thailand.

7 Conclusion

This chapter has explored apostasy from Buddhism and addressed circumstances that have caused monastics and lay people to apostasies. The story about Sunakkhatta, related in the *Digha Nikaya*, displays that apostasy was not disciplined during the Buddha's time and Buddhism does not sanction violence against apostates. Leaving Buddhism is still straightforward, and the difficulties lay people face when leaving Buddhism are related to their private lives and their relationships with family and friends. That was something that became evident among those who left Buddhism and converted to Christianity in the aftermath of the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami.

In spite of the fact that sanctions against apostasy are absent in the Buddhist canonical texts, apostasy has developed in the Buddhist traditions. In Thailand for instance, apostasy is considered as being expressed in acts of not following what is judged as Theravada Buddhism, and the Thai *sangha* excludes monastics who deviate from the Theravada teaching. The Thai *sangha* has strict rules about ordination into the Buddhist monkhood and Buddhist monks who give ordination without having the stipulated credentials, face being defrocked from monkhood. It is even more severe for monks to give women *bhikkhuni* ordination, and it is illegal under all circumstances and leads to punishment from the *sangha*.

The group Santi Asoke is an example of a Buddhist group that have been excommunicated for violating the *sangha's* legislation. Another example is Wat Phra Dhammakaya, a group that is much larger than Santi Asoke, whose members are accused of not conforming to Theravada Buddhism. Moreover, the leadership is under suspicion of criminal offences and the abbot has been

considered as apostasising and formally been stripped of his ranks and condemned to exile.

It is not always clear for Buddhists themselves that they are considered to have left Buddhism. That was something that Buddhist women experienced when they have gone abroad and received *bhiksuni* ordination in the Mahayana tradition, since it was not possible for women to be ordained in the Theravada tradition. They still identified themselves as Theravada Buddhists but when they returned to Thailand they were considered by others as having apostasised from Theravada Buddhism.

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Leaving Religion in Antiquity

Jörgen Magnusson

1 Introduction

“A time there was when disorder ruled human lives, which were then, like lives of beasts, enslaved to force; nor was there then reward for the good, nor for the wicked punishment. Next, it seems to me, humans established laws for punishment, that justice might rule over the tribe of mortals, and wanton injury be subdued; and whosoever did wrong was penalized. Next, as the laws held [mortals] back from deeds of open violence, but still such deeds were done in secret—then, I think, some shrewd man first, a man in judgment wise, found for mortals the fear of gods, thereby to frighten the wicked should they even act or speak or scheme in secret. Hence, it was that he introduced the divine telling how the divinity enjoys endless life, hears and sees, and takes thought and attends to things, and his nature is divine so that everything which mortals say is heard and everything done is visible. Even if you plan in silence some evil deed, it will not be hidden from the gods: for discernment lies in them. So, speaking words like these, the sweetest teaching did he introduce, concealing truth under untrue speech. The place he spoke of as the gods’ abode was that by which he might awe humans most—the place from which, he knew, terrors came to mortals and things advantageous in their wearisome life—the revolving heaven above, in which dwell the lightnings, and awesome claps of thunder, and the starry face of heaven, beautiful and intricate by that wise craftsman time—from which, too, the meteor’s glowing mass speeds and wet thunderstorm pours forth upon the earth. Such were the fears with which he surrounded mortals, and to the divinity he gave a fitting home, by this his speech, and in a fitting place, and [thus] extinguished lawlessness by laws” (Sextus Empiricus. *Against the Professors* 9.54.¹)

We have set out to explore the leaving religion in Classical Greece by quoting the so-called Sisyphus or Critias fragment. According to this text, Gods were

¹ With minor revisions, I have used the translation from Greek to English by J. Garrett which, in turn, is a revision of R.G. Bury’s translation).

invented by an intelligent person in order to stop criminal deeds. It is a telling fact that the quotation is from Sextus Empiricus who lived in the third century CE, and the fragment has thus often been attributed to Critias, the uncle of Plato, at least six centuries earlier than the Sextus report. Other sources, however, claim that Euripides was the author of the text, but I side with Sedley who interprets the split in evidence as an indication of the authorship being simply unknown and a matter of conjecture (Sedley 2013: 142). Nevertheless, the fragment is an example of a way of speculating the emergence of religion that dates back to the second half of the fifth century BCE. In this chapter, we will frequently come across source critical problems that resemble those above that have been briefly touched upon. Usually, the reports of the people who have criticised the public cult or even given up religiosity all together are uncertain and from many centuries later than the occurrences described in them. However, in comparison to the sources outside the Greek speaking world, the situation is favorable although challenging indeed. Thus, with so many gaps in the information, our interpretations depend on our expectations regarding ancient religiosity in general and in many cases, in particular, on how we relate to the discourse of classical Athens as the imagined cradle of the enlightenment. Moreover, if we dare say something about the vast majority of people who did not belong to the Greek speaking élite of males, which could actually express their views on religion, even when their views were critical to the public cult, we better get to grips with how religions often function and, from that base, build up as well-founded hypotheses as possible. This prelude is my apology to why I will devote some of the very limited scope of the present chapter to topics that might be a bit surprising to be found when discussing the leaving religion in Classical Greece. To me, however, such discussions seem valuable had they been included in many of the specialised studies I have dealt with in the preparation of this chapter. The scope only allows us to discuss one of the intellectuals who might have discarded religion, and I have chosen Euripides as our example. However, I will touch upon matters that make it easier for the reader to consider whether discarding the religion was extremely rare or whether there were a larger number of people than the previously assumed who were atheists but did not dare to raise their voices.

2 Key Terms

If we discuss religions more generally, rather than focusing on theologians of creedal religions, it is increasingly recognized that there is a huge gap between the “official” beliefs that one should uphold as a believer and the different

opinions and practices that people actually express and perform (Sorensen 2005). Harrison (2015: 24–27) suggests that one should follow trends in cognitive sciences according to which, a distinction between intuitive beliefs and reflective beliefs is made (Sperber 1996, 1997). Intuitive beliefs are beliefs that one holds without having to reflect upon them. Reflective beliefs are beliefs that you are taught or have derived by conscious reasoning (Harrison 2015: 25); for instance, divine retribution is an idea one might reach at when seeing a person suffering a misfortune very well matched to the crime they are guilty of (Harrison 2000, Chapter 3). Reflective belief might then be something one reaches by inference on the basis of one or many intuitive beliefs. Such intuitive beliefs may be transmitted to somebody by the meaning of rituals or stories. It is not that uncommon that the beliefs one has reached by inference may contradict each other, as they are actualised in different contexts and may have different functions (Harrison 2015: 26–27). Even if the above discussion to a large extent has been focused on the propositional side of religious belief, the emotional aspects should not be neglected. Too often, I assert, ancient religions have been under-intellectualised whereas, for instance, Christianity has been over-intellectualised. In order to know what we in the following discussion will mean by “leaving religion,” we have to determine how the category religion would relate to mystery cults and magic.

According to the paradigm that until recently has dominated the study of ancient Greek religion, the communal rituals that took place in the city constituted religion for the ancient Greeks (Kindt 2012: 1–35). Although this view has brought many valuable insights of socio-economical character, it has concealed many other important aspects of religiosity that have adhered to the private sphere and locations other than the ancient Greek city (*polis*). Investigations as that of Kindt (2012) have put the *polis*-centred paradigm into question. Moreover, a part of the critique consists of analyses showing that magic and religion were far more intertwined than what has been earlier recognized (Kindt 2012: 90–122). I am inclined to go one step further and propose that one rather than continuing to use the categories of religion, mystery cults and magic should expand the category of religion in order to include the other two categories in it. On this basis, I will use the term religion in a more inclusive way than normally.

It is clear that the ancient Greeks did not use a term equivalent to religion (Needham 1972). However, our lack of an emic equivalent to religion does not make it useless to apply an etic term for analytical purpose (Versnel 2011: 548–551). The Greek phrase that has caught most attention in the discussion is *nomizein tous theous*, carrying many meanings and can be translated “acknowledging the existence of the gods,” “to worship the gods according to the cultic

tradition,” or just “to accept the gods in the normal way” (Parker 2011: 36; Versnel 2011: 552–558; Sedley 2013: 139–140). Harrison remarks (2015: 23) that the above suggested interpretations of *nomizein tous theous* are tightly related to the particular context in which it is used. In the Apology of Plato 26c, however, we have the first obvious example in which the verb *nomizein* clearly carries the meaning of “believing in the existence of gods,” but the other meanings seem to be represented in that context as well.

“...these very gods about whom our speech now is speak still more clearly both to me and to these gentlemen; for I am unable to understand whether you say that I teach that there are some gods, and myself then believe that there are some gods and am not altogether godless and am not a wrongdoer in that way; that these, however, are not the gods whom the state believes in, but others, and this is what you accuse me for; that I believe in others or you say that I do not myself believe in gods at all and that I teach this unbelief to other people” (Plato’s Apology 26c, translated by Harold North Fowler).

In what follows the quoted passage, the accuser of Socrates states that it is to believe that there are no gods that is on stake. Hence, the use of *atheos* in that passage means “atheist” in the modern sense rather than, at that time, common meaning of “godless” (Sedley 2013: 139).

Another important concept is the Greek *asebeia*. The meaning covers the significance of the English “impiety” but seems to have a broader range. Good relations to the gods, the family, and the society in general was crucial to most Greeks. When somebody in speech or act risked the harmony in those relations, such dangerous behaviour and/or speech was labelled *asebeia* (Bowden 2015: 325–336). To sum up, the ancient Greeks used the term *nomizein* to refer to the propositions of the beliefs as well as for proper conduct in regard to divinities. Moreover, the term *asebeia* refers to unacceptable cultic conduct and asocial behaviour in general. We thus need to ask ourselves to what extent did the ancient Greek religion differ from a religion as for instance, Christianity, that often has been seen as dogmatically centred?

3 Historical Developments

If we exclude conversions, the leaving religion in antiquity is a non-existing field of research. However, I argue that there are reasons to alter this situation. Admittedly, however, there are many obstacles for the scholar who embarks on the journey of exploring the leaving religion in ancient times. To begin with,

the sources are scant. Therefore, we will focus on Athens in the fifth century BC, since that is a time with relatively abundant material to investigate. From that era, there are reports of persons who have later been considered as atheists. Nevertheless, there is not a single example of a person whom the majority of scholars have held to be an atheist. It is telling that the one who reads the chapter of atheism from the Pre-Socratics to the Hellenistic Age in *The Oxford Handbook of Atheism* (Sedley 2013) learns that atheism was a “recognizable if rare stance” (Sedley 2013: 150). Although many persons have been reported as atheists, there is no scholarly consensus according to which a certain person is held an atheist. This can be explained by how risky it would be to openly question the religious cult (Sedley 2013: 142, 144, and 147).

A resembling position is taken by Bremmer (2007) in *The Cambridge Companion to Atheism*. Atheism was never practiced, and theoretical atheism adhered to a small intellectual élite (Bremmer 2007: 11 and 19). According to Bremmer, the vast majority of people were embedded in an extremely religious society and never even thought of the possibility that gods may not exist (Bremmer 2007: 11). I side with Bremmer, Sedley, and the vast majority of scholars who stress that there is no evidence of practiced atheism in the sense of not taking part in religious cults. This is natural in a society in which the majority of people believed that cultic conduct was necessary for the society to sustain and thus would have seen as abstaining from taking part in the cult as a serious danger to all. But I claim that theoretical atheism means that one might mentally leave religion without practicing abstaining from taking part in the cult—this was far more common than hitherto has been thought. I also argue that somebody who was widely recognized as a theoretical atheist could nevertheless enjoy public high esteem.

4 Major Controversies and Significant Case Studies

Initially, we need to discuss to what degree beliefs in the ancient Greek religion can be accepted or rejected. Since enlightenment, the notion that people of old days did not critically question their own religion has been very influential. According to this master-narrative, the sceptical and scientifically-based reflection of religion generally only adhered to the modern human of the enlightenment and to those who followed that tradition (Stark 2015: 1–5). People who held that religions had ceased because of the scientific project that started with the enlightenment have used this discourse. This line of thought has been very strong and influenced the secularisation debate in the sociology of religion. Many of the founders of different theoretical perspectives in this field embraced an evolutionistic worldview according to which, religion would be

replaced by science and ethics. Representatives of such a view were August Comte (1798–1857), Karl Marx (1818–1883), Émile Durkheim (1858–1917), and Max Weber (1864–1920) (McKenzie 2017: 3–10).

In the 1930's, the thoughts of classical sociologists of religions were supported by studies of how Europe was more and more de-Christianised. Here, Gabriel LeBras can be mentioned (McKenzie 2017: 10). Thus, secularisation not only meant that religion had diminished in the public sphere of society but also described how religion in general gradually lost its significance in the private sphere. Proponents of this view from the 1960's were Brian Wilson, Peter Berger and Karel Dobbelaere (McKenzie 2017: 10; Stark 2015: 4–5). Modern proponents of this view, such as Steve Bruce, have refined and defended this view, well aware of the different challenges this theory has faced (Bruce 2011).

From the 1980's, however, this position was questioned by scholars such as Rodney Stark, William Sims Bainbridge, and Roger Finke (Stark and Bainbridge 1985; Stark and Finke 1992, 2000). According to these scholars, the old churches of Western Europe have lost their importance. This observation, according to them, does not mean that religion is about to disappear but is rather undergoing transformation and revitalisation. Nowadays, however, many sociologists of religion take up intermediate positions and avoid predicting the future of religiosity. It would be impossible to summarise the views of different theorists in the scope of this chapter, but McKenzie 2017, especially 11–28, provides an overview of the discussion.

I assert that the secularisation debate has influenced the view of ancient religions as well. According to the classical paradigm of sociology of religion, antiquity was characterised by a very high degree of uncritically accepted and foremost ritualistically orientated religiosities. I hold this as an important factor if we want to understand why theories on ancient Greek religion developed, according to which ritual played a predominant role, almost to the extinction of the study of ancient Greek myth in the history of ancient Greek religion (Bremmer 2014: 537–538). Ancient Greek myths were indeed studied but just at the fringes of history of ancient Greek religion. This state of affairs prevailed until the 1960's (Bremmer 2014: 538).

In the case of Robertson Smith (1846–1894), for example, the theoretical point of departure seemed very sound. He stressed that in order to understand ancient religions, one should do away with the concept of one's own—in his case, not forcing ancient religions into patterns of the Christianity of his time and place. Consequently, Robertson Smith, very much in line with the evolutionistic way of thinking at the end of the nineteenth century, contrasted ancient people to the preconceived more intellectually minded Christians of his day (Bell 1997: 161–162; Harrison 2015: 21).

But seeing Classical Athens as a place with a low degree of intellectual debate regarding religion is of course untenable. For instance, in book ten of *The Laws*, Plato criticises views asserting they are widespread in Athens, probably in the latter half of the fifth or of the former half of the fourth century BCE. He mentions three views that the Athenian speaker in *The Laws* claims were widespread in his city. According to the first view, there is no god (886d2–3); the second assertion is that gods are uninterested in what people do (899d8–900b3); and, according to the third claim, gods can be bribed by sacrifices (905d4).

Of course, the pioneers of the study of religions, who to a degree far higher than the average scholar of today, were well versed in the Classical Greek literature and well acquainted with book ten of *The Laws* and other relevant examples. Both being aware of the lively debates in Classical Athens and, at the same time, asserting that ancient Greek religion was ritualistic and without intellectual dimensions must have caused problems. A way out of this intellectual dilemma of the nineteenth century scholars, and for surprisingly many contemporary scholars as well, has been, and to some extent still is, to identify themselves with the intellectual giants of Classical Athens and construct a huge gap between the intellectual élite and the masses who are often held responsible for not reflecting on religious matters. According to Lloyd-Jones (1971: 148), the imagined enlightenment of Classical Greece was a product of an unconscious identification of scholars of the last quarter of the nineteenth century. To the present day, such an identification has led scholars and artists astray when interpreting ancient Greek religion and drama (Lefkowitz 2016; Harrison 2015: 21–23). According to that line of thought, intellectual reflection on religion of ancient Greeks would be atypical and constitute a threat to the normative and supposedly ritualistically centred religion of Classical Greece. With this background in mind, it is easier to understand how leading scholars have both succeeded in bringing much new knowledge about rituals of the ancient Greek religion and, at the same time, misunderstood the importance of belief for the ancient Greeks. For a scholarly giant as Walter Burkert, for instance, Greek religion consisted in communally authorised practices. Although Burkert was a leading expert on mystery cults, these cults together with magic were seen as marginal phenomena, if at all included in the category of Ancient Greek religion (Burkert 1985).

In what follows, I side with a recent trend in the study of ancient Greek religion in which, the stereotype consisting of strictly regulated rituals contrasted to a virtually non-existent intellectual side is challenged. (Kindt 2012: 1–11; Osborne 2015; Kearns 2015; Harrison 2015; Eidinow et al. 2016). As Osborne (2015) and Kearns (2015) remark, both ritual practice and belief-system were

far more flexible than usual. But how should we then conceptualise the ancient Greek religion?

5 Major Texts

The date of Euripides's drama *Heracles* is not certain. According to the stylistic analysis (Barlow 1996: 18), scholars often date it to the middle of his productive time, 420–415 BCE. For a well commented translation of the text, I recommend Barlow (1996). The play opens as Heracles is away from home performing his labors. Meanwhile, Lycus, the tyrant of Thebes, persecutes Heracles's family. In the eleventh-hour Heracles returns. As his family tells him that Lycus had sentenced them to death, he kills Lycus. But in the moment of triumph, the tables turn. On behalf of Hera, goddesses Lyssa and Iris arrive, telling that they have come in order to drive Heracles mad so that he kills his own family (830–832). In a hallucinatory stage of madness, Heracles kills his family, believing that it is his enemy Eurystheus who he has defeated. Finally, Pallas Athene stops him and puts him in a deep sleep (1002). The only surviving member of his family who escaped is his earthly father, Amphitryon; after all, Zeus was Heracles's biological father. Amphitryon ties Heracles with ropes so that he and Heracles's friend Theseus can talk to the despairing hero and persuades him to not commit suicide (1351). At the end of the drama, Heracles decides to join Theseus on his journey to Athens.

How then would we interpret the drama? A lot seems to depend on the general view of the particular scholar on Classical Athens. As the literature on Euripides's drama *Heracles* is vast, I will delimit myself to follow the discussions of two leading scholars. Barlow (1996) represents a tradition of interpreting Euripides as a thinker who challenged the traditional religion of Archaic and Classical Greece. Lefkowitz (2016), however, opposes such interpretations and describes them as products of the modern scholar who has problems understanding ancient times. In her book, (1996) Barlow sees Classical Athens as an environment in which traditional and more authoritarian values adhering to earlier times are challenged.

“By classical times the art form was emancipated, and the authors free to change traditional treatments, criticise even the divine figures and sometimes, as Euripides did, show radical...scepticism about the gods, their morals and even their very existence. This is all the result of a...creative meeting between two worlds – the archaic, traditional, aristocratic, heroic world of... myth, and the newer contemporary values of the democratic, highly social city state where the...ordinary citizen's views counted in the general reckoning of

human conduct and achievement, and where contemporary thinkers were questioning moral and theological issues" (Barlow 1996: xvi).

For her part, Lefkowitz describes the Greeks of Classical Athens as people who take it for granted that the gods do not care for or pity human beings. This is something that mankind simply has to accept; she sees no indication of people being opposed to such view (Lefkowitz 2016: 11–12). Let us now turn to their respective interpretation of the drama in question.

Barlow (1996: 8) notes that goddess Lyssa is reluctant to inflict madness on Heracles, as she sees him as pious and a benefactor to gods and the mankind (849–854). This, according to Barlow, is aimed at under striking Hera's destructive nature (1996: 8). It is in this light that Barlow reads Heracles's question as Hera triumphantly dances on Mount Olympus to celebrate her success in making Heracles slaughter his own family, "Who could pray to such a goddess? Out of jealousy for a woman loved by Zeus she destroyed the saviour of Greece who was guiltless" (1307–1308). Thus, according to Barlow, Heracles does not question the existence of gods but questions worshipping them (1341–1346).

It is not only Hera who is criticised in this drama. Zeus, the father of Heracles is described as a fake father who cannot take care of his own son (339–347; 1087–1088; 1127). Instead, Heracles recognizes Amphitryon's virtues by stating, "I consider you as my father, not Zeus" (1265).

But relations between persons are not at all unproblematic according to our drama. When Heracles comes home and understands that his family is in danger, he asks why his friends did not help his family. His wife Megara replies, "Who is friendly to a man in trouble?" (558–560). At the end, however, it is Heracles' friends Amphitryon and Theseus who rescue him and give him strength in life despite him killing his family. Finally, Heracles declares, "Whoever wants to acquire wealth or power rather than good friends is a fool!" (1425–14266).

Lefkowitz and Barlow agree that Heracles does not say that there are no gods. The drama rather describes a harsh reality where gods have power over mankind without moral obligations. But Lefkowitz does not agree with Barlow that our drama provokes the audience to think that the traditional worship is questionable: "There is no reason to suppose that anyone in the original audience would have been persuaded by Heracles' outburst to abandon traditional religious beliefs or practices" (Lefkowitz 2016: 54). Additionally, she stresses that there are many passages in Heracles in which the gods are praised: 735–739, 772–7780, and 811–814 (Lefkowitz 2016: 55). In that context, Lefkowitz argues that Euripides could have used those passages to prove that he was a pious person in the case of having been accused for impiety. I rather would say that such passages equally well could be explained by seeing Euripides as a clever theoretical atheist who did not want to be put on trial for impiety.

I assert that the drama expresses a sharp critique of the public cult as well as of personal worship of gods. Although it is uncertain how many trials for impiety that actually took place in the fifth century BCE, I hold that there were reasons for a person as Euripides to be cautious. Bauman (1990) goes through the very problematic source-critical issues and argues that many trials actually took place. After all, Socrates was sentenced to death for impiety.

6 Key Figures

As I have tried to show in the previous part, Euripides is one of the most famous tragedians of world history and, at the same time, a person that we know very little about. He was probably born in the latter half of the 480's BCE and died at approximately 406 BCE. He seems to have spent most of his life in Athens where he was a renowned composer of tragedies. In some of Aristophanes' comedies, Euripides is closely associated with Socrates. Both Socrates and Euripides are described as crazy persons who by their lofty thoughts put the traditional Gods into question (Lefkowitz 2016: 26–28). It seems, however, that it is mostly Aristophanes' depiction of Socrates and Euripides that has coursed the views of later writers on Euripides (Lefkowitz 2016: 24–35). Of course, Aristophanes' Socrates and Euripides are persons intended for people to laugh at, and we should not build biographies on such basis. Nevertheless, Aristophanes' probable exaggerations sit well together with the view of Athens that Plato presents in the tenth book of *The Laws*. Athens was a city in which traditional religion was questioned, and the existence of gods sometimes was put in doubt.

However, opinions are divided regarding Euripides's own views on religion and even on how his dramas should be interpreted. Although there is no sign that he upheld a public office in Athens, he must have been held in high esteem due to his dramas and broad knowledge in many intellectual fields. He probably did not have a happy married life, but it is hard to say much about what it really looked like on the basis of the many slanders about it (Scodel 2017: 31). There are reasons to assume that he was famous both in Athens and worldwide (Scodel 2017: 27–29). Because of this, he was on one hand envied and on the other served as the ambassador for his city (Scodel 2017: 33–35). My assumption is that Euripides was known as a theoretical atheist; this may have hindered him from taking on public positions in Athens but did not stop other states from accepting him as their ambassador (Scodel 2017: 40) nor from being rewarded for his drama in Athens.

7 Conclusion

The trend today is to stress that questioning religion and developing theology in ancient Greece is far more widespread as opposed to previously. Eidinow (2016) provides valuable discussions on how and why we actually can talk of theology in archaic and Classical Greece. The views of religion in Classical Athens, I would say, were much more diverse than what has been previously recognized and that makes room for the occurrence of atheism as well as deep personal devotion. I have not had the scope to discuss many thinkers other than Euripides who may have discarded the ancient Greek religion. I have referred to overviews as Whitmarsh (2015) who presses far in his endeavour to investigate whether there have been more atheists than assumed. It goes without saying that Euripides and persons such as Prodicus, to mention a few, were members of an intellectual élite (Mayhew 2011). However, in accordance with the new paradigm in the study of ancient Greek religion, I would say that questioning and reflecting on religions adhered to more than a few intellectuals in past times as well. In order to discard religion, however, one had to be willing to take risks. I hope that the present overview and discussion can open new perspectives and stimulate future research, not only of Classical Athens and Greece but also of the leaving religion in antiquity in general.

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Leaving Judaism

Lena Roos

1 Introduction

According to halakhah, Jewish law, there are two ways of becoming a Jew: either by being born of a Jewish mother or by converting. Hence, being Jewish does not necessarily involve any particular beliefs or practices. From the point of view of the halakhah there is no way for a Jew to leave Judaism, regardless of s/he was born a Jew or converted. Although a person may formally and ritually convert to another religion, according to the halakhah s/he remains a Jew (Ben-Sasson et al. 2007: 275). That said, it is clear that there is great variety in how this seemingly clear-cut rule can be interpreted, as will be discussed below. Some of those who have left Judaism and joined religions, identify as adherents of their new faith and no longer see themselves as Jews. Others maintain dual identities, for instance as Jewish Buddhists or Jewish Muslims. Still others claim never to have left Judaism, but are not recognised as Jews by mainstream Judaism, like the Jesus-believing Messianic Jews (Cohn-Sherbok 2000; Kollontai 2004).

2 Key Terms

In spite of the principle “always a Jew,” the many different terms referring to those who have formally left Judaism, either by renouncing Judaism or by joining another religion, show that such individuals have nevertheless been seen as constituting a category of their own, separate from other Jews. The etymologies of these words also indicate various understandings of a person who has left Judaism. Perhaps the most neutral term is *mumar*, which comes from a root simply meaning “to change.” Another frequently used term is *meshummad*. This is related to the Hebrew word *shmad*, meaning “forced conversion,” “persecution” or even “utter destruction.” Hence, a *meshummad* is a person who has converted under duress, not out of conviction, and could be expected to return to Judaism if given the opportunity (Ben-Sasson et al. 2007: 275). This term is often used, for instance, during the persecutions and forced conversions of the Middle Ages. If a *meshummad* repents, s/he should be allowed

back into the Jewish community, although some halakhic authorities require that certain symbolic acts of repentance be performed. These acts might be for instance the confessing of one's sin and repentance of it in the presence of three rabbis, or immersion in a *mikveh*, a ritual bath, as in the case of converts to Judaism (Ben-Sasson et al. 2007: 276; Endelman 2015: 26).

During the Hellenistic period the Greek term *apikoros* ("heretic") appears. It is first used in the Mishnah (*Sanhedrin* 10.1) as one of the groups of Jews who have lost their share in the world to come. The word had two related meanings: 1. One who no longer follows the commandments. 2. One who ridicules the Torah and those who follow the Torah (Rabinowitz 2007: 255–256, for an extensive discussion, see also BT *Sanhedrin* 99b–100a). Maimonides defines an *apikoros* as someone who denies prophecy, or revelation, or that God has knowledge of the actions of human beings (Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*, *Teshuvah* 3:8).

Other terms include *kofe*r ("denier") and *poshe'a Yisrael* ("transgressor of Israel"; "rebellious Jew") (Ben-Sasson et al. 2007: 275). In the Talmud a *kofe*r is someone who points out contradictions between Biblical texts (BT *Sanhedrin* 39a–b). Maimonides defines a *kofe*r as someone who denies the divine inspiration of the Torah or the authority of the oral law, or who claims that the Torah has been superseded (Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*, *Teshuvah* 3:8).

Clearly, however, leaving a religion does not always imply conversion to another. It can also mean ceasing to be religious altogether. Since Judaism is less concerned with faith than practice, in most cases this would signify ceasing to practice Judaism as outlined in the halakhah: keeping kosher, saying the daily prayers, resting on the Sabbath, following the rules of sexual purity and so on. Doing so would not make a person any less Jewish in the eyes of the halakhah, merely sinful as s/he would be failing to follow the commandments. What makes the situation even more complicated in the case of modern Judaism is that the Hebrew adjective *dati* ("religious") often means specifically Orthodox or ultra-Orthodox. This means that terms commonly used to describe such individuals require a bit of explanation. For instance, the acronym *datlash*, short for *dati leshe'avar* ("formerly religious") refers to a person who has left (ultra)-Orthodoxy but not necessarily Judaism altogether, desiring rather to practice it according to his/her own understanding. Another term for this is *ex-frum*, using the Yiddish word *frum* ("pious," "observant"), which usually refers to (ultra)-Orthodox (Kissileff 2014).

Another expression that can denote those who leave Orthodoxy is *yotzim le-she'elah* ("those leaving to question"), a term reminiscent of the classical term for those who do the opposite, namely become Orthodox, *chozrim bitshuvah* ("those returning in repentance") (Shaffir 2000: 271).

3 Historical Developments

Although both Islam and Christianity prohibit forced conversions, these have occurred in periods of persecution, for instance as during the First Crusade in 1096, or the Almohad invasion of the Iberian Peninsula in the twelfth century. Many of these conversions were, however, temporary, and the forced converts returned to Judaism as soon as possible (Roos 2003, 2006). Yet there were also Jews who converted who remained in their new faith, some of these even becoming famous for trying to convince their former co-religionists to follow them. One famous example is the man known as *Hermannus quondam Judaeus* (“Hermann, formerly a Jew,” a twelfth-century German Jew), an autobiography of whose conversion has been preserved. According to this work, before his conversion Hermann used to have debates on the Hebrew Bible with Christian theologians, but what, in his opinion, does make Jews want to convert to Christianity are the prayers of pious Christian women, the love Christians show to Jews and the good example of righteous Christian living (Roos 2006: 53). Another well-known convert was the Dominican Paul Christian, who delivered a number of forced sermons for Jews in Spain, and who was furthermore the Christian adversary of the Jewish scholar Nachmanides at the famous Barcelona disputation of 1263 (Roos 2015). The thirteenth century was also the period when the Christian church began systematic attempts at converting Jews (Endelman 2015: 27). The sources do not allow of any attempt to quantify the numbers of Jews that converted either to Islam or to Christianity, given that Jewish sources tend to downplay the numbers, and non-Jewish ones to exaggerate them. In addition to that, Jewish rabbinic sources like the *Responsa* literature tend to deal with particular cases that did not follow standard patterns, and hence called for special attention. It is therefore hard to know how representative such cases are for conversions in general (Cohen 1987: 23).

It is clear that in some settings these “New Christians” remained a separate group, one not considered entirely sincere by the “Old Christians.” The most well-known case of this is of course in the Iberian Peninsula, where for generations Jewish converts to Christianity could be suspected of secretly practicing Judaism, and thus might face persecution by the Inquisition. Indeed, in some cases this was true, and it is known that, in Spain and its colonies in the Americas, a number of families who had been subjected to forced conversion maintained Jewish practices, a group in scholarship usually referred to as crypto-Jews (Kunin 2009).

During the Enlightenment, most Christian Enlightenment thinkers were critical of Christian persecution of Jews throughout history. Although Enlightenment thinkers may have contributed to the emancipation of the Jews, this

did not mean that they had a favourable view of the Jewish religion, which they considered to be equally full of superstition as Christianity, and argued had no place in the life of enlightened persons (Heinemann et al. 2007: 214). Their arguments do not, however, seem to have convinced many Jews to abandon Judaism or religion altogether. In post-Enlightenment Europe, many Jews chose to embrace Christianity as part of assimilating into majority society. Others remained Jews but secularised and non-practicing ones. Some of the converts were motivated by religious conviction, others by other factors. Even so, it is clear that many of them were still regarded as Jews by Christians around them even after converting (Endelman 2015: 12). During certain periods, including the last decades of the nineteenth century, this attitude is related to increased hostility towards Jewish emancipation and integration (Endelman 2015: 101). During this period, the desire to convert could often be linked to age and career choices. The relative rate of conversions differed from region to region, but in general it was mainly the young and those wanting to enter new professions—the academy, media, civil service, law, the arts—who converted. Those who stayed in the traditional Jewish world of commerce at various levels had little to gain from conversion to Christianity (Endelman 2015: 125). It is impossible to generalise when it comes to gender and conversion. In contexts where women were excluded from many aspects of Jewish life, for instance traditional studies, and were therefore more exposed to the non-Jewish surroundings, they were often more likely to convert. But in middle-class Jewish settings, where the women were less likely to work or socialise outside Jewish circles, they were less likely to convert than men, since they too had less incentive to do so (Endelman 2015: 133–137).

As well as those who converted for religious or pragmatic reasons were those who were influenced by the growing nationalism of the late nineteenth century. The same nationalism that nourished early Zionism also fostered a feeling that in order to be able to embrace *Deutschtum*, for instance, or Magyar nationalism, one had to become Christian (Endelman 1987: 15).

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, there were plenty of Christian missionary organisations devoted to converting Jews to Christianity. After the Holocaust many of these have ceased to exist or changed their focus to Jewish-Christian dialogue. Today Christian missionary activity towards Jews is mainly limited to various evangelical/fundamentalist Christian groups, some Messianic Jewish, some not (Endelman 1987: 17–18. See for example *Charisma News on evangelizing Jews*, McGuire 2015; *Chosen People Ministries*; *The Church's Mission among Jewish People*; *Light of Zion* and *One for Israel*).

An interesting development since the 1960s, especially in the US, is a stream of Westerners that in one way or another have adopted Buddhism, especially

in the forms of Zen Buddhism. People from Jewish backgrounds are overrepresented in this category and are often referred to as JuBus or JewBus (Jewish Buddhists) (Gez 2011: 45, 52). One of the reasons suggested why Buddhism has proved attractive to Jews dissatisfied with Judaism is that, unlike with Christianity and Islam, Judaism had no previous history of enmity or competing claims with Buddhism (Gez 2011: 56). Another reason may have been that it offered a form of spirituality and an understanding of the nature of the world that was acceptable for post-Holocaust Jews who were asking difficult questions about why God had allowed the Holocaust to happen (Gez 2011: 58ff).

One of the problems in gauging the numbers of Jewish adherents of Buddhism is that standard Western surveys presume that a person only belongs to one religious tradition, whereas many of those who taught Buddhism to Westerners in the second half of the twentieth century stressed that their teachings were compatible with affiliation with other religions as well (Gez 2011: 52). In some cases, studying and practicing Buddhism seems to have led to an increased practice of Judaism as well, sometimes at the instigation of the teachers of Buddhism. This is especially interesting as many Jewish Buddhists came from secular background (Gez 2011: 54). What could be perceived as a way of leaving Judaism, can be understood from another perspective as a way of returning to Judaism. Similar patterns can also be found among Jews in the West who has embraced Islam through Sufi movements (Sorgenfrei 2013).

As stated above, however, leaving Judaism does not have to mean joining another religion; it can also mean leaving Orthodoxy or becoming secular. Recently there has been an increase in research into this phenomenon. This movement is not an insignificant one, as is attested by the number of autobiographies of individuals who have chosen this path, the *ex-frum* or *datlashim* (Ross 2014; Halberstam 2011). Interestingly, rather than merging into other categories such as progressive or secular Jews, this group seems to maintain a distinct identity, (Blum, 2015). Yehuda Mirsky, a scholar who has studied the group notes: “the difference between Datlashim and ordinary religious defectors is that Datlashim want their children to be Datlashim, too.” (Mirsky 2012).

Leaving ultra-Orthodoxy, however, can be a complicated process (Davidman 2014). The men, especially, having concentrated on traditional Jewish subjects in most of their schooling have few skills that would render them employable in the outside world. In addition, these individuals are leaving a community which is very supportive of its members, and may find it difficult to cope on their own. Studies have shown that an added difficulty is that, since even to contemplate leaving Orthodox practice is perceived as a grave sin, often a person having such thoughts finds him/herself without anyone with whom

to discuss these matters (Shaffir 2000). Hence the support of other *datlashim* and of organisations such as New York-based *Footsteps* can be vitally important. Similar organisations include *U-vaharta* and *Hillel* in Israel, *Mavar* and *GesherEU* in the UK and *Forward* in Canada. These provide counselling, peer support, education and career programs to facilitate the adjustment to life outside the ultra-Orthodox community.

4 Major Controversies and Significant Case Studies

One major controversy in modern times has been how the halakhic authorities should regard the group referred to as “Messianic Jews” or “Hebrew Christians,” that is, Jews that believe that Jesus was the Jewish Messiah. This is a heterogeneous category, containing some groups that stand quite close to traditional rabbinic practice, and others, mainly in the US, that are more charismatic and closer to evangelical Christianity (Cohn-Sherbok 2000; Kollontai 2004).

Most Jewish authorities do not recognise Messianic Jews as Jews on various grounds including that Jesus's teachings were contrary to Jewish faith and practices, or that for those who consider his teachings compatible with rabbinic teachings, he was not the Messiah. Another reason is that the Messianic Jews are seen as embracing beliefs that have been used to oppress Jews throughout history, for instance the view that Christians are God's chosen people. A further reason is that Messianic Judaism implies that Judaism is not complete in itself. This animosity towards Messianic Jews has resulted in Orthodox groups putting pressure on authorities to deny Messianic Jews the Right of Return (the right to emigrate to Israel), and in attacks on Messianic Jewish establishments and homes in Israel (Kollontai 2004).

Another reason why the Messianic Jews are controversial is that at least some of the groups actively proselytise among Jews, something that is still very contentious in the Jewish world, because of the long history of the Christian mission to the Jews. In Israel and elsewhere, there are a number of Jewish organisations that work to prevent and counteract missionary activities directed towards Jews and also intermarriage. The oldest is *Yad L'achim* (“A hand to brothers”) founded in 1950. More recently founded is *Jews for Judaism*. Its name resembles that of *Jews for Jesus*, one of the most important evangelical Messianic Jewish missionary organisations (Kollontai 2004). One final anti-mission organisation is *Outreach Judaism*. The activities and resources provided by these organisations testify to the continued effort of various missionary groups to proselytise among Jews and to the perceived need of Jewish organisations to counteract this.

Another controversial issue in connection with this is intermarriage. In Orthodox Judaism intermarriage is not permitted, and for a Jew to marry a non-Jew would thus amount to him/her leaving Judaism. More progressive forms of Judaism have taken a more positive stance on intermarriage. For example, in 2015 the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College decided that it would admit and graduate students who are in interreligious relationships, even rabbinical candidates (“Reconstructionist Give Green Light to Intermarried Rabbinical Students,” 2015).

One of the most controversial cases concerning Jewish identity and conversion was the case of Oswald Rufeisen (1922–1998). Rufeisen was born a Jew, but converted to Christianity and subsequently entered the Carmelite order in 1945. Before his conversion he had been a member of the Zionist youth movement, and he clearly retained this connection to the State of Israel, because in 1962 he appealed to the Israel High Court to be granted Israeli citizenship under the Law of Return which grants the right to citizenship to all Jews. Rufeisen (or Brother Daniel, by then) claimed that right as he still considered himself part of the Jewish people, despite having become a Catholic Christian. This longing for the Holy Land was also, he states, the reason why he had chosen a monastic order and a chapter in Israel. His request, however, was refused. The reason given was that although he was still considered a Jew from the point of view of the halakhah, the Law of Return was based not on halakhah but on Jewish national/historical consciousness and the ordinary secular meaning of the term “Jew” as understood by Jews. According to this understanding, a person who had willingly converted to another religion was not a Jew. In addition, recognising Brother Daniel as a Jew would be tantamount to denying the spiritual values that Jews of all ages had died for when they refused to give up their religion (Ben-Sasson et al.: 2007, 273).

In its modern interpretation, the understanding of the Law of Return appears to be based upon the general notion of Jewish identity, rather than halakhic definition of who is a Jew, since children and spouses of Jews, for example, despite not fulfilling the requirements of the halakhah, have still been granted the right of “return” (Lent 2010).

5 Major Texts

As stated above, according to the Talmud it is impossible for someone to cease to be a Jew, even if s/he is completely non-practicing and even converts to another religion (BT Sanhedrin 44a). The thirteenth-century sage Nachmanides attributes this to *Deuteronomy* 29:14 which states that the covenant between

God and Israel was made “with him that stands here with us today before the Lord our God and also with him that is not with us here today” (Nachmanides *ad loc*). This also means that a child born of a Jewish mother, even if she has left Judaism, is considered a Jew (Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*, Ishut 4:15). A marriage between two apostates or between an apostate and another Jew, if conducted according to the Jewish rite, is considered valid according to halakhah (BT Yevamot 30b; Shulchan Aruch, Even Ha-ezer 44:9). Even so, the texts suppose that the party who remains within Judaism will prefer to divorce the apostate spouse (Isserles, Moses on Shulchan Aruch, Even Ha-Ezer 140:5; 154:1). All of this applies equally to converts to Judaism (BT Yevamot 48a).

Most of the classical commentaries agree with the position stated above, that a Jewish apostate remains a Jew. This would not be Judaism, however, if there were not dissenting voices. Maimonides, for one, claims that individuals that have left Judaism voluntarily are no longer part of the Jewish people, referring to the verse: “None that go to her repent, nor will they regain the paths of life” (*Proverbs* 2:19, Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*, Hilkhot Mamrim 3:2). If, however, an apostate *is* still considered a Jew, then in theory, should s/he at some point choose to return to Judaism, no particular rite would be necessary. Nonetheless, some authorities have required that an apostate confess his sins, repent and promise to follow the halakhah henceforth (Ben-Sasson et al. 2007: 276). The sixteenth-century sage Moses Isserles claimed that returning apostates should undergo a purifying bath in the mikveh, just like converts to Judaism (Isserles on Shulchan Aruch, Yore Deah 268: 12)

Such reasoning even continues into twentieth century Reform Judaism, according to a responsum that stresses that most Jews who convert to Christianity mean no harm to Judaism, being rather concerned with their own interests, such as marrying a Christian or furthering their position in a society with a Christian majority. Although the Jewish community may not have any respect for a person who leaves Judaism, the door should always be open for him or her to return, and if the children of apostates return, no reconversion is required (“Our Attitude to Apostates”).

6 Key Figures

When we review some of the key Jewish figures who have left Judaism it becomes clear that they fall into various categories. One such category is made up of Jews who joined other religions and became avid proponents of those religions. A good example is the Dominican Paulus Christianus in the thirteenth century, who made use of his Jewish background to argue for the supremacy of

Christianity from Jewish sources. From the point of view of Orthodox Judaism, some Messianic Jews would also fall into this category – organisations like Jews for Jesus for example – because of their missionary activities towards other Jews. Its founder Moishe Rosen came from an Orthodox Jewish background, and first took an interest in Christianity in order to be able to refute the arguments of his Jewish wife who had become interested in Christianity. Both of them eventually converted and Rosen became a key figure in evangelical circles that evangelised Jews in the 1950s, -60s and -70s before founding his own organisation in 1973. Throughout his life he kept many Jewish customs such as fasting on Yom Kippur and hosting Passover *seders* (Fox 2010).

Another category contains those who simply left Judaism, embracing other faiths and from then on considered adherents of those religions. Most of these individuals have, quite naturally, gone unnoticed, especially in periods when conversions were common. Others have achieved notoriety. Within this category Shabbetai Zevi (1626–1676) stands out. Shabbetai Zevi was the leader, and designated Messiah, of the largest messianic Jewish movement in the modern era. The movement was deeply influenced by Kabbalah, especially in its Lurianic variant, which originated among the Early Modern Jewish mystics of the town of Safed. A central tenet of this movement was that all Jews were able to contribute to the process of restoration and redemption and thereby of hastening the coming of the Messiah. In 1666 Shabbetai Zevi travelled to Constantinople, apparently with the aim of deposing the sultan. Once there he was imprisoned by the authorities, and while in prison he was presented a choice between death or conversion to Islam. He chose to convert. This was naturally a disappointment to many of his followers, although some of them developed a doctrine that explained how this had all been part of a greater messianic plan (Scholem 2007).

A final category contains those that have formally converted to another religion, but where some disagreement exists as to whether or not they should still be considered Jews. One example from this category is the Catholic monk Oswald Rufeisen discussed above who wanted to claim the Right of Return as a Jew, despite having converted to Christianity. Another case that received international attention was that of the Carmelite nun St Teresa Benedicta of the Cross (1891–1942). Teresa was born into an observant Jewish family and began her life as Edith Stein. Stein pursued an academic career and received a PhD in philosophy. It is said that it was reading of the autobiography of St Teresa of Avila that moved her to convert. After holding various teaching positions, she entered a Carmelite monastery in Cologne. She later transferred to a monastery in Echt in the Netherlands, but even there she was not safe from Nazi anti-semitism. In 1942, along with other converted Jews in the Netherlands, she was

arrested and transferred to a concentration camp. She was executed the same year at the Auschwitz concentration camp. She was canonised by Pope John Paul II in 1998, and is one of the six patron saints of Europe. There was some controversy surrounding this process with critics claiming that she had been martyred because of her Jewish heritage, not because of her Christian faith. The position of the church, however, was that she was executed as a result of the stance taken by the Catholic Church in the Netherlands against Nazi antisemitism, and therefore should be considered a martyr of the church (Popkin 2007).

7 Conclusion

Within Judaism there are many different terms that are used to designate what in theory does not exist: a person who has left Judaism. As is often the case when Judaism is compared to Christianity or Islam, for example, Judaism does not fit our notion of what a “religion” should be like. In a society where religious identity ideally is something that is chosen by the individual, Judaism stands out as difficult to enter and, in theory, impossible to leave, in much the same way a person may change his/her nationality but not his/her ethnicity. It is clear that, in comparison with other religions, the status of a person who has “left” Judaism is a complicated issue, in comparison to other religions, due to the fact that the definition of Jewishness is determined not by faith nor by practice, but by a person’s lineage. Faith and practice can be abandoned, but lineage remains.

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Leaving Christianity

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1 Introduction

The body of research on leaving Christianity is expansive, ranging from the historical and social scientific study of religion to practical theology and religious education. Just as the array of Christian churches and their nature is wide, so too is the nature of leaving Christianity varied. This chapter presents an overview of key aspects regarding leaving Christianity and its major trends and debates in history. Leaving Christianity is closely entwined with definitions of membership and being a Christian, changing social norms, and codes of conduct of church officials, but also broad historical socio-cultural changes.

2 Key Terms

Leaving Christianity has many connotations. From the outset, it is important to make a clear distinction between the terms heretic and apostate. Apostasy, deriving from the Greek word *ἀποστασία* (*apostasia*, a “refection” or “revolt”), refers to a formal disaffiliation or abandonment of religion. According to Christian faith “apostasy is a wilful falling away from, or rebellion against, Christian truth... [and] the rejection of Christ by one who has once been a Christian” (Muller 1985), and an apostate is thus a former Christian who rejects Christian faith. According to the *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery* (Ryken et al. 1998: 39), there are at least four different ways in which the word apostasy is used in the Bible. It is used in reference to (1) rebellion against (for example *Joshua 22:22*; *2 Chronicles 29:19*), (2) turning away (for example *Jeremiah 17:5–6*; *Judges 2:19*), or (3) falling away from God and Christian faith, the latter being particularly evident in the New Testament (for example *Matthew 7:24–27*), and (4) adultery, which is one of the most common images of apostasy in the Old Testament (for example *Jeremiah 2:1–3*). *Heretics*, however, refer to people holding a deviant theological position or religious practice that is not accepted by the group and the leaders of the group to which the accused belongs. The word “heresy” came into wide use within Christianity through Irenaeus (130–202) and his second-century tract *Contra Haereses* (*Against Heresies*) in which he described, for example, the Gnostics’ teachings as heretical (Frend 1984: 135–193).

Furthermore, the understandings and connotations of leaving Christianity are strongly linked to belonging and membership of the church. According to Catholic understanding, once individuals become Catholics through baptism, they will remain Catholic unless they commit a sin grave enough to merit excommunication. They may become “lapsed” Roman Catholics if they do not fulfil the obligation to attend mass, although there is no record kept of who does and does not meet the terms of membership. Regarding the Church of England, there are at least three ways in which individuals can be said to belong to, and also leave, the Church. Firstly, all inhabitants in England belong to the Church of England unless they choose to belong to another denomination or religion or otherwise reject membership. Secondly, individuals may be said to forfeit Anglican Church membership if they do not receive communion at least three times a year, although no record of this is kept. Thirdly, those listed on the church’s Electoral Roll can be regarded as members. In this case, leaving means letting one’s name drop off the Electoral Roll, for example, by not attending mass or by missing the chance to fill out a certain form (Richter 2000: 21–22). The definition of membership is clearest in churches that have formal registered membership. This is common in countries where certain churches and religious groups have a right to levy taxes. In such cases, a member can be simply defined as a person who is a registered member of a church who pays church taxes. This is the case in many European countries (including Austria, Denmark, Finland, Germany, Iceland, Italy, Sweden and some parts of Switzerland), although there are also problems linked to this definition.

As the above suggests, it can be difficult to arrive at a clear definition of church leaving. For example, Richter and Francis (1998; Richter 2000: 24) used church attendance rather than membership when comparing church leaving in different denominations. They adopted Dean R. Hoge’s definition of a church leaver as a person who has reduced his or her church attendance to less than six times a year (excluding Christmas, Easter, weddings and funerals) (Johnson et al. 1993; Richter and Francis 1998; Richter 2000: 34). However, in some countries church attendance has always been low. Therefore, the vast majority of registered church members would be categorised as church leavers according to this definition. Therefore, leaving Christianity needs to be defined separately in each case and in its historical context.

3 Historical Developments

Cases of leaving Christianity during the first century of Christianity are often dismissed and poorly documented. However, two issues are noteworthy in

early Christianity. Firstly, deviant religious groups (such as the Gnostic movements, Marcionists and Montanists) were labelled heretics by the church authorities. Local church laws and canonical laws were often formed to dictate how to distinguish and manage those deemed as heretics (Van de Wiel 1991: 36–72). Secondly, the persecution of early Christians in the Roman Empire prompted a debate on how to deal with those who denied Christ. Some church leaders, such as Tertullian (155–240), considered fleeing persecution as apostasy. This caused some to fear apostasy when facing torture (Moss 2012: 108, 155). Later, Eusebius (275–339) favoured forgiving those who rejected Christ during persecution, in contrast with “heretical” Novatian (200–258), who denied re-entry of relapsed believers to the church (Oropeza 2000: 8).

In medieval Christian Europe, the distinction between a heretic and an apostate was important also for legal reasons. However, the word apostate had multiple meanings in the Canon Law of the Catholic Church. It could refer to leaving the faith (*apostasia a fide*), or religious life, such as a monastic order (*apostasia a religione*). Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274) distinguished apostasy as abandonment of the faith (*a fide*), abandonment of clerical state (*ab ordine*), and abandonment of monastic life (*a monachatus*). Furthermore, the most common referent of apostate was fugitive, not someone leaving Christianity per se. Apostasy was often referred to as treason and rebellion, and punished by excommunication from society and the Church, and loss of wills and possessions (Riesner 1942; Oropeza 2000: 10–12).

A heretic in medieval Europe was foremost a person whose practice of Christianity was deviant; doctrinal issues were secondary or later constructions. A heretic had a chance to repent and return to the accepted practices of the Church. In the case of relapse, punishments were more severe. Apostasy of faith was seen, beyond heresy, as a total rejection of religion, meaning essentially the Church, or switching, for example, to Judaism. Witchcraft was depicted, for example, by Johannes Nider (1380–1438) as a fundamentally heretical act of apostasy. In England, blasphemy, atheism and heresy were punishable by death between 1400–1677 (Kolpacoff Deane 2011: 219–220; Zagorin 2013; Välimäki 2016).

Following the Reformation, the term heretic was used to denote any kind of apostasy or switching religion, that is anyone who had a belief different to the dominant group (Hunter et al. 2005: 4). Moreover, what followed was a fragmentation of Western Christianity, enabling also internal movement, leaving institutions, and switching churches.

The Reformation enabled territorial rulers to choose the official religion of their domain in Western Europe. The Peace of Augsburg (1555) treaty and its statement *cuius regio, eius religio*, essentially meant that the religion

of the ruler would be the religion of their subjects. In some areas, a coexistence of competing religions was accepted. The Transylvanian Diet's Edict of Torda is considered the first legal guarantee of religious freedom in Christian Europe, although with restrictions. In 1558, the Edict declared free practice of both Catholicism and Lutheranism, although Calvinism was prohibited until 1564. In 1568, the freedom was extended: four denominations (Catholicism, Lutheranism, Calvinism and Unitarianism) were named as accepted denominations, while other denominations (such as the Orthodox Churches, Sabbatarians and Anabaptists) were tolerated churches, which meant that they had no legislative power, but they were not persecuted. In the Union of Utrecht (1579), freedom of conscience and private devotion and worship alongside the dominant religion was granted in the Netherlands. It allowed complete personal freedom of religion and is one of the first unlimited edicts of religious toleration. These earliest laws guaranteed people the personal right to practice their religion of choice, and to practice or not to practice religion as they wished.

Tolerance of atheism in Western Europe grew slowly through the enlightenment and modernisation. Apart from the short period of the French Revolution, change was slow and Christianity remained strong. John Locke (1632–1704) was one of the early developers of the thought of religious freedom, although he considered Roman Catholics unloyal in an Anglican England, and atheists a threat to national morale. National institutions slowly loosened their ties to Christian churches. The British court of law permitted the testimony of an atheist in 1869, and parliament accepted oaths without a Bible in 1886 (Zagorin 2013). In European colonies around the world, however, laws were not, or could not be, necessarily similarly applied. However, missionaries were constantly alerted by the possibility of natives relapsing into “uncivilised” lifestyles and syncretism (Barry et al. 2008).

The acceptance of religious freedom for individuals has varied across different Christian groups. In the Roman Catholic Church, the Second Vatican Council adopted the concept of religious freedom in its *Dignitatis humanae* (1965), but continued to oppose complete privatisation of religion and moral issues (Casanova 1994: 57). Many Protestant and Orthodox churches also have commitments to religious freedom.

In the twentieth century, the case of state-run atheism in Eastern Europe led to a massive decline in Christianity in those countries. For the study of leaving religion this poses challenges. It falls short of voluntary leaving, but merely dismissing it as a state-forced apostasy would not be sufficient. Organised secularisation was met with a counter-reaction after the fall of the Soviet Union, as many returned to the Orthodox Church or other religions. The politics of

identity and objectification of religion led to the ethnicisation of religion, not national apostasy. For example, in Russia the Orthodox Church was a way to return to the assumed traditional Russian culture (Pelkmans 2009). A similar reaction was seen, for example, in Albania, which transformed from an atheist society to a society where 88 percent said they believed in God in 2011 (Enderesen 2012).

However, state-run atheism or communist regimes did have a more long-lasting effect in some countries and regions, such as former Czechoslovakia and East Germany. The consequences are very visible when comparing religious belonging, for example, in former East Germany compared to former West Germany. During the communist era the situation of Christianity was characterised by an enduring persecution of religious believers by the Communist government of East Germany. In 2010, while only 15% of West Germans did not belong to a religious community, the figure among East Germans was 68% (Ilg et al. 2010: 51–52).

4 Major Controversies and Significant Case Studies

A controversial debate within Christianity has been the Muslim conquest of large parts of the Mediterranean world and the degree of freedom of conversion from Christianity to Islam. The story of forced mass conversions to Islam has prevailed, providing an explanation for why so many left Christianity. However, the conversion of entire populations was sometimes slow. For example, Egypt maintained a Christian majority for six centuries after the change of power, and Greece remained Orthodox under Ottoman rule (Hermansen 2014). In other cases, such as nineteenth-century southern Russia, Muslim culture and historical ethnicity were more appealing than colonial Christianity (Kefeli 2014). Arguably, preferential taxation in favour of Muslims and other practical matters make voluntary conversion debatable in many cases. In Muslim Spain (Al-Andalus, 711–1492), large-scale conversion to Islam happened only after major changes in government, legislation and culture. Umayyad emir Abd al-Rahman II (822–852) abandoned the egalitarian Arab style of governance in favour of the cultural sophistication of the Abbasid court in Baghdad, established new courts and state offices, and facilitated conditions for employment. This cultural revolution and the new professions, opportunities for livelihood, that it brought led to increasing assimilation into the new Islamic culture, and eventually to conversion to Islam. The more indigenous Muslims there were, the more indigenous Christians would convert (Coope 1993; Tieszen 2013, 21–44).

An important theological debate of the Reformation was the soteriological question of being saved. The Calvinist-Arminian debate in the early seventeenth century was, among other issues, a dispute over whether, once saved, a Christian can lose their salvation and become an apostate. The debate had its precedent in a debate between Augustine of Hippo (354–430) and Pelagius (360–420) over irresistible grace versus salvation through faith alone. John Calvin (1509–1564) went further than Augustine, proposing that God has chosen, that is predestined, people to either salvation or damnation by his sovereignty. Following this logic, there are no apostates since a person leaving Christianity was not chosen to be a Christian in the first place. Jacobus Arminius (1560–1609), however, excluded determinism from salvation. For him, salvation is conditional upon living a Christian life, and can be lost. Most Pentecostal and Evangelical groups follow Arminius' approach, expecting people both to choose and work for their salvation, although received by grace. Contrary to the Reformed views, Martin Luther (1483–1546) laid the foundation for the Protestant approach, which sees people as drawn to evil, and saveable only by God. This implies that salvation is solely the work of God, and apostasy is caused by the human nature to be drawn to evil (Demarest 1997; Calvin 2008; Luther 2008.) However, in Eastern Orthodoxy salvation is considered a free relationship, and therefore people have the capability to reject God (Carlton 2000).

Two important areas of controversy in Christianity in modern times have been liberalism and secularisation. Both have been affected by the enlightenment, and scientific, cultural and social developments in the Western world. The enlightenment was not simply an anti-religious programme, but, among other things, it was also a development towards a rational and intellectual approach to religion. However, the age of reason resulted in both secular humanism and religious liberalism. Many early philosophers of the enlightenment were born Christians but became critics or apostates of Christianity. For William Godwin (1756–1836), the key figure of modern anarchism and famous atheist of his time, moral and intellectual autonomy defined human beings. He was influenced by the rational Dissenters, who insisted that just as nature could be rationally explained, so, too, God had to be explained through human reasoning alone. The rational approach to religion and society was furthermore a criticism of the monopoly of power of the Church of England. Godwin further reasoned that man should not surrender to government or religion (Weston 2013).

The secularisation debate is closely related to the issue of state–church systems and their dismantling in Europe. However, while the former state churches, in particular, have lost members in Europe, Christianity in other parts of

the world remains relatively attractive. In 1910 a third of the world's population were Christians (34.8%), and in 2015 nearly a third (31.2%), and the share is expected to remain largely unchanged until 2060 (31.8%) (Pew 2011; 2017). However, the regional distribution of Christianity has changed and will change further: whereas in 1910 two-third (66%) of the world's Christians were European, in 2015 the share was only a quarter (24%) and is expected to decline to 14% by 2060 (Pew 2011; 2017). In contrast, the proportion of Christians in sub-Saharan Africa is growing (from 9% in 1910 to 26% in 2015 and expected to rise to 42% in 2060). However, it is important to point out that the major drivers behind this development are age distribution and fertility, not church leaving per se. In Europe, the Christian population is relatively old. (Pew 2011; 2017). However, Christian churches are also the group that is expected to experience most switching out worldwide: during a five-year period between 2015–2020 a total of 13 million people are expected to leave Christianity, most of them ending up religiously unaffiliated, particularly in Europe, North America, Australia and New Zealand (Pew 2017). Following this development, rather than disappearing, the former state churches (Europe) and mainline denominations (US) are losing their positions of power, and becoming more equal advocates in the religious, social, and political markets (Berger et al. 2008). These developments may be challenged by cases such as restoration of Church status in Poland, and possible reinterpretations of nationalism and Christian roots, as seen, for example, in Russia.

In Great Britain, the decline in Anglican attendance and membership rates and the increase in the number of people identifying as non-religious in national census has prompted debate in Britain and beyond on the role of religion and religious categorisation. People tend to define their relationship towards religion more independently than before, which poses the challenge of defining who is a Christian, compared to popular traditional definitions. Mainly in relation to the Christian (former) state churches, the current debate strives to grasp how some people believe without belonging or belong without believing, while others believe in belonging or neither believe nor belong (Davie 1990; Day 2011; Niemelä 2015; Brown and Woodhead 2016). Furthermore, religion and spirituality are also increasingly considered to be “fuzzy,” something that does not fit into the categories of “religious” and “non-religious” (Voas 2009) or “practicing” and “non-practicing” (Davie 2006). This means that religion is also increasingly regarded as something that cannot be interpreted merely by studying and analysing using traditional means and measures.

Another perspective on why many people, in this case in Sweden, are no longer identifying as Christians was given by David Thurffjell. He concluded that

the case is not so much one of declining religiosity, but a process of narrowing the definition and meaning of being a Christian. According to Thurfjell, the previous broad definition has been replaced with a stricter definition, favoured by revivalist groups and individuals. While the Lutheran Church traditionally considers all baptised Christians, the revivalists (including Pentecostals) expect a personal and active vocation of faith. This stricter understanding has alienated many cultural Christians away from Christianity and from the Church of Sweden (Thurfjell 2015).

Contemporary controversies often revolve around areas of sexuality and gender. The ordination of women to the ministry and changing attitudes and laws towards sexual minorities have caused a schism between liberals and conservatives, alienating people from both sides. These have been regarded among the biggest transformations in Christianity in the twentieth century (adoption of female ministry) and in the twenty-first century (increasing acceptance of same-sex relationships), and have also resulted in disaffiliation from Christianity. For example, in twentieth- and twenty-first-century Finland, the majority of the biggest peaks in church leaving from the former state Church have taken place alongside the debates regarding the ordination of women and the registration or marriage of same-sex couples. The debates over abortion and contraception have also contributed to church leaving (Byron and Zech 2012; Niemelä 2007).

5 Major Texts

Apostasy and falling away from Christian faith are mentioned in the Bible mainly in a few concentrated passages of the New Testament. Although there are similar passages in the Old Testament, these are usually dismissed by Christians as dated laws and social norms of ancient society dealing with conquering enemies and condemning their “false” gods. According to this understanding, Christianity begins with Jesus Christ and the old scriptures are applied in the light of the New Testament. According to the Bible, Jesus was aware that some of his followers would not last, but fall away. He compared his message and audience with seed and a farmer’s field: if one’s faith does not have “roots,” the seed will not grow and will “fall away,” but “those with a noble and good heart, who hear the word, retain it, and by persevering produce a crop” (*Luke 8: 4–15*).

The Apostolic letters have been used as the foundation for organising church life and social conduct. In the letters, leavers are depicted as being deceived by sin, and warnings of falling away are constant. In the *Letter to the*

Hebrews (3:7–19; 6:4–8; 10:25–31), the author warns of unbelief, which would deny a person of their salvation. Furthermore, they claim that “It is impossible for those who have once been enlightened [...] and who have fallen away, to be brought back to repentance.” One proverb likens the apostate as a dog who returns to its vomit (2 *Peter* 2:17–22), illustrating how the Apostles viewed those who convert and leave.

The Apostolic letters were the first official formulations of group membership and norms of social conduct for a Christian community. One passage by Paul (1 *Corinthians* 5:1–5) has been later used as an example of excommunication. In it, Paul guides the Corinthians to expel a person committed of sexual immorality, for a limited time, so they could repent and possibly return: “So when you are assembled and I am with you in spirit, and the power of our Lord Jesus is present, hand this man over to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, so that his spirit may be saved on the day of the Lord.”

The ultimate mark of apostasy in the Bible is the sin of blasphemy against the Holy Spirit. According to *Matthew* (12:31–32), Jesus said: “Anyone who speaks a word against the Son of Man [Jesus] will be forgiven, but anyone who speaks against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven, either in this age or in the age to come.” This passage is often linked with a story in *Acts* (5: 1–10) in which a couple tried to lie to the apostles, only to fall dead: “Ananias, how is it that Satan has so filled your heart that you have lied to the Holy Spirit [—] You have not lied just to human beings but to God. When Ananias heard this, he fell down and died.” These two Bible passages have been highly debated, but also used for social control, mainly in fundamentalist and other conservative groups outside mainline Christianity.

Another passage, often cited by Pentecostal and Evangelical groups, is “the great apostasy.” Apostle Paul pleaded with the Thessalonians: “not to become easily unsettled or alarmed by the teaching [...] asserting that the day of the Lord has already come. Don’t let anyone deceive you in any way, for that day will not come until the rebellion occurs and the man of lawlessness is revealed” (2 *Thessalonians*: 2). According to some Christians, this refers to a period in the end times when a large number of people will leave Christianity. The great apostasy has been identified, for instance, by various Pentecostals as, for example, the enlightenment and liberalism, the Roman Catholic Church, Islam, and the Soviet Union. Sometimes it is interpreted that the great apostasy will be followed by a final revival before the second coming of Christ (Anderson 2013: 165–170).

As previously noted, the persecution of the early Christian Churches prompted a debate on whether denying Christ under threat of death would be apostasy. Of the Apostolic Fathers and early writings, Shepherd of Hermes

(*Parables* 26:6) says that it is impossible to be saved if a person intends to deny Christ, although there is the possibility to obtain later repentance for past sins. Tertullian saw apostasy as a form of mortal sin (*De Poenitentia; De Idololatria; De Pudicitia*), criticising the Shepherd. However, Irenaeus (*Against Heresies*), while deeming apostates to be under God's punishment, stated that the apostasy was already judgement in itself, and God would not punish them directly – at least immediately.

6 Key Figures

According to Augustinian theology, Christians cannot be certain of their salvation, despite of free will. Through sin and unbelief, one could lose salvation (Augustine 2010). Another major theologian, Thomas Aquinas, saw atheism as a crime against society, since society and the Church were more important than the individual. Along with many of his contemporaries, he equated apostasy with treason, punishable if not repented of (Aquinas 2002). The contemporary *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (2003) sees apostasy as a full rejection of Catholic doctrine, and as leaving the Church.

However, Karl Rahner (1904–1984), one of the most influential Roman Catholic theologians of the twentieth century, questions the possibility of absolute apostasy. According to him, apostasy would not only require denial of Christian propositions, but also a complete abandonment of any moral realities of those propositions. In a cultural environment in which Christianity has been an important source of influence, this is essentially impossible. Instead, Rahner considers those who live in Christian-influenced culture but reject Christian propositions to be heretics, Christians who have fallen short (Rahner 1966: 486–487). Pope Francis's (1936–) statement that God has redeemed everybody, including atheists (Catholic Online 2013), underlines this Catholic understanding of the perseverance of salvation.

The Protestant dispute on perseverance and assurance of salvation is highlighted in Lutheran theologian Francis Pieper's account on perseverance and apostasy:

What Scripture teaches on final perseverance may be summarized in these two statements: 1. He that perseveres in faith does so only through God's gracious preservation; the believer's perseverance is a work of divine grace and omnipotence. 2. He that falls away from faith does so through his own fault; the cause of apostasy in every case is rejection of God's Word and resistance to the operation of the Holy Spirit in the Word.

This doctrine the Christian Church must maintain and defend on two fronts: against Calvinism and against synergism.

PIEPER 1968: 89

Although the Calvinist view could render predestination and election both ways, salvation and damnation, Karl Barth (1886–1968), a Reformed theologian, in his treatment of the question of predestination, reserved predestined judgement only to Jesus (Barth 1957). Methodists, Pentecostals, and other revivalist- and holiness-background Christians often follow in part the Arminian view on salvation, proposing that the Christ died for all, not only for the elected. However, Methodist leader Charles Wesley (1707–1788) preached that it is possible for a person to apostatise in such manner that it is “impossible to renew them again unto repentance” (Wesley 2001: 149–150). Wayne Grudem (b. 1948), a Reformed theologian widely respected in the Pentecostal-Evangelical field, combines these traditions by considering it more difficult to discern who is saved than who has become an apostate. In this he follows a common Revivalist Christian understanding that “faith” or religious conviction can be evaluated by its outcomes, by its good or bad “fruit.” (Grudem 2000, 156–157.)

7 Conclusion

The history of Christianity is often seen in the light of expansion and power. However, when examined closely, stories of dissent and apostasy can be found throughout its history. Early Christianity saw the expulsion of heretics and deniers of Christ during Roman persecution. The Middle Ages witnessed the expansion of Islam and the gradual apostasy of large geographical parts of early Christendom. The Reformation and the Enlightenment brought ideas of secularism and liberalism, which resulted in a decline in Christianity in Europe. Other cases and individual developments continue to bring strain and dissent within Christianity, resulting in apostasy.

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Leaving Islam

Christine Schirrmacher

1 Introduction

Looked at from a global perspective, possibly more people than ever are changing or leaving their religion. At the same time, while it is legally impossible to leave Islam in all Middle Eastern countries, it is considered to be a punishable crime under Sharia law, and the death penalty can be applied in a handful of countries like Saudi-Arabia or Iran. Interestingly enough, the Koran does not seem to have a clear verdict on apostasy. Muslim theologians hold different views as to whether Islam favors complete religious freedom or whether the culprit is unpunishable as long as he does not rock the boat of the community. Many Muslim theologians still hold to the death penalty.

2 Key Terms

The term for “unbelief” or “non-belief” (Arabic: *kuf̄r*) is used 482 times in the Koran. In at least 19 verses it is used in the sense of turning away or falling away from Islam (Hallaq 2001: 119–122). There is no mention in the Koran of the Arabic term for “apostasy,” which is *rid̄da* and *irtidād* in Arabic.

However, one finds neither in the Koran nor in tradition an unambiguous definition for when apostasy from Islam (Arabic: *al-ruḡū‘ ‘an dīn al-islām* or *qaṭ‘ al-islām*) is unquestionably present, how it can be determined, and whether saying the creed is sufficient in order to avert the charge of apostasy (Griffel 1998: 356). Indeed, there is widespread consensus that apostasy undoubtedly exists where the truth of the Koran is denied, where blasphemy is committed against God, Islam, or Muhammad, and where breaking away from the Islamic faith in word or deed occurs. The lasting, willful non-observance of the five pillars of Islam, in particular the duty to pray, clearly count as apostasy for most theologians. Additional distinguishing features are a change of religion, confessing atheism, nullifying the Sharia as well as judging what is allowed to be forbidden and judging what is forbidden to be allowed. Fighting against Muslims and Islam (Arabic: *muḥāraba*) also counts as unbelief or apostasy;

likewise, numerous theologians judge apostasy to be a form of battle against Islam.

3 Historical Developments

Overall, our knowledge about how the topic of apostasy has been dealt with in Islam in the close to 14 centuries of Islamic history is limited: Apart from few sources relating to the time of the Middle Ages and the Ottoman Empire, we primarily have sources at our disposal which are from the early days of Islam as well as from the 19th and 20th centuries.

Already around the time of Muḥammad's death in 632 A.D., there arose a number of Arab voices against Islamic domination which saw themselves only personally bound to Muḥammad. Fighting erupted under the first Caliph Abū Bakr, which has gone down in history as the "Apostasy Wars" (Arabic: *ḥurūb ar-ridḍa*). The reason for the outbreak of uprisings has been disputed within research: For instance, the continued existence of pre-Islamic social structures is supposed, such that a protective relationship was linked exclusively to an influential leader (Hasemann 2002: 37). Or was the uprising determined by the desire to avoid the collection of taxes and to cast off the rulers from Medina? In such case one would only be able to speak conditionally about the term apostasy (Hallaq 2001: 120–121).

There are only a few known individual cases of the use of the death penalty for apostates dating from the 8th century. The reason for this could be that it was first of all in the course of Abbasid rule from the end of the 8th century onwards that prosecution and the imposition of the death penalty set in. In the Umayyad and early Abbasid periods, the defensive measures against apostates appear to have mostly remained limited to intellectual debates (Cook 2006: 256; 276–277).

From this time, there are only a few individual cases of the prosecution of apostates which have been handed down: According thereto, Hišām Ibn 'Abd al-Malik was executed for spreading Mu'tazilite convictions in 742 or 743. In 784, the Iraqi writer Bašār Ibn Burd was killed on account of apostasy and in 922 al-Ḥusayn ibn Maṣṣūr al-Ḥallāḡ on account of blasphemy. A number of additional individual cases have to do with prior Christians, who owing to their conversion and their subsequent return to the Christian faith were reportedly executed: Tradition includes the name Kyros and his execution by burning in the year 769, the execution of "Holy Elias" in 795, the killing of "Holy Bacchus" in 806; two additional cases are known from the 10th and 14th centuries (Khoury 1994: 101–192) as well as a number from Islamic Spain, for instance, in the 11th century (Wasserstein 1993).

From the 9th century onwards, a time in which the execution of apostates becomes historically tangible, complaints become vociferous that the charge of apostasy set in as a weapon against undesired opponents. For example, Abū Ḥāmid Muḥammad ibn Muḥammad al-Ġazālī (d. 1111) raged against the excessive practice of condemning others as “unbelievers” (Arabic: *takfīr*) among theologians (Lewis 2002: 144). There are reports from this time about the re-conversion of prior non-Muslim detainees after their release. The question of whether it was a matter of heresy was decided by means of questioning those involved, namely whether they spoke “words of unbelief” (Arabic: *kalimāt al-kufr*). For these “words of unbelief,” there existed prior to the 12th century no exact definition. Since one considered the inner convictions of a person to not be justiciable, legal experts at that time appear to have generally been more cautious to judge belief or unbelief (Olsson 2008: 95). For that reason, many scholars appear to have concentrated more on the political aspect of the question, namely whether the involved individual caused revolt and rebellion. It was believed that such occurrences were able to be more clearly judged.

Tilman Nagel names the Maliki scholar al-Qāḍī ‘Ijād (d. 1149) as the first individual who called for the death penalty for “disseminating improprieties about Muḥammad or questioning his authority in all questions of faith and profane life” and, with that, shook the foundation of Muslim community. Later, the Hanbalite theologian Ibn Taimiyya (d. 1328) and the Shafiite scholar Taqī ad-Dīn as-Subkī (d.1355) followed this reasoning (Nagel 2001: 295). From the 12th century, especially during the Mamlūk Period (Levanoni 2016), and then in particular from the 14th century onwards, there are a number of cases of executions of apostates which have come down in tradition (Cook 2006: 257; 275).

The Ottoman Empire offers a more easily researchable arena as to how apostasy was dealt with. A number of reports are available from the 19th century on the execution of apostates. This was a time when there was intensive struggle between the representatives of Western powers and the Sublime Porte (High Porte) about the justification of these executions. Indeed, the Hatt-i Sharif decree by Sultan Abdülmecid I in 1839 provided all Ottoman subjects with protection of life, of honor, and of possessions independent of their religion. Strictly speaking, however, converts were not included. For example, the British envoy to the court of Sultan Abdülmecid I (1839–1861), Stratford Canning, intensively campaigned with the support of diplomatic representatives from Austria, Russia, Prussia, and France at the Sublime Porte for a prohibition on the execution of apostates. What followed was a long period marked by a diplomatic tug-of-war: While the British envoy made determined attempts to move the Sublime Porte to change its laws with respect to the criminal prosecution of apostates, the Sublime Porte, for its part, sought to be as decided in not giving in to the

urging and straitjacketing by the envoys of Europe. In the end, Sultan Abdülmecid granted a decree to Stratford Canning in which the Sultan, over against the High Porte, stated that he would support the High Porte's preventing the prosecution and execution of apostates (Deringil 2000: 556; 559).

Cases of the execution of apostates reported out of Egypt are also known from the 19th century, such as, for instance, the killing of female apostates from the years 1825 and 1835 (Peters and De Vries 1976: 13). After that, there appear to have been very few cases of execution for apostasy from the next 150 years which are known about (exceptions are, for example, the stoning of Şahibzādah 'Abd al-Laṭīf [1903] and Maulawī Ni'mat Allāh after converting to the Aḥmadiya movement in Afghanistan [1924]) (Ahmad 1989: 16).

It was not until the 20th century that the topic of apostasy developed a new dynamic: Theologians increasingly drafted tracts and papers in which the use of the death penalty for apostasy was called for while at the same time most Muslim majority states in the 20th century, in the course of nation building, formulated constitutions affirming religious freedom. Only in the fewest of these constitutions is apostasy from Islam taken to be a criminal offense; it can, for example, be punished in Saudi Arabia with the death penalty (although the country has no constitution), in Yemen, Mauretania, and in Iran. However, apostasy from Islam in the public sphere is now predominantly interpreted as a political offense, and there are more than a few position statements condemning it as an action endangering the state which has to be immediately halted.

Since Sharia law in the 20th century has been limited to family law for the majority of the states in the MENA region, a legal charge on account of apostasy is only possible in those few states which have codified Sharia law into penal law. Resourceful protagonists, however, have occasionally taken the way of efforts of a *ḥisba* legal action (as, for instance, in the case of the Koran scholar Naşr Ḥāmid Abū Zaid in Egypt in 1993) under the pretext of wanting to protect the Islamic community from the political offense of revolt. It was not until 1996 that there was a law prohibiting individuals from bringing a *ḥisba* legal action before a court due to alleged apostasy by a third party. The sole exception has to do with the plaintiff's being able to credibly demonstrate a personal and direct interest in the legal action (Bälz 1997: 141).

Traditionally, apostasy counts as a capital offense (*ḥudūd* offense) according to Sharia law. Nowadays, this classification is viewed critically by an increasing number of theologians. Up to the present day, the legal imposition of the death penalty for apostasy is possible where Sharia law has been codified in penal law. However, in Muslim majority countries or states characterised by Islam, public apostasy from Islam has social as well as legal consequences:

Apostasy is frequently viewed socially as a disgrace, treason, and a scandal. Being ostracised and cast out of the family are possible results, as are the loss of one's employment and in dramatic cases persecution and the use of force up to the point of attempting to seek to kill the apostate, incarcerate the individual, and to torture the individual (Marshall and Shea 2011: 61). Legal consequences can be disinheritance (since according to Sharia law non-Muslims are not allowed to inherit from Muslims), forced divorce (since according to Sharia law a Muslim female may not be married to a non-Muslim man), or having one's own children and the custody of those children taken away (since according to Sharia law Muslim children may not be raised by non-Muslims).

4 Major Controversies and Significant Incidents

There are essentially three main positions within Islamic theology today when it comes to the question of religious freedom. There is a liberal or progressive position, which advocates complete religious freedom, including the right of being allowed to leave Islam. There is a restrictive position, which basically rejects religious freedom for Muslims and which seeks to penalise criticism of Islam or its progressive interpretation with the death penalty. Finally, there is a centrist or moderate position, which a majority of theologians might be considered to support today.

Supporters of the restrictive position cite texts from the early days of Islam when justifying the death penalty, for instance Muḥammad's call to kill apostates as well as the tradition of the companions of the Prophet and caliphs who report cases of beheading and crucifixion. Since over the course of the history of theology the call for the death penalty for apostasy formulated in the early days of Islam has not been declared to be invalid, and since the principle justification of punishment of renegades had essentially never been placed into question by influential committees of scholars using a historical hermeneutical approach, recourse to texts from the early days of Islam have remained an acknowledged instrument for abstracting guidelines for dealing with apostates in the 20th century.

Nowadays, representatives of the liberal position likewise refer to texts from the early days in order to justify complete religious freedom. They point to texts within tradition which report on Muḥammad's rejection of punishment of apostates as well as Koran verses, such as Sura 2:256, which deny "compulsion in religion." In the course of their defusing the guidelines for the execution of apostates, they differentiate between theological and political concerns with respect to the topic of apostasy. Indeed, according to the opinion of the

majority of representatives of this position, it is also neither desirable nor is it meaningless with respect to the assessment of the individual in the Last Judgment. Nevertheless, it is not to be subject to punishment. Punishment, they hold, would contradict what is for them the intrinsic principle of free will. Since it is held that the Islamic community is not threatened by what is in total a low number of apostates, the prosecution of individual apostates in the early days of Islam cannot be taken as a guideline for dealing with those who change religions in the present day.

In contrast, the centrist or moderate position advocates freedom of belief for Muslims, which exclusively means internal thoughts. At the same time, freedom to openly confess adherence to another religion or to no religion is rejected. On the one hand, there is a warning against premature allegations and calls for execution of those whose apostasy is not unambiguously provable. On the other hand, however, it advocates execution as an obligatory action according to Sharia law in the case of proven apostates who make their turning away from Islam public. In the same way as representatives of the restrictive position, they condemn turning away from Islam as a political offense that brings unrest into the state and society and causes revolt.

The following three contemporary examples illustrate that it is often difficult, if not dangerous, to leave Islam in Muslim majority societies around the world. The first example of Yousef Nadarkhani demonstrates that in Iran the charge of apostasy, punishment, and incarceration also applies while there is no written law in the constitution which forbids converting to another religion. The second case of Farag Foda from Egypt illustrates that the said apostasy has been interpreted as a public crime by some members of society, holding that a court case is not a necessary requirement for punishing an “unbeliever,” whereas the third case of Mohammad Younus Sheikh from Pakistan shows that his continuing confession that he has remained a Muslim believer has not been seen as relevant with respect to his being charged with apostasy.

The pastor Yousef Nadarkhani, a convert to the Christian faith and the pastor of an underground Protestant Iranian church, was initially imprisoned in 2006 and then again in 2009 and 2012 on account of apostasy. In a judgment by the First Chamber of the Revolutionary Court on September 22, 2010, Nadarkhani was sentenced to death by hanging for “the dissemination of non-Islamic teaching” and “apostasy from the Islamic faith.” On June 28, 2011, the sentencing was confirmed by the Third Chamber of the Supreme Court in Qom. Gholamali Rezvani, the Vice Governor of the Gilan province, labeled pastor Nadarkhani a “zionist” who was “guilty of corruption and had committed high treason.” Iranian media labeled him a “rapist,” “burglar,” and an “extortionist.” At the beginning of July 2011, Nadarkhani’s prior lawyer Mohammad Ali Dadkhah had

been sentenced to receive lashes, 9 years of imprisonment, and a 10-year occupational ban as a lecturer and lawyer as well as being sentenced to pay a fine.¹

In September 2012, Yousef Nadarkhani was surprisingly set free, supposedly not least because of numerous international press reports and political advocacy in that same year. However, a short time later, he was again arrested, allegedly on account of some sort of irregularity. After being released again, Yousef Nadarkhani continued to work as a pastor but was permanently harassed by the Iranian authorities and eventually incarcerated again. In July 2017, he was sentenced to ten years of imprisonment and subsequently two years of exile 1,200 miles away from his hometown and family.

Nadarkhani was arguably the first convert in whose case the Iranian justice system openly named “apostasy from Islam” as the reason for its death sentence in 2010. Earlier converts were officially charged with other offenses, such as “spying” or “drug dealing.” In the case of Mehdi Dibaj in 1994, he was detained for years, but was reportedly never given a reason for his arrest. He was then abducted in the middle of the street and later found dead (Sana-sarian 2000: 124f.). Since 1996, due to a change in the penal code, insulting Muḥammad is indeed threatened with the death penalty but up to now the Iranian penal code does not contain any paragraph explicitly calling for the death penalty. On the contrary, Iran, by signing the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, has taken on the obligation of guaranteeing freedom of thought, freedom of conscience, and freedom of religion.

Another significant incident was the author and intellectual Farag Foda. He was murdered by two members of the *al-ḡamāʿa al-islāmīya* group on June 8, 1992 in Cairo. This occurred after he had already been openly accused of apostasy and unbelief for some time by various individuals. He had also been challenged by renowned representatives of Islamism in rebuttal of his viewpoints, which had a secular orientation (Soage 2007: 26). Among these were, for instance, his assertion that the application of Sharia law and the imitation of the habits and customs of the early days of Islam were an ineffective way of improving the numerous social problems in Egypt (Fūda 2003: 31). The freedom of opinion, democracy, an improved legal position for the Coptic minority as well as the separation of religion and politics were some additional items he called for.

Foda’s murder was preceded by a *fatwā* by the chairman of the al-Azhar *fatwā* committee on February 1, 1990, which generally rejected the application

1 International Society for Human Rights (ISHR): <https://www.igfm.de/youcef-nadarkhani/>; <https://www.igfm.de/news/article/irans-bekanntester-pastor-zu-zehn-jahren-haft-verurteilt/> (November 17, 2017).

of *ḥadd* punishment for apostasy (Najjar 1996: 6). However, two years later, on June 3, 1992, a second *fatwā* was issued which contained a personal vilification of Foda, threats, and his condemnation as a blasphemer and apostate. This had been instigated by a group of Azhar scholars. Foda was murdered five days later in broad daylight. Due to the lack of criminal legislation for the case of apostasy, the responsible members of the al-Azhar faculty would not have been able to have themselves carried out the execution of this individual whom they viewed to be guilty, and they would not have been able to move the state to apply the death penalty on account of apostasy. However, owing to their office and based on appealing to their religious authority, they personally convinced the hired assassins, as one of them confessed in his later hearing, that Foda's murder had been a religious duty (Rubin 2006: 1).

In the subsequent trial of Foda's murderer before the Supreme State Security Court in Cairo, Muḥammad al-Ġazālī was asked for a statement. In his statement, al-Ġazālī called for excluding every apostate from the community, his condemnation to death by the ruler as well as the unconditional enforcement of *ḥadd* punishment. He continued that an individual who prematurely kills the apostate arguably commits an act of unauthorised "assumption of authority," but Islam does not stipulate a punishment for that. This assumption of authority only repairs the "shame" that exists in the fact that state power does not enforce the appropriate punishment.

al-Ġazālī used disparaging wording when he spoke about the apostate, saying that Foda was "acting like a germ in society," who "spits out his poison and urges people to leave Islam" (Fähndrich 1994: 56) as Foda did not keep his flagrant unbelief for himself. Rather, he proclaimed it publicly and, with that said, according to al-Ġazālī, undermined Islam, which in the final event promotes Zionism and colonialism (O'Sullivan 2003: 107).

The Egyptian scholar Muḥammad Mazrū'a expressed himself more aggressively, indicating that the killing of Foda was necessary for maintaining the Muslim community since the state apparently was not willing to act. For that reason, the defendants were not guilty (Mazrū'a 1994). Indeed, what followed was a court case against Foda's attackers and their subsequent condemnation and execution on account of murder, but there were also public demonstrations which showed unconcealed delight and support for the offenders.

A third case is Dr. Muhammad Younus Shaikh, a physician educated in Pakistan and Great Britain and a professor of anatomy at the Homeopathic Medical College in Islamabad, a human rights activist. As the founder of the movement The Enlightenment, he expressed his rejection of Pakistani support of "freedom fighters" in Kashmir (Hassan 2008: 29) on October 1, 2000 at a conference of the South Asia Union. He declared himself in favor of recognising

the present line of demarcation between Pakistan and Kashmir as an international border, whereupon a high-ranking member of the Pakistani military who was present is said to have made blatant threats against Shaikh.

Only a few days later, he was suspended from his position at the Homeopathic Medical College, and on that same evening one of his students with a close tie to the Pakistani government filed a complaint on account of blasphemy according to § 295-C. He supposedly made “blasphemous remarks” about Muḥammad (International Humanist and Ethical Union 2004). According to the complaint, he was arrested on October 4, 2000 despite testimony to his innocence. The “Movement for the Finality of the Prophet” group led a mob onto the street, which threatened to set the College and the police station on fire (Marshall; Shea 2011: 98). Younus Shaikh initially remained in solitary confinement until August 2001 (according to official information this was for his own protection). However, after nearly 11 months of imprisonment, the Islamabad Additional District and Sessions Court sentenced Shaikh on August 18, 2001 to the payment of 1 million Rupees and to death. In the course of the appeal proceedings, the High Court in Rawalpindi rejected his request for release against bail on January 1, 2002, supposedly in order to protect him from execution in broad daylight.

In July 2002, after an additional 15 months of solitary confinement, new hearings were conducted in connection with the case. There was no lawyer who dared to come to Shaikh’s defense. On October 9, 2003, around three years after the indictment, the court finally judged that the first instance court’s determination was incorrect. However, Younus Shaikh was not released. Rather, the case was referred back to the lower court. In November 2003 there were three hearings appointed: On November 21, 2003, after more than three years of imprisonment and the loss of his entire livelihood, the defendant was secretly released on the grounds that his accusers had made false accusations. He immediately received asylum in Switzerland since there was a *fatwā* calling for his assassination (Schirmacher 2016: 110–112).

5 Major Texts

A number of verses in the Koran appear to leave the freedom of choice to individuals in questions of faith, for example when Sura 2:256 formulates it as follows: “Let there be no compulsion in religion.” Additional verses call believers to forgive those who solicit leaving the faith (for example, Sura 2:109), even if departing from the faith is unambiguously referred to as “straying” (arab. *dalla*) (Sura 2:108). These and quite a number of additional verses in the Koran warn

of the error of heresy but do not name a punishment the heretic has to face in this world. However, the majority of them warn of the punishment of hell in the next world (Sura 4:115), God's anger, and his punishment or "the curse of God, of His angels, and of mankind" (Arabic: *la'nat allāh wa-l-malā'ika wa-n-nās*) (Sura 3:87): God will not forgive the apostate (Sura 4:137). However, when Sura 2:217, for instance, disapproves of misleading other people to apostasy as more serious than killing a person, even here the consequence mentioned is exclusively a punishment in the next life and not worldly judgment.

Sura 9:74 makes an exception insofar as the threat of a "grievous penalty in this life and in the Hereafter" (Arabic: *'adāban alīman fi 'd-dunyā wa-l-āḥira*) is found, but admittedly this "penalty" is not concretely defined. Also, Sura 4:88–89 speaks of hypocrites (Arabic: *al-munāfiqūn*), who desire that everyone were as unbelieving as they are. After that, there is the call to "seize" and "slay" those who turn away (Arabic: *fa-ḥudūhum wa-qtulūhum*); Sura 9:11–12 also admonishes believers to fight those who have come into the Muslim community and then, however, "violate their oaths" (Arabic: *nakaṭū aimānahum*).

On the basis of this ambiguous textual finding, those who advocate religious freedom as well as those who reject it call upon the Koran (and tradition). Advocates of religious freedom argue using Sura 2:256 ("Let there be no compulsion in religion") as well as the Koran's disapproval of turning away from belief and the certainty of God's punishment of the apostate. They also use the Koran's lack of mention of a process for determining apostasy nor mention of a punishment in this world. In addition, they say that according to reports of tradition, Muḥammad himself pardoned apostates and did not execute them (Friedmann 2003: 125; 131). To model his example would in their view mean to likewise not condemn apostates nowadays.

Advocates of the death penalty for apostasy argue, in contrast, by using verses such as Sura 4:89 ("... but if they turn renegades, seize them and slay them ...") as well as by using texts found in tradition, which in the case of "apostasy" (Arabic: *ridḍa*) depict the execution of apostates in the early Islamic community and expressly call for the enforcement of the death penalty for apostasy. The text, quoted exceedingly conspicuously, is traceable back to Muḥammad's dictum: "Whoever changes his religion, kill him" (Buḥārī) (Arabic: *man bad-dala dīnahu fa-ḥudūhu*). However, this counts as only one text conveyed by a single conveyor of tradition (*ḥadīṭ al-aḥad*) and thereby does not belong to those texts with undisputed authority.

Other texts, which have been cited to justify the legitimacy of the death penalty, are, for instance, an account traced back to Ibn 'Abbās as well as to 'Ā'isha, according to which Muḥammad allowed the execution of an individual who had separated himself from the community and had turned his back on Islam

(Buḥārī, Muslim). The *ḥadīth* text is traceable back to Buḥārī, in which the blood of a Muslim is allowed to be shed in only three cases, namely due to apostasy from Islam, adultery, and the killing of an individual which was not blood revenge. The text is often quoted in this connection. A number of the texts name beheading by the sword, crucifixion, and banishment (Nasā'ī) as permissible forms of execution and punishment, although the burning of non-believers and heretics (Buḥārī) by Muḥammad's cousin and son-in-law, 'Alī, was disapproved of by Anās b. Mālik.

6 Key Figures

Abdullah Saeed (b. 1960), professor of Arabic and Islamic studies, was born on the Maldives. His school education was completed in Pakistan, and the first portion of his studies, up to the receipt of his B.A. in Arabic and Islamic Studies, was completed in Saudi Arabia. In 2004, with his brother, the former Attorney General of the Maldives, Hassan Saeed, he wrote *Freedom of Religion, Apostasy and Islam* (Saeed and Saeed 2004), in which he makes an emphatic call to revise the apostasy legislation found in classical Islamic law and in which complete freedom of religion is justified from Islamic source texts. Abdullah Saeed's significance lies in his widespread activity in a number of countries in Asia, to which his numerous invitations, conference addresses as well as his publications on the three continents of Europe, Australia, and Asia bear eloquent witness. Additionally, the fact that he consults the Australian government with respect to questions of integration of the Muslim minority and publishes domestic studies in cooperation with various governmental institutions means that his expositions have international reach.

On the basis of his numerous as well as influential offices held around the globe, the large number of book publications of around 120 titles, his *fatāwā*, articles, public addresses, sermons, and his broad teaching and consulting activities for various banks and financial institutions, his enduring media presence with his own television program on Al Jazeera and his extensive use of the internet with a number of his own websites, Yūsuf al-Qaraḍāwī (b. 1926) counts as perhaps the most influential living Sunni theologian of all. He permanently promotes his method of interpretation of "centrism" and "moderation" (*wasatīya* and *ītidāl*) and thus offers Muslim youth, in the Western diaspora in particular, a paradigm for behavior and identity which marks him off not only as a theologian but also as a socio-political personality who engages himself in a very targeted manner in current debates and markets his positions on what is "forbidden" (*ḥarām*) and what is "allowed" (*ḥalāl*) with a

sense of significant authority and media impact. In his book *ġarīmat ar-ridda wa-‘uqūbat al-murtadd fī ḍau’ al-qur’ān wa-’s-sunna* (*The Crime of Apostasy and the Punishment of Apostates in the Light of Koran and Sunna*) (al-Qaraḍāwī 1996), al-Qaraḍāwī takes a middle path. On the one hand, he does not distance himself from instruction to apply the death penalty to apostates anchored in Islamic law. On the contrary, he emphasises that administering capital punishment, as it is particularly formulated in tradition and as it was applied by Muḥammad as well as by the companions of the Prophet, is not a negotiable issue when it comes to the protection of society. On the other hand, however, he links certain conditions to imposing capital punishment for apostasy and emphasises that the execution of an apostate is not possible in every case and not without careful investigation. His moderation in relation to the punishment of apostasy thus lies in his conceding the possibility that in certain cases an apostate is not to be executed if it is a matter of the forum internum, the innermost, non-justiciable area of freedom of thought and of conscience of an individual which is not visible to the outside.

Abū l-ʿAlā Maudūdī (1903–1979) was one of the most influential Islamic intellectuals, ideologues, and theologians up to the present today. His work on the topic of apostasy, *murtadd ki sazā islāmī qānūn mēn* (*The Punishment of the apostate according to Islamic Law*) (Maudūdī 1942/43), is dedicated to addressing the question of the maintenance and the secure continuation of the Islamic state in which Islam is meant to be the sole identity and foundation of the legal system and legislation. This Islamic state is, from Maudūdī’s point of view, threatened from the outside – above all through the invasion of Western powers. However, it is also threatened by the ideologies which materialism, and godlessness propagate. However, the community of the “protected persons” (Arabic: *ḍimmī*) does not present a danger if its members remain within their own limited area where they are free to move. But the case of dealing with apostates is essentially different: These individuals have decided to rebel. For that reason, the topic of apostasy for Maudūdī is in the first instance not a religious or a theological question but rather, above all, a politically motivated, deliberate attack on the Islamic state. Given, Maudūdī’s thinking, the apostate is dangerous and a pathogenous bacillus that spreads its “poison” thus inducing the destruction of society. Therefore, the apostate is not to be tolerated; within a period of one year, the apostate either has to be forced to migrate or be executed. The apostate, from Maudūdī’s point of view, has given up his nationality and can claim no rights – also not the right to life. Maudūdī made no difference between the quiet doubter and the open propagandist with newly won views. He did not differentiate between personal freedom of belief and publicly practicing religious freedom and religious adherence.

7 Conclusions

The large majority of Muslims do not hold the opinion that the Koran explicitly demands the application of the death penalty for apostasy, whereas at the same time the *sunna* reports traditions of Muhammad where he is said to have condemned apostates to death. Sharia law makes the death penalty obligatory for those who voluntarily and willfully leave their religion, although capital punishment seems to have been applied only in rare cases throughout history. Today, there are three major positions among Muslim theologians: One minority consists of those who are openly advocating complete religious freedom, while another minority consists of those who deem the death penalty necessary under all circumstances. A majority are those who advocate religious freedom of the inner heart but forbid open propagation of changing or leaving Islam. In cases where converts or “liberals” are threatened with violence, the power factor seems to overlap with the theological discussion.

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PART 2
Case Studies



Leaving Hinduism: Deconversion as Liberation

Michael Stausberg

1 Introduction

Leaving one religion, and in its place committing to another one, tends to appear as two sides of one coin, or as two steps in one process. Conversion narratives typically emphasise dissatisfaction with and imperfections of the former and the superiority of the new religion respectively. Another model of conversion is the adoption of a religious self-assertion by previously religiously uncommitted persons who discover religion and a religion; or, alternatively, the dissolution of a religious identification and the adoption of a non-religious one; for example, former religious believers now profess new identities as humanists or atheists. *Leaving religion*, however, is not the same as *leaving a religion*.

In this chapter, we will consider the case of a public person who decided to leave Hinduism, the religion he was thrown into by birth in colonial Western India. The decision to leave this religion, however, did not emerge in the process of converting to another religion, nor did he leave religion altogether – in fact, he did not profess to be non- or anti-religious but he found religion useful and necessary. Apparently, he was not tempted to create a religion of his own making. Instead he proceeded to adopt some already extant religion, but this protracted or retarded quest for the religion he would adopt went on over several decades. The religion he and several hundred thousand of his followers adopted eventually, Buddhism, was being remade in the process. The person in question was Dr. Bhimrao Ambedkar (1891–1956), often hailed as the ‘father of the Indian constitution’.

2 Previous Research and Empirical Material (Biographical Outline)

The life and work of Ambedkar has previously been discussed, for example, by Djananjay Keer (1971), Gauri Viswanathan (1998), Johannes Beltz (2005), Cristophe Jaffrelot (2005), and Pandey Gyanendra (2006), from historical, anthropological, sociological and political science perspectives (see also Jondhale and Beltz 2005). This chapter presents a biographical sketch of Ambedkar

[based on Keer (1971); Jaffrelot (2005); Zelliott (2013)] and analyses the background and reasons for his decision to leave Hinduism, and his adoption of a new religious identity. As primary sources, the chapter draws on his writings and speeches.

Bhimrao Ambedkar was born into a Mahar family. The West Indian Mahars were treated as what was then called “untouchables,” a word that many today seek to avoid as it carries stigma. An alternative word for untouchables is *dalit* (Marathi for “broken men”), a term introduced by Ambedkar and popularised by his later followers. In the writings that concern us here, however, Ambedkar spoke of untouchables, untouchability, or depressed classes – and this is the terminology used here when speaking about Ambedkar, to capture the stigma he sought to get rid of.

In later texts, Ambedkar recalls that growing up as an untouchable imposed “certain indignities and discriminations” (Ambedkar 2002: 52). Here are some of the examples he provides: in school he had to sit in a corner by himself, where he sat on a piece of gunny cloth that the servant employed to cleanse the room would not touch. When thirsty, he could not get out and tap water, but the water had to be tapped for him by a specific worker, so that he would go thirsty if that person was not around. No washer would wash the clothes of an untouchable, nor would any barber shave or cut his hair. While this was an unquestioned part of their everyday life-world, the exceptionality of these rules dawned on him during a nightmarish trip to visit his father (who worked in a different village), where he and his relatives was denied decent transportation, assistance, and water.

During British rule, relatively many Mahars were recruited into the army. This opened opportunities for education. Ambedkar’s father was the instructor of a local military school. It seems that Ambedkar was a brilliant student, so much so that his teacher let him adopt his own surname instead of his previous one (Ambadve, after his village of origin in Bombay Province) (Zelliott 2013: 67). In 1904, the family moved to Bombay (Mumbai), where Ambedkar could advance his education. In 1912, he completed his B.A. from Elphinstone College with Persian and English as his subjects. Even though this college was a government school, given his background he was denied the opportunity to study Sanskrit. Sayajirao Gaekwad III (born Shrimant Gopalrao Gaekwad), the reform-minded Maharaja of Baroda State, awarded him a scholarship that allowed him to go abroad and study at Columbia University. There he studied with the philosopher John Dewey, the economist Edwin Seligman and the social anthropologist Alexander Goldenweiser, a student of Franz Boas. One of his student papers – a critical investigation of caste – was subsequently published in an Indian academic periodical. In line with Boasian theory, Ambedkar did not view caste as a result of race but theorised caste as a cultural

phenomenon (Cháirez-Garza 2018). At Columbia, he completed an M.A. degree and was awarded a Ph.D. He continued his education in London for one year. In 1917, however, having returned to India, it was impossible for him to work in the administration in Baroda since his colleagues refused any form of collaboration and intercourse with an untouchable. In Bombay, he became a political activist and a journalist. In 1920 he returned to London to complete his education, obtaining an M.Sc. (1922) and a D.Sc. (1923). He was one of the best educated Indians of his time, and the best educated untouchable ever.

In 1922, Ambedkar was called to the Bar at Grey's Inn, London. This opened a professional mainstay for him after his return to India in 1923. Henceforth, he practiced law for a living, and for some periods of his life he taught law. The knowledge of law was an important asset for him in his manifold campaigns for the emancipation of the untouchables from their oppression. Among of his strategies of emancipation were the introduction of new laws, the revision of extant legislation, or opposition to proposed bills. After the war, Ambedkar's expertise as a lawyer qualified him to become, in 1947, India's first law minister and to draft the constitution of independent India that was adopted in 1949. Paragraph 17 of this constitution formally abolished untouchability and turned the practice of it into a crime:

“Untouchability” is abolished and its practice in any form is forbidden. The enforcement of any disability arising out of “Untouchability” shall be an offence punishable in accordance with law.¹

Unfortunately, this legal stipulation, which does not define “untouchability,” did not uproot the resilience of the concept and the practice.² This was one factor, it could seem, that led Ambedkar to take a dramatic religious step towards the end of his life.

Over the decades Ambedkar unfolded various activities aiming to set the untouchables free from the bonds of discrimination. Among other activities, he acted as speaker, author, publisher, organiser, politician, educator. His career as an activist went along with a concern for theory; Ambedkar was a major sociologist and theoretician of caste and democracy – and as we shall see, a theoretician of religion.

¹ https://www.india.gov.in/sites/upload_files/npi/files/coi_part_full.pdf (accessed 03/07/2019).

² Even in the present age, Dalits continue to be oppressed, killed, gang-raped, amputated, paraded naked, forced to eat shit, boycotted; their land is seized and access to drinking water is denied to them. The legal system systematically defines caste as a factor out of the picture when dealing with cases of violence against Dalits (see Roy in Ambedkar 2014b).

In modern Indian history Ambedkar is often recalled as an antagonist of Mohandas (Mahatma) Gandhi.³ Their relationship turned into open conflict in 1931, at the Second Round Table Conference in London. These conferences were a platform organised by the British government to discuss matters of constitutional reforms in India. Gandhi had negotiated to be the sole representative of the Indian National Congress, and Ambedkar was one of two appointed representatives of the so-called Depressed Classes. Their dispute escalated during the following year over the matter of a separate electorate for the Depressed Classes. To Ambedkar, denying the untouchables a separate electorate would place them under the dominion of the caste-Hindus, while Gandhi feared a split within the Hindu electorate. The debate by implication centered on whether the untouchables were a part of Hinduism or Hindu society, or whether the segregation and discrimination imposed on the untouchables by the caste-Hindus made them a separate entity; Gandhi held the former view, Ambedkar the latter. This division would resurface in the issue of deconversion. For the next fifteen years or so, Ambedkar and Gandhi occasionally engaged in controversy. As late as in 1946, Ambedkar published a book with the title *What Congress and Gandhi have done to the Untouchables*, where he dismisses Gandhi's economics and his view of society. One issue in their dispute was the nature and function of Hinduism. While Gandhi was a major apologist of Hinduism – or his interpretation thereof –, Ambedkar came to reject Hinduism as “a veritable chamber of horrors,” as he put in it this book.

The relationships of untouchables to Hinduism was at the same time one of inclusion and one of exclusion. On this view, by imposing a social order based on its ideological structure, Hinduism imprisons the untouchables within a cage of rules and regulations. At the same time, these same rules and regulations exclude them from basic rights and facilities, including religious ones. For example, untouchables were not admitted to Hindu temples. Accordingly, campaigns in which Ambedkar played a part dealt with one of the foundational texts for Hindu law and the problem of temple entrance.

These two issues – the ideological basis and the practice of exclusion – were targeted since around 1927. At a conference that Ambedkar opened in December 1927, a resolution was declared that affirmed the rights of the untouchables and that condemned Hindu scriptures, which authorise social inequality. There, Ambedkar took the radical step of burning the *Manusmriti* publicly, in full sight of the participants. In the month prior to this act he had studied

3 See Coward (2003) for their respective positions on untouchability.

the *Manusmriti* with a pundit and a school-teacher. In an Indian context this act is unprecedented and it came as a shock to many (including supporters of his agenda). The idea for this had not originally been his. The conference passed four resolutions: “a declaration of human rights, a repudiation of the *Manismriti*, a demand that Hindu society be reduced to one class, and an advocacy that the priestly profession be open to all.” (Zelliot 2013: 81)

While this has been an isolated act, in November 1927 Ambedkar let himself get involved in a movement that demanded entry to Hindu temples in different locations in the Bombay Presidency. Not all of these campaigns were planned properly, and they failed in their aim to change temple policies. Authorities would rather close off temples to all worshippers than admitting untouchables. Following a Gandhian terminology and pattern these campaigns were called *satyagraha*. They used Gandhian symbolism (Rao 2009: 100), but they were not instigated by Gandhi, and Gandhi initially neither endorsed nor supported them. At a mass gathering in 1930 in the campaign to enter the Kalaram temple in Nasik, Ambedkar told the participants (in Marathi):

Today's satyagraha is a challenge to the Hindu mind. Are the Hindus ready to consider us men or not; we will discover this today ... We know that the god in the temple is of stone. Darshan and puja will not solve our problems. But we will start out, and try to make a change in the minds of the Hindus.

ZELLIOT 2013: 88

This statement makes it clear that the campaign does not primarily focus on religion; it does not aim at benefitting from the presumed religious efficacy of the temple. Even though withholding this religious benefit was perceived as unjust, Ambedkar expressed the conviction that religion will not resolve the problems of the untouchables – the temple access was not meant to provide supernatural intervention; he even went so far as to exclude this possibility by proclaiming the temple as dead (“the god ... is of stone”). For Ambedkar, the temple campaign was not a matter of faith. The *satyagraha* was more a matter of establishing his leadership, making moral claims and mobilising the untouchables behind a common cause that was able to stir emotions. The unfolding of the campaigns showed the reluctance of the government and the Indian National Congress to change the practice of exclusion. The *satyagraha* was a provocative social experiment. Its ultimate aim was to initiate a change in the mindset of the Hindus; without such a change in collective psychology, Ambedkar thought, there was no chance of the untouchables ever to become accepted as equal.

In 1934, Ambedkar stated (in Marathi):

I would advise the Depressed Class to insist upon a complete overhauling of Hindu society and Hindu theology before they consent to become an integral part of Hindu Society. I started temple entry Satyagraha only because it was the best way of energising the Depressed Class and making them conscious of their position.

ZELLIOT 2013: 90

The temple entry campaign was an exercise in creating a class conscience. Even if it would have achieved its apparent goal of allowing untouchables to enter Hindu temples and there to worship Hindu deities, this would have only been a first and modest step. For achieving recognition and respect, liberty, equality and integration of the untouchables – namely the disintegration of the social category and categorisation of untouchability – would require a complete transformation of Hinduism in its ideological, social, political, and economic dimensions.

Ambedkar's support of the temple entry movement slackened since 1932/1933, when Gandhi started to support this cause and when it became a more widely shared goal – bringing with it the threat that it was once again caste-Hindus who would define Hinduism. For Ambedkar temple entrance really was a side issue; education, employment and economic advance were much more important. He also suspected that temple entrance gave undue symbolic prestige to high-caste and orthodox Hinduism (Diks 2001: 324). Rather than reforming Hinduism, Ambedkar came to reject it altogether – and consequently he ceased to support the temple entrance movement.

In May 1935, Ambedkar's first wife (Ramabai) passed away. In June he was appointed Principal of the Government Law College in Bombay. In October he spoke at the Bombay Presidency Depressed Classes Conference in Yeola, a small town some 70 kilometers East of Nasik. In this speech, which lasted for an hour and a half, in front of some ten thousand listeners he said (in Marathi):

Because we have the misfortune of calling ourselves Hindus, we are treated thus. If we were members of another Faith, none would dare treat us such. Choose any religion which gives you equality of status and treatment. We shall repair our mistake now. I had the misfortune of being born with the stigma of an Untouchable. However, it is not my fault; but I will not die a Hindu, for that it is in my power.

ZELLIOT 2013: 147

There is an interesting shift from the plural to the singular in this passage. Ambedkar first addresses a collective entity (“we”), which suffers injustice just for being “called” Hindus and being treated according to this nominal classification. This collective entity is about to assume agency, and this implies the acceptance of responsibility: that others treat the untouchables as they do is a result of the untouchables’ own “mistake,” namely that they call themselves Hindus. Before the untouchables collective assume responsibility and agency, however, Ambedkar as an individual (“I”) takes this step of interrupting the chain of events that leads from birth to death; while he could not help being thrown into the world as an untouchable, he can achieve an exit from this unfortunate trajectory. By way of example, Ambedkar made it clear that leaving Hinduism was an individual choice and decision. That he “will not die a Hindu” announces his step of leaving Hinduism; this announcement is ambiguous: did he declare an intention (that does not need to be executed) or did he execute a performative act?

The announcement itself was scandalous – and Gandhi was scandalised. He called Ambedkar’s speech “unbelievable” and denied the feasibility or possibility of deliberately changing one’s religion: “religion is not like a house or a cloak which can be changed at will” (Zelliot 2013: 148). Ambedkar responded by saying that his was “a deeply deliberated decision”. The only uncertainty was: “What religion we shall belong to we have not yet decided”. Ambedkar also made it clear that this was his individual decision and as such it was independent on what his followers would do:

I have made up my mind to change my religion. I do not care if the masses do not come. It is for them to decide ...

ZELLIOT 2013: 148

His Yeola speech did not remain an isolated incident. At the Poona Depressed Classes Youth Conference in January 1936 Ambedkar once again confirmed his resolve to leave Hinduism (Zelliot 2013: 150). In May 1936 this was followed by further public pronouncements. At the All-Bombay District Mahar Conference he composed a kind of litany in Marathi verse, which was printed under the title *Mukti Kon Pathe?* (“What Path to Liberation?”) The first verses read as follows (in Eleanor Zelliot’s English translation [2013: 154]):

Religion is for man; man is not for religion.
 If you want to gain humanity (*manuski*), change your religion.
 If you want to create a cooperating society, change your religion.
 If you want power, change religion.

If you want equality, change your religion.

If you want independence, change your religion.

If you want to make the world in which you live happy, change your religion.

The first verse – a famous Ambedkar-quote – denaturalises and demataphysises religion. If religion becomes a good for humanity and humanity becomes the subject rather than the object of religion, changing religion becomes an option. It even becomes a legitimate option if this serves positive aims, goals and values, such as the ones listed in the following verses (humanity, sociality, empowerment, equality, independence, happiness). The poem does not recommend any given alternative religion, but it presents a severe critique of Hinduism as a religion; even though Hinduism is not mentioned, everyone would know that this was the religion addressed as “a religion” in the following verses phrased as questions:

Why should you remain in a religion that does not let you enter its temples?

Why should you remain in a religion that does not give you water to drink?

Why should you remain in a religion that does not let you become educated?

...

Ambedkar goes one step further by denying that such a religion – that is, Hinduism – is a religion at all:

That religion which forbids humanitarian behavior between man and man is not a religion but a reckless penalty.

That religion which regards the recognition of man's humanity a sin is not a religion but a sickness.

That religion which allows one to touch a foul animal but not a man is not a religion but a madness.

...

In May 1936 Ambedkar was invited to give a speech at a forum for social reforms in Lahore. When this organisation asked Ambedkar to omit certain passages of his speech that it deemed too radical, Ambedkar decided not to give the speech. Instead, he had it printed as a booklet under the title *The Annihilation of Caste*, which has become one of his most well-known and often reprinted

works (annotated and critical edition: Ambedkar 2014b). Ambedkar shows that caste, which divides humanity in different groups and puts these into a hierarchical order, is “a harmful institution” (Ambedkar 2002: 264; Ambedkar 2014b: 19) in economic terms, that it disrupts Hindu society because it prevents cooperation across the different castes and that it goes against the triad of liberty, equality and fraternity – guiding principles that he, together with justice, later came to enshrine in the preamble of the Constitution of India. Caste contributes to indifference and kills the public spirit. Ambedkar holds that caste is “a notion, ... a state of mind” (Ambedkar 2002: 289; Ambedkar 2014b: 51). Abolishing caste therefore requires a change of mindset. Ambedkar argues that caste can also be found in other religions, but that caste has a different status in Hinduism: it alone has imbued caste with an aura of “sacredness and divinity” (Ambedkar 2002: 291; Ambedkar 2014b: 53) and the status and fate of the Brahmins are tied to caste. For Ambedkar, caste is a fundamental part of Hinduism; Hindus “observe caste because they are deeply religious. In my view, what is wrong is their religion, which has inculcated the notion of caste.” (Ambedkar 2002: 289; Ambedkar 2014b: 51) This religion needs to be destroyed in order to abolish caste and its fateful consequences. Contrary to his other pronouncements, however, in this speech Ambedkar does not advocate leaving Hinduism, but of destroying parts of it: “The real remedy is to destroy the belief in the sanctity of the *Shastras*.” Or: “You must destroy the religion of the *Shrutis* and the *Smirtis*. Nothing else will avail.” (Ambedkar 2002: 290, 297f; Ambedkar 2014b: 51, 62) Consequently, in this speech, which was not directed to the Mahars, he outlines a program of how to remedy Hinduism. This version of Hinduism would be based on the Upanishads. This would not be a superficial repair but a complete transformation of its outlook. This would be to “kill Brahminism” and to “give a new doctrinal basis to your religion—a basis that will be in consonance with Liberty, Equality and Fraternity, in short, with Democracy.” (Ambedkar 2002: 301; Ambedkar 2014b: 66f) Note that he here speaks of “your religion,” as if this were no longer his own religion – or because he did not address his fellow Mahars. So, whereas he has already left Hinduism behind, for those who do not wish to take such a step, he outlines an alternative cure. Towards the end of the book, invoking John Dewey, he states:

... the Hindus must consider whether the time has not come for them to recognise that there is nothing fixed, nothing external, nothing *sanatan*; that everything is changing, that change is the law of life for individuals as well as for society.

AMBEDKAR 2002: 304; AMBEDKAR 2014b: 69

3 On the Necessity and Selection of (a) Religion

That Ambedkar announced his leaving Hinduism, did not mean that he wished to turn his back on religion. In *The Annihilation of Caste* Ambedkar distinguished between rules as prescriptions for doing things and principles as intellectual methods of judging things – and between a religion of rules and a religion of principles. For Ambedkar, Hinduism “is nothing but a multitude of commands and prohibitions” (298), a “legalised class-ethics” or “code of ordinances” (299). It is a religion of rules. But a religion of rules is not really a religion:

religion must mainly be a matter of principles only. It cannot be a matter of rules. The moment it degenerates into rules it ceases to be Religion, as it kills responsibility, which is the essence of a truly religious act.

AMBEDKAR 2002: 298

A religion of rules is not a religion, but law. Therefore, “there is nothing irreligious in working for the destruction of such a religion. Indeed I hold that it is your bounden duty to tear the mask, to remove the misrepresentation that is caused by misnaming this law as religion.” (Ambedkar 2002: 299) One difference between law and religion lies in the respective perception of changeability: while it is accepted that laws can be abolished, changed or amended, “the idea of religion is generally speaking not associated with the idea of change”; so, treating rules as if they were religion makes them immune to change (Ambedkar 2002: 299). As we have seen, this is precisely what Ambedkar wishes to challenge.

At the same time, he makes it clear: “While I condemn a Religion of Rules, I must not be understood to hold the opinion that there is no necessity for a religion.” (Ambedkar 2002: 300) He refers to a statement ascribed to Edmund Burke that “true religion is the foundation of society” (Ambedkar 2002: 300).

In the aftermath of the events of 1936 Ambedkar wrote a text, published in 1989 as “Away from the Hindus” in volume five of Ambedkar’s *Writings and Speeches* compiled by Vasant Moon (Ambedkar 2014a: 403–421; Ambedkar 2002: 219–238). In this text, Ambedkar provides a critical examination of four objections raised by opponents against deconversion such as Gandhi. (Ambedkar speaks of conversion, but deconversion seems more appropriate as it is the leaving of Hinduism that is in the focus, not the adoption of another religion.) These common objections are summarised as follows:

1. What can the Untouchables gain by conversion? Conversion can make no change in the status of the Untouchables.

2. All religions are true, all religions are good. To change religion is a futility.
3. The conversion of the Untouchables is political in its nature.
4. The conversion of the Untouchables is not genuine as it is not based on faith. (Ambedkar 2002: 219)

Ambedkar starts with the fourth objection and holds that, historically speaking, conversions “without any religious motive” (2002: 220) are the rule rather than the exception. Ambedkar here refers to mass conversions, not to individual ones, it seems. Since the (de)conversion of the Untouchables “would take place after full deliberation of the value of religion and the virtue of the different religions,” it actually “would be the first case in history of genuine conversion.” (221) The third objection is dismissed as he holds that (de)conversion would not automatically bring about political rights (221). As to the second objection Ambedkar concedes that all religions may in fact be alike “in that they all teach that the meaning of life is to be found in the pursuit of ‘good,’” but asserts that “religions are not alike in their answers to this question ‘What is good?’ In this they certainly differ”. (222) In this context, he appreciates and is critical of the comparative study of religion. On the one hand he acknowledges the relativising effect of methodological egalitarianism in the comparative study of religion:

The science of comparative religion has broken down the arrogant claims of all revealed religions that they alone are true and all others which are not the results of revelation are false. (222)

He acknowledges that by unmasking a distinction between true and false religion on the criteria of revelation as arbitrary and capricious “the science of comparative religion” has rendered a “great service ... to the cause of religion” (223). For Ambedkar the methodological critique of claims of religious superiority or supremacy has had a liberating effect, not from religion, but for religion.

On the other hand, Ambedkar voices the criticism that this attitude has had a relativising aspect that disenables the comparative study of religion to mark important differences:

But it must be said to the discredit of that science that it has created the general impression that all religions are good and there is no use and purpose in discriminating them. (223)

The critique of comparative religion as an academic discipline is twofold. First, there is its presumed uncritical pro-religious attitude, which fails to

acknowledge the negative aspects of religion – such as the disastrous effects of the Hindu caste ideology on the untouchables. Second, he believed that the methodological egalitarianism of comparative religion has blinded it to the need to make distinctions between religion based on values or principles.

In addressing the second objection to conversion, Ambedkar already starts addressing the nature of religion. Religion appears as an authority defining what is good and a “motive force for the promotion and spread of the ‘good’” (222). Hence, religion has an ambivalent power: if the aim (‘good’) in question is destructive – as the caste system in Hinduism – religion advances its spread, which in this case is a bad thing. If, however, religion would define a positive, constructive value (‘good’) religion would contribute to its advancement, which would be a good thing. To substantiate this ambivalence he refers to Cornelis Tiele (222).

Ambedkar’s discussion of the first objection to conversion results in a discussion of the function and purposes of religion. Unlike a Marxian reading that considers religion as an *Überbau* (superstructure) he finds it to be a kind of *Unterbau* (substructure or foundational structure) of society and societal life. In his discussion he cites a range of Western theoreticians such as Dewey, William Robertson Smith, Ernest Crawley, the sociologist Charles Ellwood and the psychologist William McDougall. (No Indian thinkers are cited.) Drawing on this body of theory, Ambedkar seeks to dismiss some common notions of religion: it was mistaken, for Ambedkar, “to think of religion as though it was supernatural” (223) – recall his refutation of the supernatural reality of deities in the stone of Hindu temples. Moreover, he thinks one should not “look upon religion as a matter which is individual, private and personal” (225). Instead, “the primary content of religion is social” (223), and “life and the preservation of life constitute the essence of religion” (224). Like language, religion “is social for the reason that either is essential for social life and the individual has to have it because without it he cannot participate in the life of the society.” (225) As an institution that centres on life and that allows participation in society – none being the case with Hinduism for the untouchables – religion operates like a kind of kinship community structure, which it enacts in shared ritual drinks and meals (235), a thought that seems to be inspired by Robertson Smith.

In his posthumously published work *The Buddha and his Dhamma* (critical edition: Ambedkar 2011) he rephrases his theory of religion as a theory of *dhamma*. As he states in the preface, Buddha’s *dhamma* is the best religion. “No religion can be compared to it” – a statement, which, ironically, is the result of his comparative studies. In a wording that can be read as a meta-paraphrase of Marx’s eleventh thesis on Feuerbach (“Philosophers have hitherto only *interpreted* the world in various ways; the point is to *change* it”), he writes: “The

purpose of Religion is to explain the origin of the world. The purpose of Dhamma is to reconstruct the world.“ (Ambedkar 2011: 171) *Dhamma* is religion minus its negative, supernatural and mythic aspects, plus its being “aboriginal” (2011: 168); that is, he believed it to have been the original religion of India and the untouchables. In his theory of *dhamma* he also drew on the notion of the “sacred,” which alone could guarantee that a moral order would not be transgressed (Durkheim 2011; see Omvedt 2003: 260).

As religion (or Dhamma) was, for Ambedkar, a precondition for the meaning and preservation of life, the determination and promotion of the good, social life and bonding of the individuals in a community, leaving religion never was an option. Leaving Hinduism was necessary in order to enable religion to do its work for the untouchables. Untouchables would need to “embrace the religion of the community whose kinship they seek.” (235) Which community, or which religion would that be?

Ambedkar’s announcement of leaving Hinduism opened the marketplace for religions. As much as he was determined to deconvert from Hinduism, he was not in a hurry to convert to another religion. As his personal library shows, he did read himself up on the comparative religion, investigating the different pros and cons of the main religious options available in India. Representatives of different religious communities got in touch with him, and he attended conferences of different religious groups. The archbishop of Canterbury even expressed concern about an auction of religions taking place in India (Jenkins 2007: 455).

Eventually, after World War II Ambedkar mainly concerned himself with Buddhism, even though the Indian branch of Buddhist Mahabodi Society, which was dominated by Bengali Brahmins, had in 1936 expressed shock at his decision to leave Hinduism (Omvedt 2003: 258f). In 1950 Ambedkar undertook tours to Sri Lanka, Burma, and Nepal to study lived Buddhism. Yet, it would take another six years until he and his second wife Savita – a medical doctor – in a mass ceremony in Nagpur presided over by a respected old Burmese Buddhist monk publicly recited the Three Refuges and the Five Precepts, thereby formally adopting Buddhism. He then led hundreds of thousands of his followers to take the same step. The next day, on October fifteenth, 1956, he gave a three-hour long speech in Marathi in which he recapitulated his religious trajectory and to defend his decision. “I feel as if I have been liberated from hell,” he said (Karunyakara 2002: 246). In one passage he reflects on the long timespan from deconversion to conversion:

... there are some who wonder why I have taken so long to take a decision. In regard to the change of religion. “What have you been doing all

these years?" They ask. The only reply I can give is this that question of religion is the most difficult and a very serious question. It is a matter of enormous responsibility ...

KARUNYAKARA 2002: 252

While Ambedkar does not mention this, we should not forget that he vowed not to die a Hindu. Was it merely an accident that he died less than two months after his conversion? Or did he feel death approaching? This remains a matter of speculation. In this speech, however, Ambedkar shares some results of his research in comparative religion. Here is one main finding, which for him speaks in favor of Buddhism:

The teachings of the Buddha are eternal but even then the Buddha did not proclaim them to be infallible. The religion of Buddha has the capacity to change over time. A quality which no other religion can claim to have.

KARUNYAKARA 2002: 253

Another comparative advantage that made Buddhism attractive to Ambedkar was its basis in reason and an "element of flexibility in it, which is not to be found in any other religion." (Karunyakara 2002: 255)

Ambedkar developed a scheme for a new form of Buddhism in India – he called it Navayana, as an alternative to Theravada and Hinayana. Ambedkar was not the first learned untouchable to adopt Buddhism, and his view of Buddhism shows continuities to earlier Buddhist revivalists such as the Tamil Iyothee Thass (1845–1914) and Laxmi Nasaru, whose book *The Essence of Buddhism* he republished with a preface in 1948 (Omvedt 2003: 2, 259; Jacobsen 2018: 69–71).⁴

For the present chapter, it is worth recalling that for the mass-conversion event as performed in Nagpur in October 1956 Ambedkar composed a declaration of faith comprising 22 articles that were to be recited by the new Buddhists. The first six of these are actually declarations of deconversion. The first four are statements of "I do not believe in," followed by a series of Hindu deities and avatars. The fifth article reads:

I believe that the idea that the Buddha is an *avatara* of Vishnu is false propaganda.

BELTZ 2005: 57; see OMVEDT 2003: 262 for a different translation

⁴ See Beltz (2005) for the development of Ambedkar-inspired Buddhism.

With this, Ambedkar apparently wanted to make sure that Hindu strategies of inclusivism would not be applied to re-domesticate the new Buddhism as a form of Hinduism. This is, after all, is a line of interpretation, which could seem to be warranted by the Constitution of India. An explanation (II) to paragraph 25 (“Right to Freedom of Religion”) reads as follows:

The reference to Hindus shall be construed as including a reference to persons professing the Sikh, Jaina or Buddhist religion, and the reference to Hindu religious institutions shall be construed accordingly.⁵

While this could be read to mean that Hinduism encompasses Sikhism, Jainism and Buddhism, an Ambedkarian reading would probably emphasise the equality of rights for the adherents of these religions. Moreover, the article acknowledges the religion-status for Sikhism, Jainism and Buddhism and does not refer to them as Hindu sects or the like.

4 Conclusion

Obviously, Ambedkar was not the first Hindu to leave his native religion. There is a long history of Hindu conversion to Islam, Sikhism and Christianity (see the chapter by Clemens Cavallin in this volume). Apart from individual decisions, these were often motivated and backed up by political circumstances. Yet, the case of Ambedkar is special in different respects. He acted as an individual but also on behalf of the Mahars and other groups of untouchables who he knew would follow him so that his step carried a great responsibility. As an untouchable he had a remarkable career, and through his exceptional international and interdisciplinary education he obtained a much broader horizon than any of his fellow untouchables. Ambedkar’s decision to leave Hinduism was based on his own life-experiences and on a penetrating theoretical analysis. His is a case where leaving a religion (not to be confused with leaving religion) was an existential step. It was preceded by unprecedented and provocative acts of burning a Hindu book. He conceived of leaving Hinduism as an act of liberation, but an incomplete one as long as a new religion to convert to had not been identified. This only happened shortly before his death, so that he would remain truthful to his vow of not dying as a Hindu. His study and quest, the time it took from public deconversion to public conversion, covered a period of 21 years. His decision was not based on a revelation or some kind

⁵ https://www.india.gov.in/sites/upload_files/npi/files/coi_part_full.pdf (accessed 03/07/2019).

of transformative experience, but “almost as a scientific project” (Viswanathan 1998: 134) based on critical comparative analysis. His decision was grounded in a post-supernaturalist social and functionalist theory of religion, in which there was no place for belief in deities and the miraculous. He sought to implement his ideas on the nature and function of religion by forming a new blueprint of religious praxis. Nowadays, this Buddhist religion is lived by over five million people in the Indian state of Maharashtra.

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Leaving Theravāda Buddhism in Myanmar

Niklas Foxeus

1 Introduction

This chapter examines narratives of Burmese Buddhists who have left the “traditional” Theravāda Buddhism in Burma, into which they were born, for the teachings – stamped “heretical” and illegal by the state – of a dissident Buddhist monk, Ashin Nyāna.

Since 1980, the State and monastic authorities have sought to regulate orthodox Theravāda Buddhism by means of the law. Monastic courts backed by the state have scrutinised cases charged with “heresy” (P. *adhamma*),¹ that is, teachings not considered to be in accordance with the Buddhist canon, a contested issue. Heresies are declared illegal and the dissemination of such teachings is punishable with imprisonment (see Tin Maung Maung Than 1993; Janaka Ashin and Crosby 2017). Apostasy and heresy tend to blend into one another, and the state may serve as an arbiter to decide the nature of the case (see Larsson 2018: 7, 20). From the state’s point of view, Ashin Nyāna and his followers represent a kind of disloyal Theravāda Buddhist apostates disseminating doctrines that deviate from orthodox Theravāda Buddhism and that pose a threat to the maintenance of the latter in society. From the perspective of Ashin Nyāna and his followers, Theravāda Buddhism represents a deviation from the original teaching of the Buddha, and they have therefore abandoned it and do no longer attribute authority to its monks. They do not regard their teaching as a branch of Theravāda Buddhism and therefore it cannot, in their view, be regarded as a “heresy.”²

The state-sanctioned form of Buddhism represents a collectivist and anti-secularising tendency, and likewise an enchanted form of religion, with a “traditional” cosmology comprising 31 levels, with heaven and hell, inhabited by gods, hell-beings, ghosts, and spirits.

1 In this chapter, “P.” is an abbreviation for Pāli. All foreign words are Burmese, unless otherwise indicated. The word “karma” is used instead of *kamma*, since the former has been adopted into English.

2 They tend to view Theravāda on a par with Mahāyāna Buddhism, both of which they regard as later corruptions of the pristine teaching of the Buddha.

Many of the “heresies” represent novel reinterpretations of Buddhism that have emerged in interplay with modernisation, Western science, and “Orientalist” views on “original” Buddhism. The development of doctrinal lay Buddhism began in the colonial period and continued in the post-independence period, with Buddhist monks disseminating intellectualised forms of Buddhism to the laypeople, especially simplified versions of insight meditation (P. *vipassanā*), teachings that had previously been reserved for the monks (Braun 2013; Houtman 1990).³

Ashin Nyāna (1938–) was ordained a Buddhist monk but was defrocked in 1983, whereupon he set up his own group called *mou-pyā-wāda*, “The Doctrine of the Sky-Blue [One].” At that time, he began wearing blue robes consisting of a shirt and baggy pants. His adherents still regard him as a monk exercising corresponding authority. Thereby he not only left the monastic community (P. *saṅgha*) but also Theravāda Buddhism. Ashin Nyāna claimed to have rediscovered the original teaching of the Buddha that preceded the emergence of the allegedly corrupt Theravāda Buddhism. He has served three prison sentences for having disseminated a “heretical” form of Buddhism. Last time was in 2010 and he was released in January 2016. Today, this is an underground, illegal new religious movement.

Ashin Nyāna’s teaching represents a secular form of Buddhism, acknowledging only one life; and rejecting the rebirth, Buddhist cosmology, and the metaphysical underpinnings of the teaching of karma. Moreover, it constitutes an intellectualised form of Buddhism informed by Western rationality and science. It is characterised by an individualist this-worldly orientation, and psychologisation, anti-ritualism, and scripturalism, with an emphasis on doctrines and ethics. In contrast to traditional Buddhism, it focuses on The Four Noble Truths and The Eightfold Path. His teaching is also known as *pyissouppān-kamma-wāda*, the “doctrine on present karma.” Rejecting the existence of spirits, gods and other supernatural beings, he explained them as “mind-creations” (*seitta-zā*). The cosmological levels of the Buddhist cosmology were, according to him, mere symbols for mental states. Most importantly, he reinterpreted Buddhist doctrines and simplified them so that they could serve as a practical technology for resolving everyday problems for the Buddhist laypeople, including marriage and business problems. In this teaching, most of the traditional Theravāda Buddhist practices and rituals for the laypeople are abandoned, including meditation, merit-making rituals, giving alms to monks, and presenting offerings to Buddha statues.

3 For a broader depiction of Burmese Buddhism and its history, see Foxeus 2016.

Based on fieldwork in Myanmar, the aim of this chapter is to – using various theoretical and analytical frameworks – investigate interlinked deconversion and conversion narratives of my informants divided into three different groups, based on their attitudes (secular, devotional or spiritual seekers) and the kind of Buddhist practice in which they were mainly engaged before converting.

2 Previous Research and Empirical Material

As for previous research on deconversion and conversion in Myanmar, it has mostly been concerned with cases between Buddhism, Christianity and Islam (Tint Lwin 1997; Charney 2006; Ikeya 2012). To my knowledge, there are not yet any case studies in any of these fields.

The words “apostasy” and “defection” may carry negative connotations, implying a blaming the individual for break of loyalty (Streib et al. 2009: 17). The term “deconversion,” which refers to a disaffiliation process, expresses, Streib et al argue (2009, 17), less prejudice and it suggests that deconversion is as legitimate as conversion. Earlier scholarship on conversion was shaped by Protestant subjectivist notions of conversion as sudden and privileged interior states. Today it is mainly understood as a gradual process taking place over an extended time, and the subjective orientation is expanded by including other themes, factors and contexts (see Rambo and Farhadian 2014; Streib et al. 2009, chap. 1). According to J.D. Barbour, the rise of deconversion has grown out of increasing individualism and religious pluralism in modernity (cited in Streib et al. 2009: 21). Although these changes have mainly been examined with regard to the West, that situation is, to some degree, comparable to Burma and other countries in Southeast Asia since the post-war period.

In 2014–2017, I conducted about 65 semi-structured interviews with Ashin Nyāna’s followers, mainly in Upper Burma but also in Lower Burma. Since Ashin Nyāna was arrested in 2010 and his teaching was declared to be “heretical” in 2011, the movement is formally illegal and has gone underground. Today, followers tend to keep their views to themselves and avoid discussing them in public. The movement consists of several informal social networks, many of which are unrelated to one another.

3 New Findings Focusing on “Leaving Religion”

Among Ashin Nyāna’s followers are found urban laypeople such as academics, teachers and other intellectuals; business people, some ex-communists,

student activists, military officers and politicians, but also some peasants and poor people from the lower middle-classes. The majority are men. Most of them had practiced “traditional” Burmese Theravāda Buddhism before they converted to Ashin Nyāna’s brand of Buddhism. They view his teaching as the “true” teaching of the Buddha.

The majority of my informants had undergone socialisation, in which Theravāda Buddhist notions and values, including its cosmology, became an integral part of their *habitus* and general taken for granted assumptions. One man had to attend Ashin Nyāna’s courses three times because he was so perplexed by this teaching. Most of my informants described a gradual deconversion process that developed over several years. Since Ashin Nyāna’s teaching represents an intellectualised form of Buddhism, many of them described cognitive discrepancy such as intellectual doubt (see Paloutzian 2005: 336–338) as reason for leaving Theravāda Buddhism. They read books or listened to sermons delivered by Ashin Nyāna, and doubts began to grow in some of them, and others were already in doubt.

This motif was sometimes combined with an explicit or implicit moral criticism of the monastic community. Some expressed resentment towards the monks for having deceived them; one referred to them as “rubbish” (*ahmaik*); a former student activist even said that Theravāda Buddhism had “enslaved them” (*kyun-pyu*). Such critique resembled ideology criticism viewing Theravāda Buddhism as representing a kind of Marxian “false consciousness” (compare Snow Machalek 1983: 267) sustained by the monks. In contrast to most Theravāda Buddhists, many followers do not give alms-food to the monks but instead give food to poor and needy people. In other cases, the intellectual doubt and moral criticism was combined with emotional suffering. Many said that Theravāda Buddhism brings about “expectations” (*ahmyaw*), for instance, for a better next rebirth, and “fear” (*akyauk*), for instance, to be reborn in hell. Due to one or several of these circumstances, they decided to leave Theravāda Buddhism.

These reasons for leaving Theravāda Buddhism correspond to several of the motives for deconversion in the scholarly literature, for instance, intellectual doubt, denial or disagreement with specific beliefs; moral criticism, and emotional suffering (Streib et al. (2009, 21–22). In a general sense, a “key element to any conversion or transformation process must be some element of doubt, pressure, or motivation to change” (Paloutzian 2005: 336). However, the deconversion or disaffiliation literature (Streib et al. 2009; Bromley 1998) does not seem to emphasise one aspect that was important in my material. The majority of my informants would not have left their religion if they had not have found a viable alternative. In their narratives, the deconversion process was intimately

intertwined with the conversion process. For that reason, the one cannot be separated from the other. This chapter is thus about leaving one religion for another.

In Burma, there is a rhetorical dichotomy between Buddhists who practice in a passive and in an active mode, respectively, and that has informed many of my informants. In the early post-independence period in Burma, many Buddhists discarded what is sometimes rather pejoratively called *mi-you-hpalā-bouddha-bhāthā*, a simple, ritualistic form of Buddhism inherited from their parents focused on merit-making. It is implied that it represents a passive mode, and that it is performed mechanically and without knowledge.⁴ Instead, they set out to find the “true” or “authentic” Buddhism that required commitment, knowledge, and intense practice (see Houtman 1990). For many Burmese at that time, it meant practicing a form of insight meditation that was marketed mainly by many monks (see Houtman 1990). Others became adherents of dissident monks, including Ashin Nyāna.

This dichotomy is reminiscent of the distinction between the active and the passive convert in the West, with those affiliated with new religious movements representing an “active, meaning-making subject” (Streib et al. 2009: 19–20). This is an individualistic trend in Burma emphasising agency and the converts as active subjects (see also Staples and Mauss 1987; Streib et al. 2009; Rambo and Farhadian 2014: 8). My informants can be divided into three groups depending on their preconversion practice: 1) those with a more secular orientation; 2) those practicing devotional Theravāda Buddhism; and 3) those having embarked on a spiritual quest to discover “true” Buddhism. All my informants represented the active mode, looking for alternatives to the passive mode of religiosity, but for different reasons. Before conversion, they all (in the present sample) self-identified as Theravāda Buddhists. In the following, I will give some examples from these three groups.

The first group comprises people who had already acquired a secular world view, such as communists and other sceptics. After the communist movements died out in Burma by the end of the 1980s, some communists felt disoriented and sought to restore their former Buddhist identity. Others, including farmers, also had a secular world view, but still identified as Buddhists and seemed to look for an alternative interpretation of Buddhism that was more congruent with their worldview.

4 This kind of Buddhist practice is sometimes called “karma Buddhism” because it is a ritualistic, devotional form of Buddhist practice that is oriented towards improving one’s karma by performing merit-making activities, thereby hoping to achieve a better rebirth in the next life (see Spiro 1982; he uses the label “kammatic Buddhism”).

One man was 68 years old, a former communist leader, political activist and military officer. Today he is retired and runs a tea shop. “When I was 14 years old, I became a communist [—], a “non-religious person” (*bhāthā-me-thū*), and I abandoned Theravāda Buddhism.” This remained until 1988, at which time he relinquished communist ideology, but he still retains communist sympathies. While he was a military officer, he led military units in wars in the border regions⁵ and witnessed hundreds of people die. After he left the army in 1988, he felt traumatised by the wars and began drinking alcohol. He now returned to Theravāda Buddhism for solace and started to practice insight meditation. At this time, he also began believing in previous and future existences, and the cosmology. But, it seems, he was not entirely convinced. Doubts gnawed in the back of his mind.

In 2005, he heard about Ashin Nyāna for the first time, and he met him twice that year. During this period, he read a book written by him about “desire” (*P. tanhā*) and began to doubt the Theravāda Buddhist doctrine on that matter. According to the latter, he explained, all desire, even sexual desire for one’s wife and desire for good food, is *tanhā* and must be quenched. He did not find this convincing anymore. Ashin Nyāna taught that *tanhā* merely refers to wrongful desire, not desire as such. He became convinced that this constituted the Buddha’s true teaching. He also doubted the Theravāda teaching on previous and future existences and the teaching on karma, and now he realised that these were not taught by the Buddha. For this reason, he has stopped giving alms to the monks, and has even tried to persuade others from doing so. Moreover, in his view, communism is partly compatible with Ashin Nyāna’s teaching. He left Theravāda Buddhism the same year and became a follower of Ashin Nyāna.

The second group consists of people who converted to Ashin Nyāna’s teaching from devotional forms of Theravāda Buddhism. One woman was 47 years old who runs a shop. Before she converted, she had problems with everything in her life – her marriage and business. Her siblings were wealthy, but she was poor. Her parents and the monks had explained that her misery was caused by bad karma from previous existences. The monks discouraged her from making effort to gain success in her business, and from cultivating greed (*P. lobha*) because the latter would bring about bad karma. But, as a businesswoman, she explained, she does have some greed as she wants to make profit. Success, the monks explained, would come by itself. If she donated to the monks, she would acquire karmic merit and a better rebirth. However, she did not want to donate large sums of money. Because of her present misery, she thought she

5 This combination of loyalties was quite dangerous because the Burmese army fought against the communists at the time.

would be reborn in hell. She gave up her hope in improving her situation by her own effort. Due to her bad karma, she turned to Buddhist spirits with offerings, wishing for success in business, which however, was still not forthcoming.

Through some neighbours she learned about Ashin Nyāna in 2009, and read a couple of books during one year. Thereby, she came to realise that the Theravāda teachings were wrong – the teaching on previous and future existences, the teaching about karma, the cosmology, and so forth. Later Ashin Nyāna told her that she should make effort to be successful in business and cultivate “right greed.” Today she is a devout follower and has, she claimed, become a successful businesswoman. She gives far less donations nowadays. Instead she uses her profit for her family and business.

Another woman was 47 years old, runs her own business and became a follower of Ashin Nyāna in 2006, but she had heard about him already in 1982. Her business, she explained, is successful and she has become wealthy thanks to his teaching. As a Theravāda Buddhist, she had donated large sums of money to the monks. She gave more than she had and became poor. She also spent much money in vain on offerings to Buddhist spirits, saying, “Until 2006 I followed the traditional Theravāda Buddhism. My life wasn’t successful. Why not? [—] Due to bad karma in my previous life I wasn’t successful in my present life. That is what I believed.”

The monks had explained her poverty by her bad karma from previous existences, and the only way to improve her future condition was to give alms to the monks. Through Ashin Nyāna’s teaching she realised that her poverty was caused by her actions in this present life. She became interested in his explanation of the Eightfold Path. Previously, she had often attended sermons delivered by Theravāda monks who recited texts in Pāli that the audience could not understand, and they were not encouraged to practice that path. “But,” she said, “one must practice to have real experiences.” By contrast, Ashin Nyāna preached in Burmese and he emphasised the application of Buddhist teaching in their everyday lives. After having left Theravāda Buddhism, she felt liberated: “Without having to restrain myself and holding back anymore, I nowadays feel free and have found peace of mind.” Theravāda Buddhism had, in her experience, made her passive. Only after she became a follower of Ashin Nyāna, she became an active agent that could raise herself from poverty:

My business also became successful because I managed to work in a sound way. In the past, when I followed the teaching of the traditional Theravāda Buddhist monks, my business was not successful, and I became disappointed. They said that it was because of my bad karma from

previous existences. I wasted time and I was passive. Nowadays I always make effort [to improve my situation] because I have come to know Ashin Nyāna's teaching saying that one should make effort and be active. I'm always active and in a good mood.

Both these women sometimes give donations, mostly to poor and needy people, including some monks, but without expecting anything in return, such as a better rebirth, since they have discarded such beliefs.

The third group consists of spiritual seekers looking for an alternative to traditional Theravāda Buddhism, but without leaving the latter before finding the "true" teaching of the Buddha. One man was 41 years old and runs a workshop for electronics. In his youth, he was ordained a Buddhist novice and later a monk for a short period of time. Since then, he has been interested in religious matters, and has practiced Theravāda Buddhist insight meditation. Before he found Ashin Nyāna's teaching, he had also paid interest in the doctrines of other dissident monks. Being an avid reader of books about Buddhism, he was looking for answers, for instance, to questions regarding previous and future lives. He nourished some doubts.

In 2002, a follower of Ashin Nyāna left a cassette player at his workshop. When he was going to repair it, he found a cassette in it with a sermon of Ashin Nyāna about what will happen after death. Later the follower gave him books written by Ashin Nyāna. He came every day, and they went to tea shops discussing Buddhism until dawn. In 2004 he met Ashin Nyāna for the first time and listened to his sermons, but he did not immediately become a follower. Now he learned from him that the Buddha never taught about previous and future existences. Such questions were part of the ten questions that he left unanswered. The Theravāda monks in Burma, the adherent said, never speak about these unanswered questions. He came to realise that the teaching of rebirth is derived from Hinduism and was not preached by the Buddha; and that Theravāda Buddhism represents a false teaching, "The Buddhist teaching I know now is quite different from that. [Formerly,] I performed a variety of [Theravāda] Buddhist practices. But now I don't perform them anymore. None of them are concerned with the Buddha's teaching. Now I know that I must avoid them." Around six months after his first meeting with the monk, he became a devout follower.

Another man was 65 years old, runs a business, is a politician and became a follower in 2000. He was critical to the traditional Burmese Theravāda Buddhists who, he explained, tend to follow the instructions of the monks without knowing why and how they should practice, and without asking critical

questions.⁶ As a Buddhist, he wanted to learn more about doctrines and practices by reading and studying books about Buddhism, and listening to sermons delivered by Theravāda monks. He learned from them that whatever he does is *dukkha*, “suffering,” and that human existence is inherently suffering. He practiced insight mediation and breathing exercises (P. *ānāpāna*) at various insight meditation centres for three years. Although he sat cross-legged meditating for several hours a day, through which he achieved a temporary inner peace, as soon as he began working with his business, the spiritual joy (P. *sukha*) disappeared. A sense of disappointment aroused in him regarding Theravāda meditation.

In this period, around 1999, he heard about Ashin Nyāna and his opposite view that “the human existence is the noblest one.” He found this idea strange. Later he met an adherent of him who explained that his problem of the temporary inner peace, followed by worries and tensions (P. *soka*), was caused by the fact that he accepted it. Initially, he became sceptic but borrowed a DVD with a sermon delivered by Ashin Nyāna where he explained the technique of being “mindful of the causes” to mental tensions. By that means, one should search for these causes in present actions (karma), not in a previous life. Suffering, he now realised, is not inherent in the human existence as such, which the Theravāda monks had taught him, but is caused by one’s actions in the here and now in one’s present life. In this way, he managed to achieve lasting inner peace, not in a cross-legged position but in all everyday activities. At the same time, he became critical to the Theravāda Buddhist doctrine on karma and exemplified with farmers who wrongly believe that their misery is caused by karma from previous existences when, in fact, the government is the real cause. He became convinced by this teaching and abandoned Theravāda Buddhism and became a follower of Ashin Nyāna.

In the following, I will provide some tentative analyses of the interlinked deconversion and conversion narratives of my informants. To some extent, I will highlight the dynamics that may take place in the interplay between deconversion and conversion in their narratives. My informants recounted their deconversion from their position in the present, in which they had converted to Ashin Nyāna’s teaching. Such narratives may have been informed by a “biographical reconstruction” (Snow and Machalek 1983: 266–269), that is, “the past is reconstructed in light of the new meanings which emerge from one’s present status as a convert” (Staples and Mauss 1987: 135). The preconversion past tend to be depicted in negative light, as erratic and obscured by false views, and the

6 These were the passive Buddhists mentioned above.

present as an improvement and a discovery of the truth. This reconstruction may involve exaggerations and even fabrications (Snow and Machalek 1983: 267–268). Such narratives thus tend to serve as tacit justifications and support of the present. Hereby, the passive and active modes mentioned above constitute local, cultural “genres for self-construction” – the self as a cultural, discursive product (Bruner 1997: 147). Thereby, this dichotomy served as a lens through which some of my informants structured their narratives.

What changes in conversion is the “universe of discourse,” and is understood as a “radical change” conceptualised as “the displacement of one universe of discourse by another and its attendant grammar or rules for putting things together,” a kind of paradigm shift (Snow and Machalek 1983: 265–266).⁷ In this way, deconversion is biographical change moving out of a state of naïveté and taken-for-grantedness (Streib et al. 2009: 23). Traditional Burmese Theravāda Buddhism and Ashin Nyāna’s teaching represent diametrically opposite forms of Buddhism – enchanted and secular forms, respectively. The shift from one to the other thus represents an epistemic shift of a “universe of discourse.” However, such shift seems to have been most evident among those who had practiced the (allegedly passive) devotional forms of Theravāda Buddhism (the second group), as the difference was greater between these two versions of Buddhism.

Religious doubt, Paloutzian explains, may emerge as a result of crises, for instance, of efficacy. In that case, “life circumstances happen that are inconsistent with deeply held beliefs, wants, expectations” (2005: 336; see also Higgins 1987: 322). That was an intrinsic part of the narratives in the second group. Since the majority of the Buddhists in Burma are socialised into traditional Theravāda Buddhism, it is part of their ingrained *habitus*. If their misery is explained by representatives from such an “allegiant” religious organisation to which society attributes a high degree of legitimacy and moral authority, they tend to blame themselves, rather than the religion in question, if discrepancies occur between their efforts, expectations and results (see Bromley 1998: 147–148). However, as we saw in the narratives of the women, this discrepancy that was explained with reference to bad karma from previous existences by the monks brought about frustration and emotional suffering, which prepared the ground for the emergence of doubt and later deconversion and its attendant “spiritual transformation” (see Paloutzian 2005: 337).

7 It could be added that this cognitive approach should be supplemented by a consideration of the impact of emotions and the body. Many of my informants emphasised a shift in their behavior and emotional orientation.

In this way, these two women tended to depict their lives prior to conversion in a negative manner, as being filled by suffering, and to stress how their lives had improved after they had found the truth. They thus fit the pattern of shifting from the passive mode to an active one characterised by agency and empowerment seeking to embody the true teaching of the Buddha in their lives, even in their business activities. Their past was thus contrasted with the present in which they claimed to have found peace and become successful in business through Ashin Nyāna's teachings, thereby attributing success exclusively to themselves.⁸ These cases could be interpreted as "biographical reconstruction," in which "previously important events may be de-emphasised and less significant ones elevated to greater prominence" (Staples and Mauss 1987: 135). In other words, there may have been a tendency of over-emphasising preconversion hardships. As for the first woman, her shop, where I interviewed her, did not seem to be as flourishing as she tended to depict it. In this manner, a "crisis of purpose" can be followed by a "sense of purpose" after conversion (Paloutzian: 2005: 342). That perceived improvement is an important rhetoric strategy in conversion narratives. In these cases, loss of religious experiences (especially the second woman), implied moral criticism of the Buddhist monks and emotional suffering caused by their instructions, followed by doubt, as well as purely pragmatic, instrumental reasons, especially economic ones, were thus motives for leaving Theravāda Buddhism.

The epistemic shift was less radical for the secular people (the first group) who found an interpretation of Buddhism that harmonised with their worldview. Their deconversion process went faster, probably due to the fact that meaning systems change slowly (Paloutzian 2005: 339). The cognitive discrepancy between their secular worldview and Theravāda Buddhism caused some strain and intellectual doubt. They seemed to already have been looking for an alternative that would enable them to overcome that "cognitive dissonance" or "belief incompatibility" that may bring about tensions (see Higgins 1987: 320–321). For instance, the former communist's down-to-earth view on desire was incompatible with the ascetic one prescribed by Theravāda Buddhism.

Less discrepancy also characterised the spiritual seekers (the third group). They had already worked on various epistemes, such as insight meditation that, in contrast to ritualistic Theravāda Buddhism, is (like Ashin Nyāna's teaching) characterised by a high degree of rationality and emphasis on doctrines (see

⁸ This is a modern, individualistic, secular concept of agency and of an autonomous subject/self that contrasts with agency within Burmese Theravāda Buddhism (dependence on monks and spirits).

Houtman 1990).⁹ As Paloutzian (2005: 336–337) explains, doubt “set the process of questing in motion,” and coping with such doubt likewise set the stage for “spiritual transformation.” The two men were already in doubt regarding some teachings in Theravāda Buddhism and had set out to find the truth by critically examining various teachings. As one old follower said, those who become interested in Ashin Nyāna’s teaching have not received satisfying answers from Theravāda Buddhist monks. Those belonging to the first and third groups were thus mainly motivated by intellectual doubt for leaving Theravāda Buddhism. In contrast to the second group, their lives do not seem to have changed dramatically after conversion and were therefore less inclined to depict their preconversion past in a negative manner. The second man in the third group experienced some frustration regarding meditation, but it did not seem to develop into a crisis, although a loss of religious experience was another motive for him to convert. Furthermore, he sought to distance himself from those characterised by the passive mode, thereby drawing on the local model for self-construction.

All informants in this sample, moreover, were motivated by moral criticism to convert, at least from their present point of view. Directly or indirectly, they claimed to previously have been exposed to false teachings and been deceived by the Theravāda monks and others. They were now convinced that they had found the truth and had achieved peace of mind. This is a common rhetorical figure in biographical reconstruction and may serve to vindicate their decision to leave and shift loyalties. Some adherents even resembled born-again Protestants and were very eager to spread the “true” teaching of the Buddha. This intense fervour could also be explained by the radical discrepancy between Ashin Nyāna’s teachings and Burmese Theravāda Buddhism. It is less a difference in degree than in kind. The former communist even sought to persuade others from giving alms to the monks. Some viewed the monks as an unproductive burden for society and even as “rubbish,” and one man had even felt “enslaved” by Theravāda Buddhism.

Although some followers have ceased giving alms to the Theravāda monks, others still do so for social reasons, presumably because they want to avoid being treated as social outcasts or disloyal apostates (compare Larsson 2018). That behaviour is similar to many Muslims living in Mandalay area who, for similar reasons, also give alms to the monks. To some degree, these two tendencies correspond to the exit roles in deconversion that Streib et al. (2009: 26–28) refer to as “oppositional exit” and “integrating exit”; therewith it is here

⁹ However, insight meditation still operates within Theravāda’s “universe of discourse.”

also implied a retaining of an oppositional and accommodating attitude, respectively, after conversion.

4 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have investigated cases of interlinked deconversion and conversion among Buddhists in Burma who had left the state-supported Theravāda Buddhism for a version of Buddhism that almost represents its inversion. The reasons my informants, divided into three groups, articulated for leaving included loss of religious experiences, doubt; moral criticism; and emotional suffering, as outlined by Streib et al. (2009), as well as more pragmatic, economic reasons. They had become followers of a monk whose teaching they regarded as the “true” teaching of the Buddha but that was declared illegal and “heretical” by the state. The degree to which there was a radical change of the adherents’ “universe of discourse,” as well as the applicability of the concept of “biographical reconstruction,” varied between the three groups, and the highest degree could be observed among those who had practiced devotional Theravāda Buddhism. All three groups could retain a Buddhist identity, now reconstituted on the basis of a systematic alternative universe of Buddhist discourse, one that was better adapted to their lives mainly in urban modernising areas characterised by a growth of capitalism since the 1990s.

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Leaving Vipassana Meditation

Masoumeh Rahmani

1 Introduction

This chapter explores the disaffiliation narratives of former members of one of the most successful international Buddhist organisations – S.N. Goenka’s (1924–2013) Vipassana meditation movement. To date, Goenka’s network is the largest donor-funded Vipassana organisation with over 170 official, and over 130 non-official centers worldwide. These centers offer courses of varying durations (3–60 day), though the standard ten-day retreats mark one’s entry into this organisation, and hence they are the most frequently held and best attended (Dhamma 2017). Around the globe, Goenka’s courses are conducted more or less identically; they all follow the same guidelines and are taught via pre-recorded audio and video footage of Goenka.

Goenka’s teachings are theoretically underpinned by the basic Buddhist doctrines of the Four Noble Truths and his selective interpretation of the Buddhist text, *Satipaṭṭhana Sutta* in light of the Theravada text, *Abhidhamma* and “the Path of purification” (Rahmani and Pagis 2015). According to Goenka, human existence is characterised by suffering, resulting from attachment and aversion to things that are impermanent. He therefore follows the Buddhist premise that all phenomena are marked by suffering (*dukkha*), impermanence (*anicca*), and not-self (*anatta*). Goenka asserts that insight into the true nature of reality, can be gained through the observance of Buddha’s Noble Eightfold Path, which is divided into three sections: morality (*sila*), concentration (*samadhi*), and wisdom (*panna*). A standard ten-day course is structured meticulously in order to practice these three stages and to develop insight into the true nature of reality, as it is understood within the Theravada tradition (Pagis, 2010).

However, Goenka (1997: 12) argues that a mere intellectual understanding of these concepts and processes does not produce “real wisdom,” and therefore cannot liberate one from suffering; rather one must understand the true at an *experiential* and embodied level. Hence, students are advised to invest more time in meditation than reading or engaging in “useless intellectual games.” This epistemic strategy undergirds much of Goenka’s enterprise including his continuous effort to abstract his movement and its teachings from the category

of religion so as to promote the practice as a “rational,” “non-sectarian,” self-development “tool,” which is “universal” and “does not involve religious conversion.”

Finally, even though Goenka adopts a world-affirming and scientific language to transmit the “teachings of the Buddha” to his non-Buddhist audience, the ultimate goal of *nibbana* is never left behind in his discourses. In fact, Goenka (1997: 1) constantly vacillates between emphasising the practical benefits of Vipassana meditation (for example, clarity of mind) and promoting this practice as a transformative tool for achieving enlightenment. While this vacillation often led new students to question the purpose of the technique, there was no such ambivalence in the mind of committed meditators who undeniably pursued enlightenment. This chapter is primarily concerned with reporting the narratives of the latter group; those who constructed a life around this practice, indicated high levels of commitment during their involvement, and had the experience of attending a minimum of three ten-day courses and a maximum of twenty, ten-day courses.

2 Previous Research and Empirical Material

In comparison to the proliferation of books and doctoral dissertations theorising the transformative efficacy of meditation and the process of conversion to Buddhism, the process of exit from the Buddhist world-view is extremely underdeveloped and in dire of scholarly attention. Perhaps Tim Mapel’s (2007) study, “The Adjustment of Ex-Buddhist Monks to Life after Monastery” is the closest approximation to this topic. However, as the title suggest, Mapel’s work is primarily focused on the process of adjustment post exit (such as employment, building new relationships, developing intimacy, etc.) and does not explore disaffiliation in itself.¹ This gap in the literature is, in part, due to the temporal “newness” of Buddhism/Buddhist meditation in western context; it is also contingent to the positive sociopolitical discourse surrounding meditation, which, in comparison to the “cult controversies” of the 1960s–1970s, has not provoked a sense of (public) immediacy for this phenomenon to be investigated. Considering the diversity of Buddhist traditions/groups active in contemporary western societies and the rate at which disengagement occurs from these groups (particularly short-lived engagements), a wealth of unknown is

1 As an ex-monk himself, Mapel does not make any reference as to whether he or any of the five western ex-monks in his study had deconverted.

yet to be excavated and explored through interdisciplinary approaches (anthropology, gender studies, sociology, and psychology).

Following Wright and Ebaugh (1993: 120) I use the terms affiliation and disaffiliation to refer to the formal processes of joining and leaving an organisation; both terms are neutral to the processes of personal transformations prompted by one's the acceptance or rejection of a system of meaning. Conversely, the terms conversion and deconversion are used to delineate the gradual process of migration to a new universe of discourse (Snow and Machalek, 1983) and the *creation* of a new self-concept.² As "a system of common or social meanings" the universe of discourse provides the individual with necessary recourse for self-construction, reorientation towards world, and the interpretation of experiences, events, and the action of self and others.

This chapter prioritised a narrative analysis approach, and presents the findings in light of the linguistic and institutional features of the movement. The chapter is *not* concerned with speculating the cause of disengagement or with the role of factors (social, gender, etc.) in the disengagement process.

3 New Findings Focusing on "Leaving Religion"

The findings presented here are based on my ethnographic fieldwork and in-depth interviews with twenty-six current and former Vipassana meditators in New Zealand (Rahmani 2017). Participant recruitment took place over a period of two-years and involved theoretical and snowball sampling method. In what follows, I depict the contours of Vipassana disaffiliation narratives, and, based on the existing material, I suggest that deconversion is (relatively) a *rare* exit pattern from this movement.

Many facets of Vipassana disaffiliation narratives correspond with previous religious disengagement literature (Barbour 1994; Bromley 1998; Streib et al. 2011). Former Vipassana meditators commonly described the process of disaffiliation as a gradual, lengthy, and emotionally consuming. Their narrative plots contained description of major (or series of minor) events that eventually disturbed the practitioners' taken-for-granted assumptions, predominantly about the institutional aspects of the movement and/or the movement's leadership and other authoritative figures (Wright 2007). As a result, disaffiliates

² By using the term self and self-concept, I follow the largely unchanged footprints of Mead (1934 cited in Gecas 1982: 3) who sees the former not as an organism, but as a "reflexive phenomenon that develops in social interaction and is based on the social character of human language," and the latter as the "product" of this reflexive activity.

heavily relied on “moral criticism” (Barbour 1994: 51) as a rhetorical strategy to vindicate their decision to depart. For instance, one participant anchored his disaffiliation on the premise of feeling “deceived” into believing that the movement offered an “open teaching” yet gradually discovered the “hidden structures” within it, such as the demand of complete observance of *sila* including celibacy.

However, while “intellectual doubt” is often considered as one of the main ingredients in the disengagement process and its narrative³ (Barbour 1994; Fazzino 2014; Streib et al. 2011), former Vipassana meditators rarely harbored doubts about the movement’s ideologies, or used intellectual doubt as a rhetoric to plot their narratives. In fact, while some rendered the “discursive” components of the teachings problematic, almost all (except one: Luke) participants praised the “essence of the technique” as a “universal,” “indisputable,” “and “incredibly on the ball” for “understanding reality.” Instead, Vipassana disaffiliation narratives were marked by a sense of ambivalence indicating the ex-members’ (often ongoing) unequivocal trust in the transformative efficacy of the technique, and a certain doubt about *their own* abilities to achieve the desired/propagated goals.

The theme of “self-doubt” was therefore ubiquitous across the narratives of all those consulted for this research. In most instances, self-doubt seemed to be prompted by, and interlaced with, the movement’s ambiguous discourse surrounding progress. On a Vipassana course, students are constantly discouraged from developing expectations, yet are repeatedly reassured that “results are bound to come” and they will experience some sort of change if they practice the technique “properly” (Goenka 1997: 33). Students are told that progress cannot be measured by the *types* of sensations one experiences (subtle or gross); rather by the sense of “equanimity” they develop in response to their sensations (that is, how they handle their cravings and aversions) – which is itself difficult to measure (Pagis 2008: 174). Despite these assertions, there are various descriptions in Goenka’s instructions that are taken by practitioners as yardsticks such as descriptions of *bhanga*, which is the experience of total dissolution of the apparent solidity of the body into waves of pleasant sensations:

Kevin:⁴ I spent a lot of time doubting whether I’d ever be able to um correctly perform the technique (...) you know, you’re bound to be seeing

3 This may be related partially to the theological features of the traditions in which these studies were commonly grounded.

4 Pseudonyms are used to ensure the anonymity of those who requested it. I have also respected the decision of other participants who desired to be named.

some results, and really it's quite, quite subtle (...) I've heard people talking about it you know, "oh I've experience the bhanga or dissolution." Not me! [hah] Plus, you know, I was never really going for that, I knew I was a plonker (...) I kind of accepted it.

More profoundly, however, self-doubt reflected the ex-member's ambivalence about their progress towards enlightenment:

Damian: I had doubts about the teachings, not that it didn't work, but that there was a propaganda element within the teaching of retreats that made you believe you were near to a break through (...) and you thought (...) "I'm gonna get there, I'm gonna like um get enlightened" (...) and then on the last day he [Goenka] says "well it is a long path (...) maybe a lifetime path" (...) So I had doubt about my progress (...) I felt that in fact I was going backwards.

A thematic exploration of these case studies highlights two common disaffiliation trajectories, indicating two distinct ways in which former members resolved their doubts, plotted their disaffiliation narratives, and articulated their current self-concepts. These include (1) "drifters in samsara," and (2) "pursuers of the gateless gate." While these two trajectories are presented in juxtaposition to one another, they should *not* be construed as watertight categories; rather as a black and white reflection of the ex-members' (re)orientations towards enlightenment and the various positions they occupied along the traditional-modernist spectrum after exit. Note, however, that in addition to the enduring trace of the Buddhist language, all narratives shared one underlying similarity, which involved the giving up and letting go of an obsession with enlightenment.

The narratives of "drifters in samsara" indicated a movement towards a more traditional Theravada discourse with a conception of enlightenment as a transcendental reality and an impossibly distant ideal. They metaphorically perceived Vipassana meditation as a raft carrying them across the ocean of *samsara* towards the distant shore of *nibbana*. For many of them, the path to enlightenment was tied to the mastery of emotions and cravings (for example, sexual passion). As such, their self-doubt seemed entangled with a perceived inability to eliminate patterns of craving (eradicate *sankharas*). Take for instance, the following passage:

Damian: In my current life, there's an element of resignation... feeling that not much can change for me in the rest of my life... what Vipassana

showed me was that the process of transformation is very, very slow... and the karmic history of each consciousness in general is quite vast... so I feel a bit resigned to the shit parts of me (...) which in a funny way was a logical outcome of Vipassana, because it's all about acceptance (...) have you heard of Ram Dass? (...) he'd been in India, where he went extensively and he'd come back and he was on a bus and he saw some woman and he thought "hmm, she's pretty attractive" and then he had this self-reflection and he, he felt like "after all of this how come I haven't managed to, why haven't I been able to get past this? I still got this sort of sexual interest" (...) and it kind of echoes what I'm trying to say is that, you know you can do realms and realms of spiritual practice but (...) wind up struggling with the same old junk that you were struggling with when you were a teenager.

As this passage demonstrates, the narratives of the drifters in samsara indicated the participants' commitment to certain theological concepts (for example, reincarnation, karma, *sankhara*), which they directly used to rationalise abandoning the much-desired goal of enlightenment in the *present* life. Yet, while self-doubt or a perceived lack of self-mastery had evidently exhausted these individuals' enthusiasm, they nevertheless continued idealising enlightenment as a transcendental reality – it is just that the goal was postponed to *another life*.

An outstanding component of these narratives was enigmatic reports and side stories of "ghost visitations," and/or "past-life experiences," which the drifters in samsara often voluntarily launched into. A linguistics and thematic exploration of these narratives highlights the participants' need for a new conceptual framework to understand the self, and hence achieve a sense of self-acceptance. For instance, Damian (40s, former member) noted, "often when I felt negative, I realised that (...) some of my feelings are colored by visitations by ghosts and other psychic entities." These experiences led him to question the idea that "everything you feel is absolutely your responsibility." Yet, even though these individuals engaged in practices that may be considered unorthodox from Goenka's viewpoint (for example, looking for causal explanations, or rejecting individual responsibility), in most instances, participants' search for alternative frameworks did *not* land them outside the Buddhist tradition. In fact, participants who shared these narratives tended to draw from the *Jatakas* and argued that such perspectives are in perfect harmony with traditional Theravada conventions.

Conversely, the narratives of the "pursuers of the gateless gate" indicated a reorientation towards an understanding of enlightenment that affirmed the

ordinary life as a site for awakening. For these former Vipassana meditators, enlightenment did no longer represent an unattainable transcendental reality; rather something intrinsic and already existing. This point represented the pinnacle of their stories, and was regarded as a “highly liberating” realisation. In simple terms, these individuals resolved their uncertainties by replanting enlightenment within an immanent framework and effectively bringing this goal within reach. Such understandings correspond with modernist Zen – interpretations of D.T. Suzuki’s (1870–1966) legacy – and West Coast American interpretations of Vipassana pioneered by Jack Kornfield (1945–).

The pursuers of the gateless gate also stressed a new approach to meditation. They rendered the act (sitting) meditation “counterproductive” and a barrier to living life and having a “pulsate experience” of it. Instead, they took the meditation “off the cushion,” and aimed for implementing the insights gained from the practice into every aspect of the ordinary life. An outstanding linguistic feature of these narratives was the positive context in which “life” was spoken of. This characteristic should be interpreted in light of their biographical stories, which magnified an intense devotion to the practice (during involvement), due to which most developed resentment towards mundane aspects of life such as earning a living. In the most extreme scenario, after leaving Goenka’s movement, one participant (Kovido, 60s) ordained in the Thai Forest tradition of Ajahn Chah in order to make the pursue of enlightenment his full-time career:

Kovido: I spent years trying to get enlightened. You know and went through various teachers (...) and then kind of actually then coming back to this, the teaching of that, actually we’re ok as we are. You know. That actually, what the Buddha realised was that it’s something that is already here, it’s already existing (...) something to do with living fully you know, I’m a human being (...) this incarnation or other incarnations, it kind of makes sense (...) But it’s about living fully really and not suffer.

Contrary to the nuances of self-acceptance encountered in Damian’s narrative, which was predicated under the hegemony of Theravada Buddhism, the pursuers of the gateless gate rehearsed narratives reconstructed within what Gleig (2010) refers to as a “feminine” approach to Buddhism. Such an approach, according to Gleig (2010: 120), promotes a “feminine-associated appreciation of self-acceptance, interdependence and healing.” These shifts are most notably evident in Jack Kornfield’s (2000) innovations and reinterpretations of Vipassana, which explicitly condemns western practitioners’ tendencies to misuse Buddhist ideals to feed their harsh and unhealthy “inner-critic” (Kornfield

2000 cited in Gleig 2010: 119–121). Instead, Kornfield calls for a metaphorical reading of Buddhist enlightenment which he frames as “mature spirituality” or “embodied enlightenment,” which aims not to transcend the “pain of human life,” but to acknowledge and develop awareness, and to embody human wholeness in everyday life (cited in Gleig 2010: 121). The following passage from Karen’s (30s, former member) narrative encapsulates these points:

Karen: At that time of meditating four or five hours a day, I was thinking, that’s what gets you to nirvana (...) you sit on your bum until I don’t know what happens I don’t know, someone pops a party cracker, it’s done (...) from my experiences it’s [enlightenment] a total pile of bullshit sales pitch that is (...) enticing people to sit their asses on the cushion and donate their money to different corporations (...) once we step out of the way and actually allow ourselves to let go of the things we hold dear (...) once that’s gone, there only is, there’s only nirvana. Even the not seeing nirvana is nirvana (...) it’s so sad because it makes people think “I’m not good enough,” “I’m not there yet.”

The final prevalent characteristic of the narratives in this group is the theme of Perennialism – the idea that there is a shared essence, a mystical core or an ultimate reality behind the plurality of religious and philosophical traditions, which is often conceived as a non-dual absolute consciousness (Sharf, 2015: 477). Pursuers of the gateless gate insisted on presenting selves that are open and appreciative of religious diversity, knowing that they all teach and preach of the same underlying “essence.” This feature stood in sharp contrast to the language of the drifters in samsara who explicitly and implicitly demonstrated their commitment to the Theravada Buddhist perspective (for example, some expressed prejudice towards the Tibetan Mahayana traditions for its “circus-like” rituals, or rendered meditational methods “wishy-washy”).

In sharp juxtaposition to the two categories described above, the language of only one participant (Luke, 40s, former member) leaped outside of the movement’s (and the Buddhist) universe of discourse, and landed within a more secular, humanistic one. While a thorough exploration of this story merits its own chapter, it is important to demonstrate why this narrative warrants the “deconversion” label. As hinted above, even though some disaffiliates re-configured the concept of enlightenment, they did not completely reject the doctrine, or any other Buddhist concept of that matter. Against this backdrop, Luke confidently repudiated the technique on grounds of theory and practice using striking narrative asides such as stories about a fellow student who committed suicide, in parallel to his own experience and suffering: “I just became

suicidal within the first year of practice (...) and bizarrely I thought that going deeper into the practice was my solution to the problem.” In essence, Luke constructed a narrative that centralised on crisis and trauma, which he perceived to be the resultant of the meditational practice:

Luke: The goal [of the practice] is to fracture the psyche in some particular way and um uproot it. But there’s no particular place to put it (...) Where am I in all this? (...) the notions of “you don’t exist,” “oh there’s no I.” Well, practically speaking there is an “I” (...) practically speaking I do exist, and um, really as well (...) So I won’t go along with this notion of, “oh there’s no I.” Because, who’s suggesting there’s no I? It’s either Goenka or me suggesting that there’s no I.

Luke’s narrative, as a whole, emphasised the trauma caused by the displacement of self (self is detached from an embodied experience of the body), leading to alienation or a point where one does no longer identify with the body, emotions, sensations, and the mind. While this detached perspective is essential for understanding the true nature of the self (not-self), Luke used it as an anchoring point to position himself against the movement, legitimise his exit, and construct/represent a “rational” sense of self. On a linguistic level, Luke rejected the concept of not-self by posing an epistemological question – “who’s suggesting there is no I.” Luke sought to dismiss the concept of not-self – and by extension, Goenka – by proving the ontological existence of the self. To achieve this, Luke objectified the “self” (for example, “psyche”), subjected it to rational inquiry (elsewhere he added, “there is an I, and what does it do?”), and even sought to metaphorically ascribe locality to it (“no particular place to put it”). On a more implicit level, Luke rejected not-self, and reinforced the reality of self by performing the role of the Cartesian *cogito*.

This articulation is born out of two decades of retrospective meaning making and in-depth critical engagement with both insider and outsider literature – a typical phase of disengagement process that has been previously described as “paradigmatic work” (Fazzino 2014: 258). However, in this feature, Luke was not alone. Other disaffiliates in this research indicated a sudden appetite for intellectual knowledge, which commonly reflected their need for an alternative resource to construct selves post exit, and/or a mere desire to assess the movement’s claims and to locate it within the historical Buddhist context.

The abovementioned trends in Vipassana disaffiliation narratives (theme of self-doubt, the absence of serious intellectual disputes of the movement’s

beliefs and doctrine, and the infrequency of deconversion), support Bromley's (1998) tripartite model which links exit role types (I defectors, II whistle-blowers, and III apostates) and organisational structures (I allegiant, II contestant, and III subversive). In short, Bromley (1998) argues that the manner in which an individual leaves a NRM is largely determined by the level of tension between the organisation and the context of its host society.

Seen through the prism of Bromley's typology, the typical exit pattern from Goenka's Vipassana organisation could be considered as *defectors*, who leave *allegiant* organisations. According to Bromley (1998: 148), "The high level of legitimacy and moral rectitude attributed to allegiant organisations allows them to translate problems into organisational terms and categories that place primary responsibility for failure on the member." As a result, the defector may be left incapable of articulating grievances or validating claims without meaningful alternative resources (Bromley 1998: 147) and they do not pose a major threat to their former group; instead, they continue to respect, and reaffirm the organisations values and goals after exit – as it has been the case of most disaffiliates.

Regardless of the movement's fast-and-loose associations with Buddhism, which essentially allows it to relish the positive image of the tradition (peacefulness, direct link to the Buddha) and discard its other connotations, Vipassana in New Zealand had arguably enjoyed a certain degree of legitimacy from its early years of establishment (having been officially registered as an "educational institute" at the local council). More importantly, unlike other religious organisations (such as the Mormon church and The Family), Goenka's organisation has not been the target of any noteworthy scandals or lawsuits, which helps to preserve their respectable image globally. Furthermore, the movement arguably benefits from a low-tension relation with other religious organisations by the virtue of its proselytisation tactics (word of mouth), which makes the center accessible to specific demographics/subcultures, and *covert* to the more culturally/religiously conservative sectors of the population.

Not surprisingly, Goenka's organisation exerts control over disputes and has various interpersonal guidelines and strategies to prevent the spread of controversial ideas among members. According to a number of participants, potential "claimmakers" are placed on deferral lists and any behavior that may lead to the spread of disputes are said to cause "bad karma." Moreover, the centre in New Zealand is said to have supplemented a position of a social worker (presumably psychiatrist/psychologist) in order to control post-participation psychosomatic episodes. As shown, the organisation administrates the exit narrative, and enforces its emic categories that effectively places the failure on

the member – hence the significance of self-doubt. According to the Vipassana Teacher I interviewed, “If they stop, it’s not the technique that’s the problem, it’s the person.” Together, these structural features (linguistic and organisational) could be said to constrain the process of exit and its interpretive narrative in intricate ways.

Finally, while Bromley’s typology corresponds with the linguistic and institutional features of the movement, there does remain a point of departure. In reference to the defector role, Bromley (1998: 148) posits, “The absence of pre-existing oppositional groups significantly restricts the political and economical opportunity for a former member career.” I would argue that in the case of international Buddhist organisations (and possibly Buddhism in general), we are witnessing a diverging trend. That is, the positive discourse surrounding meditation – promoted by psychologists and channeled through various outlets – has created a fertile field for former Buddhists to venture in, and benefit from their ex-member identities. In addition to ex-monks’ apparent career choice in various subfields of psychology, the development of meditation apps and “Dhamma counseling” via Skype (for \$150 US per 50 minute) by ex-Buddhist monks are a case in point.

4 Conclusion

This chapter explored the narratives of individuals who departed from Goenka’s movement after years of intensive commitment. My analysis showed that in the vast majority of instances, disaffiliation did not result in total rejection of the movement’s doctrines; nor did it result in complete migration outside of its universe of discourse. I posit that consequential to Vipassana’s ideologies and linguistic strategies (including its epistemic ideology, claims of rationality, universality, and instrumentality, rejection of religious labels and categories, emphasise on self-development and individual autonomy, and more importantly, its propagation of meditation as a mean to end human suffering) Goenka’s movement occupies a low-tension niche within the cultural context of New Zealand, which itself *supports* these dispositions. As a result of this harmony, not only does the movement enforce its emic categories on exit narratives, but it also continues to influence the world of many of its former members. However, this chapter has primarily gazed at religious disengagement through the keyhole of language and was insensitive to other factors influencing this process. Future studies should cast a wider net in order to gain a more holistic understanding of exit from this tradition.

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Leaving Orthodox Judaism

David Belfon

1 Introduction

Leavetaking in Judaism is a deeply individual experience, very much informed by personal choices, power dynamics, as well as complex mechanics of identity change. My ongoing research study investigates the ways in which this process occurs in a Canadian context through interviews with twenty leavetakers from several varieties of Jewish observance in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA). Participants run the gamut of observant Judaism from the moderately-observant to highly-traditionalist former *haredim* (ultra-Orthodox). They range in age from early twenties to late forties, relating their experiences in an Orthodox community, the process of leaving, and their current lifestyle and self-identification. This chapter presents some preliminary findings of this work, wherein I have endeavored to give careful attention to the numerous identities that exist in-between and beyond the standard poles of observant Judaism—experiential categories that add a new dimension to studying leavetaking and disaffiliation.

There is no formal mechanism in place for leaving Judaism wholesale. According to longstanding Orthodox Jewish ethos (*Babylonian Talmud*, *Sanhedrin* 44a; *Yevamot* 47b), if a person is born Jewish or has undergone an authorised conversion into the tradition, they are considered Jewish in perpetuity. This standing remains immutable, regardless of their intent to leave the religion or if their community shuns them for divergent beliefs or activities. Renouncing religious beliefs does not correlate to leaving Judaism either, unlike in some Christian contexts (Roof and Hoge 1980), given that faith is not necessarily the core criterion for Jewish membership. Furthermore, there are no records of members “on the rolls” or officially “active,” aside from synagogue affiliations (Lazerwitz and Harrison 1980). After all, “[m]embership in the Jewish faith is conferred by birth, not belief” (Phillips 2010: 81). Arguing for the centrality of “ethno-apostasy” in religious leaving and switching, Phillips and Kelner contend that “in Jewish culture the boundaries between religion and other aspects of life are blurred, and native discourse defines piety more in terms of practice rather than belief” (2006: 509). As such, one can identify with Judaism’s cultural or ethnic dimensions aside from its spiritual and ritual elements (Troen

2016), informally leave any Jewish denomination, community, or even self-identify as a religious “none” (Pew Research Centre 2013)—while remaining technically Jewish.

As the most theologically-conservative and ritually-observant Jewish denominational stream, *haredism* has long been the subject of the majority of scholarly discussion on leavetaking in Judaism. Key issues including rituals, physical trappings, food and drink, gender relations, education, social interactions, and other matters of the everyday are governed by complex rules informed by religious authorities and the wider community within Orthodoxy. These entities enact and defend norms more fervently than other Jewish denominations that may be less intrinsically rigid and proscribed. The stakes, therefore, are arguably highest in leaving this highly-traditionalist environment. Socialisation is an especially powerful tool for cultivating Orthodox identities—especially among *haredim*—with schools training by instruction and modelling how to live a “Jewish” lifestyle. In this context, “Jewish” is a shorthand that treats strictly-Orthodox observance as normative Judaism and the vanguard for the only possibly legitimate practices and beliefs within the tradition, while emphasising chosenness both over non-Jews and less-observant Jews.

Leavetakers from these “Orthodoxies” conduct themselves in a manner contradicting the normative path of Torah observance and the religious lifestyle consistent with community standards. Experiences vary widely between and among the different denominational affiliations at issue, as well as concerning the various nuances of time and place that work to dictate different standards of orthodoxy and orthopraxy deemed as acceptable in a given community. Challenging community norms—especially concerning issues of orthopraxy and the legitimacy of community insularity—tend to be especially sensitive issues. Since community boundary maintenance against outside influences is considered imperative to continued Jewish endurance (Sarna 2004), a renunciation of community standards of comportment is of serious consequence to the entire community, and deviations can be quite public. When a religious change entails a shifting self-identification as a Jew, a complex series of events are set in motion that affect several crucial aspects of the leavetaker’s ethno-socio-cultural lives in addition to their spiritual change or personal identification as part of the religious group. Because reputation and familial standing are so prevalent in maintaining an observant Jewish family’s status within a community, a member’s decreased observance may impact the immediate family and even the wider religious community in an intricate system of corollaries.

Given that secular concerns deemed non-essential tend to be kept at a distance from strictly-Orthodox experience owing to a concern that much secular

culture is licentious or otherwise unpius, much of a leavetaker's experience in the city has been with Jewish institutions within a roughly-delineated enclave. The GTA being a region home to myriad religions and ethnicities can result in a leavetaker being thrust into an unfamiliar environment, with a limited practical and social toolkit with which to navigate their new experience. They may undertake this journey alone since leavetakers sometimes find themselves cut off from their families, friends and familiar strictly-Orthodox surroundings—the only experience many have known up to that point. A discontented individual may not express their concerns for fear of community reprisal—even from close friends and family given the powerful taboos associated with lessened observance, and so may opt instead to live a double-life instead of openly leaving (Fader 2017). For some individuals on the conservative side of Orthodoxy and especially leavetakers from *haredism*, it can be an all-or-nothing decision to stay or leave their community.

Leavetaking from observant Judaism is not, however, always as conspicuous as typical notions of an insider-outsider dichotomy assumes it to be. Every participant in my ongoing study of leavetakers from Judaism in the GTA articulated experiencing a gradual process of doubting and secretly transgressing taboos. The various gradations of clandestine deviation or leavetaking often-times involve a deeply complex struggle as the individual “tests the waters” secretly while living a double-life of sorts before “coming out,” weighing their inclination to leave often without an institutionalised support system to assist them. Normative observance is, therefore, a tall order given the high standards of personal piety that not everyone born into an observant family is willing or able to realise.

2 Previous Research and Empirical Material

Social scientific work on leavetaking from Judaism is a burgeoning field of study, but scholarship pertaining to this phenomenon in Canada is remarkably scarce, as are statistics of this invisible population. Only marginally-approximate data exists, such as *Starting a Conversation: A Pioneering Survey of Those Who Have Left the Orthodox Community* (Trencher 2016), which offers general figures for mainstream Orthodox leavetakers in the United States.

The vast majority of available research on leavetaking in Judaism is demographic and informed by etic sensibilities, focusing particularly on denominational switching in Judaism (Sands et al. 2006; Hartman and Hartman 1999; Lazerwitz 1995). By virtue of these researchers' particular framework emphasising trends and quantitative analytics, these publications articulate hypotheses

concerning experiential aspects that, in my view, merit qualitative scholarly consideration as well, especially since switching and decisive leavetaking are only roughly correlative to the experiences related by participants in my study.

Since Shaffir and Rockaway's 1987 work on *haredi* defection in Israel, several qualitative studies of Jewish leavetaking have emerged (Weiskopf 2016; Davidman 2014; Berger 2014; Topel 2012; Stadler 2009; Attia 2008; Davidman and Greil 2007; Winston 2005; Frankenthaler 2004; Herzbrun 1999) focusing on the diverse experiential aspects of this phenomenon. For example, Bar-Lev et al. (1997) addressed the culture-specific aspects of leavetaking from *haredism* in Israel, noting that the cultural, social, national, and ethnic dimensions of Judaism tend to persist in certain respects after leavetaking from the specifically religious and ritual dimensions, a finding that raises questions on how this might compare to leavetaking trajectories elsewhere. Other foci analyse data informed via Psychology (Weiskopf 2016) or address persons within a subculture different to the wider leavetaker community, as in Attia's (2008) work on adolescent ultra-Orthodox runaways.

An especially compelling manner of approaching leavetaking and disaffiliation has been considering how these phenomena parallel with increasing Jewish observance. Berger (2014) and Davidman and Greil (2007) have noted that studies dealing largely with "deconversion" from the Orthodoxy one joined and subsequently left are markedly different to the disaffiliation process in Judaism. Shaffir (1991) argues that in contrast to the socialisation process of becoming Orthodox—which for males occurs chiefly in and around the highly structured *yeshiva* (seminary) and synagogue experiences—a leavetaker's socialisation proceeds in the absence of any formalised supports or sympathetic and supportive subculture.

In my view, because there is no explicit conversion occurring in circumstances involving individuals who were born into an observant household, "deconversion" does not satisfactorily articulate their leavetaking trajectory, although some scholars of leavetaking in Judaism continue to favour "deconversion" nevertheless (Frankenthaler 2015, 2004). Rethinking "deconversion" compels researchers to study leavetaking as not simply an inversion of the oft-studied processes of religious conversion, but rather as its own distinct phenomenon. Davidman and Greil, following Beckford (1985), agree, adding that "[e]xit narratives also differ from conversion narratives in that exiters are less likely to be provided with readily available scripts with which they may tell their stories" (2007: 201). The distinct lack of formalised structural support or institutional guidance are products of the disaffiliation experience, as are a lack of readily available narrative types at their disposal—a very different experience to becoming Orthodox, where there are various supports and models

at one's disposal. It is, therefore, crucial to analyse the fullness of a leavetaking account to isolate issues concerning scripting, modelling, and creativity as these people navigate the complexities of role and identity change from, within, back to, and out of Orthodoxies without the limiting implications that tend to be associated with "deconversion."

Even with their distinctive ranges of inquiry, researchers contributing to the burgeoning field of studying leavetakers in Judaism rarely make a meaningful distinction between the leavetaking experiences of strictly *haredi* interlocutors and observant-but-not-*haredi* leavetakers. Berger acknowledges this lacuna in her study of *haredi* leavetakers in New York, suggesting that "[f]uture research may help clarify the dynamics and correlates of diversity in the struggle with the issue of identity among 'exiters'" (2014: 93). My work embraces this largely neglected issue via its broader inclusion criteria than those typically advanced in scholarship on Jewish leavetaking. The study takes into account the wider milieu of observant Judaism that engage in leavetaking which includes strictly ultra-Orthodox *haredim* in the GTA, as well as other religiously-conservative Jewish experiences. The resulting comparative data enables further insight into identity, trajectory and community alternatives at issue.

Concurrently to the nascent scholarly interest into leavetaking from Judaism, numerous memoirs from individual leavetakers from *haredism* have been published (Deen 2015; Deitsch 2015; Feldman 2014, 2012; Lax 2015; Vincent, 2014; Eichenstein 2013; Auslander 2007; Mann 2007). Although they lack scholarly rigor and are necessarily anecdotal, these accounts remain valuable cultural artifacts. They offer insight into the mechanics of leavetaking through a singular narrative, an essential window into post-hoc rationalisation and critical reflection of the leavetaking experience, expressed through the leavetaker's own words in an autobiographical sense while raising questions of how narrative varieties can facilitate or otherwise affect perceptions and audiences.

Several study interlocutors described becoming aware during our interview that they were only then working through their sense of identity vis-à-vis Judaism, developing their responses and rationalising their expressions in real time. False starts, slips of the tongue, code-switching, and vocalised idiosyncrasies are all significant data that lend insight into how a discussion on leavetaking can differ meaningfully from an edited, marketed, and published memoir. This analytical method is evocative of Stromberg's work on narratively constituted identity change in Evangelical conversion narratives (1993), where every utterance matters. For example, upon hearing about my familiarity with the GTA's varied Jewish landscape, participant "Ariel"¹ described his previous observance

1 All interviewees have been anonymised and have been assigned pseudonyms.

as being reflected through his institutional affiliations instead of claiming membership in any distinct Jewish denomination, noting only that he was “somewhere in the Orthodox camp” but that “lines were blurred.” He did so by detailing at length which specific educational institutions and synagogues he attended in the past and describing the types of Judaism these institutions represent in the community’s perception of Jewish piety in the city, utilising restricted code to articulate his former station without actually labeling it as a distinct denomination. At no point did Ariel spell this out to me—it became clear only when noticing that his expression omits traditional categories of denomination altogether. There is a palpable sense of the opacity of membership and observance here, largely governed by public opinion, personal resolve, and, in Ariel’s individual arc, Jewish institutional affiliations.

3 New Findings Focusing on “leaving religion”

Because the “something else” leavetakers come to identify with in the marketplace of potential identities will likely be substantially different to the lifestyle they had been accustomed to previously, these identity changes are especially ripe for scholarly analysis. The more oblique, circuitous, and difficult to classify identifications within the largely overlooked reaches of Orthodoxy make evident the vacillations that exist between the poles of ultra-Orthodoxy, Modern Orthodoxy, and beyond.

This wider discourse on the permeability of boundaries in observant Judaism reveals variable conceptions of changing religiosity from—and, somewhat unpredictably, sometimes still within—observant Judaism, from decisive leavetaking to break-taking and eventual circling back, along the spectrum encountering the different ways in which a leavetaker re-evaluates their positioning in the tradition while presenting as a leavetaker nevertheless. A key question of this study pertains to the mechanisms through which leavetaking and disaffiliation can occur while the individual remains a self-described Jew living within some atypical conception of the Jewish milieu. As Taylor argues (2007), notions of binary membership and identity largely miss the significance of marginality. My data shows that boundaries are more malleable than they are typically assumed to be in terms of the indistinct affiliations professed through interviews—given that participants express how the jargon of typical organisational categories preclude their lived experiences. Some time-tested denominational affiliations, however, do appeal to some interlocutors, who readily articulate their positioning within standard categories of belonging such as “Modern Orthodox” or “Conservative.”

If this population remains “officially” Jewish and several participants indeed identify themselves as still belonging somewhere along the Orthodox spectrum, are they really leavetakers? They are not—strictly speaking—“exes,” after all (Ebaugh, 1988). My preliminary findings show that the answer is a resounding “yes.” All interlocutors still identify as “Jewish,” although specific varieties of Jewish identification vary between them, with no one expressing to me that their changes in affiliation or observance rendered them ineligible from identifying as Jewish in some manner. Nevertheless, these accounts do trend towards highlighting themes of leavetaking, departure, or at least a keen sense of separation of some kind from their previous positioning within the tradition, even if their articulation of that separation and new identification remains undefined to them using existing metrics of religious belonging.

Interlocutors touched upon several common issues that led to their leavetaking, although the degree to which these issues were emphasised to me varied between them, sometimes significantly. Community hypocrisy, unmanageable standards, encapsulation, inadequate general studies education, judgmental attitudes towards outsiders, relentless community surveillance, overbearing rules, and unbelief were particularly prevalent in participants’ narratives.

Leavetakers from *haredism* described having had largely similar experiences to leavetakers from less-traditionalist groups insofar as they related a similar trajectory of dissatisfaction, questioning, investigating alternatives, surreptitious leavetaking, outing themselves or being outed, and new identification as differently-Jewish. Mirroring Davidman’s findings among former *haredim* in New York (2014), strictly-Orthodox participants’ reasons for leaving in my project tended to correlate more closely with systematic mistreatment in the community than a personal journey towards being truer to one’s self elsewhere. “Avi” related that he decided to leave *haredism* at a very young age: “It actually started because they were beating us constantly in school. It wasn’t just, like, the school or I didn’t like learning about the Torah anymore or anything like that. It had nothing to do with that. It had to do with the way we were treated.” Conversely, interlocutors who described themselves as having been Orthodox but not *haredi* expressed more varied reasons. Ariel recalls his youth in Orthodoxy to be fairly innocuous, relating simply, “I don’t attribute negativity to it. It just wasn’t for me.” Correspondingly, some participants related how their challenges in the community have traumatised them, while others report that observant Judaism no longer appealed to them and so they stopped living that way, moving to a different Jewish identity that they found more agreeable rather effortlessly and without significant angst or interpersonal conflict.

Profound moods of guilt and shame often accompany leavetaking even from the questioning phase, where leavetakers feel that they have betrayed their

lineage and declined their apparent chosenness. Most participants recalled this being a significant impediment to leavetaking, and feelings of guilt and shame can linger through vestiges down the line. For example, most interlocutors recall that although they no longer observe Jewish dietary requirements, certain food taboos remain powerful—a finding in common with Davidman's work with *haredim* (2014) and in studies of Muslim leavetakers (Cottee, 2015). Some participants described an especially keenly-felt aversion to consuming pork products and shellfish—goods traditionally perceived as being especially verboten—for reasons they cannot easily articulate. When I asked participant “Dov” why he still avoids these foods, he replied, “I want to stay a little bit part of my parents’ community deep down, and that’s just—it’s a little way to do that? To represent, like, I’m still ‘traditional’. For some reason I want to stay—even if it’s a little bit—like, *anchored* to the tradition. It may not be a logical thing, but it’s just, certain things just stay with you.”

Losing faith in God and the authority of the Torah was cited as significant in a minority of leavetaker narratives, with the majority of respondents relating instead that criticism towards and from the Jewish community were intrinsic to their leavetaking. Orthodoxy and orthopraxy remain significant issues throughout, since participants recognise these aspects of religious life as encompassing normative Jewish observance while privileging one (usually orthopraxy) over the other—at least publically—raising crucial questions about sincerity, performativity, and embodiment.

All interlocutors described having happier, more gratifying and more meaningful relationships with Judaism upon leavetaking from their previous Orthodoxy. Although criticisms of the tradition and community were sometimes fierce, many participants insisted that their experiences are not necessarily typical. Indeed, several expressed how there can be tremendous joy, beauty, and fulfilment in observant Judaism even if they did not find it personally workable. This finding highlights that results may vary in Orthodox leavetaking, and that one need not necessarily feel acrimony towards the tradition to disaffiliate from it.

Divergences along gendered lines are evident in my data, with women finding it more challenging to live up to community expectations of ascribed piety than men did. Participant “Adina” discussed self-presentation inside and out of the community’s purview: “I went out with friends shopping, and it was on *Shabbat*. And I was nervous that I’d see anyone. I went out, I bought a blonde wig, to wear. Like, I’m gonna run into twenty people I know. So, yeah. I dressed up. That probably sounds *crazy*. I was like sixteen or seventeen. I put it back on until I got safely [back] inside the house.” Dress was less central in men’s accounts, given that gender roles in the community tend to

underscore female trappings and sexuality as being especially indicative of observance and general status, yet wearing (or not wearing) the *kippah* (skull-cap) was indeed described as being a powerful exterior mark of membership for many men.

Several interlocutors expressed finding themselves at the margins of or near to the tradition and existing in a blind spot that remains popularly unclassified—an especially salient finding. Most participants described Judaism as being a cafeteria tradition—without this term’s pejorative connotations—within which they feel authentic Judaism is most accessible through choosing what elements are meaningful to them and disregarding to various degrees those that are not, emphasising individualisation. As such, nearly everyone dismissed a rigidly-defined category of “Orthodox” observance in favour of a far broader variety of observances that they can accept or reject as appropriate. This picking-and-choosing is typically perceived as being unworkable in the wider Orthodox ethos, where religious identifications and resulting comportment must fit into largely inflexible categories wherein an individual is either “observant” or not, determined by their willingness to submit to normative religious obligations.

Furthermore, religious leavetaking is not necessarily monodirectional, as some participants related returning to observance later in life. For example, Ariel articulated how he left observant Judaism but eventually returned, albeit to an observance level different to the kind he rejected in his youth. “I think that the official phrase is ‘took a break,’” Ariel shares, acknowledging that although he usually keeps kosher nowadays, he will occasionally eat in a non-kosher establishment when he is confident that no Orthodox Jews who might see and recognise him are in the immediate vicinity. Ariel does not find his ability to operate effectively in both worlds to be phony or especially burdensome.

4 Conclusion

Leavetaking from observant Judaism is not necessarily deconversion or becoming an “ex”; this process can entail reaffirming certain aspects of Jewish experiences alongside reshaping or suspending elements that a person finds problematic. Regardless of their technically-indissoluble station as Jews, leavetakers could very well say that they are finished with Jewish rituals and belief, living outside of Judaism perhaps save for some deeply-encoded vestiges and the tradition’s ethnic dimension. But not everyone chooses this path, as per this study’s findings.

Some people resist qualifying their Judaism as they once did, arguing that rigid denominational classifications constrain their oftentimes ongoing journey to find an appealing, meaningful, socially-conscious, and sensible religious, social, and ethnic identity within Judaism. Binary categories privileging identification with either “insiders” or “outsiders” in the tradition miss this crucial element, and are therefore no longer sufficient on their own in a robust examination of religious change. According to my data, Jewish “leavetakers” can and sometimes do remain inside that same tradition while still taking leave from certain aspects of it, and marginal leavetaker narratives endure as pertinent fixtures of contemporary Jewish experience in Canada.

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Leaving the Amish

David L. McConnell

1 Introduction

Contrary to the persistent myth that they are dying out, the Amish population in North America continues to grow at a rapid pace. Numbering over 330,000 in thirty-one states and four Canadian provinces, the Amish population doubles every twenty years (Young Center 2018; Donnermeyer et al. 2013). While over 60 percent of the Amish still reside in Pennsylvania, Ohio, and Indiana, home to the four largest Amish settlements, population pressures are increasingly resulting in out-migration to areas where land prices are more affordable. Because the Amish do not actively seek converts, this population surge is a result of two major forces—large family sizes and a high retention rate. Though family size differs by affiliation, Amish families still average approximately five children. At the same time, the retention rate is at an all-time high. Fully 85 percent of Amish youth get down on their knees in front of their congregation and pledge to uphold the *Ordnung*, or unwritten code of conduct, of their local church district (Kraybill, Johnson-Weiner, and Nolt 2013).

Less visible in this overall picture are the approximately 15 percent of Amish youth who leave the community. Like other Anabaptist groups, the Amish require youth to make a conscious decision to join the church at some point after they reach “the age of accountability,” usually age sixteen, and enter the period known as *rumspringa*, where parental supervision is relaxed. The focus on adult baptism arose during the Radical Reformation in the early 1500s as a sign that believers had made a “conscious decision to follow Christ and form a church apart from the state” (Nolt 2003: 12). Because the state church used infant baptism as a means of controlling the population, however, it saw adult baptism as a grave threat to its legitimacy. The persecution of Anabaptists over the next century—as many as 2500 were killed—was a key factor in their subsequent migration to the U.S. in the 1700s (followed by another wave in the 1800s) at the invitation of the Quaker governor of Pennsylvania, William Penn (Kraybill, Johnson-Weiner and Nolt 2013: 24). Because adult baptism remains a cornerstone tenet of the Amish faith, the individuals who decide not to join the church, or who join but later decide to leave, provide a useful mirror on the rapidly changing relationship between the Amish and the outside world.

Two recent changes in the social fabric of Amish society are of particular importance in understanding the experiences of leavers. The first involves the unprecedented diversity now seen in the Amish world. Just a century ago, there were only a few Amish groups, whereas now more than 40 non-fellowshipping Amish affiliations exist in North America. These affiliations, or “clusters of church districts linked by social and spiritual bonds,” lie on a spectrum of accommodation with the world, which the Amish themselves refer to as “high” and “low” (Kraybill, Johnson-Weiner, and Nolt 2013: 12). Lower affiliations, such as the Swartzentruber Amish, generally observe stricter separation from the world, whereas the higher groups, such as the New Order Amish, have made more compromises with technology and “emphasise a more personal and reflective religious experience” (Hurst and McConnell 2010: 35).

Alongside this landscape of religious fracture, a significant transformation in the occupational structure of Amish society has taken place. Over the past fifty years, Amish heads of household have left farming in droves, mostly to start their own small businesses or, to a lesser extent, to work in non-Amish factories. This “mini-industrial revolution” (Kraybill and Nolt 2004: vii) has in turn spawned growing socioeconomic differentiation within Amish communities, as well as diversification in health care and educational choices. In spite of these far-reaching changes in the very fabric of Amish society, however, recent ethnographic studies of Amish settlements in key Midwestern states have painted a portrait of enormous vitality (Meyers and Nolt 2005; Johnson-Weiner 2010; Hurst and McConnell, 2010; Kraybill 2001). The number of speakers of Pennsylvania Dutch, the Germanic-derived dialect spoken by most Amish, is growing exponentially, even though Pennsylvania Dutch has not been refreshed by later waves of immigration since the late eighteenth century (Louden 2016).

Based on a review of earlier and more recent studies on leaving the Amish, this chapter argues that as the Amish community itself has become more heterogeneous and prosperous, the ways of leaving have become equally diverse. Early academic studies of departure from the Amish focused, on the one hand, on describing the cultural logic of rumspringa, baptism, excommunication and shunning and, on the other hand, on establishing, quantitatively, the predictors of apostasy. More recent studies have tried to clarify the motivations for and the process of leaving and to relate the different experiences of leaving to baptismal status, affiliation, and gender. While central themes can be identified as running through many Amish experiences of leaving, there is no one path or master narrative that captures the former Amish experience.

2 Previous Research and Empirical Material

Unfortunately, the general public has come to understand rumspringa primarily through the lens of popular culture caricatures of the Amish. Lucy Walker's (2002) documentary, *The Devil's Playground*, spotlighted northern Indiana teens, for whom rumspringa emerged as a non-stop party, replete with alcohol, drugs, and sex. The portrayals were widely criticised by Amish scholars who pointed out that rumspringa does not always equate with wild behaviour (Stevick 2014). This did nothing to stem the tide of reality television shows, however, where former Amish have gained fame and notoriety through shows such as UPN's *Amish in the City*, TLC's *Breaking Amish*, and National Geographic's *Amish: Out of Order*. Similarly, Amish-themed romance novels often turn on a plot line involving excommunication and shunning, yet they routinely overstate the frequency of shunning, the types of infractions that lead to shunning, and the severity of the punishment (Weaver-Zercher 2013: 205–209). Such superficial and often misleading accounts in the print and visual media do little to clarify the motives or the experience of those who choose to leave the faith.

Earlier scholarly studies tended to analyze both rumspringa and excommunication in functionalist terms and from the perspective of the church community, rarely delving into the perceptions and experiences of so-called defectors themselves. Hostetler (1993) describes apostasy in terms of “deviant behaviour” and partially blames evangelical churches who prey on the Amish for enticing youth to leave. Reiling (2002) also uses the frame of deviance but concludes that it is “culturally sanctioned” and leads to strong levels of angst and “negative affective response” when young people try to reconcile expectations of obedience to God and the church with unspoken parental assumptions that they should “sow their wild oats.” Kraybill (2001: 131–141) offers a detailed description of the process for excommunicating and shunning adult members who have taken their vows and then broken them. A series of minor confessions and punishments usually precede formal excommunication; the hope is that wayward individuals will see the error in their choices and decide to make things right again. An individual who is formally excommunicated, however, faces specific “rituals of shaming,” such as not being allowed to eat at the same table or accept gifts from other church members. Kraybill argues that shunning and excommunication are powerful forms of social control that place loyalty to God and the church over family ties, notwithstanding the inconsistencies in enforcement.

Kraybill's early work (2001) on rumspringa also views it as a liminal period of rowdiness that seems contrary to Amish beliefs but in fact serves a “redeeming

function” in their social system. Because the large majority of youth eventually settle down and join the church, Kraybill (2001: 186) argues that “flirting with the world serves as a form of social immunisation.” Zeroing in on the issue of whether Amish youth have a “free choice,” he argues that they do not because they are funneled towards joining church by their upbringing and other social forces around them. He concludes, however, that “the illusion of choice” plays a critical role in fostering obedience to the church rules later in life because members see themselves as having made a choice. Mazie (2005), a political philosopher, takes up the Amish “quandary of exit” as an instructive case for how liberal states ought to deal with conservative minorities. He affirms the notion that the cards are stacked against Amish youth leaving because they have to give up so much in the process, especially family ties, and have very little preparation for transitioning to non-Amish life.

In a somewhat different vein, early quantitative studies of predictors of defection were useful in shedding light on precisely which youth were at greatest risk of leaving. Meyers’ (1994) study in northern Indiana was the first to demonstrate statistically what all ultra-conservative Amish intuitively know: degree of isolation from non-Amish is an important factor in shaping retention rates. Meyers found that residential proximity to towns was positively correlated with likelihood of defection, presumably because of greater access to other plausibility structures. As Stevick (2014: 346) points out, however, it is difficult to know whether influences from the town or the characteristics of families who choose to live near towns are at work here. Meyers also found that Amish children who attend public schools are twice as likely to leave as those who attend parochial schools and that males are significantly more at risk for leaving than females, in part because they have more contact with the outside world as members of sports teams and assisting in family businesses. These findings corroborate the idea that the degree of physical separation from the world on the part of the family and the affiliation matters.

Other factors shown to correlate with retention rates include occupation, church leadership status, birth order, and family wealth. Greksa and Korbin (2002) found that farming families and families of ordained leaders in the Geauga settlement in Ohio have higher retention rates for their children, an outcome they attribute to a more conservative orientation. In addition, Meyers (1994) found that the oldest sibling is more likely to leave, while Greksa and Korbin (2002) discovered that if the oldest sibling in the family leaves, a younger sibling is four times more likely to follow suit. Using the 1988 Amish Directory and local data on real estate values, Choy’s (2016) study of Holmes County, Ohio, showed that children from wealthier Amish families were more likely to remain Amish than those from poorer families.

Finally, the emergence of an entire genre of narratives of leaving written by former Amish has allowed a glimpse into the diverse ways they reconstruct and make sense of their experiences. Among the earliest and most controversial memoirs was Ruth Irene Garrett's, *Crossing Over*, written by a woman who grew up in a conservative affiliation in Iowa and left the church to marry a divorced man who had worked as her family's taxi driver. Subtitled, *One Woman's Escape from Amish Life*, the book cast a harsh light on the Amish, even describing them as "cult-like" (Garrett 2003). Saloma Furlong's *Why I Left the Amish* is a somewhat more sympathetic account even though she highlights the physical and sexual abuses that may drive some individuals to leave (Furlong 2011). Ira Wagler's (2011) *Growing Up Amish* begins with the assertion that "one shouldn't be condemned for simply craving freedom," and yet his own departure was a protracted affair that involved many false starts before he achieved final separation. In fact, a recurrent theme in these narratives is the emotional difficulty of leaving because parents and extended family go to extraordinary lengths to convince their wayward children to return. One man who tried to leave related that when his dad found out where he was staying, he came and sat on the back steps of the house all night to persuade him to come home. Because most memoirs have been written by excommunicated former Amish from relatively conservative communities, they tend to accentuate the conflicts that unfold around their departures.

3 New Empirical Findings Focusing on "Leaving Religion"

Building on the foundation of early studies, but with sharper conceptual and methodological tools, a new round of research by Hurst and McConnell (2010), Stevick (2014), Kraybill, Johnson-Weiner, and Nolt (2013), Faulkner and Dinger (2014), and Foster (2016) has considerably improved our understanding of overall patterns of defection, as well as the diverse processes and experiences of leaving that can be seen across the Amish spectrum. Hurst and McConnell (2010) discovered that in all but the most conservative affiliations the decision to leave before baptism is treated much more positively than the decision to leave after having made one's vows. Focusing in further on baptismal status, Faulkner and Dinger (2014) found the narratives of those who left after baptism revealed a great deal of role conflict (see Ebaugh 1988), as well as a perceived lack of control. In contrast, those who left before baptism, though they were typically unmarried and had more truncated social networks, followed trusted individuals who led them to see that the benefits of leaving outweighed the costs; as a result, they decided they could no longer be passive followers.

Kraybill, Johnson-Weiner, and Nolt (2014: 162) explore the important question of why the overall rate of defection has fallen over the past 40–50 years at precisely the same time that the Amish were leaving farming in large numbers. They point out that the historical rise in the retention rate corresponded with the growth of Amish parochial schools and the end of military draft, both of which reinforced separation from the world at a critical time in late adolescent life. The rise of retention rates nationally was further supported by the successful entry of many Amish into small businesses. Young people saw that they could remain Amish and make a living that allowed for disposable income without having to work the long hours that come with life on the farm.

A more nuanced understanding of how Amish retention rates vary by affiliation has also emerged in recent years. Quantitative studies of leaving the Amish are made possible because of the existence of published Amish Directories for each settlement that list a wide variety of household information, including the baptism status of all children. Using the Holmes County, Ohio, Amish Directory, Friedrich (2001: 96) found that individuals from New Order families were four times more likely to no longer be Amish than those from Old Order families, and, in turn, those from Old Order families were three times more likely to leave than those from Andy Weaver affiliations. More recently, Kraybill, Johnson-Weiner, and Nolt (2014: 163) found that defection rates in the Holmes County settlement varied from 2.6 percent for the Andy Weaver affiliations to 25.1 percent for the Old Order and 40.4 and for the New Order. In general, these results seem to support the argument that the more conservative the *Ordnung*, the higher the retention rate because strict churches demand more of their members (Iannacone 1994). Yet there can be considerable differences within a given affiliation in retention rates, depending on the church district and settlement.

The diverse motives and processes for leaving have also come into clearer focus. Hurst and McConnell (2010: 84) found the desire for fewer lifestyle restrictions and for a more intense and personal religious experience to be the two dominant motivations for leaving in the Holmes County, Ohio, settlement. The latter motivation seems counter-intuitive to those who assume the Amish are already “hyper-religious,” but some Amish are attracted to the ideas of interpreting the bible themselves, being “saved” through faith alone, and establishing a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. Though such ideas are considered “strange beliefs” by most Amish—one New Order man criticised the “born again approach” as “fantastic emotionalism”—they are promoted by surrounding evangelical churches who actively proselytise the Amish.

Foster (2016), on the other hand, found that while four of her fourteen respondents left because they “had been saved,” frustrations with the rules of

their respective church districts were a central motivation for leaving. For some, a key turning point, such as a new restriction on technology, pushed them to make the final break. McConnell and Hurst (2010), for example, relate the story of an ex-Andy Weaver woman whose father had come to her house to cut her countertop in half because it was one foot longer than the 8-foot maximum allowed by the church. She recounted, "So then in my mind I was just like, 'Well, if this little piece of countertop is going to take me to Hell, I'm going to leave the Amish and drive a car and have some fun and go to Hell' That was my decision." Faulkner and Dinger (2014: 122–123) raise the possibility of gender differences in the process and perception of leaving. In their study, females who left harboured an intense resentment of specific rules that they saw as arbitrary and unfairly limiting their autonomy, while males expressed a more generalised sentiment of spiritual and philosophical conflicts.

The terms of separation can also be much more amicable, however. Foster (2016) found that most of those who left Old Order Ohio communities before baptism experienced a distancing from their families at first. Over time, however, they gradually improved their relations with their parents and siblings, sometimes even joining in family events or assisting their Amish kin in matters ranging from transportation to navigating the medical and legal systems. Most also stayed relatively close to the area where they grew up, did not pursue further formal education, and joined Mennonite or evangelical churches. Males overwhelmingly stayed in the manual trades they had mastered while growing up Amish, while females focused on mothering and homemaking. In addition, only a few of Foster's fourteen respondents were afraid of being "caught out," referring to the belief that a person's soul is at risk of going to hell if they die in the window of time between reaching the age of accountability and joining the church. They were more concerned that their departure would hurt their parents, a theme also mentioned in previous studies (Stevick 2014; Hurst and McConnell 2010).

Finally, the border between the Amish and the non-Amish is complex and multifaceted. In addition to religious differences, Faulkner and Dinger (2014: 109) found that it includes "different social networks and cultural traditions, practices, and ideologies, such as language, styles of dress, modes of transportation, and values." Drawing on Bourdieu's (1986) concepts of cultural and social capital, Foster similarly discovered that her respondents faced many practical challenges of adjusting to different expectations surrounding transportation, dress, and language in the outside world. Those with more robust social networks of non-Amish and former Amish were more prepared than others to

meet those challenges. Because such stories of a relatively uneventful transition to English life do not make for good sales material, they often go unreported.

4 Conclusion

Taken together, recent scholarship suggests that the institutional structures and processes surrounding the decision to leave the Amish are complex, flexible, and changing, which allows for a diverse set of experiences among leavers. Just as there are lots of ways to be Amish, there are many ways to leave the Amish. Faulkner and Dinger (2014) suggest that future studies take an intersectionality approach in order to capture the inter-relations between occupation, gender, affiliation, and baptismal status—to which we might add social class, type of education (public or parochial), age, marital status, and birth order. The presence or absence of non-Amish friends and the social and cultural capital they possess also shape the integration of former Amish into the wider society. In general, scholarship on leaving the Amish has moved beyond functionalist accounts that accentuate the perspective of the church community to more nuanced studies that focus on diversity, conflict, and change and attempt to understand the diverse, subjective experiences of leavers.

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Leaving Evangelicalism

Philip Salim Francis

1 Introduction

Exiting from a religious community, like joining, entails more than just intellectual recalibration or tinkering with belief. It is, rather, an overhaul of one's previous conception of self, a re-creation of one's way of being in the world. For this reason, the transition out of any religious community—and notably evangelicalism—is rarely smooth. For example, James Baldwin, the famed American writer (1924–1987), described his exit from evangelicalism as a “pulverisation of my fortress.” John Ruskin (1819–1900), leading English social thinker of the Victorian era, referred to his deconversion as a “crash” (Hempton 2008). Numerous “obstacles”—theological, psychological, and relational—rise up and block the way.

From the perspective of the evangelical community, these “obstacles” are more accurately described as *methods of identity preservation*. These are intentionally cultivated ways of being, intended to render certain evangelical beliefs and practices steadfast, to establish the faithful in their Christian identity. In other words, the evangelical identity, like all identities, is established through a repertoire of repeated, ritualised performances, in the sense given the terms “identity” and “performativity” by American Philosopher Judith Butler (1956–) in *Gender Trouble*, her groundbreaking work in 1990. Identity, in her terms, is a sense of self that congeals over time through performance of a series of socially prescribed bodily practices that transpire within the framework of a particular social unit with its unique codes and compulsions.

In my fieldwork on evangelicals who leave the fold (from 2007–2017), particularly at a unique American (in the state of Oregon) school run by renegade post-evangelical Christians called the Oregon Extension (established in 1975–), I have documented the manner in which evangelical deconversion entails not only a relinquishment of the performative practices of evangelicalism, but also, simultaneously, the cultivation of performative strategies by which one signifies to self and other that a new identity has been assumed. In fact, my field work convinces me of the importance of defining conversion and deconversion in such Butlerian terms.

This chapter focuses on my fieldwork at the Oregon Extension and draws on the performative theoretical framework of Judith Butler to demonstrate the ways that evangelical deconversion entails a performative act replete with bodily practice. Such an interpretation of evangelical deconversion stands in contrast to merely intellectualist interpretations. This essay is thus in keeping with a growing body of scholarship that seeks to “widen the purview of discourse” to consider at once “the influence of multiple forces at work in religious conversion” and deconversion (Rambo and Farhadian 2014).

Since 1975, a small college-level program called the Oregon Extension, nestled into a mountaintop in the Southern Oregon Cascades, has been the site of hundreds of evangelical deconversion experiences. From 2007–2012 I undertook an ethnographic study of the Oregon Extension in order to understand the inner working of the program and why it set so many evangelical college students on a path out of the fold. I was not wrong to suspect that I would learn a great deal about the lived experience of evangelical deconversion, and, of course, about evangelicalism. In the following, I will examine the role of the Oregon Extension in the undoing of one evangelical method of performative identity preservation in particular. It is what my participants refer to as *the felt need for absolute certainty*.

The Oregon Extension was launched in 1975 by a small group of unconventional evangelical Christian professors from Trinity College in Deerfield, Illinois, as a semester study-away program on the site of an abandoned logging camp (Francis 2017). This core group taught together for nearly thirty years, before handing the reins over to a new group of younger professors between 2008 and 2012. Since its founding, the Oregon Extension has drawn between twenty-five and forty students each year from evangelical Christian colleges. They offer students a Henry David Thoreau-like back-to-the-land experience, living in small cabins, away from the confusions of everyday life, reading novels, poems, and essays, chopping wood, and “asking life’s most difficult questions.” Although this setting may sound benign, vast numbers of Oregon Extension alumni—even those looking back 20 years later—describe their time in the program as *the* moment in which they “broke free from the evangelical mindset,” as one alumnus phrases it (Francis 2017: 35).

One cannot understand the Oregon Extension experience without knowing that it is an aesthetically charged environment, from the sublime mountain setting to the poetry and fiction that fill the syllabi. As Jennifer W. recalls, “Arts in all forms were everywhere at the OE. Morning lectures always started with someone sharing a poem, song, reading etc. I remember Nancy Linton [long-time Oregon Extension professor] reading from *Operating Instructions*

(1993) by American author Anne Lamott (1954–), and sharing the song *When I Was a Boy* by American singer-songwriter (1967–) Dar Williams” (Francis 2017: 36). After preludes such as these, the morning was then built around lectures and intensive small group discussions, while the afternoon was reserved for reading—novels, poetry, essays. Lectures and discussion are often held at a professor’s home, as all faculty live on site. Students tend to develop close, personal relationships with Oregon Extension professors. These relationships are fostered in small group discussions and through formal and informal one-on-one meetings.

At the Oregon Extension, there is no division between personal and intellectual struggles. The ideas on the page are discussed in relation to a student’s lived experience, and the characters in the novels animate the student’s life. Shawnie P., who attended in the late 1990s, recalls in her memoir, *The Brothers Karamazov* was the culminating book of my Oregon Extension experience. It took me more deeply into my questions about faith than anything before” (Francis 2017: 37) Like the Russian author Fyodor Dostoyevski’s (1821–1881) character, Alyosha Karamazov, some Oregon Extension alumni hold onto their faith even as it changes. Like Ivan Karamazov, other Oregon alumnae “respectfully return their ticket to God.”

Though many Oregon Extension alumni end up leaving or reconfiguring their relationship to evangelicalism, Oregon Extension professors continue to identify as Christians. Founder and long-time professor Doug Frank’s intention with the program, as far as I can tell, is not to dismantle his students’ “faith,” but to cut it free from the umbilical cord of American evangelicalism, or the facile strand thereof, which is wrapped around its neck. The faith may die, Doug would concede, but it will, at the least, have been given a chance to live.

In 2007, I established formal contact with the Oregon Extension and its alumni in the interest of undertaking a study of the intellectual and spiritual change that its participants undergo. I spent time in Oregon and began conversations with the professors there. I contacted hundreds of Oregon Extension alumni lists. I asked them to contribute to this study by writing a memoir about their experience in Oregon and beyond. Of the approximately two hundred Oregon Extension alumni respondents, roughly one hundred agreed to full participation in the study. Within this set there is a range of reflective distance from their time in Oregon. In their self-accounts, almost all Oregon Extension alumni note the decisive role played by aesthetic experience—primarily of a novel or a poem or a song or an image—in the unsettling of their religious foundations, or the “disruption of our felt need for absolute certainties,” to use the phrasing of alumnus Tracy F., who attended in the early 1980s (Francis 2017: 37).

“The felt need for absolute certainty.” This phrase recurred in the accounts of virtually all of my participants. When I met with professor Doug Frank at the Oregon Extension, I began to understand why (Frank 2010). By the time I met Frank in 2007, he was in his late 60s and had already been teaching philosophy, history, and literature households (his PhD is in History) in Oregon for about thirty-five years, shaping and unsettling the beliefs of scores of students, who, like him, were reared in conservative evangelical. I asked Frank what he considered to be among his primary pedagogical tasks when a new group of evangelical students arrived at the doorstep of his program. He said that he hopes to help students to “tame for themselves the wild need for absolute certainty in matters of religious belief,” a need which has been “bred in them from an early age.” He said he wants to help these young evangelicals to understand that religious “doubt is not a reflection of moral depravity.” He hopes to guide them to resources and models that will help them learn to “dwell in the mystery of unknowing.” He wants them to become “seekers,” and in this way to live (Francis 2017: 37).

In the “New Findings” part below, I demonstrate the ways that this felt need for absolute certainty is inculcated in evangelicals through performative acts and also the way it is undone at the Oregon Extension, again through performative acts, often associated with aesthetic experience. But first I will explain through reference to previous research why such an interpretation of evangelical deconversion is relevant to current scholarship on religious conversion and deconversion.

2 Previous Research and Empirical Material

The accounts of Oregon Extension alumni provide a counter-balance to a dominant trend in scholarship on the evangelical mind and more particularly on claims to “absolute certainty” and the role it plays in evangelical deconversion. These dominant trends, flowing from a line of scholarship influenced by Mark Noll’s important study, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind* (1994), describe evangelical claims to “absolute certainty” in exclusively intellectual and cognitive terms, obscuring the important role of bodily practice and overlooking the non-intellectual effects of the state of certainty. Here, Noll, an evangelical insider, argues, essentially, that “the scandal of the evangelical mind is that there is not much of an evangelical mind” (Noll 1994: 3). He makes the case that American Evangelicalism has established an anti-intellectual subculture that seriously hinders their ability to engage in rigorous academic research. In this case, the “evangelical mind” is measured in purely intellectual terms.

And so Noll, who is sympathetic to his fellow evangelicals, reaches a conclusion with overlap with post-evangelical “free thinkers,” like American Dan Barker (1949–), who publishes books with titles like *Losing Faith in Faith: From Preacher to Atheist* and *God: The Most Unpleasant Character in All Fiction*, and is co-president of the Freedom From Religion Foundation (Barker 1992; 2016). Barker and other post-evangelical new atheists read the evangelical quest for absolute certainty as anti-modern, anti-science, anti-free thought. To escape evangelicalism, you must *think* your way out. Of course, it is true that evangelicals often instinctively have a rearguard against things modern; and a majority of evangelicals have famously set themselves in opposition to certain modern scientific conclusions, such as, Darwinian evolution and climate change (Marsden 1990). But, like Noll, Barker and the new atheists, because they measure the evangelical mind in purely intellectualist terms, fail to recognise the ways that the felt need for “absolute certainty” is about much more than just the mind (Barbour 1994).

The intentionally cultivated felt need for absolute certainty—as I have suggested—is a method of identity preservation, intended to solidify evangelicals in their Christian identity. It is precisely for this reason that the evangelical experience of being absolutely certain is about much more than just the intellect. The Oregon Extension, as I will demonstrate, occasions misstep after misstep in the performance of the non-doubter’s identity with which its students arrive. Professors simultaneously guide students through the very difficult process of replacing their practices of certainty with practices of uncertainty.

3 New Findings Focusing on “leaving religion”

In my study of evangelical deconversion at the Oregon Extension, I have come to see the ways that *being absolutely certain* is more than a state of mind. It is, within evangelicalism, *an identity*. “We were to *be* non-doubters,” recalls Oregon Extension alumnus John Z. emblematically, “and this was nonnegotiable. It was who we were.” Like John, virtually all of my participants from the Oregon Extension describe their former evangelical communities as fixated on the maintenance of absolute certainty in matters of religious belief and practice. All adherents were, they say, called upon to cultivate and exhibit this high degree of certainty by following a regimen of apparently informal but nonetheless ritualised physical and mental exercises. It was through this set of practices that these women and men established an identity as a person of certainty, or as a “nondoubter,” and in this way secured their place in the social order of the community.

My ethnographic archive contains numerous examples of the ways that these evangelical communities cultivate specific practices of certainty, that is, practices that engender the non-doubter's identity by inculcating a deeply felt need for absolute certainty. In what follows, I will examine three of these practices of certainty: child evangelism, vilification of doubt, and certainty of salvation. I will then explore the path of their undoing at the Oregon Extension.

First practice of certainty: evangelising friends and strangers from a young age. Oregon Extension alumnus John Z. recalls how his family would spend Saturdays going door-to-door "preaching the Gospel to sinners".

When I was 8 years old I was allowed to knock on doors by myself (a source of pride). I remember my heart beating heavy in my chest as I extended a small finger toward the door bell. I remember looking down at my shiny shoes, waiting for an answer, rehearsing my speech, turning over in my mind the note cards of apologetic ripostes given me by my father. I became a master of persuasion at a very young age.

I asked John about this experience:

PF: What was it like to start evangelizing door-to-door from such a young age?

JZ: I liked having strong answers for all of their doubts. I liked convincing others of TRUTH, and of course I sincerely believed I was saving them from the jaws of Hell. I look back now and am shocked at how certain I was of the things I was telling them. I mean, where does that come from?

PF: Where *do* you think that sense of certainty comes from?

JZ: I must have been channeling, or mimicking, the certainty I saw in my parents or my pastors.

John suggests that he borrowed this certainty from his parents and his pastors as he grew into the part, learning their arguments but also imitating all the subtleties of their embodied relationship to these posited religious truths. He recalls the note-cards—the scripts—that his father would give him, but he also recalls imitating and perfecting certain evangelical vocal techniques in his own evangelising. He speaks in several places of the sense of self—the self-esteem—that accrued to him when he had mastered the evangelical routine with mind and body. His parent's were proud of him. Put otherwise, *being certain takes practice*; John's identity as a non-doubter took hold through the practice and recitation of an already scripted way of being in relationship to certainty. Once this practice of certainty became habitual for John, it was

virtually impossible to understand himself as anything but a man certain about the way things are in the universe.

Second Practice of Certainty: moralising of doubt. If the difficulty of self-identifying as a doubter begins in the practice of evangelising, it is exacerbated by the general suspicion of doubt that pervades certain conservative evangelical communities. My informants almost universally claim that in the communities in which they were raised, doubting in matters of faith was frowned upon and doubters were regularly regarded with scorn. In many cases, doubt was an indication of immorality.

Bob Jones alumnus Holly S. says,

My first encounter with doubt happened when I was about 7 or 8 years old, at night, after the lights were out and the house was asleep. I would stare at the shadows on the wall and think about the immensity of “everlasting life” in heaven. It bothered me. Everything ends; it has to end. Why does everyone talk about this as if it makes sense? Doubt entered my mind.

Doubt entered her mind. But it was quickly hidden away in a dark corner, she recalls, where only she could sense its presence. Thinking back, Holly wonders at the fact that she felt unable to voice these doubts to her parents or the elders of the community. She is surprised that even as a child she had picked up the signals: “questions were marks of faithlessness,” she recalls, “and so I whispered them to myself.” Holly’s account is a particular instance of the more general phenomenon of identifying doubt with sin, uncertainty with perfidy, and so imbuing doubt and uncertainty with an intense moral valence.

Third Practice of Certainty: The Sinner’s Prayer. Within these conservative evangelical communities it is by “accepting Jesus Christ into one’s heart as personal Lord and Savior” and by saying “the Sinner’s Prayer” that one avoids the fires of Hell. All congregants, including children, are admonished to be *absolutely* certain that they have been “saved.” A familiar sermonic refrain: “If you were hit by a car as you walked out of Church this morning, would you know *beyond a shadow of a doubt* that you would go to Heaven and not to Hell?”

Because “Saying the Sinner’s Prayer” is about more than just saying the words, because its efficacy is based on a *real* spiritual-emotional-volitional act of inviting Jesus into your heart, many of my informants felt tremendous anxiety about whether or not they had *really* been saved. Did I really mean it? With my whole heart? My participants often recall the workings of their childhood imagination trying to attain this certainty, fearing that they might not

be “saved,” and extrapolating on the biblical phrase, “weeping and gnashing of teeth.” Clearly, “getting saved” functions as a crucial practice of certainty.

In these three practices of certainty, my informants demonstrate just how vital it is for individuals in these communities to develop a strong capacity for absolute certainty. And they give us a sense of just how difficult it must be to undo this felt need. As should be clear, the capacity for absolute certainty in these evangelical communities is best understood not as the domain of one faculty—the intellect, say—but as a repertoire of ritualised, embodied practices, undertaken within the constraints of a social unit that authorises one’s identity as a person of certainty.

However, students regularly observe a dramatic change in their relationship to certainty and doubt during their time at the Oregon Extension. This transformation generally involves much more than an intellectual recalibration of beliefs. It is, they suggest, an overhaul of their previous identity as persons of certainty. This overhaul entails cultivating a new, practical—often physical—relationship to uncertainty, and yielding to a set of ideals that valorises, rather than denigrates, the practice of doubt. At the Oregon Extension, this valorisation is often expressed by the professors with terms such as “honesty” and “authenticity.”

Drawing on the language of the Oregon Extension, Cora T., who attended in the early 2000s, remembers feeling that “although all my certainties were being stripped away, I was now convinced that this feeling of unknowing was somehow the grounds for a more *authentic* faith.” Given the evangelical anti-doubting culture in which these Oregon Extension alumni were formed, it is not hard to imagine why the Oregon Extension’s culture of “authentic doubting” might engender spiritual and emotional tectonic shifts. Once the doubts came flooding out, there was no stopping them, and this flood bore them right out of evangelicalism.

In the same way that practices of certainty are modeled by the leaders in the evangelical communities, these new practices of uncertainty are modeled by the leaders at the Oregon Extension. Professors are forthcoming with students about their own questions, doubts, and uncertainties. In lectures, small group discussions and individual meetings, students are encouraged to form questions and voice doubts.

The task of modeling uncertainty extends beyond the Oregon Extension faculty to include the “fictional leaders” of the community as well. Alumni describe the protagonists of the novels in the Oregon Extension curriculum as exemplary of the practices of uncertainty. Walker Percy’s (American, 1916–1990) Binx from *The Moviegoer* (1961), Wendell Berry’s (American, 1934–) Jayber Crow from *Jayber Crow*, David James Duncan’s (American 1952–), the Chance

brothers from *The Brothers K* (1992), Dostoyevsky's Karamozovs, and Shusaku Endo's (Japanese 1923–1996) Otsu from *Deep River* (1993) are regularly cited as examples. The characters in these books who fused doubt with a “more authentic kind of faith” helped to create a general culture at the Oregon Extension in which forming questions and expressing doubts were valorised.

The constraints and compulsions under which these new performative strategies transpire compel these students in quite the opposite direction of those found in their evangelical communities. Yet they are constraints and compulsions nonetheless. As Oregon Extension alumnus Eleanor W. recalls, “a huge proportion of my fellow Oregon students were questioning their faith just like me, and thus I felt like I ‘fit in.’” But as these doubting students bonded, those who could not yet bring themselves to question the faith were sometimes left out in the cold. Perhaps this must be measured as a cost to the creation of a counterculture with constraints and codes powerful enough to establish at least the beginnings of a new set of performative rituals that enabled these Oregon Extension alumni to embrace the “spiritual quality” of uncertainty. With uncertainty's embrace, came a repudiation of their evangelical identity.

4 Conclusion

This study of the Oregon Extension broadens our understanding of evangelical deconversion and complexifies the relationship between belief and practice. Firstly, as noted above, it takes us beyond accounts of evangelical deconversion that focus too exclusively on the role of the intellect. Many of the loudest voices advocating evangelical deconversion, such as Dan Barker, president of the Freedom From Religion Foundation, reduce it to a process of *thinking* one's way out. One of the reasons that the Oregon Extension is so effective at bringing about evangelical deconversion is that its professors understand that the evangelical felt need for absolute certainty is about more than just the intellect. They thus approach their goal of leveraging students out of “the fundamentalist side of evangelicalism” in a more holistic manner. The Oregon Extension professors engage the intellect, of course. They model new modes of thought, new approaches to uncertainty, new ways of formulating questions and being comfortable with doubt. But they recognise that practices of uncertainty must also engage students at the level of the body, the senses, emotion, and desire. Why? Because the practices of certainty in these evangelical communities do likewise.

It is in part for this reason that Oregon Extension professors integrate the arts into the curriculum. Rather than having their students merely read books

by the well-known proponents of leaving evangelicalism, they prefer to have students read the *Brothers Karamazov*, contemplate Rothko, and listen to Bob Dylan. Within this context, the arts become an essential element in the *practices of uncertainty* that these students begin to exercise. The arts bring home for them, with strange intensity, what William James refers to as the “more,” that endless stretch of unknowns that recedes to the edge of experience—and beyond that edge (James 1902). Yet at the same time, my participants suggest that the arts lend a comforting *form* to the perceived formlessness of belief and identity that accompanies their initial foray into the disquieting realm of questions and doubts. The arts become a different way of knowing and unknowing that generates and intensifies the experience of uncertainty, while rendering it livable. Future scholarship on evangelical deconversion would do well to take into account the role of embodied practices—such as aesthetic experience—in the deconversion process. David Hempton, in *Evangelical Disenchantment* (2008), draws a similar conclusion, particularly in his portraits of James Baldwin and John Ruskin.

Secondly, and relatedly, this study highlights the interconnectedness of belief and practice in deconversion. Influenced in part by American professor of religion Robert Orsi (1953–), various scholars in the academic study of religion, especially the study of “lived religion,” have been wary of late to include “belief” among their terms of inquiry (See Orsi 2005). This wariness is in part a response to recent, trenchant critiques of the discipline’s Protestant inheritance, which, it is argued, presupposes that belief-as-assent-to-proposition is at the heart of religion—as opposed to, say, bodily practice, ritual, or relationships.

Robert Orsi’s approach is an important corrective, of course, but in downplaying the role of belief it is possible to miss the fact that in many traditions, not just Protestantism, “beliefs” are an irreducible part of how religion is *lived out* “on the ground.” This is especially true in the experience of my participants. In fact, the memoirs of these Oregon Extension alumni make a strong case for the inseparability of belief and bodily practice. Beliefs preserve practices as practices preserve beliefs, and both function, at least in part, to signify a sufficiently coherent identity to self and other. At the same time that my participants remind me of these interconnections, they teach me the value of maintaining a distinction between these terms—“belief” and “bodily practice”—as a way of tracking the differing strata of experience on which the transformation of identity unfolds.

To do justice to the complexity of evangelical deconversion experience, scholars must give simultaneous attention to the role of socially embedded beliefs, bodily practices, and sensory experiences. My argument here is in line with the arguments presented by Rambo and Farhadian in *The Oxford*

Handbook of Religious Conversion (2014: 7) in their discussion of scholarship on religious conversion in general. In emphasising the way that beliefs and identities can be reshaped through cumulative marks of signification and under the countervailing weight of inherited ways of being in the world (Butler 1990), scholars of deconversion can demonstrate just how tortuous it can be to achieve a significant transformation of self—and how multidimensional the role of mind and body must be in the process.

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Leaving Pentecostalism

Teemu T. Mantsinen

1 Introduction

Pentecostalism is often described as an expanding and dynamic form of Christianity (Martin 1990; Vasquez 2009; Anderson 2014: 1–2), rife with disruptions and divisions (Coleman 1998, 2013). In the beginning of the twentieth century, when large numbers of Pentecostal groups and congregations were being founded, many of them strictly defined their identity and moral boundaries by opposing both mainstream Christianity and the contemporary society and culture. For example, the Finnish Pentecostal Movement (henceforth FPM) identified itself in terms of a community of believers, in contrast of the Finnish Lutheran Church. In the FPM, many of the first-generation members came from the Lutheran Church and Laestadian groups with a historical background in Pietism, a revival movement which favoured individual vocation and holiness teachings of Christian morality. (Mantsinen 2014: 17–19; 2015a: 45–48.)

In the first sixty years of its history, the FPM and its congregations saw constant mobility and membership turnover, with people joining, leaving, and being expelled. Due to these disruptions, new congregations and deviated groups were formed. Especially the 1960s has been labelled by many in the FPM as an era of “legalistic spirit,” when different criteria for a “true believer” were invented. In many cases, breaking social norms – for example, smoking or dating an outsider – demanded a ritual of public apology if one wished to remain in the group. The harsh treatment of members in the past still represents collective trauma in the FPM, as well as for many who left or were forced to leave. The turnover rate has since decreased significantly; in the 2010s, a member rarely gets expelled. Local disruptions and conflicts do exist, but the majority of experiences of leavers are specific to individuals, not necessarily collectively shared. (Mantsinen 2015b.)

In addition to group control and maintaining the sacred borders of a religion, some aspects of Pentecostal religion can be emotionally and mentally burdening: namely, highlighting the end times and the coming of Christ, a vivid and intense worldview of personal good and evil, and ecstatic-charismatic practices, such as glossolalia and prophecies. The high intensity of living up to expectations of a committed personal practice of religion and its moral

teachings, social pressures around the experience of emotionally laden charismatic phenomena and a personal connection to God, and living in expectation of the end times can be very heavy, both emotionally and cognitively, if also fulfilling and exciting for many.

The FPM and its congregations have been open for people to leave without sanctions or official actions towards apostates after their departure. The grasp of a Pentecostal congregation usually ends at its doorstep. However, every exit from a social community has its cost for an individual, especially in forms of weakening social support and a changing worldview and understanding of reality. Pentecostals have traditionally taught that for a believer the congregation is the safeguard against the evil world and the Devil. Therefore, many who have considered leaving have first had to face the mental pressure of assuring that their souls are safe after the exit. Usually leavers have not experienced intimidation by Pentecostals, tending to remain in contact with Pentecostals only through their own family and closest friends.

2 Previous Research and Empirical Material

Research on Pentecostalism has been growing rapidly since David Martin's *Tongues of Fire* (1990), with major concentration on the African and Latin American scene, the expansion of Pentecostalism, and Prosperity Gospel (Coleman 2000; Corten and Marshall-Fratani 2001; Robbins 2008; 2011). Perhaps due to the expansion of Pentecostalism around the world, there has been relatively little attention paid to the generational transmission and failure of transmission of Pentecostalism, as well as the act of leaving Pentecostalism. These issues have been touched upon only briefly when scholars have written about social and organisational changes in Pentecostal denominations (Poloma 1989; Miller and Yamamori 2007; Poloma and Green 2010). This lack of transgenerational and apostasy research produces challenges for understanding processes of transmission, change, and personal consequences of Pentecostalism. In my research, I have worked to fill this gap.

To date, research on leaving religion in Finland has been scarce. It is approached usually from the perspective of the majority religion, the Lutheran Church of Finland. The first work done in this field was a study of who left the Church – and how – by Jouko Siipi (1965). Later, Juha Seppo (1983) studied the historical case of the first leavers, when the law of religious freedom became effective in the 1920s, making it legal to not belong to any religious institution in Finland. These first leavers included many who joined Pentecostal congregations, but also many non-religious people. Other cases have studied leaving

the Lutheran Church (Niemelä 2007; Spännäri 2014), leaving the Jehovah's Witnesses (Ronimus 2011), and identity formation in exit stories from various religious groups (Timonen 2014). Additionally, recent public discussion on power and violence in religions has generated a few studies and publications (Hurtig 2013; Ruoho 2013; Villa 2013; Linjakumpu 2015).

I have limited my research on leaving religion to those ex-Pentecostals who grew up in Pentecostal families. In this way, I have narrowed the scope of enquiry and excluded converts, who often can be more fluid in their mobility between social groups and religious identities. In my study, the informants had the opportunity to be socialised into the religion of their parents, but somewhere this transgenerational transmission failed. My collected research material consists of individual in-depth thematic interviews (11 people), written personal stories and questionnaire (12 people), publicly available stories in magazines and books and on the internet (5 separate stories), a survey conducted among FPM congregations (84 respondents), and interviews with two Pentecostal pastors. Additionally, I have used my previous ethnographical fieldwork, interviews, and other collected research material in order to ground my findings in the larger context of Finnish Pentecostalism.

Searching for ex-members of a minority religion can pose challenges. The total number of leavers is still relatively small within the general population, and therefore a public call for informants can be futile. First and foremost, I found my informants through social media and previous contacts: via a project website, Facebook, and e-mails, which people forwarded and shared among their contacts. Later, I also sought informants through an e-mail list offered by *Uskontojen uhrien tukiry.* (Support for Victims of Religions Association). Finally, to add variation to the scope of the study, I personally contacted one informant who is now a Lutheran priest. With these methods, I managed to reach an acceptable saturation point of data for a successful analysis of the issue.

Although academic research on leaving Pentecostalism has been scarce and no previous academically collected material exists, there is a growing and already available body of source material. On the internet, there is a wide variety of personal blog posts and support groups for people who have left Pentecostalism (as well as other religions, such as Islam; see Enstedt and Larsson 2013). Most of these are in English, but they can be found in other languages as well. Furthermore, newspaper and magazine articles, as well as entire books, have been written by people who have left Pentecostalism. These personal stories offer valuable sources for many new research initiatives to study narratives of exits and the construction of new identities. However, since they are not systematically organised and samples cannot be standardised, there is little sense in forming any generalisations based on them. Although this is somewhat the

case with all exit stories – they cannot be generalised to include all personal experiences in every situation – by carefully studying every selected case and their backgrounds we can detect some similarities and common causes in exit processes and trajectories. Yet, individual complexities still remain. For this, a systematically collected – and perhaps proportionally selected sample – might tell us more.

3 New Findings Focusing on “leaving religion”

The FPM reached roughly its current size (46,000 members, 224 congregations) already in the 1980s in a country of five million people. Apart from an aging population and natural loss in membership, one reason for the stall in its growth rate has been that a large number (my estimation is in the thousands) of children of Pentecostals have left the FPM or have never become baptised members. When I conducted a survey among Pentecostal congregations, I asked how many people had left their congregation in the past ten years and how many had been expelled. According to the data, larger congregations (more than 800 members) are careful not to expel anybody. The small congregations (less than 100 members) have been relatively more prone to use their power when it comes to a perceived deviant individual than the larger congregations, although the number of people expelled is still small. One significant and crucial explanation for the difference can be found in the large number of lay persons working in congregations. According to my findings, although education and professionalism (for example, the use of trained psychologists) has increased in the FPM, this trend varies greatly between congregations. In larger congregations, professionals are easier to find; in small congregations, there are not enough trained, experienced people. From this it also follows that power can end up in the hands of a few selected individuals, without checks and balances or a concern for ethical practices.

This distorted balance of power and unprofessional practices were among the reasons that my informants expressed as eventually leading to their exit. However, differences between congregations, including size, were an important factor for what kind of experiences they had. Informants from small congregations witnessed different standards for congregational leaders and members; in larger congregations, however, leaders were held more accountable for their actions. Regardless of the size, however, was the matter of how lay leaders and volunteers might act in congregations. These individuals, some calling themselves preachers, could spread fear with their judging sermons and prophecies on how the Devil himself would attack someone, as told to my

informant Annikki (all of the names of the informants in this study have been changed for the sake of anonymity). In and around Pentecostal groups, these deviant actors are common, and their actions can have various effects on congregations and individuals, ranging from supportive to destructive.

While some exit stories included these structural elements of power as the main causes of departure from the FPM, others were more personal and lacked any specific organisational or human object of criticism. Different experiences included learning natural and psychological explanations about the nature of reality, changing one's social circle, and emotional alienation from the Pentecostal emotional world. In regards to the latter in particular, given the intensity of Pentecostal religiosity, people with a more calm mentality and personality can feel themselves alienated from the social experience of that religion. For my informant Urho, central features of Pentecostal practices and belief, ecstatic experiences of falling down, speaking in tongues, and worshipping with hands held high presented a culture which he could never relate to. He did not have strong conflicting emotions; the emotional state and its balance just did not resonate with him.

One crucial explanatory factor for cultural distance and un-relatedness (not feeling a relationship with the religion) is the difference between the conversion experiences of first-generation Pentecostals and the socialisation of children of Pentecostal families. The FPM Pentecostal culture has mainly attracted working-class converts, who tend to make a radical separation with their past. Socialised children have not shared this radical separation of past and Pentecostal life, however, leading to less tension in their lives and attitude towards the outside world, other cultures, and ecstatic expressions and practices of religion. (See Mantsinen 2015a.) Another factor for the un-relatedness includes age-inappropriate exposure to frightening elements of religion (such as the Devil and the apocalypse) without proper explanations and emotional support. Although nowadays in the FPM there is a better understanding of human development of cognition and emotions, problems of conduct do still emerge, and due to the large degree of lay involvement in ministry, not all are sufficiently trained.

What is common in all the interviewees' stories is an expressed discrepancy between their personal experience of themselves and the world and what they think the Pentecostal culture promotes. Previously this conflict has been approached through psychology (for example, examining conflicts in one's belief, identity, or cognitive reasoning). Simplified, however, the basic idea is the same: a new, conflicting idea arises to challenge an existing idea and state of balance. This conflict has been described, for example, as dissonance (Festinger 1957), imbalance (Heider 1958), incongruity (Osgood and Tannenbaum 1955),

self-inconsistency (Epstein 1980), or self-discrepancy (Higgins 1987; Stanley and Burrow 2015). A failure to relate to the Pentecostal culture, along with its practices and beliefs imposed by social pressure, can cause an emotional-cognitive break from it. If we follow the basic assumption that people seek balance in their life (for example Festinger 1957), a discrepancy will lead to a search for a solution from another place. If there is no alternative solution available, as was the case for some of my informants, they can find themselves adrift without any social and emotional support.

One possible way to study this imbalance would be to detect stress factors and the pressure point at which the exit would happen. Such analysis should include individual factors, but also the social field and the available compensators and possibilities. If there is no easy way to leave and switch to an existing alternative and more balanced position, stress and pressure can begin to grow and cause problems. Also, if the stress level is high, the rupture can be brutal. This was the case for a few of my informants, who experienced problems ranging from depression to anxiety attacks and mild psychosis. Some have eased their way into a new position, but for all of them the process has been a journey with potential stress and at least some cognitive challenges in finding a new identity in another reality. Therefore, it is also important to study which factors influence the quality of the exit process.

For some of my informants, the discrepancy arose as a result of concrete actions, such as being subjected to an exorcism or a prophecy of an impending attack by the Devil. For others, it was a result of losing a meaningful relationship with the religion – or never having had one. This includes a lack of personal relevance around such experiences as speaking in tongues. Pentecostalism can be an intense experience. People with a different temperament, who may wish for a more peaceful life or religion, can easily feel disconnected from the culture of their parents. Social ties can compensate to some degree, but they cannot overcome everything.

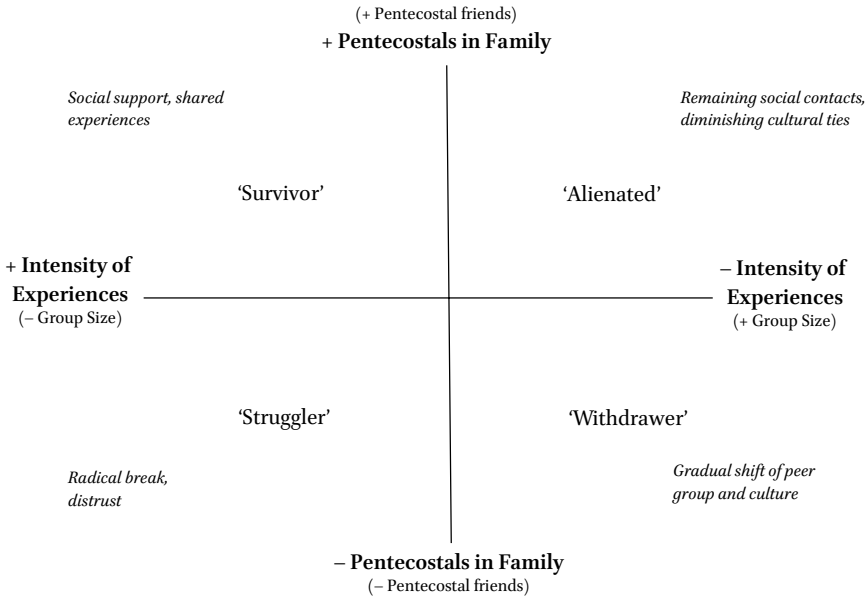
All leavers and their experiences are unique, but individual stories can be lost in popular discussion on the particular religion and group they are leaving, including its shortcomings and downfalls. A general analysis of social dynamics also dismisses the variety of issues and reasons which are specific to each case. Not all who leave become atheists or join another religious group. It is important to determine other positions as well, and to analyse the processes leading to them. In my research, I have worked to define the leavers, their positions as leavers, and their processes of leaving. As a result, I have proposed two specific typologies: leaver processes and leaver positions. The former introduces the cultural positions of leavers, defined by factors of their relation

to religion in general and religion in particular. The latter introduces the main causes which influence the process and how a person copes with the process. (Mantsinen 2015b.)

I was interested not only in the exit processes, but also their outcomes. For this I sought first to locate the current cultural positions of my informants. While Brinkerhoff and Burke defined one's individual sociocultural position towards religion with factors of religiosity and communality (Brinkerhoff and Burke 1980: 42–44), Richardson, van der Lans, and Derks (1986) put importance on which actors (for example, self, community, outsiders) are relevant in the exit. To categorise exit types, Streib and his research group used Troeltsch's and Bourdieu's categories to define clear positions between which people move (Streib et al. 2009: 25–32, 97–99, 235–238). These and other definitions are important to define the nature and event of an exit. In my work, however, I have been more interested in how ex-members position themselves towards their past, namely, their subjective positioning and relation to cultural categories. For this, I find how one relates to religion in general and one's own religion in particular to be relevant defining criteria of subjective location. (Mantsinen 2015b.)

I divided these two criteria into four-by-four set of category locations. With relation to religion in general, the groups were: member of another religious group, religious individual, agnostic, and atheist. With relation to religion in particular, the groups were: accepting, understanding, critical, and rejecting. These positions also help us to accept the complexity of the categories. For example, being an atheist does not have to presuppose hostility towards a religious group. One can be an understanding atheist, as seen in the attitude of Suvi, a young educated woman, towards her former congregation. She explains charismatic phenomena with psychological models, and she has no direct connection to Pentecostalism anymore. Nevertheless, she still speaks of the social importance of the congregation to its members, and she would not dare to condemn that specific religion altogether. In contrast, Kyllikki has switched to another religious group and considers Pentecostalism dangerous for people.

As I analysed the stories and answers of my informants, I found two major common denominators which influenced how they had experienced their exit processes: the severity of their experiences and the number of Pentecostals in their family (namely, the number of Pentecostal generations). The latter also translates to the nature of parental conversion experiences, which can have a significant effect on one's socialisation and cultural immersion in Pentecostalism. In my research, I have found that converted parents tend to have more conservative morals than socialised parents, who approach their religion as



GRAPH 14.1 Types of leavers from Finnish Pentecostalism

an inherited culture rather than life-altering experience, an interruption. In addition, social support in the form of Pentecostal friends added to the family factor, and group size compensated for the intensity of personal experiences. For the main defining factors, I named the four constructed leaver types as “survivor,” “struggler,” “alienated,” and “withdrawer.” (Graph 14.1.)

Among my informants, those who had had intense experiences but enjoyed sufficient social support – such as Saima, who was part of a larger group of leavers from a small congregation – described themselves as “survivors,” as they had found new groups and acceptance in their lives. Having traumatic experiences and a lack of support, Annikki still struggled to find her place and peace. In contrast to her case, “alienated” individuals had social support and had not had intense experiences. For example, Urho still has many Pentecostal friends but simply has no connection to the Pentecostal emotional world. As a more private person, Suvi was at peace with her experiences, but a gradual shift towards another peer group and interests led her to withdraw from Pentecostalism. These four leaver types help us to understand major themes in the exit processes. However, the lines between them are not definite, and some individuals could be located in-between two or more types. Every situation is unique and should be approached as such.

4 Conclusion

The FPM has not been successful in remaining relevant for a large number of children who grew in Pentecostal congregations. The reasons for and consequences of exits are numerous. Social support has been one important factor in how leavers have processed discrepancies in their personal experiences in the Pentecostal cultural field. While some reject religion altogether, others find the problem to lie with Pentecostal congregational culture, not Christianity or religion in general.

Social support can help in the exit process, but leavers usually also leave networks of support before gaining new ones. This has led a few of my informants to feeling disconnected. Families can provide a buffer against strict congregational teachings, such as restrictions surrounding alcohol and sexual behaviour. However, religious culture in the family can also be a reason for leaving. Converted parents restrict their children more often than those parents with a Pentecostal background.

Reasons for leaving Pentecostalism vary, but a crucial issue for children of Pentecostal families is the generational difference in culture and habits. Traditional Pentecostal culture often reflects the conversion experience, radical separation from the past and “the world,” and the intensity of religion of first-generation Pentecostals. Subsequent generations do not share that tension, and therefore their experience of life and religion can lead to a personal crisis.

The case of Pentecostalism raises a few noteworthy issues. The first issue involves the different consequences of conversion and socialisation for subsequent generations, as explained above. A second issue is the problem of continuation of culture in Pentecostalism. This has not been a key interest of research in the academic field, as researchers are used to approaching Pentecostalism as a conversion-centred, expansionist religion with phenomena which intrigues them. However, the intensity of first-generation Pentecostal converts' religion and the poor adjustment of subsequent generations to this culture, which they have not lived and they cannot relate to, are not only peculiar to Finland. Third, approaching apostasy as an emotional-cognitive discrepancy prompting cultural mobility can help us understand the process of leaving religion, in general and from Pentecostalism in particular.

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Leaving Roman Catholicism

Hugh Turpin

1 Introduction

This chapter presents the Republic of Ireland as a case study in how a once deeply Catholic society is renegotiating its relationship with religion. It draws on my own research to describe the particular style of exit these conditions encourage for those leaving the Catholic Church. Existing Irish secularisation literature demonstrates that changes in social expectations led to a collapse in embodied religiosity. While this has likely reduced the overall transmission and importance of Catholic belief and identity, the Church retains significant institutional influence, supported by widespread “cultural Catholic” affiliation. A series of scandals has acted as a lightning rod for the tensions implicit in this situation, “morally contaminating” the Church and enabling discourse around the rectitude of Catholic affiliation. Together, these contribute to morally charged secularism focussed on severing the default link between Irish ethnic and religious identity to erode lingering Church influence. Against this background, Irish ex-Catholics do not simply leave the Church; many also depict themselves as repudiating “inauthentic” cultural Catholicism which irresponsibly supports the *status quo*.

2 Previous Research and Empirical Material

Catholic population growth exceeds the global average, but the Church is weakening in its old heartlands. Latin American Pentecostalism booms at Catholicism’s expense (Robbins, 2004), and 13 percent of the US population describe themselves as *former* Catholics.¹ In Europe, Catholicism’s cradle, some projections anticipate eventual religious extinction in Catholic states,² surprisingly including “Holy Catholic Ireland”, once renowned for its commitment to

1 Pew (2015). *America’s Changing Religious Landscape*. <http://www.pewforum.org/2015/05/12/americas-changing-religious-landscape/>. Accessed 10/3/2017.

2 BBC News. “Religion may become extinct in nine nations, study finds” <http://www.bbc.com/news/science-environment-12811197>. Accessed 10/3/2017.

the One True Church (Fuller, 2002). While excellent work exists on leaving Catholic religious vocations (Ebaugh, 1977, 1984; Hollingsworth, 1985), and on individual disaffiliation trajectories (for the United States, see Hornbeck 11, 2011; for Germany, see Knepper, 2012), this chapter adopts a macro-level perspective, examining an example of *national* departure from Catholic religiosity, and the conflicting social positions that ensue.

Sociologists long considered the Republic of Ireland a pious Western European outlier (Nic Ghiolla Phádraig, 2009), with religiosity more typical of the US (Norris and Ingleharte, 2011). Neo-secularisationists attributed this to Catholicism's key role in defining the national community, an anomalous situation in secularising Western Europe (Bruce, 1992; Taylor, 2007). Anti-secularisationists found solace in the Irish case (Ó Féich and O'Connell, 2015; Ganiel, 2016), claiming that the "need to believe" can prevail in the face of declining institutional and public religion (Davie, 1994).

Now, though the majority still identify as Catholic (78.3 percent, Census 2016), self-identification as nonreligious is rising (growing from 269,800 to 468,400 people between 2011 and 2016, a relative increase of 73.6 percent – Census, 2016; recent data indicates that 25 percent of 14–25 year-olds identify as atheist, agnostic or "none" – Barna, 2017). There is little evidence of religious switching (Egan, 2011), unlike in the US (Bottan and Perez-Truglia, 2015). Religious vocations have collapsed (Weafer, 2014), and religious practice is declining rapidly (weekly mass went from 85 percent in 1980 to 35 percent in 2012 – Ganiel, 2016). Agreement with Church moral stances is low (O'Mahoney, 2010; Barna, 2017) and institutional distrust is high (Donnelly and Inglis, 2010). Qualitative work also suggests widespread antipathy towards the Church and religious scepticism outstripping that suggested by surveys (Hilliard, 2003; Inglis, 2014). Outwardly, the Republic must be described as "leaving Catholicism." The most analogous case of large-scale Catholic secularisation may turn out to be Quebec's "quiet revolution" during the 1960s (Seljak, 1996), a decoupling of religious and ethnic identity whereby the rejection of Catholicism no longer constituted "ethno-apostasy" (Philips and Kelner, 2006; Deringil, 2012). Yet there is disagreement regarding application of the term "secularisation" in the Irish Catholic case. To understand this, we must examine Irish Catholicism from its peak to the present.

The Irish Catholic "doctrinal revolution" in the mid-19th Century ushered in an era of highly observant Catholicism (Larkin, 1976; Inglis, 1998; Fuller, 2002). Proposed causes include the Famine and consequent population collapse of the rural poor (Connolly, 2001), a cultural identity crisis (Larkin, 1976), the need to limit the fragmentation of inherited landholdings (Inglis, 1998; Connolly, 2001), zealous Church reform (Larkin, 1976; Connolly, 2001), the desire to

be as “civilised” as the Protestant British (Fuller, 2002), and British support for the Church as a pacifying influence (Inglis, 1998). Larkin portrays a devotional smorgasbord featuring not only regular Mass, confession and communion, but also “the rosary, forty hours, perpetual adoration, novenas, blessed altars, Via Crucis, benediction, vespers, devotion to the Sacred Heart and to the Immaculate Conception, jubilees, triduums, pilgrimages, shrines, processions, and retreats (Larkin, 1976: 77).”

Mass attendance rose to 95 percent, a figure that persisted for almost a century. Clerical pre-eminence was strengthened under the new Republic (1937), the Church's hold reinforced by control of healthcare and education. Writers and social historians describe omnipresent religious inflection, with widespread clericalism and sexual prohibition (McGahern, 1974; Ferriter, 2009; Inglis, 1998). Social capital accrued to those best able to project pious signals, dubbed the “Irish Catholic habitus”, cultivated at home by the traditional “Irish mother”, who strove to carve out a niche of domestic power within a highly patriarchal society by embodying the Church's picture of feminine virtue (Inglis, 1998). Although scepticism and dissent certainly existed, public and private life was lived in the shadow of the ethno-Catholic sacred canopy.

From the late 1960s onwards, cultural and economic globalisation gradually relativised the Faith (Inglis, 1998; Fuller, 2002). Women entered the workforce, reducing female piety and weakening the “priest/mother” religious socialisation alliance. Television provided a new class of cultural commentator over whom the Church eventually lost control. The 70s saw objection to the Church's anti-contraceptive stance (embodied in the papal encyclical *Humanae Vitae*) galvanise the first large-scale emergence of female anti-clerical protest (Forster, 2007; Ganiel, 2016). Vatican II proved disruptive, alienating the aged by overturning cherished rituals and certainties while failing to reign in straying youth (Fuller, 2002; O'Doherty, 2008). For many, practise became almost openly habitual, something Ferriter attempts to capture with the term “practising lapsed Catholics” (Ferriter, 2012).

Though the ethnic tie remained inviolable, the diktats of the Church increasingly seemed anachronistic to youth socialised from the 70s onwards, precipitating the emergence of Catholics less inclined to turn to the Church for moral or spiritual leadership. The Catholic habitus declined; Catholicism “Protestantised”, requiring neither outward expression nor the imprimatur of an external authority. Traditional Catholicism became an ageing subculture yielding to purely “cultural” or idiosyncratically “creative” varieties (Inglis, 1998); the majority reconnected with institutional religion sporadically during rites of passage. Privatisation accelerated when clerical sexual abuse of children, cover-ups, and numerous other scandals erupted into the limelight from

the early 1990s onwards and “tainted the role of the Church as carer, and portrayed it instead as abuser” (Inglis, 1998:227).

Sociological disagreement re-emerges around how to interpret a large majority who identify as Catholic, professing theism while rejecting religious practice and Church moral strictures. Some focus on declining institutional influence and practice to suggest that the Republic fits traditional notions of secularisation quite well (White, 2007; Voas, 2009). Others are more ambiguous (Inglis, 1998; Penet, 2008), while most adopt an optimistic “private Catholicism” model primarily based on high Catholic identification and theistic survey self-reports (Greeley, 1994; Cassidy, 2002; Anderson and Lavan, 2007; Ó Féich and O’Connell, 2015), influenced by Grace Davie’s formulation of “believing without belonging” (Davie, 1994). While Church hegemony is unquestionably waning, a recent analysis also concludes that Catholicism may re-evolve to attract “spiritual consumers” within an emerging “religious marketplace” (Ganiel, 2016).

Recent work in the anthropology and psychology of religion encourages greater caution around stable privatised Catholic belief. The embargo on belief within the social anthropology of religion (Needham, 1972; Ruel, 1982) has diminished due to current trends within the anthropology of Christianity emphasising its effortful cultivation (Luhmann, 2012), requiring us to describe the social mechanisms by which believing is achieved (for example Mair, 2013); current anthropological theory might hesitate to agree that on-paper identification as a believer always amounts to *being* a believer. Furthermore, survey self-reports may reflect socially desirable responding arising from unreflective “fuzzy fidelity” (Voas, 2009), and Irish data from the European Values Survey (EVS) suggest that the perceived importance of religion is declining alongside practice (cited in Keenan, 2012; Voas, 2009). At the same time, work in the anthropology of Catholicism notes the widespread acceptance of “lapsed” or “cultural” Catholics; identification with Catholicism is often not particularly belief-oriented (Norget *et al*, 2017). The “optimistic model”, however, suggests that non-practicing Irish Catholics tend to be *believers* because the majority survey-report belief; identificatory and doxastic self-reports are thus fused to yield privatised Catholic theism. Lastly, problems for the optimistic model are also suggested by work on the psychology of religious transmission, which proposes that behavioural displays of commitment (regular ritual participation, financial donation, observation of taboo, and so on) are especially important components in successful intergenerational religious transmission (Henrich, 2009), with initial correlational studies suggesting that exposure to such “credibility enhancing displays” (CREDS) plays a role in determining levels of theism/atheism (Lanman and Buhrmester, 2016) and intercultural variations in religiosity between otherwise similar cultures (Willard and Cingl, in press).

My own research investigated the interrelationships between declining practice, Church scandals, and belief. The research consisted of interviews carried out in a number of Dublin parishes with both religious and non-religious individuals, religious personnel, and members of prominent secularist groups, followed by a survey aimed at examining, among other things, the relationship between exposure to parental behaviour indexing Catholic religiosity and the subsequent acceptance of Catholic religious beliefs.

3 New Findings Focusing on “Leaving Religion”

Religious informants identified parental failure to “pass on the faith” as crucial to the decline of religiosity, and the survey found the degree to which people perceived their parents’ actions to be motivated by religious belief was the best predictor of acceptance of theism, orthodox Catholic belief, and Catholic social identification. Furthermore, it appeared that younger cohorts perceived parental behaviour to be less motivated by religion (Turpin, forthcoming). This could suggest that the replacement of embodied doctrinal Catholicism with the internalised variety proposed by Irish sociologists constitutes a reduction in the embodied transmission of Catholic belief and identity. Catholic “believing without practicing” may be a transitory bridge to unbelief (for example Voas, 2009) rather than a new, transmissible form of religiosity (for example Davie, 1994).

More devout privatised Catholicism also rewards investigation. Informants who retained strong Catholic belief and identity but also rejected the moral leadership of the institutional Church tended to report a Catholic upbringing to which they felt some need to maintain a link; it was “their culture” (see also Egan, 2011; Inglis, 2014). Thus, some de-institutionalised Catholicism could issue from a temporary species of “cross pressure” (Taylor, 2007) where a deeply rooted social identification with Catholicism conflicts with a more liberal environment and values. A privatised interpretive “take-over” from the Church resolves this dissonance, allowing “modernity” to be embraced and Catholic identification retained, albeit relatively unexpressed. However, for subsequent generations receiving lower “CRED exposure” as a result, Catholicism will constitute a more alien supernatural product. Thus, even if a post-Catholic “religious marketplace” should emerge, the Catholic share of that marketplace is far from guaranteed.

This overall situation might entail only a fade into something functionally analogous to an established state church such as in the UK; secularisationists such as Demerath (2000) and Voas (2009) describe how European

secularisation trajectories can plateau at a minimally committed state of “cultural religion”, perhaps a plausible destiny in any society where religious and ethnic identity are so intertwined. However, such a trajectory is complicated by two further interconnected factors: moral inversion and lingering influence.

Whereas non-religion in some Western European contexts is characterised as apathetic (Zuckerman, 2008), in the Republic it is often self-conscious and charged; Catholicism is ever an issue (Ganiel, 2016), and many ex-Catholics view the Church and Catholicism in a highly negative moral light, as comprehensively expressed by the following ex-Catholic informant:

It has created a lot of guilt and oppression for generations. It has been used to control and punish people and has slowed down the country’s intellectual and economic development. It has particularly had a negative effect on women’s rights and helped to establish the view that all women are seen either as virgins, mothers or whores and that they do not hold the rights to their own bodies, either in terms of sex or reproduction (which are two separate things). It held such a choke-hold on the country that it was able to, for years, facilitate the physical, sexual and psychological abuse of children by hypocritical authoritarian priests who preached one thing and did another and whose offences were routinely covered up as a matter of course in a society where lay people feared speaking out against the regime of the Catholic Church.

This antipathy also emerges in an analysis of 2008 EVS data from 14 western European countries; the Republic had both the strongest anti-religious sentiment and the widest endorsement of religion (Ribberink *et al.*, 2013). We can speak both of a growing self-consciously anti-religious minority and a larger vaguely “pro-religious” group who retain a Catholic identity while nevertheless rejecting the Church: a 2011 survey by the conservative Catholic Iona Institute found that almost half (47 percent) of the population had a negative view of the Church, and 25 percent would be unperturbed if it disappeared entirely.³

This widespread negative view may be motivated by a mixture of distrust (Donnelly and Inglis, 2010) and rejection of moral conservatism (Barna, 2017). Donnelly and Inglis found that trust in the Church had decreased more quickly in Ireland than in other European Catholic societies since the 1990s. The Iona data relate this attitudinal shift to sexual and institutional abuse revelations

3 “Attitudes Towards the Catholic Church,” <http://www.ionainstitute.ie/wp-content/uploads/2014/11/Attitudes-to-Church-poll.pdf>. Accessed 10/3/2017.

(Iona, 2011). My own survey on rejection factors found that moral conservatism and clerical abuse were the two most emphasised factors in disaffiliation. Compared to other Catholic societies, the effect of the scandals is likely amplified in Ireland as the Church's prior moral hegemony foregrounds the hypocrisy of its fall from grace (Inglis, 1998; Hilliard, 2003; Keenan, 2012).

The depletion of religious practice has likely been exacerbated by such revelations; many attribute their own declining religious participation to Church scandals (Hilliard, 2003), with practice declining more swiftly over the "era of scandal" than the preceding decades (Donnelly and Inglis, 2010; Bottan and Perez-Truglia, 2015). Clerical interviewees, too, corroborated this picture, describing wavering religious confidence among even "old, faithful people." At the interpersonal level, family religious pressure became easier to resist (Hilliard, 2003), and some devout individuals withdrew in shame from the established mechanisms of public theistic expression (Egan, 2011). For instance, one non-religious informant recalled successfully resisting his mother's attempts to force him to Mass as a teenager: "There I was with my Ma banging on the bathroom door and I says to her, I says, 'Why the fuck should I go there and listen to that bunch of paedophile priests and the paedophile nuns that protect them?'"

Whether clerical abuse has directly accelerated declining religiosity or has acted to provide a cultural narrative legitimising a socially tense transformation that was already well underway is an uncertain matter. It is likely that the scandals fell on fertile ground (O'Doherty, 2008), empowering religious resistance and perhaps even drawing latent moral opposition into acute conscious awareness (Keane, 2015), precipitating exit from a default cultural Catholicism often described to me as marked by experiences of boredom, irrelevance, and transparent social conformism. At the same time, some traditional or conservative Catholics have incorporated such reactions into their own narratives, maintaining that the scandals were widely exploited to abandon religious participation: as one conservative priest phrased it, "those who were looking for an excuse to leave got what they wanted very nicely."

While some priests were particularly daunted by situations that required them to go into Dublin city centre in clerical attire, maintaining that a trend had emerged for priests to go "incognito" in secular clothing, a "very Irish thing" (see also Goode *et al*, 2003, for priestly attire as "paedophile uniform"), I also encountered the view that overt hostility "peaked around 10 or 15 years ago... we've mostly moved beyond that sort of thing now." Irish society cannot be said to have moved *back* though. Habituation to religious scandal is evident from its presence in comedy (for example, in the work of Dublin comedian David McSavage) and *noir*-tinted period drama, with the alliterative term "paedo

priest” long since etched into public consciousness.⁴ Paradoxically, the “paedo priest” trope can even be instrumentalised to legitimise *staying* Catholic while rejecting hierarchical claims to authority on Catholicism’s meaning. Liberated from subordination to a corrupt clergy’s theology, a self-tailored “moral therapeutic deism” can be inserted into the socially-approved husk of ethnic Catholic affiliation (for example Smith, 2005). Given the sheer salience of clerical abuse, intergroup distinctions may lie not in levels of awareness but rather by how the “taint” is handled by various actors to legitimise their orientation towards Catholic belief and identification.

What we can say with greater certainty is that the Church’s “moral taint” means that committed engagement now requires more justification (for example Ganiel, 2016; Egan, 2011). This is a problem for committed Catholics, whose moral intuitions (for example Haidt and Joseph, 2004) can pull in different directions: they may evoke disgust while being compelled to remain loyal to their religious identity, with various reconciliation strategies addressing this “moral dissonance.” “Bad apple” theories quarantine the moral taint from the institutional Church. Deflection strategies emphasise feelings of personal victimhood, repositioning Catholics as a vulnerable and stigmatised group at the mercy of those who are “anti-Church, anti-religion, anti-everything, really”, as one young Catholic woman averred, and as manifests repeatedly in conservative Catholic media discourse defending a cowed “silent majority” against a liberal elite cabal intent on hastening secularisation – for instance, one conservative Catholic media article prophesied a futuristic Orwellian scenario where Irish Catholics would have to identify one another with secret handshakes and symbols. Alternatively, the mainstream Church, and with it the taint, can be rejected outright, with reformist splinter factions embraced instead. Conversely, the taint can be spread wide, and a complicit society constructed as scapegoating the Church. The range of these self-conscious justificatory strategies highlights the fragmentation and inefficacy of Catholic narratives in forming popular consensus (for example Haidt and Joseph, 2004; Keane, 2015); such viewpoints lack large scale media exposure and are easily branded “excuses”, or brushed off as “brainwashed” or “conspiracist.”

Secular narratives by contrast are powerfully reinforced by scandal, offering the opportunity, the *duty*, of liberation from the clutches of a repressive past. Whereas this “revisionist view” was once the province of a minority (Ruane, 1998), it has long since spread out on wings of scandal (Browne, 2012): ex-Catholicism is now a powerful moral stance. An example of this is the following

4 For instance: <https://www.joe.ie/uncategorized/paedo-priests-face-slashed-in-prison-13635>. Accessed 4/11/2017.

testimony from an ex-Catholic in her thirties. Initially describing her incredulity about a society which permitted “priests running around killing women and children. Like, separating women and children, selling babies, then burying them in mass graves and then ugh, God!”, she describes her feelings around a family member’s acquiescence in cultural Catholic practices:

Yesterday, my sister baptised her second child. I am disgusted. I’m sure it was the first time she has been in a church since the baptism of her first child, before that, her wedding. I’m sure the real reason is to fit in, or to please my older family members, not that they would have asked her to do it. Maybe because she’s not sure about what to believe. Maybe she wants to be able to get the kids into a school more easily...the reason is definitely not because she believes... although she would argue that it is, to defend her actions.

We can see from the frustration evident above that full secularisation is impeded by the fact that the vast majority continue to identify as Catholic, seen as preserving Church influence consolidated during a more religious age. This perception that the Church is both waning *and* retaining influence allows for the simultaneous existence of strong anti-religion among the non-religious and vestigial Catholicism in the larger “Church rejecting” block. Indeed, Church influence could be sustained by its increased subordination; lacking the same level of dictatorial strength, it is more easily ignored and tolerated, called upon when needed. Older people in particular still turn to it for a sense of community and comfort, generating pressure on family members not to disturb them by openly defecting, and a large majority continue to enjoy traditional Catholic rites of passage. Indeed, the sheer centrality of these to Irish social identity has led the Church to strategise that this “anthropological link” might be exploited as a means of re-evangelisation,⁵ perhaps explaining its tenacious hold on the education system, where it strives to impart Catholic beliefs, rituals, and values disregarded by increasingly disengaged parents.

The devout thus exhort cultural Catholics to find their faith, while secularists encourage them to drop their passive support for a morally reprehensible institution, meaning Irish ex-Catholicism is perhaps notable for its propensity to define itself in opposition to cultural religion as much as devout religion. Though nonchalant popular Catholicism could be viewed as a strategic

5 *Where is your God? Responding to the Challenge of Unbelief and Religious Indifference Today*. Concluding Document of the 2006 Plenary Assembly. <http://www.cultura.va/content/cultura/en/pub/documenti/whereisyourgod.html>. Accessed 4/2/2017.

triumph, allowing individuals to take what they want from a humbled Church, the compromise causes problems for those who seek a more complete breach. Ongoing confusion around Catholic census identification, for example, is compounded by the fact that 90 percent of primary schools are under Catholic Church patronage, creating difficulties for those wishing to raise children without what one side describes as religious indoctrination and the other, faith formation. The key objective for some secularist groups is to drive down habitual Catholic identification among the inertial middle, dislodging the hold of the Church and ridding society of institutional-religious obstacles and Catholicism-inflected laws. A prime mechanism for this is drawing attention to the Church's hypocrisies, which provide potent content for getting "complacent Catholics" to reassess a "contaminated" affiliation.

The 2017 Tuam scandal provided a particularly clear example of such "weaponisation." Archaeologists employed by a commission of enquiry discovered a "significant amount" of infant remains interred in a decommissioned septic tank at a former home for "unmarried mothers" run by the Bon Secours nuns. This prompted a surge in public condemnation, energising online secularist groups in particular. Responses were characterised by moral disgust, with the entire Church frequently portrayed as contaminated. There was chagrin that religious acquaintances could remain associated with such a "murderous" institution, even promising to "pray for the little babies." Petitions emerged demanding the re-introduction of an official mechanism for de-baptism and an end to Church educational and health involvement. Apart from religious institutions themselves, the strongest antagonism coalesced around conservative spokespeople shifting blame from Catholicism onto general society, and habitual Catholics constructed as oblivious enablers of ongoing clerical domination. This new wave of scandal potentially describes Catholicism itself almost as a moral infection, distinguishing it from "quarantinable" clerical sexual abuse. It also further contributes to the de-legitimisation of the majority cultural Catholic default. Whether or not greater numbers of the "inertial middle" drop a Catholic affiliation thereby precipitating acceleration in the Republic's institutional secularisation remains to be seen.

4 Conclusion

This chapter sought to provide a case study of how a once particularly Catholic society can now be said to be leaving Catholicism. While much of the existing literature argues that Ireland is best viewed as merely dropping public practice while privatising Catholic belief, I have argued that continuing reduction

in embodied displays of religiosity is reducing the overall importance and transmission of Catholicism. Meanwhile a series of scandals has morally contaminated the Church, rendering devout Catholicism something that must be explained. Despite this, the Church retains significant influence in certain areas of Irish life, and the majority continue to think of themselves as Catholic, at least in an ethnic sense. Together, these contribute to a strident secularist minority focussed on severing the default link between Irish ethnic and religious identification in order to erode lingering Church control. This dynamic is likely to persist into the future.

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Leaving Mormonism

Amorette Hinderaker

1 Introduction

In March 2017, a counter-organisational website made national headlines after its release of internal documents belonging to the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (henceforth LDS) drew legal threats from the Church. MormonLeaks, a WikiLeaks inspired website launched in December 2016, released internal Church documents including financial records and memos that were largely ignored by Church officials. It was the March posting of a Power Point presentation detailing “issues and concerns leading people away from the gospel” (www.mormonleaks.io), however, that raised Church ire. Following a take-down order, the document was removed for a few days before being restored with an attorney’s letter. In the meanwhile, several media outlets had already captured and published the content. Both the content and the Church’s protection of the document suggest an organisational concern over member retention.

With 16.1 million members worldwide (Statistical Report 2017), the LDS, whose followers are commonly referred to as Mormons, is a rapidly growing faith and the only uniquely American religion to gain global acceptance. Like many faiths, the Church is concerned with new member conversion. In addition to children born into the faith each year, the church baptises nearly 250,000 new converts through their active missionary system (Statistical Report 2017). But, as new converts join, a number of the formerly faithful leave. The Pew Forum (2015) reports that Americans, particularly young adults, are leaving churches in record numbers, with a third of millennials reporting that they are religiously unaffiliated. This trend, coupled with the interest the Church has shown (through leaked documents) in reasons members leave makes a consideration of Mormon exit particularly pertinent.

2 Introducing the Case

Leaving Mormonism is, arguably, more complicated than abandoning less encompassing faiths. Unlike other faiths, the LDS is rigidly structured and

highly institutionalised, leaving little room for member individualism or disagreement. Church headquarters in Salt Lake City maintains tight controls over local ward operations including lessons, teachings, and cultural practices. Hinderaker (2015) and Hinderaker and O'Connor (2015) characterised the faith as *totalistic*, for its reach into members' lives. We defined totalistic memberships as value-based, identity formational, involving primary family and friend relationships, and requiring fealty.

To contemplate leaving Mormonism is to consider leaving behind fundamental and identity formational values, cultural practices, beliefs, and primary relationships.

The cultural and doctrinal practices of the LDS, arguably, foster a more totalistic membership than other churches. To begin, doctrine labels those who leave the faith as apostates, a sin that separates the former member from both God and faithful family members eternally. Scripture teaches: "But whoso breaketh this covenant after he hath received it, and altogether turneth therefrom, shall not have forgiveness of sins in this world nor in the world to come" (*The Doctrine and Covenants* 84:41), and members "that are found to have apostatised, or to have been cut off from the church, as well as the lesser priesthood, or the members, in that day shall not find an inheritance among the saints of the Most High" (*The Doctrine and Covenants* 85:11). Mormonism is a religion based in the doctrine of apostasy. The church considers itself a restoration faith, a re-establishment of God's one true church and priesthood authority on Earth. Rejection of the gospel is akin to rejecting God—a sin that cannot be atoned in death. Eternal separation from family members, further, is doctrinally dictated by the Mormon practice of temple marriage, which seals spouses and all children born of their marriage together eternally (*The Doctrine and Covenants* 132:19). Breaking the covenant of temple endowment, thus, endangers the eternal family.

The cultural practices of Mormonism create a tight-knit religious community that is consuming of the member's life. Members are expected to maintain organisational values in their everyday lives that include austerity and refraining from coarse language, alcohol, cigarettes, and caffeine. Faithful members who attend temple wear sacred garments daily under all clothing as a constant reminder of their covenant with God. Givens (1997) noted that Mormons spend more time in church than other faiths, both attending multiple hour services on Sunday and engaging in weekday church activities. Shippy (2000) connected the strong sense of Mormon community to the Church's history of communal living and separation. She likened the Mormon move to Utah in 1847 to an American diaspora that created a culture of self-reliance that the current church still retains.

The 2011 Pew Research Center report on Mormons in America (*The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, 2011*) supported the modern Mormon communal identity Givens (1997) and Shipps (2000) promoted. The report noted that 82 percent still say that their religion is very important in their everyday lives, and 77 percent say that they wholeheartedly believe all of the faith's teachings. This connection to the Church is demonstrated even more starkly in the Pew report's finding that 85 percent of married Mormons are married to other Mormons; a percentage higher than that of other faiths including Catholics (78 percent). Further, 57 percent of Mormons surveyed at large, and 73 percent of those living in Utah said that most or all of their friends are Mormon. The Pew report notes that while Mormons indicate high levels of community and religious commitment, non-Mormons still criticise the faith, most frequently using the word "cult" to describe it. Shipps (2000) and Givens (1997) both attributed modern public perceptions of Mormonism as a cult to the communal and polygamist history of the faith, and noted that this criticism serves to create the modern Mormon identity. These historical and doctrinal roots of the Mormon faith serve to tether the member tightly to the church, and make exit both risky and difficult.

3 Previous Research and Empirical Material

Considered from a communicative standpoint, organisational exit is situated within Jablin's (1984, 1987, 2001) phasic model of assimilation (anticipatory socialisation, encounter, metamorphosis, exit). Assimilation literature recognises the inherent tie between socialisation and later exit. Values instilled in the socialisation process are the ties that members must break during exit. Jablin advanced the study of exit (2001) with addition of a staged model of exit including preannouncement, announcement/exit, and post-exit organisational sensemaking. Research in corporate environments has treated exit as failure to metamorphose (Carr et al. 2006; DiSanza 1995; Gibson and Papa 2000; Jablin 1984; Myers 2005), or the "inevitable conclusion" (Kramer 2010: 186) of membership. The notable exception was Kramer's (2011) study of volunteers leaving a choir. His finding that volunteers simply stopped showing up, leaving the door open to future return, suggested that unpaid members engage in a fluid exit that does not involve a formal announcement, or a difficult post-exit sensemaking. My own work studying exit from the LDS (Hinderaker 2015; Hinderaker and O'Connor 2015), however, suggests that the process of leaving a totalistic faith community mirrors neither the phasic nature of corporate exit, nor the fluid exit of volunteers.

To exit a totalistic faith is to leave not only an organisation, but the core identity. Research on religious exit has articulated this tie to identity. In their study of Orthodox Judaism, Davidman and Greil (2007) noted that exit entails leaving behind the cultural script taught to describe religious identities, leaving ex-members without a language to describe their new selves. Avance (2013) treated online exit stories as expressions of deconversion testimony that allow construction of a new ex-Mormon identity. Many such websites exist, providing a glance at the lived experiences of those leaving faiths.¹

4 New Findings Focusing on “Leaving Religion”

Findings presented here represent a combined summary of data from my previously published works on leaving Mormonism (Hinderaker 2015; Hinderaker and O'Connor 2015) to offer the reader a broader picture of apostasy and exit from the LDS. All quotations are taken from these two works. The findings summary presented here represents a combined data set of 100 narratives gathered over a two-year period from online communities (www.postmormon.org and www.exmormon.org), and analysed as microstories, or single tellings of lived experiences. Boje advanced the use of microstoria analysis as a rich reading of stories not of the elite of an organisation, but of the “little people” (Boje 2001: 45) living within organisational confines. Boje (2001) refers to this bottom-up constructed narrative as “antenarrative,” or outside the predominant organisational story, but predictive of future narrative. Consistent with Boje’s method, narratives in the studies summarised here were coded with an abductive process that assumes an organisational truth as members experience it, and an approximate truth of theory’s ability to predict and explain based on previous literature, then coded for emic typologies to compare to existing research. Analysis provides, then, a picture of both individual exit experiences, and a larger grand narrative of leaving Mormonism.

The narrative of exit that emerged mirrored neither the corporate exit of previous research, nor the fluid volunteer exit process Kramer (2011) observed. Exit was described as a “journey,” or “traveling the road out” that was neither short nor linear. Rather, former Mormons described initiating, stopping, then reinitiating the exit process multiple times. Exit was reached through

1 A number of ex-Mormon online communities exist including exmormon.org, postmormon.org. Sites for former members to connect in real life or on social media include exmormonsunite.com, an ex-Mormon Meetup.com page, and a Facebook group for ex-Mormons.

a prolonged process of testing exit, returning to faith, renewed doubt, and re-initiation of the exit process. Mormons experienced exit as a series of stoppages as they quit one part of their faith at a time, stopping one activity such as tithing, then, another like going to temple or activities at the church. The narratives described a sense of daring at each stoppage. As one writer expressed, "I started testing the waters. I wasn't attending church, and nothing bad had happened to my family. So I quit paying tithing, just to see if we would immediately burn in hell. Nope, we didn't."

Where corporate exit research reflects a pre-announcement period of communicative sensemaking about the decision to leave, Mormons did not describe discussing the potential exit with friends, family, or other members. Rather, the pre-announcement period was prolonged and agonising, involving years of self-doubt and silencing. While all narratives analysed discussed a level of disbelief, the decision to exit was often triggered by a particular event that precipitated a period of scrutinising formerly repressed doubts to doctrine. Catalytic events engendered a sudden change in attitude towards the Church and were described in terms of enlightenment: "the veil lifted," "I saw the light," or a "light bulb moment." Rather than turning towards faith for comfort, ex-Mormons described traumatic events as an impetus to beginning the exit process, particularly when clergy and church leadership reacted in ways members felt inappropriate. One writer questioned her place in the church after her husband died and clergy would not allow his closest friends, who were ex-communicated former Mormons, to speak at the funeral. Members experiencing divorce or other familial struggle described doubting the doctrine of eternal marriage, and thus the Church. One woman described talking to her bishop about domestic violence, and beginning her exit after the bishop told her to pray harder and make her husband a cherry pie. Violence or sexual abuse, particularly if dismissed by clergy, became catalysts to doubt that eventually led the member out of the faith. Even when not linked to perceived trauma, Mormons described beginning the process of exit after uncompassionate clerical encounters. One writer described beginning a two-month period of confusion and doubts after a ward leader told him "that the bishopric preferred the church services that our family did not attend" because his disabled son was disruptive.

Disbelief in doctrine separate from perceived trauma was a gradual process of disillusionment. Writers described learning of particular pieces of church history that they found distasteful or unbelievable, then embarking on research that provoked deeper doubts. Historical works that contradicted Church history, such as Native American history that contradicted the Book of Mormon, which teaches that Christ and early civilisations interacted in North America, were particularly likely to induce doubt. Members questioned temple ceremonies, which they described as "weird," "bizarre," or "cultish," and

cultural practices such as the prohibition of coffee. As one writer put it, “I had a hard time reconciling Mormonism with rational thought—why certain things were necessary. Why would God require certain things to get into heaven?”

The deep doubts expressed by exiting Mormons stands in sharp contrast to exit research in corporate or volunteer environments (Jablin 2001; Kramer 2010; Kramer 2011). As Mormons found themselves unable to either believe or practice their faith, they expressed feelings of personal inadequacy, or failure, shifting the narrative from flawed doctrine to self-indictment. Inability to believe was rationalised not as erroneous teachings, but as personal unworthiness that they feared might be punishable by God. One woman miscarried a child while contemplating exit, and wrote, “I never told a soul but secretly I believed that maybe God didn’t want me to have children because of my not being valiant in the pre-existence.” In the midst of self-doubt, members expressed fears that kept them from leaving the faith. Nearly all of the narratives analysed included fear of family rejection or retaliation for leaving the faith. As one member wrote, “my motivation at the time wasn’t from some burning testimony—it was from fear. I was afraid they would quit loving me.”

Where organisational exit literature expects communication with peers and family to rationalise the exit decision, Mormons neither communicated doubts, nor announced their exit. Doubts were instead willfully concealed, while working to maintain an outward appearance of faith. Members referred to wearing a “Mormon mask” to feign an appearance of faithfulness, meanwhile undertaking a lone effort of exit. As one member wrote, “somehow it just never all tied together for me. Internally it never felt quite right, yet I continued to live dualistically, ever the strong, active Mormon under the weight of so many doubts.” Several men described concealing their doubts even while serving active missions and baptising other members. When members finally separated from the Church, they did so quietly, choosing to announce the decision only after they had completely stopped practicing. In the aftermath of exit, Mormons described family rejections and loss of friends that legitimised earlier fears. One woman described her mother shutting her out for months. Other members described family arguments that turned into long-term feuds. Many described a sense of grief at the loss of Church rituals and practices, a sense of missing something that was formerly fundamental in their lives. More positive effects of exit included feeling internal peace and growth of new relationships with non-Mormons.

The prolonged and oscillating exit process Mormons described suggests two considerations for study of religious exit. First, results suggest a more nuanced view of organisational exit than corporate literature suggests. The process of exit from Mormonism suggests that where the stakes of exit are high, members engage in a non-communicative pattern of active concealment. Second, the

exit process is intrinsically tied to the reach of a faith organisation into the members' lives. Where organisational values are deeply ingrained by a rigid assimilation process, the process of exit is neither simple nor finite.

Current phasic models of exit suggest a linear and defined process of communicative sensemaking, announcement, and severing of ties. The process of Mormon exit, however, mirrored neither this phasic model, nor the more passive exit observed with volunteers (Kramer 2011). Mormons described a prolonged and oscillating exit marked by deep personal doubt that reinitiated faithfulness. Where Kramer (2010) treated organisational exit as an inevitable conclusion, a finite state wherein the exiter is either in or out, Mormon exit suggests exit is not a zero-sum game. Results suggests a more fluid view of exit for faith communities marked by retention of core religious identities. In the aftermath of exit, former Mormons with still-faithful family described continued attendance at Mormon family functions and participation in cultural Mormon practices. The sense of grief and loss former Mormons described, moreover, suggests that members retain attachments not only to ingrained faith values, but to cultural practices that may be tied to the core Mormon identity, a process Ebaugh (1988) likened to exiting not a position, but a role.

The active process of concealment Mormons engaged in suggest a link between the stakes of leaving and communication during exit. Where research in corporate exit reveals a communicative pattern of talking out the exit decision and weighing options with friends, family, and peers, Mormons masked both their contemplation of exit and their doubts. Employees and volunteers may quit assuming small responsibilities at a job or detach from coworkers when considering leaving. These actions represent visible cues that make others aware of the member's detachment. Unlike a job, however, partial participation in a totalistic faith is still viewed as apostasy. Mormons used the derogatory term "Jack Mormon" to describe the partially faithful, and described active masking of their tests to exit to avoid the perception. Mormons described displaying, in effect, hyper-metamorphosis, acting highly faithful while secretly exiting the Church. Concealment may be linked to the potentially high relational stakes of leaving a totalistic faith, as concealing the exit decision delays social penalties until the exit is final. The price, however, is a lack of support from peers during the exit process.

The process of exit from Mormonism suggests that the totalistic reach of organisational values into the members' lives is closely tied to the exit process. The consuming faith values, cultural practices, and primary relationships of Mormonism are not only symbols of membership, but constitute the member's foundational identity. Teachings for both children and new converts are designed to instill values at a core and identity formational level. The extent

to which an individual identifies with Church values during socialisation may relate to the propensity to exit. Albrecht, Cornwall, and Cunningham (1988) found that children raised in highly religiously identified Mormon households were more like to remain active in the church for life than children raised in less identified Mormon homes. For those deeply identified who later exit, however, leaving represents leaving behind not only an organisational role, but also an elemental part of the self. The sense of grief and loss Mormons described after exit points to the loss of identity that leaves the exiter adrift once ties are severed. Leaving a totalistic faith involves an untethering from foundational beliefs that are not readily replaced with another faith. The former Mormon becomes an apostate, a classification carrying negative social connotations that highlight the social and cultural consequences that are distinct in totalistic exit. A few who leave the faith take to critiquing it. Many anti-Mormon writers are former members of the faith, including Jerald and Sandy Tanner, who Foster (1984) called “career apostates,” for their publication of multiple anti-church articles, books, and LDS documents.

5 Conclusion

Exit from Mormonism represents departure not from an organisation in the traditional sense, but from consuming values that constitute member identities. Findings on Mormon exit have implications for both faith organisations seeking to retain members, and for the scholarly study of faith exit. From an organisational standpoint, the catalysts to doubt and exit suggest an opportunity for clergy to respond to personal crises in ways that draw members towards faith, rather than turn them away. The self-doubt, grief, and loss of identity expressed by Mormons suggest that for scholars, a more careful consideration of the formation of religious identities is warranted. Where religious scholars have explored the difficulty of constructing an ex-member identity (Avance 2013; Davidman and Greil 2007), deeper understanding of religious identity socialisation, particularly in totalistic faiths, is necessary to understanding the process of exit.

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Leaving Islam for Christianity: Asylum Seeker Converts

Nora Stene

1 Introduction

This chapter presents a case study from Norway, and explores why and how some asylum seekers leave one religion for another: more specifically Islam for Christianity. The context of their conversion is migration and the difficult situation of asylum seekers. The chapter also highlights perspectives and methodologies especially relevant to this field of study.

There are no available official statistics on the number of asylum seeker converts in Norway. However, the Norwegian Immigration Appeals Board (UNE) estimates that between 2001 and 2015 approximately 950 individuals converted from Islam to Christianity – listing fear of religious persecution as support for their asylum appeals. The great majority of them were from Iran or Afghanistan, but UNE data has registered smaller numbers of converts from a total of 23 different countries (details in Stene 2016, personal communication UNE 2017). It should be noted that in order to be considered a convert by the UNE there must be an announcement of faith, baptism, and attachment to a local Christian congregation (UNE 2016). The actual number of converts may also be higher than the figure given above, as asylum seekers may not mention conversion in their applications –or appeals.

The UNE has observed that conversions/baptisms usually take place during the appeal-process, after an initial asylum application has been rejected. In this period a number of asylum seekers have contact with Christian congregations (UNE 2016). Clearly critical to certain kinds of active proselytisation among asylum seekers, the UNE, human rights- and church umbrella-organisations have issued guidelines to protect asylum seekers from what has been termed “unwanted attention” from missionaries (details in Stene 2016:207). The Church of Norway’s charter emphasises that converts may face negative reactions: “If a Muslim is to be baptised, it will also be necessary to discuss [with the baptismal candidate] the consequences baptism may have in the baptismal candidates’ networks both in Norway and in country of origin” (Bishops’ Council 2016:8, my translation). The fact that guidelines of this kind exists, underscores

the existence of missionary work amongst asylum seekers. The number of converts also points to dynamics that are worth further investigation.

2 Previous Research and Empirical Material

There is little existing research on religious conversion amongst asylum seekers. However, some empirical material is found in research on migrants. Perspectives, models and findings from a selection of these studies are presented here, and further developed in the analysis of new material below.

From the field of migration studies, Marzouki and Roy (2013) underline the importance of understanding both the individual and relational character of conversion. Their book includes Le Pape's model of 'grammar for conversion.' Based on interviews conducted in France, Le Pape shows how certain rules must be respected for a religious conversion to be understood and accepted in society. According to his understanding, conversion must be validated not only by the faith-community, but also by a broader social group. In the broader group, parental reactions were found to be important, and often the most difficult to handle (Le Pape 2013).

Another in-depth migration study is made by Akcapar (2006). Based on fieldwork with Iranian converts in Turkey, Akcapar emphasises that conversion often runs parallel to migration. He highlights the discontinuity in the lives of migrants, alongside the continuity in efforts to retain family values and mother tongue. Conversion is discussed as a migration strategy in a transit country, possibly used to manipulate migration authorities. Akcapar portrays internal strife among Iranians related to conversions, as well as the deep identification many seem to have developed with Christianity and their new-found faith-communities. Similar findings are highlighted in Spellman's study of Iranian networks in Britain (Spellman 2004).

Theological studies have had a focus on growth in the number of converts from Islam to Christianity worldwide. Miller and Johnstone (2015) discuss the possible over- and underestimation of available figures, as well as new self-identifications like "Muslim-background Believer" and "Muslim Follower of Christ," and the fact that many converts avoid the term "Christian." Miller and Johnstone highlight an early conversion-wave in Indonesia in the 1960s and similar developments amongst Iranians some decades later. Intensified missionary work, contact with indigenous Christians, globalisation, new media, emigration and turmoil in the Muslim World are listed as explanations for why Muslims convert. Concerning Iranians, Miller argues that leaving Islam may be a way of remaining "Persian" in the context of migration, as Islam is associated

with the Arab world. Christianity is seen as a religion where “Persian-ness” is given ample room (2012; 2015). Like Marzouki and Roy (2013), Miller underscores that a high number of ex-Muslims become Pentecostals, though Miller also stresses that conversion to different denominations is known (2014; 2015).

Human rights studies inspired my own exploration of Christian missionaries working amongst asylum seekers (Stene 2016). Based on fieldwork in Norway, my study shows how a broad variety of denominations are involved. Some missionaries offer diaconal services; others run intense proselytisation programs and many combine evangelisation and practical help. Missionaries with a migrant background were found to work mainly among those with similar backgrounds (see also Synnes 2012). Some missionaries were found to actively use the language of human rights to defend their activities, though not all. The article argues that this kind of missionary work must be understood within the context of Christian activism, in which asylum seekers are viewed as people in desperate need, but also as a new, local “mission field.”

Website studies of apostasy/conversion narratives are important in mapping out religious change. Enstedt and Larsson (2013) discuss apostates’ perceptions of Islam. Through text analysis, they underscore how the religion left behind (Islam) is presented as evil, irrational and anti-modern, and how this corresponds to broader anti-Muslim discourses and ideas of the New Atheist Movement (see also Larsson 2015, 2016).

Islamophobia is also explored by Marti (2016). Based on fieldwork in North Carolina, Marti’s study presents an immigrant Christian convert who is still associated with Islam by his congregation, through ideas of interwoven ethno-religious identities. Marti shows how the convert remains the “other” and uses this to his own advantage; the notion of persecution under Islam gives him the symbolic power of being close to martyrdom. The convert also remains the raw and exotic ex-Muslim who gives legitimacy to his congregation as he embodies a long-awaited religious revival.

In contrast to the image of Islam mentioned above, Speelman’s interview-based study of converts from Islam to Christianity in the Netherlands (2006), stresses how two “Islams” are often present in the same narrative; one of strict rules and one of a loving parent. These stories typically include the following steps: crisis, contact with believers and a Bible, and finally conversion- when a distant or absent God becomes a God of utmost importance. Echoing Le Pape’s model, parents are usually part of the narrative’s turning point; conversion happens after their death, a family break-up or a reconciliation-process.

Migrants continue to relate to their country of origin. Studies from “sender-countries” capture important aspects, for example that leaving Islam does not necessarily mean leaving a Muslim identity. With empirical material from the

Middle East, both Kraft (2013) and Barnett (2008) show some of the complex ways conversions are negotiated (and often hidden) in family-oriented societies. In the following, we do not meet such “closeted apostates” (see Cottee 2015), but rather converts who have taken a step out into the open.

3 New Findings on Asylum Seekers leaving Islam for Christianity

This section analyzes fieldwork material from 2014 (details in Stene 2016), and 11 follow-up interviews from 2017 (seven men; four women). The stories of four interviewees have been chosen to give empirical insight and to offer a nuanced image of asylum seekers’ conversion narratives. Analysis point back to findings from previous research (see above) and is further developed in the conclusion. To protect anonymity pseudonyms are used and some non-relevant details have been altered.

‘Bahram’ is from Iran. Among those interviewed, he is the only one who obtained residence prior to his conversion. His religious change was depicted both as sudden and as an on-going process. He arrived in Norway with his asylum-seeking parents. He describes them as “liberal Muslims,” but adds that he never practiced “any of that stuff” after they died. Everyday life had not been easy for Bahram. At one point, he started drinking heavily. Just when he thought he could fall no further a fellow drinking friend turned up and proclaimed his newfound faith in Jesus. Confused, Bahram started to read the Bible his friend left behind: “I read for three days and could not stop crying.” Soon after, he approached a Pentecostal congregation and asked to be baptised, but was told that he had to be taught more about Jesus first: “From the moment I read the Bible I knew I believed, but I had to get to know Jesus -properly.” In the congregation a small fellowship communicated in Farsi, which is important to Bahram: “As Persians, we don’t like Arabs. Islam is an Arabic religion. When I found Jesus, I did not need anything Arabic anymore.” As noted by Miller (2015b), this conversion seems to strengthen Bahram’s ethnic, Persian identification.

The religion Bahram left behind was in many ways described as foreign. His conversion gave him a new identity, along with a calling to missionary work. Speaking Farsi, he joined a prayer group that attracts asylum-seeking Iranians: “Many have a real thirst for God, even if some first come to us because they are curious or just bored at the reception center, or think they can get residence by becoming Christian...” In this quote, Bahram touches upon what Ackapar (2006) calls “conversion as migration strategy.” This pinpoints the imposter-problem: are those who convert true believers, or just pretending? Society at large is especially concerned with this question when it comes to asylum

seekers. To use Le Pape's model (2013); asylum seeker converts need not only to be accepted by a new faith-community, their conversion must also be public and validated by a broader social group, in this case including immigration authorities. Bahram ends his story with reference to the problem of being seen as an imposter: "I have been a Christian for many years. I did not need to change religion; I already had a residence permit. Still people don't believe me. I try to convince them..." This striving to have a conversion accepted by society may be seen as part of the on-going public conversion of many asylum seeker converts.

'Sherif' is from Iraq. His first application for asylum was rejected. It was accepted only after several appeals during a difficult 12-year period: "I could never have managed without Jesus," he says. Like what happens to many asylum seekers, the long appeal-period increased his contact with Christianity, as well as his conversion opportunities. He first met Christian activists at asylum reception centers. Sherif describes how people from the local Church of Norway collected asylum seekers, transported them to church services and even invited them into their homes: "They were so kind, but I didn't understand much of what they said. I didn't speak Norwegian at that time." For Sherif, the turning point came when he met Arabic-speaking Pentecostals: "They gave me a Bible in Arabic and took me to their congregation. I read the whole Bible and I believed. I told them 'Jesus is my Lord' and they baptised me." However, remembering his first contact with Lutherans, Sherif later found a Lutheran congregation, where he now feels at home.

As opposed to Bahram, Sherif underlines that his conversion was not sudden: "It was something from my childhood. I knew churches from Iraq. I liked them; songs came out their doors. Sometimes when I went to Baghdad where nobody knew me, I visited churches and lit candles." Sherif explains his conversion through reference to his childhood experiences: "I always liked the Christians. I had Christian teachers in school and was drawn to their faith, even if I didn't know it." Like other converts I talked to, he describes long-lasting ties to Christianity; they stem from his childhood and even further back into history. It is important to him that "his" Iraq once was a Christian area. These stories of pre-migration connections to Christianity can be analysed as rhetorical devices used to show the sincerity of his conversion, because like Bahram, Sherif still has to face societies' scrutiny of "new" converts.

In Sherif's memory, religion (Islam) was practiced in a good way in his village. He has little negative to say about the religion left behind. It only lacked Jesus, and he believes relatives would become Christians: "If only they *really* knew Jesus..." The image given is one of righteous people who have not heard the gospel – yet. Like in Speelman's study (2006), two "Islams" are present; positive images connected to village life and older relatives alongside negative

images: “Muslims know about my faith. At times this can be dangerous, because leaving Islam can make them see you as a traitor, not only towards Islam, but also towards your country, your family... So if my car is bumped, first I always think: ‘Muslims did this to me.’” This double-image of Islam ran through many of the stories I heard; the Islam of up-right Muslim relatives, and the Islam that causes fear.

‘Sandy’ is from the Balkans. She arrived in Norway with a small child, having left an older one behind. Her application for asylum was turned down. Years of appeals followed. During these years she got to know her Christian neighbors. They invited her along to Norwegian-classes for asylum seekers and low-church meetings. Sandy describes her earlier life like this: “Those days I cried and cried all day, I did not sleep at all. In the end, I did not want to live. I worried sick for the child I had to leave. I only relaxed inside the church; only there my problems were left behind. There my Christian friends helped me.” Sandy’s case illustrates the importance of group dynamics when it comes to religious change. As referred to above (Stene 2016), Christian evangelism and diaconal service often blend. Groups embrace potential converts, and some convert. In the conversion narratives of all of my interviewees, practical help from a local community was stressed as essential. In Sandy’s case, her new network helped with every aspect of life, social, financial and legal. To understand the on-going group dynamics, I will expand on Akcapar’s term “conversion as migration strategy,” and highlight “conversion as integration strategy.” To some asylum seekers a new religious identity may become a way into (a section of) broader society. Should residence permits be granted, their “reception-congregations” provide a community where they already belong.

Sandy calls the pastor-couple of her congregation “my new parents.” She has not told her biological parents about her conversion and does not intend to: “We have very little contact. They will not understand.” The phrase “my new parents” may be connected to a theme touched upon by previous researchers. As argued by Marzouki and Roy (2013) and Le Pape (2013), conversion may be individual, but it also has a relational aspect. Relation to parents seems to be especially important. In the stories of those I interviewed, a family rupture often preceded the conversion. Some converted after the death of parents (like Bahram), or after the loss of regular contact (like Sherif and Sandy). Some struggled to keep ties alive- or concentrated on other relatives than parents. Like the Middle Eastern converts discussed by Kraft (2013) and Barnett (2008), relations with family members were generally portrayed as important, despite the difficulties some converts experienced.

In Sandy’s case, her congregation kept praying that the problem of her broken family might be solved. Then one day: “... like a miracle my sister arrived

in Norway, with my child!" Overjoyed, Sandy turned to the congregation she believed had spurred the miracle. Previously she had not fully identified as Christian, now she did. She joined the local church with her children and they were baptised together: "...because we were finally together." The turning point in this story was not the growth of personal faith, but the resolution of a crisis attributed to a miracle. To Sandy, the natural consequence was conversion.

'Mansur' is from Afghanistan. In his story an outer and inner journey run parallel. He cries as he recounts how he barely survived *en route* to Europe. He did not want to beg, but was forced to contact handout places. Some food packages included biblical quotes. He was curious about the Bible and the Christians: "They sang even if they did not know how to sing! And why give things for free to those you do not know?" When he arrived in Norway, he had lots of spare time and studied the Bible. He also continued to read works of Muslim scholars, like he had done before, but what they wrote disappointed him. Compared to the converts presented above, Mansur gave harsh statements about Islam. Like apostates in Enstedt/Larsson (2013) and Larsson (2016), he portrayed Islam as a straitjacket and message of punishment. These negative images were contrasted to Christianity, explained as a religion of generosity and forgiveness: "It answered all my questions about life. I found a church and finally felt safe. I spent days and even nights sitting there. One night I dreamt of being guided through a house, and recognised it as my church. The dream strengthened my faith."

Mansur's narrative is focused on inner change. He portrays himself as a seeker looking for religious answers. He was in danger, but was saved; in need, and met helping hands. Like many asylum seekers, he identifies the Bible as essential to his conversion. This may be explained by the centrality of the Bible in Protestant Christianity, which is the type of Christianity most asylum seekers in Norway meet. To Mansur, the content of the Bible was important. To others, possessing the book seemed just as important. Several recounted how they, in a miraculous way, read it all in a few days. Besides reading the Scripture, many conversion narratives also focused on church-buildings. Like Sandy, Mansur depicts the church as his place of refuge. Explanations for this are not easily found by reference to Protestant Christianity, which concentrates more on faith than buildings. However, the political context is relevant; asylum seekers often live in fear of an expulsion order, but they also know that Norwegian police do not enter churches to carry out such orders. Stories of peace inside church-rooms may therefore be related to the storyteller's legal status. Furthermore, the narratives underline how conversion "takes place" inside rooms and buildings. Not only congregations, but also buildings embrace converts, thereby stressing a conversion's tangible aspect. To Mansur, the local church

is important: "It is my new home." So far little explored, this perspective from material culture studies shed light on the importance of physical structures in conversion narratives. It is a perspective that may prove useful for further studies in this field.

4 Conclusion

The four stories above are personal and unique. However, they all have detectable patterns relevant to the topic of this book.

To some asylum seekers, what follows leaving (a particular) religion is religious conversion. The conversion may be part of a migration and/or integration strategy. As migrants, individuals are in a vulnerable situation and new socio-religious networks develop into important safety nets. Life prior to conversion is often portrayed as a perpetual crisis and conversion as a solution. To some converts, blending into new, local networks becomes paramount. Some also nurture ethno-religious identifications, like being Christian-Persian. To all, the relational character of conversion remains essential, especially relating to close relatives. However, changing religious affiliation may lead to a break of contact with family and kin. For some asylum seekers this break of contact has provided space for new relationships.

In this study, a double-image is given of the religion left behind. As ex-Muslims, interviewees expressed both critical and moderate views on Islam, often alongside appreciations of Muslim relatives. Many converts did not dwell on leaving, but rather on joining. In other words, they did not stress apostasy as much as newfound faith. These findings stand in interesting contrast to the one-sided negative representations of Islam found on apostate webpages, as discussed by Enstedt and Larsson (2013). Difference in method and material may have shaped these findings; web-based text analysis and fieldwork give different empirical bases. These findings underline that people express themselves differently on webpages and in face-to-face situations. In future research, both methodologies are clearly useful.

As mentioned above, some converts in the Middle East use terms like "Muslim-background Believer" or "Muslim Follower of Christ." In this study of asylum seekers, all the converts called themselves Christians. I argue that this is connected to the fact that they want their religious change to be public and recognised by the authorities. As asylum seekers, they cannot use the sometimes fuzzy-boundary conversions of the Middle East. They must show a clear break if they are to be given asylum due to fear of religious persecution. This may explain their often unambiguous presentation of a new religious identity.

Although we do not know how many asylum seekers that converts from Islam to Christianity, such cases are well known to immigration authorities and church congregations. As this case study shows, for some religious change does not mean rejecting religion altogether; but leaving one religion to embrace another. Our studies of “leaving religion” need to include these groups, in order to further investigate how religious affiliations can and does change.

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Leaving Islam from a Queer Perspective

Erica Li Lundqvist

1 Introduction

This chapter puts queer theory in dialogue with the study of religion, specifically in relation to Islamic studies and those who have left their religion or are in the process of doing so. It also explores the intersection of sexuality and religion and uses queer theory to investigate the taken-for-granted categories of “normal” and “natural,” asking what they mean in religious terms when religion is studied as a socially constructed and cultural phenomenon.

Queer theory does not consist of just one theory, or even a number of clearly formulated theories, but of several different perspectives and ways of interpreting society, culture, and identity (Kulick 1996; Kulick 2005). Queer theory draws on poststructuralism, deconstruction, and psychoanalysis, and scholars such as Michel Foucault (1978), Eve Sedgwick (1990), and Judith Butler (1990, 2003) are major influences in the field. One feature common to all queer perspectives is critique of what is perceived as normative, destabilising the status of norms as “given” or taken for granted. If we apply a queer perspective to people who are leaving religion, rejecting religiosity or religious faith altogether, then the irreligious position can, on one hand, be understood as opposing religious norms and, on the other, also be destabilised and called into question as a fixed, non-religious position (Taylor and Snowdon 2014). In short, no position is safe or stable from a queer perspective.

As subject positions, identities, and bodily experiences merge within complex networks of norms, the content of a queer theoretical approach seeks to engage and disrupt these norms, or at least describe and expose them (Schipert 2011). What is interesting from a queer-theoretical perspective is to see how religious norms are socially produced and maintained, and what consequences these norms have for people about to leave their religion.

Therefore, reconciliation or disaffiliation with religion should not be considered a static two-sided coin (that is, believing or not believing) but rather as a dynamic process of doubt, ambivalence, and religious crisis. I therefore call for a more dynamic and intersectional approach that views unbelief and disaffiliation as processes combining various subject positions, competing values,

interests, and rights. The concept of intersectionality indicates that for example, ethnicity, gender, and class are co-constitutive and shape one's relationship to power and oppression (Crenshaw 1991). Intersectionality has recently been extended to include sexuality, religion, and belief, as well as (dis)ability, age, and other social dimensions, to illustrate how these aspects correlate and are always in play (Kolysh 2017).

Religion and irreligiosity can therefore be understood as intersecting with other social categories rather than studied as though they operated on their own in isolation. That is, people rarely identify themselves just in terms of religious affiliation or atheist (irreligious) positions, but rather understand their religious/irreligious selves in relation to gender, class, ethnicity, sexuality, etc., and may well foreground different dimensions of these identifications depending on the circumstances. Although different perspectives will be highlighted, this chapter concentrates on the two intersections most often assumed to create the most tension, that is, religious belief and sexual orientation.

2 Previous Research and Empirical Material

This chapter draws its empirical examples and methodological discussion from a study of former Muslims in Sweden who were born and raised with Islam as their normative religious system, but at some point in life, often in their young adulthood, left Islam as well as their country of birth. A snowball sampling strategy was employed and two initial participants were recruited from within my own personal network. The two initial interviews were conducted face-to-face while the other interviews were conducted via email, mostly due to geographical distance. Pseudonyms are used in all cases except for Serin and Omar who wishes to use their real names. Ayman is a Shiite Muslim from Lebanon, Abs is also of Lebanese origin but was raised as Sunni. Serin is a 40-year old woman from Jordan. Taym is from Syria and Omar is from Egypt.

They all display ways to disconnect from religion, all of which have different characterisations (see, for example, Gooren 2010 on disaffiliation; Cottee 2015 and Zuckerman 2012 on apostasy and unbelief; Flynn 2007 on irreligiosity; and Wright et al. 2011 and Köse 1996 on deconversion and conversion). For example, some interviewees are now non-practicing Muslims who do not uphold Islamic views or rituals but still feel they belong to the community of Muslims (*Umma*) in the sense of "belonging without believing" (McIntosh 2015). Although they might have abandoned their religious beliefs, they have not abandoned their community. Other leave takers believe without belonging

to the Muslim community, as in the case of many LGBTQ persons like Ayman and Abs or other migrants from Muslim countries now living residing in Sweden. Following Hervieu-Léger (2006), such an attitude can be understood as “a distant shared memory, which does not necessitate shared belief, but which – even from a distance – still governs collective reflexes in terms of identity” (p. 48). There were also examples of what Wuthnow (1998) has called “patchwork religion,” in which people take what they want from a religion and omit parts that do not fit their way of life, such as abstaining from alcohol or praying five times a day (see also Otterbeck 2015). A few of the interviewees stated that they were not religious at all, but were instead pursuing a quest for spirituality. There are also examples of non-attending believers and private practitioners who still felt attached to their (former) religious traditions (for example, praying when visiting the graves of family members), and examples of those who had lost faith not only in Islam but in religion entirely, like Omar and Serin. Some interviewees considered themselves Muslim just because they were born into a Muslim family, making the process of leaving the religion easier than for a formerly devout Muslim. The point is that there is a risk of relying on misleading assumptions about people who leave their religion, since current research into people who leave religion, without claiming an atheist or publicly oppositional stance against religion, is limited.

Previous studies have focused mainly on people who find ways to reconcile two often-conflicting positions (Lundqvist 2013; Yip 2005), such as “contrasting belief versus unbelief or religiosity versus atheism or agnosticism” (Streib and Klein 2013: 717), or “coping with identity threat” as Jaspal and Cinnirella (2010) puts in their study of young British Muslim gay men of Pakistani background. Other studies emphasise the eventual outcome of the conflict between sexuality and religiosity. The aim of this research is to generate a better understanding of former Muslims’ own knowledge and personal understanding of what it means to be or not to be a Muslim and discuss the process by which individuals resolve this conflict by *leaving* Islam.

3 New Findings Concerning Leaving Religion

The decision to leave religion is not made overnight. In some cultures, leaving religion is a major move (even leading to the death penalty in some countries), a deviant act, a social risk, and, for many, a powerful personal transition. This section will examine the process of moving out of religion and give examples of the interviewees’ renegotiating of their identity through a complex relationship of tension between the continuity of their former identity as Muslim and

transformation to a new non-religious identity. In other words, we will look at the process of unfixing normative subject positions.

3.1 *The Pursuit of Autonomy*

“I was born homosexual but forced to be a Muslim,” Abs told me. According to Abs, who grew up in Lebanon, he was never truly a believer:

You grow up with something. You think it is the truth because your mother and father say it is so. Like it is in every culture. My reaction was that I wanted to get to know my religion more, since it was my religion, my identity, so I wanted to go deeper.

Interview, Abs, 14/09/2016

Ayman had similar views: “I have never been a Muslim, fully. I can say that it is something I inherited. But to be Muslim or religious is not just something you are but something you have to understand” (email interview, Ayman, 10/11/2016). This same kind of reasoning was expressed in Taym’s narrative. Taym grew up in Syria and was raised to be a “strong” Muslim “like everyone else.” During his adolescence, Islam had a great influence on his life, but the more he got to know about his religion, the more he started to doubt his faith: “It started from small details,” innocent thoughts, that were the beginning of his journey to leave Islam, he said. This left him with a desire to learn more about Islam, as he did not want to sink into what he called “fake faith”:

I was stronger. I started to think more and more. I read the Koran word by word many times. It’s just because I hadn’t chosen to be a Muslim. For me, I wanted to be Muslim after conviction of [the truth of] Islam. That was a good motive to keep thinking. By that time I was losing my belief in Islam. I didn’t pray like before. Ramadan became a normal month like other months. I found a lot of injustice in Islam. And that Mohammad was such a mean and criminal person.

Email interview, Taym, 26/11/2016

This pursuit of autonomy as a long-term gradual process of stepping away from one’s previous religious environment (Streib and Klein 2013: 717) often includes “finding oneself” on the basis of one’s own choices and individual identity, which could sometimes lead to “a struggle within,” as Abs said. After leaving Lebanon to study in Berlin, Abs became very involved in learning more about the teachings of Islam. He went to the mosque regularly and talked with his friends about important religious questions. Subsequently, one day he

discovered that some important values and matters in his life were not compatible with the teachings of Islam, such as being a homosexual. “I sometimes prayed to God during Ramadan to fix me, to make me a heterosexual,” Abs said, adding that he knew that all people know, within themselves, what is “right” and what is “wrong.” Abs knew that there was nothing wrong with being homosexual. This was the point of no return, when Abs decided he was finished with Islam (Interview, Abs, 14/09/2016). This pursuit of autonomy can also take other forms, in some cases leading to rebellion against one’s upbringing and a rejection of religion altogether. Serin, a woman in her forties who was born in Jordan, changed her views of Islam at the age of six, when she moved to live in Saudi Arabia. Serin believed that religion should be a free choice, “not a mandatory law or lifestyle”:

At that time, my image of God changed from that of a god of tolerance and love to a god of power and control. I started to feel that I wanted another God – their God would not represent me, would not accept my faults. I was scared of the dark, of voices, of everything. I felt controlled by Allah, whom I never saw.

Email interview, Serin, 06/07/2017

Omar, who identifies as an ex-Muslim and anti-theist explain his relation to Islam in similar words as Serin:

Religion meant a lot to me, it was the main lens throughout I saw everything, what I perceived (sic!) as true or untrue (sic!), good or bad. I was brought up in a conservative sunni family and raised as a devout Muslim and I had been so for the majority of my life up until I started studying the scripture myself. However after having (sic!) left Islam, I became to regard it as what it is a tool of oppression, runs counter to reason, science and the values of human rights, and hence my opposition to it as an ideology.

Email interview, Omar, 29/06/2017

Although both Serin and Omar has now rejected Islam entirely, the journey of abandoning Islam was not easy, it was laden with emotional and intellectual struggle. For both it was a gradual process that took place over several years, while studying the Islamic scriptures and early history of Islam. Omar explains that there is a quote saying: “The best cure for religion is studying the scripture” (email interview, Omar, 29/06/2017).

Even if some interviewees might express considerable disbelief in God, this might not be enough to reject religion in its entirety. It could instead be

regarded as negotiation with their religion of birth and the dominant discourse on what one should believe and do as a Muslim – “the pressure from others that you should pray, fast, and practice the religion fully,” as Ayman put it (interview, Ayman, 10/11/2016). Possible discrepancies between religious faith and obligations to perform rituals and other religious duties, often combined with pressure from society and family, were the main causes of the rejection of religion. Enstedt (2018: 83) argued in his study of apostasy in Sweden that “while one’s religious *beliefs* can be abandoned, or denounced as in an apostasy narrative, the faith can be intact and so can habits and practices, norms and values, that are deeply connected with, in this case, Islam. One can therefore leave the social and belief aspects of religion but still be religious in a range of other aspects.” The next section will discuss the influence of the social environment and how migration can affect both the self-understanding and identification processes.

3.2 *Experience of Migration*

After migrating to Sweden, many of the informants’ views of other, non-religious aspects of life, such as politics and family, changed. The important change for Abs regarding sexuality was his developing individualism when it came to both sexual decision-making and forms of relationships (see also Ahmadi 2003). For Abs, being able to live as homosexual, to be himself, was possible in Sweden, and in light of that experience, he found that the social environment of his upbringing restricted him in expressing his true self before others:

I have lived here [in Sweden] for five years. I was born and grew up in Lebanon until I was nineteen, and during that time I was always super self-conscious, was in the ‘closet,’ did not reveal myself to anyone because I saw how other ‘gay-like’ boys were treated in school, in society.

Interview, Abs, 14/09/2016

Nonetheless, he claimed that many were afraid to be themselves even in Sweden. There were times when he still concealed his sexuality even in Sweden, as he was afraid to be the butt of jokes. As for Serin, the move to Sweden made her feel less isolated, as Islam was central to the culture in which she grew up. She also argued that women’s space in society is very limited in Muslim societies:

Before, I thought that I was a bad person, that God would never love me or accept me because of my thoughts and opinions about him. Nowadays I feel freer, inner peace, stronger, mature, more progressive and relaxed.

I don't need to bother myself with religious issues. Specifically, since moving to Sweden I've felt more harmony within myself and more aligned with society.

Email interview, Serin, 06/07/2017

Their encounter with, as well as their understanding of “the Swedish way of thinking” and “Swedish culture” seems to have influenced both Serin's and Abs' views of life. In Sweden, relationships are more egalitarian, and there is a relatively strong tendency towards similar views between the sexes regarding sexuality. However, this newfound freedom comes at a cost. Serin, for example, has lost most of her friends and family:

I don't socialise with my friends who became religious, and I have lost many of them. Some of them don't accept me and my thoughts. I avoid all the religious people, relatives, and my family as well. It is really a great shift in my social life – you feel like you have another identity.

Email interview, Serin, 06/07/2017

Omar's narrative shows similar traits to Serin's:

(...) it can be a struggle at times because my vocal criticism of religion and me abandoning Islam has strained my relationship with some family members and many relatives and friends, to varying degrees, including some who ever cursed me and cut off their relationship with me. It can be also challenging to be open with my views and criticism of Islam even here in Sweden, not just on account of reactions from Muslims but also from some swedes who are very politically correct and in their fear of racism have a knee jerk reaction of defending Islam itself, not just Muslims.

Email interview, Omar, 29/06/2017

It is interesting to observe the consequences of religious norms for the interviewees and the strength of the connection between religion and family. Religious leave takers – be it unconsciously, deliberately, out of necessity, or even accidentally – destabilise religious normative values and put forward different perspectives on, and interpretations of society, culture, and identity.

3.3 *The Closet Metaphor*

The metaphor of the “closet,” as in “coming out of the closet,” the hegemonic and quintessential gesture of LGBTQ people publically acknowledging who they really are, can also be applied to those leaving religion (see Cottee 2015).

The metaphoric narrative of “coming out,” belonging to a binary dialectic of suffering in silence versus thriving through self-expression, is useful when talking about relinquishing religious belonging and identities (see, for example, Sedgwick 1990; Seidman 2002; Plummer 1995). I will take Ayman’s narrative as an example, as he refuses labels altogether, opting for an emancipation from identity constructs. He explained that it is the aspects of identity connected to sexuality and religion that are primarily the cause of all the problems, stigmas, and misconceptions about sexuality and faith:

For me it is all about not putting a label on people according to religion, sexual orientation, race, or the like. We are all equal ... It is the label, being labelled as a Muslim or Christian or Jew. I don’t want that. I am a human being. I could just as well have been born into a Jewish or a Buddhist family, so it is not something you chose. ... Sexual orientation is also a label. That is why I also don’t identify as homosexual. Sure, I am for the simple reason that I am attracted to the same sex, but I am reluctant to label myself as that and say that I am.

Email interview, Ayman, 10/11/2016

In relation to the closet metaphor, discussions of people’s (non-)religious identity may be less interesting than discussing why some people feel it necessary to deny their sexual orientation and others to publically announce it. One must also consider that people might simply have an authentic lack of interest in religion and not be actively or consciously distancing themselves from or opposing themselves to religious values through identifying as, for instance, homosexual. Even so, when interviewed, they might retrospectively construct their religious and sexual selves as trying to find that “authentic identity” and perform it both to themselves and to those around them to show that they have shifted in orientation *away* from something as well as *towards* something new. The metaphoric narrative of “coming out of the closet” is therefore hegemonic as it is the quintessential gesture of acknowledging who one is, telling the “truth” (Enstedt and Larsson 2013). Since most people use labels as a shorthand way of conceptualising and describing their identity to themselves and others, whether aligned with religious, sexual, or other intersectional dimensions, the unwillingness to be categorised while living according to some religious expectations is in many ways queer, as it disrupts the heteronormative view of identities as unequivocal, fixed, and authentic.

It is reasonable to argue that people tend to have more fractionalised self-conceptions that reject labels with any religious connotations, but might use other types of labels to describe, for example, their political views. For

individuals who do label themselves, a label such as “atheist” or “apostate” identifies that person’s former religious identity but also stresses the oppositional current self-identification, as the “non-“ prefix in non-Muslim and non-heterosexual imply. One may still acknowledge that society and culture have major impacts on a person’s self-understanding and experiences of sexuality and religion. An emphasis on identification *processes* rather than more stable identities highlights the strategies that facilitate, or reasons that complicate, the process of leaving religion at the same time as it highlights what makes a person a believer and what does not. In such a process, people can identify several aspects of life they typically associate with Islam and being a Muslim and ascribe meaning to these aspects.

4 Conclusion

Although religion has an impact, what it means to be religious depends on many factors and may change over a lifetime without necessarily causing any major difficulties, although it also most certainly can do so. Future research into leaving religion might benefit from looking into what it actually means to claim a Muslim identity and, most importantly, into the difficulties of maintaining such an identity, for instance, in a migration situation. Research into how people construct new religious or non-religious identities by leaving or changing religion needs to be aware of the systems that push subjects towards forced identity categorisations. Research must account for both essentialist perspectives that approach sexual/religious identities as existing categories and more constructivist perspectives that actively avoid applying modern Western identity labels in other contexts. As such, a queer theoretical approach to the matter of leaving religion challenges us to think more critically about our reliance on natural bodies and authentic selves. Introducing a queer perspective to the study of leaving religion is fruitful because of the similarities between the normative and the taken for granted uncovered in heteronormativity and sexuality studies.

Studies of irreligiosity gain substantially from critical views of religious norms, doctrines, and practices as part of the great human pursuit of knowledge and power instead of accepting them as static and outside individual influence. The focus on the normative aspect of religion can help highlight and problematise the seemingly obvious in religiously lived lives, giving new dimensions to ethnological, anthropological, and sociological studies of leaving religion. By studying religiosity and the lack thereof from a starting point in what is held as normative, queer studies can serve to destabilise that

normativity and investigate what religions hide in plain sight – deviant and queer lives – as well as questioning what is meant by terms such as “believer,” “Muslim,” and “religious.”

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Leaving New Religions

Carole M. Cusack

1 Introduction

Early studies of joining and leaving new religious movements (henceforth NRMs) exhibited deficiencies found in research on religious conversion in general. These include a tendency to sharply distinguish the pre- and post-conversion identity of NRM members, and to view leaving as a simple process. New religions were compared to established religions, and the vocabulary used to describe NRM members differed from that used for Buddhists or Christians. Terms like “recruit” for “convert,” and “affiliation” and “disaffiliation” for “conversion” and “apostasy” showed that NRMs were regarded as social movements or “cults” not “religions” (Richardson 1993: 352–354). Disaffiliation, except in cases of alleged “brainwashing” involving deprogrammers (Melton 2004: 232–235), was rarely of interest. From the 1980s the study of joining and leaving NRMs became more nuanced; it is evident that people leave for a range of reasons. All leavers (like all joiners) are not identical; some retain faith while abandoning membership, while others abandon both.

David Bromley has posited three exit roles for leavers departing organisations: Defector, Whistle-blower, and Apostate (Bromley 1998a: 145). The status of each leaver depends upon the degree of tension with broader culture that the organisation manifests. The majority of leavers do not engage in public airing of grievances, loss of faith, or dispute with religious organisations, but experience departure as an “uncontested leave-taking” (Bromley 1998a: 146). Whistle-blowers and apostates have more difficult exits; they are perceived as disloyal and may be voluble critics of their former religion. Apostates may receive threats and even go into hiding. Because NRMs are, in Bromley’s terms, “subversive,” exhibiting a high degree of tension with society, apostate roles are prominent for ex-members (Bromley 1998a: 153). There is also doubt about the use of ex-member testimonies. Benjamin D. Zablocki posited “believer,” “apostate,” and “ethnographer” sources in research on NRMs. He argued “there is very little difference between the *reliability* (that is, stability across time) of accounts from believers and ex-believers (or apostates)” (cited in Carter 1998: 222). The *validity* of ex-member accounts is harder to ascertain, given believers

provide positive accounts while apostates provide negative testimonies. This is not unique to NRMs, but occurs in all religions (see, for example, Larsson 2016). Scholars use member and ex-member sources, adding to them personal observation and external accounts, such as those by journalists.

This chapter describes academic models of conversion and deconversion that have been used to study NRMs, and analyses the concept of “brainwashing” and the use of “deprogramming” (or exit counselling) to forcibly separate individuals from religious groups (Zablocki 1998). This model of leaving NRMs was promoted by the anti-cult movement (ACM), and encouraged ex-members to craft a “captivity” narrative that justified violent intervention (Bromley 1998a: 155). This is followed by a survey of roles adopted by ex-members, and the perspectives they hold regarding the groups they left. The Church of Scientology (henceforth CoS) has experienced a high number of departures since 2008, and is the focus due to a surplus of ex-member memoirs and the emergence of the “Free Zone,” a loose network of former Scientologists that still practice L. Ron Hubbard’s “tech” outside of CoS structures (Rubin 2011). The Free Zone supports Bromley’s idea that “most individuals exiting religious movements labelled subversive are not hostile to the groups with which they were formerly affiliated” (Bromley 1998b: 7). The conclusion reviews scholarship about leaving new religions in the twenty-first century, and suggests areas for further research.

2 Previous Research and Empirical Material

The study of NRMs emerged in the 1960s, when counter-cultural worldviews and lifeways gained ground as so-called traditional Western religion (especially Christianity) lost explanatory validity and institutional power. These NRMs included: neo-Hindu movements like Transcendental Meditation (TM) and the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON), which were founded by Indian gurus, Maharishi Mahesh Yogi (in 1959) and Srila Prabhupada (in 1965) respectively; Western versions of Buddhism emerged as Tibetan and Japanese monks came to the West; Hazrat Inayat Khan’s Sufi Order in the West (founded 1914); and other groups like Subud, Scientology, and the Children of God. In the 1960s, research on NRMs was mostly conducted by sociologists, and participant observation (usually joining a group temporarily or permanently) was an important technique for gathering information. This reinforced the notion that NRMs did not mandate “true” conversion, but rather “adherence” or the adoption of specific behaviours that mapped out a “conversion career” (Richardson 1980).

Scholarship on conversion emerged in the early twentieth century. In 1902 William James proposed “tension, deprivation, and subsequent frustration ... as the underlying foundation for conversion” (Gooren 2007: 338). The language of conversion and deconversion had Christian origins, as seen in Arthur Darby Nock’s *Conversion* (1933), which focused on religious change in the ancient world (see also Magnusson, Part 1 in this volume). Nock claimed only Christianity required “true” conversion, which he defined as the “reorienting of the soul of an individual, his deliberate turning from indifference or from an earlier form of piety, to another, a turning which implies that a great change is involved, that the old was wrong and the new is right” (Nock 1933: 2). In the 1960s West NRMs were studied variously: for example, as deviant social groups; and as offering insights into the origin of religions. However, they were rarely considered as being of similar importance or legitimacy as, for instance, early Christianity.

Over time, newer models of conversion developed that emphasised stages of interest, participation, and commitment, demonstrating that conversion was a process that is ongoing, rather than a dramatic transformation like that of the apostle Paul on the road to Damascus (Acts 9: 3–9). Individuals experience changes throughout life, and joining and leaving religions are thus elements in the development of the self, which is “flexible, amenable to infinite reshaping according to mood, whim, desire and imagination” (Lyon 2002 [2000]: 92). John Lofland and Norman Skonovd’s model of conversion identified “motifs” that influenced the self-directed religious quest of seekers (intellectual, experimental, mystical, affectional, and coercive) (Lofland and Skonovd 1981: 375). This differs radically from the “transformation” by God idea based on Christianity.

The NRM milieu offers “seekers” a range of options to experiment with without commitment. Older ideas of evangelism, in which missionaries preached the message to passive populations, sit awkwardly with the active seeker, exploring religions through books, websites, retreats and seminars. As James T. Richardson noted, “[t]his seeking approach to life is of such importance that some people become members *in spite* of the absence of some usually expected pressures such as the development of interaction and affective ties between members and prospects” (Richardson 1985: 169). The “seeker” orientation explains leaving as well as joining NRMs; the typical “conversion career” in which a person joins and leaves many religious and spiritual groups in their lifetime is the result of the active, meaning-seeking person taking what they need from each group and moving on when no longer satisfied (Richardson 1980).

Models of leaving new religions proliferated since the 1980s and emphasise a range of factors that may prove decisive. Stuart A. Wright explored familial bonds in NRMs and reconceptualised leaving as equivalent to the breakdown

of the intimate marital bond in divorce (Wright 1991), also demonstrating that close family ties and parental disapproval are factors in many people leaving NRMs (Wright and Piper 1986: 22). This approach is welcome because it emphasises individual agency, normalises what is often viewed as “deviant” religion preying on weak or psychologically damaged recruits, and permits the leaver mixed feelings about time spent in a NRM. Janet Jacobs used Wright’s five-factor model of defection from NRMs to study the power of charismatic leaders and bonds that female members developed with them. These are: “1) the breakdown in member’s insulation from the outside world; 2) unregulated development of dyadic relationships within the communal context; 3) perceived lack of success in achieving world transformation; 4) failure to meet affective needs of a primary group; and 5) inconsistencies between the actions of leaders and the ideals they symbolically represent” (Wright cited in Jacobs 1987: 295). The women she interviewed separated from the group first, and only later relinquished the emotional bond they felt with the charismatic leader, even exhibiting “willingness to exonerate the leader from any wrong-doing” (Jacobs 1987: 299). Her interviewees related to their NRM leaders as love objects, and felt emotional pain in losing the connection to them, which reinforces Wright’s familial emphasis in explaining leaving NRMs.

3 “Brainwashing” and “Deprogramming” in “Leaving New Religions”

In the 1960s and 1970s joining NRMs was viewed as deviant behaviour, and an explanatory framework developed that robbed converts of agency and endowed “cults” and their charismatic leaders with powers of “brainwashing” and “coercive persuasion” (Snow and Machalek 1984: 178). These claims emerged during the Korean War (1950–1953), when Chinese soldiers influenced American captives to cooperate, and in rare cases, to defect to communist China. English psychiatrist William Sargant (1907–1988) published *Battle for the Mind: A Physiology of Conversion and Brainwashing* (1957), which became an important source for the emergent ACM. The application of the “brainwashing” model to NRMs is problematic, in that none were total institutions which effectively imprisoned members, so the prisoner of war analogy was false. Yet it found an audience via popular culture including print and television media (Richardson and Introvigne 2007).

The popular acceptance of “brainwashing” spawned two related phenomena; the “captivity” narrative and the practice of “deprogramming.” Bromley described the elements of the former as: the convert presents themselves as innocent of the group’s “true” nature and overpowered by “subversive

techniques;" experiencing brutality and humiliation as a member; escaping from the "cult" and rejecting its teachings; and warning others of the risks they, and society, face from such deviants (Bromley 1998a: 154). Deprogramming, a practice pioneered by Ted Patrick (b. 1930), usually involved kidnapping the NRM member and restraining them for an unspecified time, while engaging in confrontational techniques to get them to relinquish faith. This process was generally instigated by parents, was costly and risky, involved the "abrogation of freedom of religious expression," and was often unsuccessful, with deprogramming subjects often returning to the group (Lewis and Bromley 1987: 509).

Richardson identified the "brainwashing" model of conversion to NRMs as a version of the traditional Christian account of the Damascene conversion of Paul, in which "an ostensibly powerful man was totally incapacitated by the actions of the external causal agent [God] focusing on him as an individual" (Richardson 1985: 165). The convert is disempowered, and allegedly discards all of their previous beliefs, life experiences and values, with the teachings of the "cult" being adopted entirely after the conversion. Prior to the twentieth century it was assumed that religious conversion in the West was to Christianity, the "true" religion, and thus unproblematic. In the twentieth century the view that religion was undesirable was expressed by Sigmund Freud and others. This gave rise to hypotheses that "deprivation" or other negative factors made some people more susceptible to being converted, a hypothesis that dominated the first half of the twentieth century. In the 1960s and 1970s the secular ACM and the Christian "counter-cult" movement formed; both were involved in promoting the brainwashing and deprogramming model. David A. Snow and Richard Machalek note that the idea that ex-member accounts are hostile, unreliable, and supply evidence supporting the brainwashing hypothesis is because those promoting that hypothesis often rely on "information derived from ex-converts who have been deprogrammed" (Snow and Machalek 1984: 179).

It is now agreed by legal professionals, psychiatrists, religious studies scholars, and psychologists, that "brainwashing" is misleading term, and the phenomenon is invalid and/or non-existent. In 1998 Benjamin D. Zablocki tried to rehabilitate the concept as "exit cost analysis" (Zablocki 1998: 216). He argued that, if restricted to religious groups and relationships between members and charismatic leaders, brainwashing was reframed in terms of exit costs it became a useful concept in understanding how groups *retain* (rather than *attract*) members. He drew on rational choice theory, a popular tool in the consumerist reading of religious participation, employed the concept of "religious switching" (Sherkat 1991), and offered a cost-benefit analysis of staying or leaving. He defined brainwashing as "a set of transactions between a charismatically-led collectivity and an isolated agent of the collectivity with

the goal of transforming the agent into a deployable agent” (Zablocki 1998: 221). Individuals cease to act as agents of themselves, and act as agents of the charismatic authority.

Zablocki’s redefinition of brainwashing is interesting; but his research would be more persuasive if the reframed “brainwashing” was subtracted from the argument, as he admits it is rare. Leaving NRMS is a statistically common experience requiring explanation, in which the idea of “exit costs” has value, and can contribute to models that emphasise doubt, searching for alternative roles, and, after a turning point becoming an “ex” rather than a member (Ebaugh 1988). In the twenty-first century the consensus that “brainwashing” and “deprogramming” are pseudo-scientific and with no explanatory value in terms of leaving NRMS has become scholarly orthodoxy. The monograph *Agents of Discord: Deprogramming, Pseudo-Science, and the American Anticult Movement* (2006) by the late Anson Shupe and Susan E. Darnell chronicled the American attitude to NRMS from the post-War era to the present, charting the rise and fall of the ACM, and proposing a “social economy” model of NRMS in the new millennium (Shupe and Darnell 2006). Yet, brainwashing and deprogramming have survived the onslaught of legal challenges and scientific assessments and have moved sideways into the (related) fields of extremism, terrorism, and counter-terrorism studies (Morris et al. 2010). W. Michael Ashcraft’s *A Historical Introduction to the Study of New Religious Movements* (2018) summarises the history of the field through an examination of the scholars who created it. His focus on identifying the positions, ideological, scientific, and personal, that scholars personally espoused updates the study of NRMS in light of the vital question of situating the researcher in the research (Chenail 2011).

4 Leaving the Church of Scientology

A substantial number of ex-Scientology memoirs have appeared since John Duignan’s *The Complex: An Insider Exposes the Covert World of Scientology* (Duignan and Tallant 2008). These memoirs are not written by rank and file Scientologists, but by those who exited the elite Sea Org (a para-naval group often compared to the Jesuit Order in the Catholic Church). Sea Org members sign “billion year contracts” which commit them permanently to CoS. They work long hours for negligible wages and experience a high level of interference in their personal lives, often separated from spouses, banned from having children, and in the worst case, forced to labour on the Rehabilitation Project Force (Swainson 2017). The authors justified their lives by reference to serving

charismatic founder L. Ron Hubbard (1911–1986) or his successor David Miscavige (b. 1960). It is difficult to understand why Sea Org members endured such humiliation, violence, and hardship; Zablocki's "exit cost" analysis may appear attractive, as it "is primarily concerned with the paradox of feeling trapped in what is nominally a voluntary association" (Zablocki 1998: 220).

Ex-Scientologists have attracted much attention in the last decade, with memoirs, crusading journalists' exposures of scandals affecting CoS, and films, including Paul Thomas Anderson's feature film starring Joaquin Phoenix and Philip Seymour Hoffman, *The Master* (2012), Alex Gibney's documentary *Going Clear: Scientology and the Prison of Belief* (2015), and John Dower's *My Scientology Movie* (2015), scripted by investigative journalist Louis Theroux. The impact of the Internet is incalculable, from sites hosting confidential CoS materials to online ex-member support groups, like Ex-Scientology Kids, with the tagline "I was born. I grew up. I escaped" (Ex-Scientology Kids 2017). This mass of information about Scientology is remarkable, considering CoS aggressively controlled its public image by using legal means (copyright, libel, and defamation) to prevent apostates and outsiders from publishing negative or critical information about CoS (Cusack 2012).

As noted, the majority of Scientology defectors are Sea Org members, and the memoirs reveal a life of drudgery, low pay, surveillance, lack of privacy, and violence. This shifts emphasis from the biography and teachings of the charismatic founder of Scientology L. Ron Hubbard, which were the focus of early ex-member books – Jon Atack's *A Piece of Blue Sky* (1990) and Ronald DeWolf and Bent Corydon's *L. Ron Hubbard: Messiah or Madman?* (1987) – and journalistic exposés including Russell Miller's *Bare-faced Messiah: The True Story of L. Ron Hubbard* (1987). Readers of Marc Headley's *Blown for Good: Behind the Iron Curtain of Scientology* (2009) or Nancy Many's *My Billion Year Contract: Memoir of a Former Scientologist* (2009) are less concerned with whether L. Ron Hubbard was mentally ill, a liar, or a ruthless monetarist, than with the daily drudgery experienced by the elite Sea Org. Nancy Many converted to Scientology in 1971, but Marc Headley (twenty years her junior) was raised in CoS, educated at the Scientology high school Delphi Academy in Los Angeles, and joined the Sea Org as a teenager. Both worked hundred hour weeks and experienced marital pressure, and both "blew" (left the church). Headley's motorcycle escape involved being "run off the road by the Gold Security SUV, attempt(s) to be recovered by at least two other Golden Era staff in vehicles (that I knew of)" and rescue by "the Riverside County Sheriff's department" (Headley 2009: 307). Headley and Many are voluble critics of the church they served selflessly for decades; they have exited both the organisation and the belief system, which they seek to discredit.

Yet some former members of the CoS continue to practice auditing and to do Training Routines (TRs): in the former an auditor questions a believer using an E-Meter (electropsychometer measuring galvanic skin response) to identify the source of negative memories or engrams; the latter involves working in pairs through various exercises under the supervision of a highly-ranked Scientologist. These ex-members also study the Operating Thetan (OT) levels, collectively known as “The Bridge to Total Freedom,” a hierarchical set of esoteric texts that are gradually revealed to Scientologists who have progressed spiritually as members of the Free Zone (Rubin 2011). These ex-Scientologists orient their lives around L. Ron Hubbard’s teachings; they express regret at aspects of Scientology that necessitated their departure, chiefly institutional issues and the leadership of David Miscavige (Rubin 2011: 208). Elisabeth Tuxen Rubin’s research among Danish ex-Scientologists suggests that many feared leaving because of the CoS practice of “disconnection,” shunning by those who remain in the church, even family members. Rubin’s informants continued to practice Scientology as individuals, or contacted a group like Ron’s Org (started by Captain Bill in 1985) in Switzerland or Germany (Rubin 2011: 209). These ex-members believe while rejecting institutional belonging. Mark “Marty” Rathbun, former Inspector General of the Research Technology Centre, was a key figure in the Free Zone from 2004 when he left Scientology after twenty-seven years. He now identifies as non-religious, and regrets involvement in Theroux’s *My Scientology Movie*, but for more than a decade Rathbun provided Scientology services to Free Zone practitioners, and watching him conduct TRs and direct re-enactments of events at CoS Gold Base near Hemet, California are the highlights of that film (Dower 2015).

The case of Scientology is also important for correlating ex-member testimonies with information contained in critical accounts by investigative journalists, and also with the online publication of confidential church materials. This is a game-changer for scholars, who can now write about controversial topics, and who can test the accuracy of material published by early defectors like Attack and Corydon against originals online. Free Zone practitioners are similarly enabled by the Internet, which connects ex-Scientologists across geographical and other divides. This has implications for the study of leaving NRMS, as while institutions like CoS can expel members, such ex-Scientologists may continue to practice the religion, despite institutional hostility and censure.

5 Conclusion

In the twenty-first century the study of leaving NRMS has expanded to allow possibilities that were unanticipated in the early studies from the 1960s

and 1970s. It was initially assumed that, as new religions were regarded as less “genuine” than traditional faiths like Christianity, conversion and apostasy were minor phenomena better described as “recruitment” and “disaffiliation” (Richardson 1993). Sociologists of religion initially researched NRMs as social problems and instances of deviance on the part of members. In the 1970s the anti-cult movement and the Christian counter-cult movement promoted the discourse of “brainwashing” and favoured the use of forcible removal of “cult” members by deprogrammers (Zablocki 1998).

In the twenty-first century brainwashing is a discredited concept and deprogramming is seen as a violation of religious freedom and also, on occasion, involving kidnapping which is a criminal offence (Lewis and Bromley 1987). New religions are understood by scholars, and increasingly by the public, as legitimate paths, and the all-pervasive nature of the Internet has increased available information about religions for scholars and interested people alike. The study of leaving new religions has been complicated by the fact that the individualism characteristic of late modern Western culture has resulted in ex-members choosing to exit groups and institutions, but retain their faith or practices; Free Zone Scientology is the clearest example of this (Rubin 2011). The study of leaving NRMs is now part of a religious and spiritual landscape in the late capitalist West that is complicated, contentious, and constantly changing.

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Non-Religion and Atheism

Caleb Schaffner and Ryan T. Cragun

1 Introduction

The other chapters in this part examine the process and experience of leaving a variety of different religions. However, there are several topics that those other chapters do not address, and the aim of this chapter is to fill some of these lacunae. Specifically, we are hoping to offer some insight into both the beliefs of those who have left religions in general – in our particular case, atheists – and explore how confident atheists are that they have made the correct decision. In a sense, then, we are examining those who have already left religions, but with the aim of understanding how certain they are in their new beliefs. This connects back to the broader topic of leaving religion both because the people who were interviewed for this study all left religions but also because it is exploring whether those who have left religion in general consider returning to religion.

We explore two aspects of this question. First, we examine the various ways that atheists understand their new worldview, as not all atheists understand atheism to mean the same thing. Second, we explore how dogmatic atheists are with their new beliefs. Are atheists open to the possibility that they are wrong? And, if so, to what extent are they open to this possibility?

To address these questions, we draw upon data gleaned from 201 surveys and fifty semi-structured interviews with Chicagoland atheists who had exited religion. The former contained scales measuring childhood religiosity, childhood religious ethnocentrism, and present-day dogmatism, which form our quantitative analysis. Fifty interviewees were randomly selected from survey participants. Interviews lasted twenty to seventy minutes, investigating present-day beliefs concerning atheism, among other topics. Many reflected on their previous theistic beliefs, offering varying degrees of certainty that they would not return. Their explanations are the focus of our qualitative analysis.

2 Previous Research and Empirical Material

Religious beliefs (and disbeliefs) often are central to people's identities, serving as a foundation upon which more mundane beliefs rest. Thouless (1935) noted

that respondents in his research rated their belief or disbelief in god as more certain than ordinary, knowable topics. Given the primacy many attach to religion (or atheism), there are advantages to being certain. Those most certain about the existence of god rate higher in emotional stability and life satisfaction, regardless of whether they are certain of god's existence or non-existence (Galen and Kloet 2011).

Interestingly, there is no consensus about the epistemological belief required to be a genuine atheist, even among researchers and authors. Some atheist literature (for example Cliteur 2009) uses a lenient definition, describing it merely as the lack of belief in a deity. Often this is termed "negative atheism." One of the most prominent contemporary atheists, Richard Dawkins (2006), would fall into this camp, describing himself as just shy of absolute certainty.

In contrast, many dictionaries (for example Merriam Webster and Cambridge) use a stricter, positive atheist definition, that is the complete certainty that a god does not exist. In her publications, Madalyn Murray O'Hair would often define atheism in this way, stressing an atheist must completely reject the possibility of any deity (Schaffner 2012). Around the world, the number of people who identify as positive atheists is increasing, but projections based primarily on fertility rates suggest that atheists may shrink as a percentage of the world's population in coming decades due to higher rates of fertility in predominantly religious countries (Pew Research Center 2015). However, within developed countries, the percentage of people who are atheists and/or nonreligious is increasing and projected to continue to increase (see also Stinespring and Cragun 2015). Below, we explore how the individuals we interviewed understand atheism and illustrate that their conceptions of atheism are varied and nuanced.

In addition to trying to understand how those who have left religions understand their new beliefs, prior research has also begun to explore the extent to which individuals who have left religions are confident they have made what they perceive to be the correct decision. In other words, how dogmatic are atheists? One possible contributor to the dogmatism of atheists that prior research has noted (Hunsberger and Altemeyer 2006) but not adequately tested is whether the religion in which atheists were raised was also dogmatic. If individuals raised in very dogmatic, ethnocentric religions who leave those religions remain dogmatic, this could be evidence for a hangover effect from one's prior religion. Variation in dogmatism is a prime domain to probe for evidence of residual or hangover influences from one's religious upbringing.

Some research has explored these types of hangover effects, like one's adherence to gender ideology (Cottee 2015) or dietary customs (Davidman 2014). However, one prominent hole in the exit literature concerns the effects of the

religious intensity of one's upbringing on current dogmatism. It is possible that the strength of one's religious upbringing may resonate into the present day.

Hunsberger and Altemeyer (2006) suggest that a deeper and more intense experience with theism may increase the certainty that it is incompatible with oneself, resulting in increased atheist dogmatism. Altemeyer (2012) maintained this hypothesis in a personal correspondence, predicting a weak-to-moderate positive correlation ($r = +.3$) between religious emphasis during one's upbringing and present-day dogmatism. We test this hypothesis below.

Although very little prior research supports it, the inverse is also possible: higher levels of religiosity during one's upbringing may result in lower levels of atheist dogmatism. Having been a devout believer growing up only to leave the faith may allow one to view their current beliefs more tentatively, as the best available explanation rather than as a certainty. Below we present some data that allow us to examine whether childhood religiosity influences the dogmatism of atheists.

3 New Findings Focusing on "leaving religion"

After leaving their original religion, our interviewees took a variety of trajectories which all eventually culminated in atheism. Roughly twenty-eight percent considered themselves atheists immediately upon leaving their original religion. Another nine percent formally joined another religion before they ceased believing in a god or higher power.

As noted, there is controversy in defining atheism. Responses from our interviewees revealed similar variability, with some stressing certainty that a deity does not exist and others offering less certainty. Survey participants identified themselves as having one of four epistemological stances about the existence of a deity: positive atheists, hard agnostics, soft agnostics, and apathetic atheists. Positive atheists are completely certain of the non-existence of any deity. These were the single most numerous epistemological group, comprising forty-four percent of all valid survey responses. Representing the dictionary-definition of atheist, their explanations were numerous, but generally terse. In comparison, those who were not positive atheists devoted considerable interview time to explaining their stances and justifying their application of the "atheist" label, apparently aware that their claims would be contested by some of their peers.

Unlike most positive atheists, Regina¹ offered her reasoning at length. It proved memorable and unique among the fifty interviews. She reasoned that,

¹ All names are pseudonyms.

as the non-existence of anything is unprovable, atheism entails a degree of faith, whereas agnosticism does not. She defined atheism as a religion, whereas agnosticism is a stance about how knowable god or gods are. Implicit here is that religion is defined by faith in something that cannot be conclusively proven:

I think atheism is a religion. I believe being agnostic is non-religious. But I think atheists... You have to believe that there is no god. Agnostic you don't really know. You need proof in either direction. There is no proof that god does not exist. There's just a lack of evidence that he does. You really have to believe that he doesn't exist. So I count that as religion.

Most interesting about Regina's delineation was its resemblance to tactics used by the Religious Right to oppose and attempt to diminish the teaching of evolution and secular morality in classrooms, by equating them with religious faith. Regina was cognizant that this stance differed from the majority of rank-and-file atheists, pointing to it as the key way she differed from her peers:

And the way that I definitely know I differ from other atheists is the fact that I do think of atheism as a religion. I don't think a lot of atheists think that we have to have faith to be atheists. But I definitely think that you have to have faith to be atheists: faith in the lack of god, as opposed to faith in a god.

Again, Regina was distinct as far as the interview sample was concerned. While others were similarly certain, most stress the impossibility of a deity, rather than explicitly portraying atheism as tantamount to religion. She was the only one to wrestle with how to prove a negative and attempt to resolve it in such a manner.

Those who were epistemologically hard agnostics stated that they did not think it was possible for humans to ever definitively know whether or not god exists. Like Regina, Trent similarly talked about the impossibility of proving a negative like the non-existence of a deity. While Regina solved this impasse by stressing that atheism is a faith (and that she was among its faithful), Trent took a different route. As it is impossible to prove the existence of a negative, all atheists are necessarily agnostic by definition, according to Trent.

Trent: Well, I mean, basically I think to an extent every atheist is agnostic. Because you just can't know if there's a god. I mean it's infallible.

Interviewer: Would you want to elaborate a bit, on how it's truly unknowable in the end?

Trent: Yeah. The claim that if I said I have an invisible dinosaur in my backyard. You can't see him or feel him. Only I can. If no one's looking. That's an infallible statement. No one can say that surely doesn't exist. That's basically god. Because we don't really know his attributes. People have different points of view of what god is. The Christian god on the other hand, you can basically say he's untrue, because of different historical events that never happened the flood and stuff like that, that are attributed to him.

While Trent and Regina both used broad brush strokes to address the lines between atheism and agnosticism, they painted different pictures. Trent framed atheists as a subgroup within the broader category of agnostics, while Regina designated atheism a religious category, distinct from the areligious, epistemological category of "agnostic."

The final three sentences in Trent's reply illuminate how atheists can exhibit certainty that their beliefs will not change. Trent – and other atheists – can be certain about the non-existence of the gods of world religions because those deities have miracles and historical events attached to their names, which can be falsified by scientific investigation or the lack of corroborating evidence. In contrast, when Trent talked about being unable to definitively prove the non-existence of a god, he was talking about a deity in the abstract sense: a Deist conception of god, which has no specific worldly effects to investigate.

Those whose beliefs made them soft agnostics limited the above statement to themselves, stating that they personally did not know whether or not a deity exists. After leaving religion, Lionel initially considered himself to be agnostic, before self-identifying as atheist. When pressed for any additional argument or event which precipitated this shift, Lionel could not point to any precise watershed moment. Instead, he stated:

At that point it was maybe a switch in the label I would use. But it wasn't that I had a huge switch in my belief then... Technically I wouldn't even quite call myself an atheist today, just because I don't put too much stock in my ability to be sure in such a fundamental thing. I just think they're plenty of things with the universe that I'm not capable of understanding. And its ultimate cause in nature is probably the biggest. But, that said, I think that the possibility of there being a god is so extremely unlikely that for all intents and purposes I'm an atheist.

Lionel's reasoning was not unique among the interviews. Several other participants mentioned being personally unsure to some degree. Multiple

respondents actually quantified their certainty of a god's non-existence: 99-point-some-amount-of-nines-repeating percent. Lionel and these other respondents essentially "rounded up" to consider themselves atheists. Lionel's stance was distinguished from Trent's by the scope of uncertainty: whereas Trent did not consider it possible for humans to ever be certain of the non-existence of god, Lionel's response was more measured, limited to himself

Finally, the epistemologically apathetic were unconcerned with whether or not a deity exists. Patrice started from a point similar to Trent, laying the foundation for explaining his lack of complete certainty with a metaphor. However, he fell into a different category than Trent: epistemologically apathetic.

Patrice: And even though I don't believe in god, I don't believe god exists, I don't know there's no higher power, obviously. I don't believe one exists and I don't believe if it did exist – hypothetically speaking – I don't believe it would care anything about what's going on here. But I can't know for sure. And I know that theoretically that's supposed to be agnostic. But I don't believe in the god in the same way that I don't believe that the moon is made of cheese. I don't believe in it but it's not like an ambiguous 'I don't believe in it,' I don't believe in it because there's no reason to. So I identify as atheist even though the more atheist purists would call me 'agnostic.'

Interviewer: Functionally atheist as opposed to epistemologically atheist?

Patrice: Yeah. That's a good way to put it. Functionally atheist, that's a good way to put it.

Where Patrice diverged from Trent is how he handled this inability to prove a negative. Trent concluded that it is beyond the realm of human ability to do so. In contrast, Patrice did not care about the proposition, opting to live his life as a functional atheist and put the prospect out of his mind.

Furthermore, Patrice's assertion that "there's no reason to" believe in a god that would not "care about what's going on here" demonstrated that, similar to Trent, he conceptualised such a deity as wholly removed and uninterested in human affairs. Often, negative atheists do not rule out what they conceptualise as a deistic god, while they feel completely confident stating that more specific conceptions of a god – such as the Abrahamic god – do not exist.

The "functionalist atheist" label accurately summarised Patrice's decision to live his life without concern about a god or religious dogma. Others used similar terminology, such as Glenn, who stated, "I guess I live my life as a de facto atheist. I don't live my life in a way that I believe there's going to be any kind of retribution by a deity." Underscoring that one's actions are identical to positive

atheists is one key avenue which negative atheists use to legitimise their application of the “atheist” label.

We now turn to our findings regarding dogmatism. In recounting their exit narratives, sixty percent of interviewees researched joining another religion, though very few formally joined any. The religions researched ranged from Islam to Bahá’í to Mormonism. Seven interviewees had a brief quest phase, researching and entertaining the possibility of joining multiple different religions. Some immediately dove into atheism, while others first dipped their toes into multiple religions. Eventually, all respondents reached a level of certainty that no religion is satisfactory and no argument could persuade them of the existence of any deity. In recounting acquaintances’ futile attempts to persuade her to attend their church, Tracy memorably summarised their attitudes towards her disbelief:

I had somewhat similar experiences with other people, where they just think that if I just pray with them they’ll change my mind. I’m afraid of dogs and people are like ‘If you just meet my dog you’ll be okay.’ It’s just the same thing with god.

Like Tracy, individuals must be confident enough in their disbelief to discount the possibility of ever amending some of their most central convictions in order to return to theism. However, in the interviews, there were differing levels of certainty. While many were positive that their beliefs could now never be changed by any life event or argument for theism, others’ expectations were more tempered. Five interviewees specifically mentioned the potential reversibility of their beliefs. One clear example was Brad, who stated that “atheism is just a working assumption for my worldview.”

Another case was Kelsey. She was a self-starter, raised by Catholic parents who were not particularly religious. At ten, she became more interested in religion, stressing, “I don’t think that a change was noticeable to most people. It was very private.” She prayed and read the bible frequently in her room. She also attended some Catholic retreats. Since leaving religion and becoming an atheist, she reported some concern that she may return to theism later in her life:

Kelsey: There’s definitely a little bit of feeling that, since I was raised religious, a fear that maybe I would go back to it. And I really don’t want to. And I think that’s part of spending... I spent the first fifteen years of my life believing in something. And it’s weird to think that for those

first fifteen years I was wrong. And I'm afraid that someday when I'm old I will go back to it and I really don't want to. I guess that's a fear that I have...

Interviewer: That it's so ingrained in you that down the road you might want to?

Kelsey: Yeah. And definitely me right now I really hope not. But... yeah, it's definitely weird because it is taught at such a young age.

Brad and Kelsey demonstrate that some atheists consider it possible that their identity might not be permanent; their identity is capable of changing with more information or later in their lives. This possibility was unwelcome and greeted with concern, as in Kelsey's case where she really hoped she would not return to believing in a god or higher power. Nevertheless, the interviewees who mentioned the prospect served as one pole on the spectrum of dogmatism: a more cautious stance, contrasted with absolute certainty.

In light of Altemeyer's (2012) suggestion of a potential correlation between childhood religiosity and atheistic dogmatism, we specifically tested that claim using three scale measures. The first scale was a forty-point dogmatism measure that does not specifically reference religion. The mean in our sample was 17.0; the standard deviation was 5.8. We also developed two measures of childhood religiosity. The first measured emphasis placed on religiosity in one's childhood. This scale ranged from zero to forty-eight, with a mean of 25.1 and standard deviation of 13.0. The second measured how ethnocentric or exclusive one's childhood religion was. This scale ranged from zero to twenty-four, with a mean of 11.6 and standard deviation of 6.7. We regressed these variables along with a variety of control variables on dogmatism (results not shown), but for parsimony we report here simple bivariate correlation coefficients.

TABLE 20.1 Correlations Between Dogmatism, Religiosity, and Religious Ethnocentrism (* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$)

	Dogmatism	Religiosity	Religious Ethnocentrism
Dogmatism			
Religiosity	.01		
Religious Ethnocentrism	.17*	.71**	

Only childhood religious ethnocentrism behaves according to Altemeyer's (2012) predictions, exhibiting a positive correlation with dogmatism which is significant at a .05 level. Childhood religiosity has no discernable impact on dogmatism. In fact, upon controlling for its considerable overlap with childhood religious ethnocentrism, it actually has a marginal ($p < .10$), negative impact on dogmatism (results not shown).

Overall, the effects of one's childhood religion are nuanced, with the two prongs having unique effects. Childhood religious ethnocentrism behaves as hypothesised by Altemeyer's correspondence (2012). Recall his prediction was aimed at the umbrella concept of childhood "religious emphasis," rather than specifically on either prong which comprises it. Those raised with more negative views of other religious groups maintain the strict dichotomy between their own beliefs and others, even after overhauling their belief system upon exit. They remain steadfast in their new beliefs, seeing little chance of amending them in the future. This provides evidence that stances learned in religion can result in a hangover effect, with a continuation of the sharp differentiation between one's new, atheistic beliefs and competing options.

In contrast, childhood religiosity behaves opposite to initial expectations. While it has no effect when the only measure considered, controlling for childhood religious ethnocentrism isolates its unique contributions. When comparing two individuals who received identical messages concerning their faith's acceptance of outside groups, the individual with a more religious upbringing is expected to be less dogmatic in the present day. Being so personally invested in a religion, only to eventually exit can sensitise one to the tentative nature of their present beliefs.

Kelsey serves as a perfect example, as seen in her survey results. She ranked above average in childhood religiosity, yet below average in childhood religious ethnocentrism. Believing so fervently in her pre-teens and early teens, only to eventually leave, made it conceivable that her beliefs may again change. The tendency to belief might be deeply ingrained inside her. Her explanation contains two strands: cognisance that even one's most central beliefs can drastically change and the possibility that a tendency towards Catholicism cannot ever be completely uprooted.

For those whom religion was a particularly central aspect of their identity growing up, their childhood dogmatism may persist even in light of shifts in other beliefs and values. Specific, consciously-recognised instances of residual influences of one's childhood religion appear to survive the transition to atheism. Our data suggest that being raised with a strong distinction between one's in-group and out-group carries over to new beliefs to some degree, even

as one switches religious reference groups. Some maintain a strict distinction between their beliefs and others, stressing certainty in the superiority and ultimate correctness of their present answers to major, existential questions. But the correlation is not particularly strong, suggesting that this is true of just a minority of atheists or a generally weak effect. For other atheists, having been deeply invested in a belief system only to exit leads one to consider the tentative nature of their present beliefs. Further analysis is needed, but our results suggest a small, persistent effect of one's childhood religion, even when the specific faith – and theism in general – is disavowed.

4 Conclusion

Our aim in this chapter has been to illustrate that among those who have left religion in general, in our case atheists, there is not universal certainty. What it means to be an atheist differs, with some insisting on the non-existence of any and all gods, while others find the question irrelevant to their daily lives. Likewise, the degree of confidence atheists exhibit in their new worldview varies and appears to have at least some connection to childhood religiosity, even if the relationship is not particularly strong. As the other chapters in this part illustrate, many people leave religions. While most atheists and a growing percentage of the nonreligious are remaining atheists and nonreligious, respectively (see Merino 2011), our research suggests that there is the possibility that members of both groups could change their views and adopt theism or join a religion. However, such transitions are uncommon. As secularisation theorists have long argued (Bruce 2013), once you go secular, you rarely go back.

Our chapter illustrates that scholars are just beginning to explore the process of leaving religion in general. In order to have a clear understanding of what it is like to become nonreligious, scholars need better ways of measuring types of nonreligion, like those we employed above, as well as better ways of measuring types of religious upbringing. In addition to these variables, it is, of course, necessary to understand the environment in which a religious exit takes place (for example, How religious is the surrounding society? Family? Friends?) and an individual's social location (for example, Are they part of a racial and/or gender majority? Are they well-educated? Wealthy?). Tentatively, we suggest that, while childhood religious experience will no doubt be filtered through variables like environment and social location, it may remain an important factor influencing how nonreligion and atheism are manifest after people leave religions.

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PART 3

Theoretical and Methodological Approaches



Historical Approaches to Leaving Religion

Ryan Szpiech

1 Introducing Historical Approaches to Leaving Religion

In the early fourteenth century, the Castilian Jew Abner of Burgos (d. ca. 1347) embraced the Christian religion and began to call himself Alfonso of Valladolid after changing his city of residence. He passed the remaining three decades of his life writing extensive polemics against Judaism, not in Latin, but in Hebrew, some of which he and possibly others translated into Castilian. Although there is no evidence that the sincerity of his conversion was ever in question among his Christian brethren, Abner/Alfonso—he is known by both names, depending on the sources—became one of the Christian anti-Jewish polemical writers who was most often cited by Jews, a majority of whom roundly condemn him as a liar, traitor, and apostate (Szpiech 2013: 144–150).

Abner/Alfonso's reputation among Jews as a notorious apostate has persisted to the twentieth century. Historian Yitzhaq Baer, states, “Abner did not belong in the fold of orthodox Catholicism; he was a typical *mumar*, a heretic within the Jewish camp” (Baer 1961: 1:334). Yet even though his “heresy” was commonplace, his reputation was not, for as word of his actions spread, he became no less than “the best known apostate ever to arise in medieval Jewry” (328). For Baer, Abner/Alfonso's identity as an apostate relies on the lingering persistence of his Jewish identity, his remaining *within* the Jewish fold rather than leaving it. For Baer, Abner/Alfonso “remained a Jew at heart.” (334). Yet not all historians agree, and some see him as a traitor who left Judaism (for example, Shamir 1975: 53, who deems him a “true convert”). Raphale Jospe sums up the problem, posing the question, “Do we treat such thinkers and their works as Jewish, as Jewish until the time of their apostasy, or as non-Jewish and having no place in the context of Jewish philosophy?” (Jospe 1988: 9, my translation). If Abner/Alfonso was a “Jew at heart” who remained “within the Jewish camp,” was his departure from Judaism insincere and incomplete? Must he be deemed a “true convert” (and so also a “true apostate”) in order to “leave” one religion for another?

Abner/Alfonso's life and works present historians with a vexing question about scholarly methodology: how can one approach without bias the subject of leaving religion in historical sources? The question springs from a broader

methodological challenge that confronts all historical study of religious identity: how can the differences between beliefs and practices, whether on an individual or collective level, be historicised in objective, or at least neutral, terms? The goal of this chapter is to introduce basic historical approaches to the subject of leaving religion and to point out the challenges that such approaches face. The discussion that follows will first provide a brief overview of past and contemporary approaches to the historical study of leaving religion. It will then provide a brief critical evaluation of such methodologies, offering a few recommendations for future methodological avenues.

2 Theoretical Perspectives and Turning Points

As in modern religious studies, leaving religion in a historical context has not been studied as a topic on its own until very recently. Generally speaking, it has been approached as a subtopic of conversion studies, and this conflation has brought with it a number of theoretical problems and challenges. Most problematic is the imposition, often unintentional, of a hierarchy of values in which faith and piety are implicitly held to be positive and normal while loss of faith and departure from religious belief or practice are characterised as negative and deviant. Such a hierarchy is certainly evident in the earliest scholarly literature on conversion. For example, William James, in his foundational 1902 study of religious experience, negatively casts leaving religion as “backsliding” and conversion as positive, a “high-water mark of [man’s] spiritual capacity” (James 1987: 237). Such a view casts unfavourable judgment on leaving faith and regards it as a purely negative force that “diminishes” the individual’s spiritual capacity. Later studies based on his model have inadvertently perpetuated a similarly hierarchical structure by accepting pre- or early modern paradigms of faith as natural and given rather than as culturally and historically determined. Overcoming the persistence of such assumptions is an important challenge for contemporary studies of entering or leaving religion.

Arthur Nock’s 1933 study, *Conversion*, the first truly scholarly treatment of the subject in a historical context, constitutes the first serious effort to move away from such an implicit hierarchy. In contradistinction to conversion as an inner act of faith, he introduces what he calls “adhesion” to a religious tradition both from within and outside of the believer’s faith community. He even goes so far as to present conversion to Christianity from the perspective of an ancient pagan like Celsus (second century) for whom “Christianity is primarily a mass movement of falling away from tradition” (Nock 1933: 207). Because he considers religious change not only in terms of entering religion or acquiring faith but also in terms of conversion as a falling away from tradition, he might

be taken as a distant founding figure in the modern study of leaving religion and deconversion.

Despite the possibilities opened up by Nock's intervention (many of which Nock himself did not explore), much historical literature from the middle of the twentieth century continued to treat leaving religion as a sub-topic of the study of conversion. Historians of the medieval world have tended to approach it only through related categories such as heresy, apostasy, unorthodoxy (Grundmann 1953; Russell 1965; Leff 1967; Moore 1975; Kanarfogel 2012) while historians of the later medieval and early modern period represent dissent from tradition in terms of doubt, scepticism, or secularisation (Febvre 1937; Popkin 1979; Tuck 1988; Edwards 1988; Cohen 1999). While the former group sometimes treats deviation from or abandonment of normative belief according to medieval categories of faith and heresy, the latter tend to suffer from an implicit teleology that champions the story of scepticism as the story of modern secularism and Enlightenment reason.

An important theoretical shift in the scholarly literature of religious experience has accompanied the so-called linguistic turn in historiography over the last half-century, when intellectual and religious historiography has begun to engage more directly with questions of language as a mediator and determining factor not only of religious meaning and experience (Proudfoot 1985) but also of historical meaning (Skinner 1969; Jay 1982; Toews 1987; Spiegel 1990). This turn in historiography follows the lead of Michel Foucault, for whom "discourse is not the majestically unfolding manifestation of a thinking, knowing, speaking subject" (1972: 54). Because historical evidence always exists as a "discursive formation" that makes sense only in a particular context, historians must take care to "disconnect the unquestioned continuities by which we organise, in advance, the discourses that we are to analyse" (25). The approach to historical sources as forms of discourse in need of decoding and interpretation rather than as transparent stores of "data" about social and economic historical facts, has provoked a sense of crisis in the discipline, especially many parts of Europe, where social historiography still remains committed to traditional methodologies (Vásquez García 2004). As Nicola Clark explains, the resistance to the influence of cultural and literary studies points to the deep and "unsettling" shift that it has implied for accepted historiographical methodologies.

If the "real" is known only in and through its discursive construction (...) how could historians assume (as they customarily had) the adequacy of words to refer to things? (...) If language does not refer in a one-to-one fashion to things in the "real world," how could historians argue that their language about the past corresponded to "what had actually happened?"

CLARK 2004: 6

Facing the question imposed by discourse has involved two important shifts in religious studies: the awareness of religious change (entering or leaving religion) defined not as a historical event but as a lived experience always mediated by symbols; and the awareness that the representation of that experience, in language or other symbolic structures, is not simply reflective but is actually constitutive of the experience itself. As Proudfoot explains, “the labels a person adopts in order to understand what is happening to him determine what he experiences” (1985: 229).

Some scholars in the social sciences have adopted an approach to their sources based on discourse analysis. Stromberg, for example, has based his anthropological study of conversion narratives on the premise that “the event is a symbolic construction” (Stromberg 1993: 15, 133 n. 10) and Leone has adopted a “semiotic” approach (2004). Nevertheless, the linguistic turn has also led to the characterisation of conversion and apostasy as a “historiographical problem” (Szpiech 2017) in which “a great divide opens between eleventh- and twelfth-century ideas about conversion and modern studies in sociology, anthropology, and history” (Morrison 1992: xv).

Yet the effect of this shift need not only be received as negative. Rather than seeing all examples of leaving religion as a “falling away” from tradition or loss of faith, the linguistic turn has provoked a heightened attention to the role of individual testimony in characterising movements of faith, whether towards or away from participation, orthodoxy, or belief. This historiographical relativism resulting from the “linguistic turn” constitutes one of the most important turning points in the study of conversion and leaving religion over the last century and has led to the generalised view that any conversion can also be seen as an apostasy from another, contrary faith and, vice versa, that all leaving religion can be potentially understood in positive terms as the discovery of a new understanding and worldview. As Lewis Rambo explains, “Some forms of conversion also require an apostasy. Some conversions require explicit and enacted rejection of past affiliations, but all conversions implicitly require a leaving-behind or a reinterpretation of some past way of life and set of beliefs” (Rambo 1993: 53). A good example of this two-sided treatment in a historical context is Segal (1992), which presents the “conversion” of Paul as both a finding of new faith and an “apostasy” and departure from Judaism. Similarly, Malkiel (2007: 6) considers the image of Jewish apostates in medieval Ashkenaz who “hurdled the Jewish-Christian divide with ease, as if they did not consider it terribly significant.” Such approaches that are cognizant of the two-sided nature of religious change, whether movement between religions or departure from religion altogether, have more successfully avoided the distortions that

caricature religious change only in negative terms as loss and apostasy or in positive terms as triumph and enlightenment.

3 Methodological Perspectives and Turning Points

Most studies that mention apostasy include it in studies of conversion, considered both in broad, social terms (such as the “Christianization” of Europe or the “Islamization” of the Levant, for example Jones 1962; Aubin 1963; Bulliet 1979; Fletcher 1997) and in narrow individual ones (such as the stories of individual apostates). Both of these approaches developed under the influence of French historiographical trends associated with the *Annales* school, which reformed positivist historiographical trends of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century by taking a more critical approach informed by the growth of other social sciences such as sociology and anthropology. One of the most influential methodologies in European history in the middle decades of the twentieth century was the history of “mentalities” that grew from the *Annales* school in France. *Annales* historians were divided within this view between pursuing “microhistory” as a means of accessing locally contextualised worldviews, and a more comprehensive *longue-durée* approach, looking at historical and economic factors over a long time span. While the latter presented religious change as part of a large-scale social movement, the former focused on unique and idiosyncratic cases of belief and disbelief, yielding studies of heresy, witchcraft, or mysticism (for example Le Roy Laudarie 1978; Ginzburg 1980; Ginzburg 1991). One notable study by a pioneer from the *Annales* school, Lucien Febvre, explicitly addressed the question of “unbelief” in the sixteenth century on the basis of literary texts of the period (Febvre 1982). Similarly, Jeremy Cohen has taken individual case studies as the basis for a generalised speculation about the “mentality of the medieval Jewish apostate” (Cohen 1987).

Although the *Annales* focus on mentalities yielded some useful results in the historical study of religion, it also involved speculation about motives and subjectivity on the basis of only fragmentary, narrative sources, sometimes without a thorough accounting of the limitations presented by such sources or the attention to discourse necessary to read them in a meaningful, historicised context. One notable trend in response to these limitations has been to avoid treating religious change as a discreet historical event that can be historicised alongside other events and instead to focus on the histories of representation. This shift is not simply a product of limitations in available sources or

knowledge, however, but also a methodological shift in the treatment of representations (narratives, images, etc.) as vital aspects of the conversion “event” in themselves. In contrast to Cohen’s consideration of the “mentality” of the medieval Jewish apostate, Karl Morrison, on the basis of some of the same sources, argued that, “scholars cannot penetrate to experience through texts, that what we actually can study is a document” (xii). Linking conversion and apostasy as contrary aspects of one conceptual phenomenon, he calls the latter “the keystone of the pathology of conversion” (Morrison 1992: 91), and sees the text as a window not into the “mentality” of the convert but into that of the author who depicted him or the public that imagined him. The narrative approach, shifting from the history of the experience of entering or leaving religion to that of understanding these processes through stories, has been developed in numerous subsequent publications over the last twenty-five years (for example Fredriksen 1986; Deweese 1994; Hindmarsh 2005; Schmitt 2010; Hindmarsh 2014; Szpiech 2013). Similarly, a few studies (Barbour 1994; Viswanathan 1998) have explicitly treated leaving religion (apart from conversion) on the basis of narrative and discourse analysis. Others, taking stock of these methodological changes, have produced similar historical studies according to a more traditional methodology, although often with innovative results (Arnold 2005; Lillevik 2014; Endelman 2015). Selim Deringil, for example, has studied sources in the archives of the Ottoman Empire to argue that “Conversion and/or apostasy were seen as particularly dangerous in the nineteenth-century Ottoman Empire because they were perceived as *de-nationalisation*” (Deringil 2012: 2–3). An equally innovative approach to the social history of apostasy is Paola Tartakoff’s study of the uncommon prosecution of various Jews, converts, and “apostates” by the medieval (papal) Inquisition in fourteenth-century Aragón (Tartakoff 2012: 2–3). Most approaches can be sorted according to what John R. Hall calls “generalizing” versus “particularizing” orientations (Hall 2007: 158–161), each producing different results according to different foci and approaches to language.

4 Critical Reflections, Evaluations and Predictions

Investigations of religious belief and behaviour before the twentieth century are largely confined to written documents, ritual objects, and visual representations, and these are generally scarcer and more thinly contextualised the further back in time one proceeds. There are usually few or no ethnographic, sociological, or anthropological studies from the period to draw from; evidence

providing first-hand observations is quite limited, and observations that do survive must be read always as local representations, not scientific or ethnographic records. Moreover, sources of demographic or other numerical data are extremely tenuous. Historians do not have the data or proximity to assess the often complicated motives behind the decision to leave religion. Thus the nuanced distinctions proposed by Zuckerman between “shallow” and “deep” apostasy or “mild” and “transformative” apostasy experiences (Zuckerman 2012: 6–7), which relies on first-hand contact with modern subjects, are virtually impossible for the historian. As Steven Epstein has observed about studying renegades and apostates, “the subject is partly motive, which is always difficult for the historian to fathom” (Epstein 2006: 137), and this difficulty is exacerbated by a lack of extensive or detailed documentation.

Such a lack limits the historian’s knowledge and determines the sorts of questions that can and cannot be asked about religious communities and the members who entered and left them. There are, as a result, numerous risks presented by the limitation of information and reliance on written documents that must be carefully avoided when studying leaving religions in the past. Making extrapolated assumptions about motives, identities, beliefs; assigning monolithic and singular identities and perspectives to religious communities; relying on modern categories of the sacred and secular as a measure of a society in which such categories did not exist as such; reading too much into too little information. Many historical studies on conversion and apostasy find themselves limited by one or another of these methodological and theoretical assumptions.

To be sure, historians continue to revise their methodologies in an attempt to avoid past missteps without succumbing to new biases. Gabrielle Spiegel recommends a moderate combination of discourse analysis and scepticism in attending to what she calls the “social logic” of historical sources (Spiegel 1990: 85). Suggestions like these are extremely useful. Yet however carefully they negotiate the pull between text and context in their analysis, historians of all stripes face a stark choice in answering the methodological challenges of the last decades: can the “real” be accessed through texts or not? Is there even a single “real” to be historicised and analysed and if so, how can it be approached? Christine Ames cautions against taking epistemological skepticism too far. “The linguistic turn indeed changed how scholars of religion receive and interpret texts. But they must still, despite source limitations and the difficulty of gauging internal faith from external practice, resist the magnetism of intellectual history, of reducing medieval religion to it” (Ames 2012: 342). The caution makes sense, yet it does not offer a clear course of action out of the impasse: without a solid theoretical basis on which to resist the destabilisation

of the real brought on by the turn to discourse, that resistance and reduction rely more on faith and imagination than knowledge or understanding. One may study the representations of leaving religion as evidence of cultural history, but, in the absence of extensive testimony, one can only consider motives and experiences by approximation and extrapolation, and along this path lie formidable risks of interpretive bias.

5 Suggestions How To Do It

In an attempt to avoid imposing overly simple characterisations of belief in historiography, Marc Baer proposes four categories for conversion in history: “acculturation” (incorporation into a larger cultural system), “adhesion/hybridity” (adopting new beliefs and practices alongside the old), “syncretism” (fusion of old and new), and “transformation” (total replacement of the old with the new) (Baer 2014: 25–26). Adapting Baer’s view, we can propose characterising leaving religion according to comparable, parallel categories: “distancing” (cultural and geographic separation to mark departure from belief systems and a waning of ritual practice without a certain change of beliefs); “de-ritualisation” (an abandonment of former practices and beliefs alongside a certain persistence of a generalised spiritual sensibility); “deconversion” (a marked temporal and historical rupture with old ways and beliefs without a certain stance, whether positive or negative, on any new spirituality); and “secularisation” (a total rejection of any religious sensibility in favor of a non-religious worldview and practice). These categories represent a spectrum of positions towards former and current ideas about religion and identity and might serve, as least in a heuristic sense, to account for the varieties of experience implied by the broad notion of “leaving religion.”

To apply these terms to the example with which we began, that of Abner of Burgos/Alfonso of Valladolid, we might ask how one may write a historical account of his departure from Judaism. Should historians attempt to date his “distancing” in social terms according to his actions (baptism, adherence to a new social group, etc.) or in affective terms according to his own statements about his inner doubts and isolation? Because he wrote in Hebrew and by all accounts approached Christianity through mostly Jewish paradigms, we might say that he never “deconverted” from Judaism, as Shamir implies, but only that he “de-ritualised,” as Yitzhak Baer’s reading suggests, making him more of a Jewish apostate than a Christian convert. He did not, in any case, become secularised to a purely philosophical worldview outside of religion, thus although he left one religion for another, he did not “leave religion” altogether. Was he

more a “heretic,” or more a “Jew at heart”? While these questions remain difficult to answer, we can be more certain that Abner/Alfonso is notable because his account of leaving Judaism is one of the best autobiographical accounts of religious change from the Iberian Peninsula, and thus his *representation* of his experience fits coherently into a larger chronology of conversion and apostasy narratives in the Middle Ages.

The case of Abner of Burgos/Alfonso of Valladolid underscores the difficulty of establishing the study of “leaving religion” as an independent historical area. Whether the historian follows the categorical distinctions offered above, or other ones, the challenge she faces is how to represent historical change without relying on pietistic or presentist hierarchies and value structures that see leaving religion either in negative terms (as a “loss of faith”) or in positive ones (as a “rational” break with superstition), and at the same time without filling in data with information about “typical” experiences where such material is obscure or lacking in the source record. As historiographical writing more generally takes ever greater stock of individual actors and perspectives in an effort to characterise experience, identity, and agency in historical terms, so the historiography of religion might best strive to offer not a history of religious belief or unbelief per se but a critical ethnography of the production and use of religious symbols and narratives by specific communities and individuals. As Foucault argues, it should eschew “a reading that would bring back, in all its purity, the distant, precarious, almost effaced light of the origin” and instead commit itself only to “the systematic description of the discourse-object” (1972: 140). In other words, the study of leaving religion in a historical context might do best to attend principally to how leaving religion is depicted, resisting the tendency to generalise too much from representations to historical events.

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Geographical and Demographic Approaches to Leaving Religion

Lily Kong and Orlando Woods

1 Introducing Geographical and Demographic Approaches to Leaving Religion

This chapter provides an overview of geographical and demographic approaches to leaving religion. Just as the study of leaving religion is associated with processes of religious conversion and change, geographical and demographic approaches seek to map such changes across space and the human lifecycle. More than that, the fact that “people enter, exit, and move within religion, just as they are born, will die, and migrate, in life” (Voas 2003: 94) reveals the importance of such approaches, not least because they seek to understand religious change within the frame of life events, such as schooling, work, marriage, migration, procreation, upward (or downward) socio-economic mobility, retirement and death. By combining an understanding of demographic events and the socio-economic, political and cultural contexts within which religious change takes place, it will become apparent how geographical and demographic approaches to leaving religion are mutually enriching, and have the potential to offer unique perspectives to understanding the phenomenon of leaving religion.

To talk about leaving religion is, first and foremost, to accept that an individual identifies with a religion—one that is distinguishable from other systems of belief (Ivakhiv 2006). Leaving religion—or apostasy—is one half of the conversion equation; the other being the entering of religion. It should not be assumed that “leaving” religion is the same as “renouncing” religion; the process can be one of religious transfer as much as it is rejection. When viewing the process from a temporal perspective, the equation can be solved instantly (that is, when converting out of one religion and into another), protractedly (that is, when there is a period of time before converting into another religion) or never (that is, when the convert remains “religion-less”) (see Streib 2012 for a broader overview of deconversion pathways). Further complicating the discourse are three necessary considerations. The first pertains to how actively an individual engages with their religion. Given that many individuals are born into the religious identity of their parents, the religion that they identify with

is often not so much a function of their own choice (or an expression of their own religious agency), but of their circumstances and environments. In such cases, one may be nominally religious, but have little active engagement with the religion or belief in its doctrine; a case of “belonging without believing” (McIntosh 2015; after Davie’s 1990 notion of “believing without belonging” and Day’s 2011 notion of “believing in belonging”). If this is the case, then the notion of leaving the religion of birth becomes normative: it was not chosen, therefore leaving it is an expression of human agency overcoming the situational or circumstantial determinants of religious “choice.” Moreover, recent debates concerning religious socialisation highlight the extent to which a religious upbringing can influence the decision to stay with or leave religion in later life (see Altemeyer and Hunsberger 1997; Loveland 2003).

Related to this is the second consideration, which pertains to the role of choice in the process of leaving. To leave a religion assumes a modernist distinction between being “in” or “out” of a religion; it is choice that dictates which side of the dualism one identifies with. Such a dualism is, however, fallacious in many contexts around the world. Indeed, the very idea of religious dualism (and its more integrative counterpart – religious syncretism) suggests that individuals can identify with more than one religion at once, and do not necessarily need to leave or be “out” of a religion in order to identify with a new one. Woods (2013), for example, highlights the retention of Hinduism amongst Christian “converts” in Sri Lanka, whilst Keyes (1993) shows how the spread of Buddhism amongst hill tribes in northern Thailand did not result in the replacement of one set of beliefs with another, but an expansion of understanding and the co-existence of multiple belief systems.

The third consideration pertains to classifications of “religion.” If religion is a set of beliefs that are identified with or adhered to (or are just immanent), then can positions of secularism, atheism and agnosticism be classified as religions? If so, can converting from a position of secularity to one that identifies with a more formal religion such as Buddhism or Christianity constitute leaving one religion and entering another? Whilst we return to the problem of discursive framing later in the chapter, it is necessary to recognise upfront that we treat the field of “leaving religion” in a broad sense, to include both the transference and renunciation of “religion,” and shifts from positions of “non-religion” to “religion” as well.

2 Theoretical Perspectives and Turning Points

Traditional geographical and demographic approaches to leaving religion concern the mapping of patterns of religion identification across space and

the human lifecycle. Often, such mapping occurs periodically, with longitudinal analysis used to identify and explain changes in religion over time (see Zelinsky 1961; Park 1994). There are, however, some key differences between demographic and geographical approaches. Demographic approaches seek to correlate life events (such as getting married and having children), human development (such as rising incomes and access to education, and the associated propensity to migrate) and broader population profiling (such as changing gender and age profiles) with the act of leaving religion. This has involved studying how demographic variables such as gender, inter-religious marriage, socio-economic status and migration can affect the propensity to leave religion (see, for example, Hout et al. 2001; Lawton and Bures 2001; Kaufmann et al. 2012). Such studies strive to model behaviours and predict changes in religious composition over time. By correlating gender with leaving religion, for example, Skirbekk et al. (2010: 300) predict that men are six percent more likely to switch out of their religion of birth than women, and that women who identified with no religion at the age of 16 are twenty nine percent more likely than males to subsequently adopt a religion (a possible function of patriarchy within inter-religious marriage). Demographic modelling like this is predictive in nature, and aims to develop a macro-level overview of when – but not necessarily why – individuals are likely to leave a religion.

Geographical approaches have traditionally sought to explain the variability of religion across space (see Kong and Woods 2016). In doing so, they seek to highlight contextual differences that can explain why individuals may leave a religion. Geographical approaches have, therefore, the potential to sensitise the discourse to different interpretations of “religion,” and what it could mean to “leave” it. Throughout history, geographical processes associated with the movement and diffusion of people, ideas and capital have resulted in large-scale shifts in religious affiliation. Specifically, processes of modernisation (along with colonialism and the colonisation of territory, and international migration), communism and secularisation have all caused individuals to leave religion, and have therefore helped to reshape the religious topography of the world. Each of these constitutes a turning point impacting the religious lives of large populations. We examine each in turn below.

First, the modernisation of society and culture has caused populations to leave traditional religions associated with superstition and ritual. Whilst modernisation was once associated with colonialism and/or the colonisation of space by religiously-motivated groups, it has more recently found meaning in socio-economic advancement. In the first instance, colonialism caused the importation of religion to pre-modern societies, and introduced “the notion of religion as an individual option” (Ivakhiv 2006: 172, original emphasis; see also Smith 1998). Specifically, the missionisation of large parts of Asia, Africa

and Latin America during the era of European colonialism resulted in departures from indigenous religions, and the uptake of Christianity (van der Veer 1996; see also Carlson's 2015 discussion of the Islamisation of the Middle East). This has, for example, transformed the religious topographies of the Philippines and Jamaica: from animism and *zemi*¹ worship, to Catholicism and Protestantism respectively. In the second instance, in countries such as Singapore, socio-economic advancement has been shown to correlate with a shift towards more rational thought, which in turn has resulted in individuals leaving superstition-based systems of belief and embracing more cognitive, scripture-based religions such as Christianity, Islam and Buddhism (Tong 2007; Woods 2012a). Thus, whilst modernisation was once associated with the importation of religion by colonising powers, it is now associated with a more protracted shift away from superstition and ritual, and the uptake of more formal, "world" religions instead.

Second, the spread of communism throughout parts of Asia, Russia, Eastern Europe and Latin America from the 1960s to 1980s coincided with the spread of state-sponsored atheism. This was a response to the belief that organised religion contradicted the Marxist philosophy of communism, and must therefore be repressed. In Cambodia, the spread of communism under the Khmer Rouge (1975–1979) resulted in a departure from Theravada Buddhism, as witnessed by the forcible de-robing and execution of monks, and the destruction of temples and pagodas (Poethig 2002). Whilst expansive in scale and scope, the efficacy of such repression did, however, vary. In China, attempts to eradicate Christianity during the Maoist era (1949–1979) were largely unsuccessful, as Christians escaped execution and imprisonment by operating underground instead (Chao and Chong 1997). This demonstrates the geopolitical potential for scaling-up the analytical framework, showing how the state can influence religious change by actively (and sometimes forcibly) inducing a departure from religion.

Third, socio-economic advancement has witnessed the large-scale retreat of religion from many Western societies; a shift enshrined in the secularisation thesis. The secularisation thesis predicts that higher per capita income correlates with a lower demand for religion, as measured by regular participation in formal religious services and practices (Norris and Inglehart 2004). Such diminished demand is caused by the structural and social differentiation brought about by modernisation, which has caused the social role of religion to be eclipsed and replaced by other providers (Bruce 2002). Secularisation is believed to have caused Switzerland's Christian community to shrink from

1 A *zemi* is an ancestral spirit worshipped by the indigenous Taíno people of the Caribbean.

ninety five percent of the population in 1970 to seventy five percent in 2000, and is projected to fall to forty two to sixty three percent by 2050. Similarly, Austria's Catholic community is predicted to shrink from seventy five percent of the population in 2001, to less than half by 2050 (Goujon et al. 2007). At a global level, the Pew Research Center (2015) predicts that during the period 2010–2050, the population of the religiously “unaffiliated” will grow by more than sixty million, with much of this growth coming from Christians converting out of religion and into a position of non-religion. Whilst such patterns have been witnessed throughout much of Western Europe, critical scholarship has more recently sought to interrogate the extent to which secularisation actually brought about a departure from religion, and whether or not such a process has now given way to an era of “post-secularisation” (Kong 2010), or a more nuanced understanding of contemporary religiosity that finds meaning in alternative forms of belief and spirituality.

In recent decades, traditional approaches have given way to more granular exploration of what it means to leave a religion. These new approaches reflect a change in focus: from identifying patterns, to exploring the processes and politics associated with leaving religion. This has also resulted in closer engagement with geographical conceptions of space, with the role of space shifting from that of a contextual canvas upon which religion is practiced, to a mediator and outcome of religious activity. This change in focus does, to a large extent, reflect the paradigm shift in cultural geography that occurred in the late 1980s; a shift that was informed by poststructuralist thought and the emergence of the geographies of religion as an increasingly viable sub-discipline within human geography (see Kong 2001, Kong 2010; Knott 2005; Dwyer 2016). Complementing such a shift has been the emergence of more complex and variegated religious landscapes brought about by international migration, which itself has contributed significantly to the processes of religious switching (through, for example, the shift from a majority to minority religious position during the migration journey). Thus, if traditional approaches sought to identify large-scale patterns of religious change, new approaches add nuance by exploring the effects of inter-community mixing and ever-greater religious pluralism on the propensity to leave religion.

Inter-religious mixing and pluralism has resulted in more complex webs of conversion practices and politics. Migrants' religious identities are often buttressed by specific ethnic and linguistic identities, creating rigid assemblages that, if left (or joined), can affect the convert in both positive and negative ways. On the one hand, Özyürek (2009: 102) draws on Viswanathan's (1998: xi) observation that “conversion is arguably one of the most unsettling political events in the life of a society” to show how German Muslims (who left Christianity)

and Turkish Christians (who left Islam) are each depicted as threats to national security, and a “challenge to [the] socio-spatial ordering of self and other.” Similarly, Ramahi and Suleiman (2017) coin the term “intimate strangers” to reflect the tension between estrangement and emotion experienced by female converts to Islam in the United Kingdom.

On the other hand, Kalir (2009: 132) demonstrates how the conversion of secular Chinese migrant workers to Christianity whilst in Israel is “because of a more deep-seated disposition towards what they consider to be a modern reformation of their personal identity.” Converting to Christianity represents not just a departure from their secular past, but is also a metaphor for becoming “modernised.” It involves leaving their (traditional, rural, impoverished) backgrounds behind, and embracing a Western belief system (that goes beyond Christianity) instead. The resultant cultural capital associated with conversion enables them to “symbolically distinguish themselves from nonmigrants” (Kalir 2009: 146), thus enforcing a sense of their own difference and, implicitly, betterment.

3 Methodological Perspectives and Turning Points

Demographical approaches to the study of leaving religion reflect – almost exclusively – a quantitative bias. The use of large-scale datasets is needed to provide the robustness needed to model population-related behaviours at the national level. Recently, such approaches have been refined by the use of time-series data to offer longitudinal perspectives on leaving religion and religious change, and a shift from bivariate to multivariate modelling of religious behaviours (Sherkat 2001, Sherkat 2004; Kaufmann 2008). Combined, these developments have improved the sophistication of demographic analyses. This has resulted in the ability to more accurately model the net impact of secularisation by balancing net departures from religion with the net arrivals generated by immigration. Such modelling reveals the “power of demography to reverse secularization” which in turn “may lead us to question the widely shared view that secularization is an inevitable handmaiden of the modernization process” (Skirbekk et al. 2010: 304). Whilst such “powers of reversal” are transformative, they also highlight the potential for manipulation, and the whitewashing of statistical anomalies.

That said, as big data increases the range, quality and frequency of demographic data available to researchers, we can expect the predicting, inferencing and modelling of behaviour to become an increasingly integral part of the demographic value-proposition. Whilst the predictive focus is already evident

in, for example, Skirbekk's et al. (2010) study of the religious composition of the United States until 2043, we can expect to see such modelling scale up (by looking at regions and inter-country dynamics), across (by looking at countries beyond the United States and, more generally, the West) and down (by examining subnational fluctuations). Such models will continue to be based on demographic projections, although their accuracy and sophistication will only improve as more data points become available through digital technology, and the predictive power of computational algorithms increases.

4 Critical Reflections, Evaluations and Predictions

Whilst the geographies of religion subdiscipline is growing in prominence within the wider geographical enterprise, it has so far failed to sufficiently integrate religious conversion and the processes of leaving religion into its canon (Woods 2012a). Doing so has caused distinctively geographical perspectives to either be lost, unrecognised, or claimed by neighbouring disciplines within the broader social sciences (see, for example, Williams 2005; also Knott 2005). Indeed, much of the empirical work discussed in this chapter does not come from geographers, but from sociologists, political scientists and scholars of religious and area studies instead. Thus, whilst Kaufmann (2008: 2) laments the fact that "sociologists often overlook the role of demography" when explaining religious change, the greater irony is that geographers are yet to engage with the discourse in a meaningful way either.

Geographical perspectives are not, however, without value; in fact, the reverse is true. Given that religion is, by now, "everywhere" (Dwyer 2016: 758) in geographical scholarship, and that religion "varies from place to place, context to context" (Ivakhiv 2006: 170), research must continue to embrace more critical, geographically nuanced approaches that unravel what it means to enter, leave, return to, and be "with" or "without" religion (Tse 2014). Such approaches can help to shed light on the key shortcomings of existing scholarship, which tend to be context-specific and yet universalising in their gaze. Most work on secularisation, for example, focuses on European contexts, where state religions prevail, but is problematised when applied to the more open religious marketplace of the United States (see Kaufmann 2008). Geographical sensitivity is therefore needed to overcome the focus on the "normative" West, and to re-engage with non-Western, often postcolonial contexts.

Doing so will serve to reify the terminological complexity that is inherent to the study of (leaving) religion by showing how "the language of conversion has often failed to adopt perspectives that are broad or inclusive enough to cover

the full gamut of conversion processes and outcomes” (Woods 2012a: 445). Indeed, a growing trend throughout the United States is to self-identify with being “spiritual rather than religious; or as polyconfessional, multireligious, nondenominational, or evolving; or as religious but of no single persuasion, and so on” (Ivakhiv 2006: 170); a trend that, as recognised at the beginning of this chapter, is normative in other parts of the world. By destabilising – or removing – the boundary between categories of religion and non-religion, the potential for a more inclusivist discourse opens up; one that is sensitive to the potentialities of postmodern thought, and which questions the very premise that one can ever “leave” a religion.

A more critical discourse also requires new methodological approaches to overcome the quantitative bias outlined above. The veracity of large-scale datasets has often been uncritically assumed, and has led to a tendency to create what Bruce (1999: 40) terms “theor[ies] of everything” that attempt to “explain religious change at the macrolevel, yet in doing so... risk overlooking market nuances at the microlevel” (Woods 2012b: 217). These theories run the danger of coming across as overly simplistic – and, in some cases, misleading – in their explanatory potential. Increasingly, and in accordance with an injection of geographical sensibility, research should embrace more explorative and, therefore, qualitative approaches to understanding religious behaviours, actions and outcomes. Doing so would reflect more a methodological expansion than replacement. Quantitative approaches will still be needed to meet the instrumentalist demands of public policy and planning, but we can also expect more balanced, mixed methodology approaches that yield more holistic understandings of what it means to “leave religion.”

5 Suggestions How to Do It

Geographers have a lot more to offer in terms of reframing and expanding the discourse. Doing so will help to extend the “transgressive lens” of the geographies of religion, and thus help to develop a more encompassing discourse that explores how leaving a religion “goes beyond the reorientation of individual belief, and is instead a process of change that involves the (re)definition of self and other” (Woods 2012a: 452, 440; Kong 2001; Kong 2010). Such a discourse would recognise the fact that leaving religion represents a departure from a pre-existing state of being, and would seek to identify and understand the political and symbolic ramifications of leaving a religion. In particular, to help realise the uniqueness of geographical perspectives, we suggest that scholarship focuses more explicitly on exploring how these ramifications intersect with the mediating role of space.

An immediate and specific area of investigation is the processes and politics of dispossession associated with the religious conversion of space (see Woods 2012a, Woods 2013). Such dispossession transcends the individual, and can occur at various scales of analysis, ranging from the conversion of religious territory to the conversion of religious buildings. For example, the forcible conversion of Palestinian (Islamic) territory to the Jewish settlement of Israel involved a massive restructuring of the population, the renaming of physical landmarks, and other efforts to create a “distinct Hebrew toponymy” (Azaryahu and Golan 2001: 180). Similarly, one outcome of secularisation has been the conversion of churches and other places of religion into alternative lifestyle spaces, such as bars, clubs and residential accommodation (see, for example, Woods 2018, Woods 2019). At each scale, geographers can contribute unique perspectives by examining the processes – and ensuing politics – needed to desacralise space, and to bring about a departure from the religion that they were previously associated with. Doing so would contribute to a more wide-ranging discourse that engages more closely with issues of geopolitical and policy-related concern.

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Statistical Approaches to Leaving Religion

Isabella Kasselstrand

1 Introducing Statistical Approaches to Leaving Religion

Quantitative research has relatively recently become a prominent approach in the social scientific study of religion. While there are a handful of examples of such studies from the first half of the past century, quantitatively oriented research on religion has been a more common occurrence since the 1960s (Voas 2007). Predominantly a result of significant technological advancements in the second half of the twentieth century that allow for complex calculations to be carried out instantaneously by a computer, this development follows a similar surge in the application of statistical methods across the social sciences more broadly (Blalock 1989).

Early quantitative researchers on apostasy (for example Caplowitz and Sherrow 1977; Hunsberger 1976; Roof and Hadaway 1977; Wuthnow and Glock 1973) responded to a need for measuring a changing religious landscape – an undertaking that required statistical tools. Since then, quantitative research has continued to thrive. Today, the amount of resources available for scholars interested in studying religious disengagement quantitatively are abundant and constantly growing. Such resources, which are discussed in this chapter, include a wide range of publicly available data sets as well as statistical software programs that have the capacity to perform advanced statistical analysis.

Although statistical methods are increasingly popular in the study of religion, this approach has been criticised for its limited ability to thoroughly capture diverse meanings that exist in the social world (Gergen 1999). This has also been noted specifically in relation to research on religion and nonreligion. Yamane (2000), for example, asserts that highly subjective phenomena, such as religious feelings and experiences, are inherently unquantifiable. Despite this criticism, statistical methods provide important strengths and insights on apostasy that cannot be discerned from the use of qualitative approaches. Along these lines, Voas (2007) maintains that quantitative research provides rigor, clarity, and the ability to distinguish social trends and patterns.

In this chapter, I explore approaches, opportunities, challenges, and limitations of using statistical methods to study the phenomenon of individuals

leaving religion. In order to showcase the strengths and dilemmas of this approach, methodological literature and theory are discussed and evaluated alongside a presentation of previous empirical quantitative research studies on apostasy. Finally, this chapter concludes with overall suggestions for researchers who are interested in using this methodological approach.

2 Theoretical Perspectives and Turning Points

Due to the complex and intricate nature of the object of study, each researcher that uses statistical methods has to carefully consider how to conceptualise apostasy. Yet, I also believe that there is considerable value in adopting a definition that has been used in previous literature. Brinkerhoff and Mackie (1993) reason that apostasy involves disengagement from two major dimensions of religion: “belief” and “community.” In operationalising these concepts, the authors focus on indicators of “persistence of beliefs” and “denominational self-identification.” More specifically, they compare respondents’ answers to the questions on “childhood denominational identification” and “current denominational identification.” Additionally, they examine whether the respondents still maintain the religious beliefs that they were raised in. Brinkerhoff and Mackie (1993) suggest that an apostate is a respondent who used to identify with a religion but no longer does so and who no longer holds the beliefs that he or she was socialised into. Operationalising apostasy by comparing adulthood and childhood religiosity corresponds with core theory in apostasy literature, including socialisation theories that explore the salience and persistence of childhood religious socialisation on religious beliefs and belonging in adulthood (Altemeyer and Hunsberger 1997).

In the same fashion, Streib and Klein (2013) define apostasy as “disaffiliation from a religious tradition.” They discuss variables from the cross-national, publicly available data from the International Social Survey Program (Table 23.1) that allow for comparing a respondent’s current religious affiliation with the one that he or she grew up in. Using a similar definition, Streib et al. (2011) refer to apostasy as “deconversion” and provide a comparative and contextualised account of leaving religion in the United States and Germany using both quantitative and qualitative methodology. Similarly, Schwadel (2010) studies religious disaffiliation in the United States by comparing current and childhood religious affiliation using data from the General Social Survey.

Statistical methods make a wide range of contributions to our theoretical understanding of individuals who leave religion. One of the key debates

TABLE 23.1 Repeated Cross-Sectional Data on Individuals

Data Source ^a	Years	Countries ^b	Access
European Social Survey	2012–2016	36 European countries	ESS – European Research Infrastructure http://www.europeansocialsurvey.org
General Social Survey	1972–2018	United States	NORC at the University of Chicago http://gss.norc.org
International Social Survey Program	1985–2017 ^c	45 countries	GESIS https://www.gesis.org/issp
World Values Survey	1981–2014	100 countries	WVS Association http://www.worldvaluessurvey.org/

- a While this table lists common large-scale data sources, this list is by no means comprehensive. A collection of a larger number of cross-national and country specific data sources can be found through the Association for Religion and Data Archives (<http://thearda.com>).
- b Not all countries participate in all rounds of the data. For a full list of countries by year, visit respective website.
- c Extended module on religion available in 1991, 1998, 2008, and 2018 (forthcoming in 2020).

on religious disaffiliation that quantitative researchers engage in is whether changes in religiosity are due to “age effects,” meaning that people’s levels of religiosity change as they age, “cohort effects,” suggesting generational shifts in levels of religiosity, or “period effects,” that assume variations in religious beliefs and practices across different historical time periods. This theoretical question is of great relevance to researchers using quantitative methods to study apostasy. Voas (2007) agrees that distinguishing cohort and age effects is a key challenge that quantitative researches should pay attention to. Some examples of such studies include Hamberg’s (1991) longitudinal study on Sweden that shows that while older individuals were more religious, all cohorts saw a decline in subjective religiosity between 1955 and 1970. Using data from the General Social Survey, Chaves (1991) maintains that secularising trends of church attendance in the United States are a result of a combination of age, period, and cohort effects. Also using data from the General Social

Survey, Schwadel's (2011) study showed that religious service attendance and frequency of prayer declined across cohorts, that biblical literalism was associated with both period and cohort declines, and that belief in the afterlife was stable across cohorts. The author argues that the debate surrounding religious disaffiliation is a result of methodological limitations. However, he explains that there are recent developments in the statistical techniques that are available to researchers, suggesting that today's software programs, such as SPSS, R, Stata, and SAS, have the ability to distinguish between the three different effects. More specifically, he describes a technique called "intrinsic estimator models" that allow for unbiased estimates of age, period, and cohort effects, a method he utilizes in his own study. This technique is discussed in-depth in Yang et al. (2008). This development highlights a general trend in the use of statistical techniques in the social sciences, namely that there are continuous advancements that allow us to examine intricate trends, patterns, and relationships that we were previously unable to study.

3 Methodological Perspectives and Turning Points

An important methodological concern in the study of apostasy is the availability of data that adequately grasp the dynamics of leaving religion. The most common source of secondary data is "cross-sectional" in nature, which means that data have been collected from a particular group of individuals at one point in time. Many large-scale, cross-sectional data sets (see Table 23.1) repeat the implementation of the same (or very similar) surveys at multiple points in time, but with different participants. This type of data is called "repeated cross-sectional data." These data sets include a range of variables on various topics of interest to social scientists across different fields of research. For example, they provide information on respondents' opinions on different political and social issues, their demographic characteristics, and perhaps of most relevance for studies on apostasy, their religious affiliation, beliefs, and behaviour.

While repeated cross-sectional data on individuals' current religious beliefs and practices can offer important insights on societal trends of religious change (for example the percentage of respondents who identify with a religion across different years), they are unable to examine changes at the individual level (such as whether a particular person has left the religion that he or she was raised in). Although this can be done through survey questions that ask individuals to recall past religious affiliation, practices, and beliefs, there are also limitations to using data gathered on respondents' memories of their

childhood. While Brinkerhoff and Mackie (1993: 240) use this approach in their own study on apostasy, they maintain that “the literature is replete with the pitfalls of relying on memory in reporting beliefs and behaviors from the past.”

“Panel studies,” which consist of data that are collected from the same sample of the same respondents at multiple points in time, are perhaps the most useful type of data for discerning trends of apostasy since they measure the changes in religiosity for each individual over time, without relying on his or her memory or on assumptions that two different samples are comparable. However, collecting this type of data requires extensive resources and long-term commitment. Thus, there are few such data sources available. Nevertheless, there are a number of noteworthy examples of studies on apostasy that are based on panel data. For example, Sherkat and Wilson (1995) analyse religious switching and disaffiliation between senior year of high school and eight years later. They use American data from two waves (1965 and 1973) of the Youth-Parent Socialization Panel Study (Interuniversity Consortium for Political and Social Research) to explore the effects of social ties on religious switching and apostasy, concluding that women, Conservative Protestants, individuals with children, and people with lower levels of education, are less likely to be apostates. They further advocate for panel data as filling important gaps in studying religious dynamics. Using panel data from the first (1994–1995) and the third (2001–2002) waves of the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent to Adult Health (Add Health), Uecker et al. (2007) examine declines in religious participation, affiliation, and personal importance of religion among American youth who were seventh to twelfth graders in the first wave and 18–25-year-olds in the third wave. One dimension of their study emphasizes behavioural factors, showing that those who engaged in premarital sex, who had consumed marijuana, and who used alcohol experienced the largest decline in religion (see Table 23.2).

Scholars use a variety of descriptive and inferential techniques in the pursuit of studying apostasy. “Descriptive analysis” involves the most basic forms of statistical analysis, whereby researchers examine the distribution of responses within and across relevant variables on religious disengagement. Such analysis involves frequency tables, charts, and summary measures (such as mean, median, mode, range, and standard deviation), as well as basic bivariate tables. Examples of such statistical analysis include Streib’s (2012: 6) finding that 11% of Americans and 14% of Germans are religious disaffiliates and that Germans are more likely than Americans to cease to believe in God (see Table 23.3); and Caplovitz and Sherrow’s (1977) many bivariate tables of apostasy across various demographic variables (such as religion of origin, geographical region, size of home town, parental relations, career intellectuality, and type of college attended).

TABLE 23.2 Percent of Young American Adults Experiencing Types of Religious Decline

	Attendance	Importance of Religion	Disaffiliation
<i>Premarital Sex</i>			
Had sex before age at marriage	72.8	21.0	17.5
Did not have sex before age at marriage	49.6	15.1	14.1
<i>Marijuana Use</i>			
Has ever smoked marijuana	79.2	24.3	21.3
Has never smoked marijuana	60.4	16.5	13.2
<i>Alcohol Consumption</i>			
Increased alcohol consumption	73.0	21.1	17.2
Did not increase alcohol consumption	62.0	18.4	16.7
<i>All Young Adults</i>	68.6	20.0	17.0

Adapted from Uecker et al. (2007: 1676) with data from Add Health (1994–1995; 2001–2002)

TABLE 23.3 Changes in Belief in God

Which best describes your belief about God?	United States	Germany
I don't believe in God and never have	4.2%	28.3%
I don't believe in God now but I used to	5.4%	15.2%
I believe in God now, but I didn't used to	7.3%	8.5%
I believe in God now and I always have	83.1%	47.9%
	100%	100%

Adapted from Streib (2012: 6) with data from ISSP (2008).

While the goal of descriptive analysis is to provide an overview of the characteristics of a sample, “inferential statistics” aims to generalize findings from a sample to a larger population. This approach includes some bivariate techniques (for example Pearson’s R correlation, ANOVA, t-test, and chi-square) and various multivariate options (such as linear and logistic regression

techniques). Examples from the empirical literature on apostasy include, for example, Suh and Russell's (2015) multivariate regressions on religious changes using 2006–2010 panel data from the General Social Survey that show that the religiously unaffiliated become more secular over time and score the lowest on every measure of religiosity. Additional examples are Hertel's (1988) regression and ANOVA results that show that workforce participation rates among apostates differ by gender, whereby women who are apostates have the highest levels of participation in the labour force while male apostates have the lowest levels.

The key strength of multivariate compared to bivariate inferential techniques are that they allow for studying the relationship between two variables while controlling for a range of potentially intervening factors. This is a necessary step in order to suggest a causal relationship between two variables. For example, Kasselstrand et al. (2017) use multivariate analysis of data from the World Values Survey to show that, compared to those who are religious, atheists and the nonreligious Americans are significantly less likely to have confidence in social and political institutions, even after controlling for general trust, religious service attendance, age, marital status, education, gender, race, income, and political views.

Both descriptive and inferential statistics can tell us much about apostasy in the modern world. Inferential statistics calculate the probability that the findings from a smaller sample reflect characteristics or relationships in a larger population. Given that we rarely have access to an entire population in social science research, it gives us an opportunity to study the population with a smaller, more easily attainable sample. On the other hand, while descriptive findings are not generalizable to a larger population, such analysis "can be quite revealing, providing insights that would not otherwise be apparent" (Black 1999: 46). More specifically, descriptive findings can offer a broad overview of measures and characteristics of apostasy that are more reader friendly, in particular for an audience that is not well-versed in statistics. With a strong, representative sample, it is also possible to add an inferential component to basic univariate and bivariate statistical tests (such as chi-square to a bivariate table and confidence intervals to sample means). In other words, even researchers without advanced quantitative skills in multivariate inferential statistics can produce findings from survey data that are of crucial value in the field.

4 Critical Reflexions, Evaluations and Predictions

While there are countless opportunities to further our understanding of apostasy with statistical methods there are also several challenges associated

with this type of research. One challenge lies in understanding the effects of survey question and response option wording on the overall findings (Davie 2007; Willander 2014; Wuthnow and Glock 1973). Brinkerhoff and Mackie (1993) note that one of the reasons for why studies often report diverse levels of religious disaffiliation is due to differences in how questions are asked in surveys. For example, there are distinct outcomes when comparing a question that asks about religious identification, religious belonging, and religious membership. They also mention that the surveys that are used to collect data are seldom made available to the readers in published literature. Along with this, Bruce (2002) argues that current research on religious decline has methodological deficiencies. More specifically, he argues that some scholars invent latent religiosity by using leading questions, questionable cut-off points in categorising and analyzing data, by wrongfully interpreting largely secular responses as religious, and by failing to adopt a critical approach in relation to the meanings behind people's values and attitudes on religion.

While attention to questionnaire construction is vital when studying religious decline, with various data sets designed to compare trends at a cross-national level, it is also important to note that survey measures on religiosity generally do not consider the diverse conceptual meanings found in different environments. Along these lines, Davie (2007: 114) speaks of the necessity to "take into account cultural specificity, historical trajectory, linguistic nuance, and culturally varied motivations." Likewise, while some large-scale data sets (such as the World Values Survey and the International Social Survey Program) provide information on non-Western contexts, a large abundance of accessible survey data are shaped by Western, primarily Christian, conceptions of religiosity (Spickard 2017).

In other words, applying set survey items to multiple contexts broadly overlooks the historical and cultural processes that have shaped the meaning of being religious or secular in a certain context. For example, many secular Europeans, particularly in Scandinavia, identify with the national churches and use them for life cycle ceremonies as a recognition of a cultural heritage despite being nonbelievers in God (Kasselstrand 2015; Zuckerman 2008). This is in line with Hervieu-Léger's (2006: 48) argument that it is possible to "belong without believing" suggesting that one can believe in the *social* aspect of religion. Likewise, many Europeans "believe without belonging" in that they have rejected organised religion while still holding personal religious beliefs (Davie 2007). Given that apostasy may not necessarily encompass a simultaneous rejection of all dimensions of religion, it is thus important to clearly define what constitutes "leaving a religion," when considering diverse sociocultural contexts. On this note, it is also worth considering whether a person who rejects all

dimensions of religion, or who has become a self-defined atheist, is necessarily a more salient apostate than an individual who rejects certain dimensions of religion or who has simply become apathetic to religion.

Furthermore, the experiences of leaving a religion are evidently largely different across different cultures and religions. Indeed, the process of “coming out” as atheist or agnostic has stronger normative implications in certain contexts. For example, the role conflict associated with revealing an atheist identity in the United States (Smith 2011) is much more pervasive than in more secular contexts, with widespread religious indifference (Kasselstrand 2016). Thus, one needs to carefully consider such implications when analysing large-scale cross-national data sets on religion. Bruce (2002) highlights contextual norms as a challenge in studying religious change using survey methods as core values and expected behaviours of the specific social group may influence how respondents answer survey questions, referring to a study by Hadaway et al. (1993) that showed that Americans tend to exaggerate their religious service attendance.

In other words, it is likely that participants give answers that they think the researcher wants to hear. What this means for the study of apostasy is that we need to interpret individuals’ responses in relation to dominant social norms and expectations present at the time and the place that the survey was implemented. This may be particularly challenging in longitudinal studies that are based on panel data. For example, individuals may exaggerate their religious involvement during a time period when secularity was particularly stigmatised, only to alter their response in a later survey, following changing social norms, irrespective of their true levels of religious engagement.

In response to the challenges that are associated with using statistical data described in this chapter, I predict that the future will bring an increasing wealth of mixed methods research on apostasy. The main advantage of a mixed methods approach is that by using both quantitative and qualitative elements in a research project, it is possible to combine the strengths of each method and offset their weaknesses. As statistical data can be used to study general trends and as qualitative research explores in-depth meanings, an integration of the two leads to a more comprehensive understanding that may not be possible if using one method alone (Johnson and Onwuegbuzie 2004). With mixed methods, researchers may therefore be able to use statistical data that may be generalised to larger populations while still incorporating more in-depth explanations for the complex processes of apostasy.

I also foresee a growing number of studies that attempt to predict future levels of secularity on the basis of current and past trends. This can, for example,

be seen in a recent study from Pew Research Center (2015) where present levels of religious affiliation and population growth patterns are used to predict the size of various religions and the unaffiliated in year 2050. Here, the authors argue that although the religiously unaffiliated population will increase in size, as well as in its share of the population in Europe and North America, its proportion of the global population will decline due to different population growth rates in different regions of the world. Another example of research that uses such a methodology is Stolz et al.'s (2016) prediction of religiosity, spirituality, and secularity in 2030 based on trends in 1950 and 2012. This study, based on Swiss data, foresees a continued decline in established religion and a growth in the secular population. While studies that predict future levels of religiosity rely on the assumption that current and past trends will continue into the future, many of these studies offer robust predictions that are of significant value to our field of study. As such, I agree with Bruce' (2002) argument that as social scientists, we should attempt to measure and map out religious trends, despite any potential challenges in doing so.

Finally, the future of secular studies may see an increase in the use of "big data," which is a term used to describe sets of data that are not subject to sampling and are instead generated on entire populations. Such data include census data, various forms of administrative data (for example membership data from religious organisations) and data on internet behaviour gathered from, for example, search engines. Overall, I believe there is potential to expand our use of big data in studying apostasy and secularisation. An example of using big data on internet behaviour to understand religious decline includes Stephens-Davidowitz' (2015) finding that there has been an increase in google searches about doubting the existence of God, a steep decline in searches for churches, and a limited interest in searching for information about Jesus and the Pope. In fact, he notes that the celebrity Kim Kardashian was subject to 49 million google searches in the first half of this decade, compared to only five million for Jesus Christ and three million for Pope Francis. These data offer valuable, detailed, information that reveal trends of changing interests for the large segment of the world's population that accesses the internet for information.

5 Suggestions for How to Do It

My first suggestion for how to complete a quantitative study on apostasy involves using secondary data (such as one of the data sets discussed in Table 23.1).

There is a common misconception that primary data is at all times superior. As a matter of fact, in many circumstances, secondary quantitative data analysis may serve as a stronger and more robust method of research. The perhaps most obvious advantage to secondary data analysis is that it requires considerably less time and resources. Survey construction and implementation that would yield data on apostasy that is generalizable to larger populations is a close to impossible undertaking for a sole researcher with limited resources. Furthermore, secondary data is associated with fewer data collection problems (Kiekolt and Nathan 1985). Many large-scale surveys are administered by organisations employing experts with extensive knowledge on survey construction, sampling techniques, and data collection. These surveys are likewise commonly put through rigorous pre-testing in order to improve the quality of the data. However, it is important to note that when using secondary data sources, a researcher's conceptualisation of apostasy is dictated by the items that are available in the data. For example, most large-scale data sets on religion include indicators on religious affiliation, church attendance, and belief in God, but variables on ritual participation are rare. Thus, more comprehensive measures that thoroughly capture various dimensions of apostasy require collection of original data from surveys designed for this particular purpose.

An important resource for researchers interested in secondary data analysis is the Association of Religion Data Archives (the ARDA) available at <http://www.thearda.com>. This database offers public access to a wide range of data sets collected at different levels and across various contexts. What makes the ARDA particularly useful for researchers with limited knowledge in statistics is the fact that they also offer online analysis features on their website, where basic statistical findings for variables of interest can be produced. The data sets are also downloadable and can be analysed with statistical software, such as SPSS, Stata, SAS, and the open source software called R (The R Project for Statistical Computing), available at <http://www.r-project.org>.

There are countless opportunities to expand our knowledge on individuals who leave religion by using statistical approaches, particularly given the increasing abundance of high quality data for open access and new and improving software tools for this purpose. Being able to understand and conduct such analysis is increasingly becoming a key to researching secularity. Indeed, without access to statistical data our knowledge of secularisation and apostasy would be limited. It is with the use of such data that we have come to learn about key changes in our population, including the recent but sharp drop in religious belonging in the United States (Sherkat 2014), the decline in religious service attendance in Europe (Berger et al. 2008), and the growth in various religious groups and the unaffiliated population around the world (Pew Research

Center 2015). In summary, statistical methods are both advantageous as well as necessary when studying patterns of apostasy that move beyond individual experiences.

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Sociological Approaches to Leaving Religion

Daniel Enstedt

1 Introducing Sociological Approaches to Leaving Religion

Sociological research on leaving religion has progressed in four overlapping phases: (1) The initial phase emerged during the 1960s and focused on the decline in religious affiliation in Western Europe and North America. This research was closely related to studies about secularisation, unbelief, and irreligiosity in modern, Western, and primarily Christian societies. (2) During the 1970s and peaking in the 1980s, studies about the process included exiting not only Christian and Jewish groups, but also new religious movements (henceforth NRMs; so called “cults” or “sects”), and changed the direction of study through discussions of the brainwashing hypothesis and the “snapping” and deprogramming of NRM members. (3) During the third phase, from the 1990s until around 2010, research on leaving religion based more on case-studies, but the focus remained on leaving Christianity, Judaism, and NRMs. (4) In the fourth phase, from 2010 on, interest in leaving different religious traditions, such as Islam and orthodox Judaism, grew and was combined with a theoretical development based on empirical fieldwork. The next part of this chapter will discuss the sociological research on leaving religion conducted since the end of the 1960s and onwards.

This chapter fits in a larger framework of secularisation and societal and religious change, but I will limit its scope by focusing on studies that specifically examine the process of leaving religion.¹ Several different concepts – such as apostasy, deconversion, disaffiliation, religious shifting, “nones” (people who claim no religious affiliation), leave-taking, and becoming an ex – are used in sociological discussions of leaving religion.²

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- 1 The boundaries between the sociology of religion and other disciplines, such as psychology, ethnology, and anthropology are not always clear-cut, as some of the research discussed in this chapter will show.
 - 2 See Cragun and Hammer (2011) for a critical discussion of the concepts used in the sociology of religion to examine leaving religion.

2 Theoretical Perspectives and Turning Points³

The study of unbelief, irreligiosity, and atheism emerged in the sociology of religion during the 1960s. The papers and discussions from a symposium on unbelief held in Rome in March 1969 were published in *The Culture of Unbelief* (1971). Peter L. Berger called the symposium “an historic occasion” and a “pioneering venture,” and emphasised that the sociology of religion can no longer study religion exclusively, but needs also to “broaden its scope to deal with the social dynamics of contemporary nonreligious culture” (1971: vii-viii).⁴ During the symposium, which highlighted the tension between science and religion, the causes and effects of unbelief were discussed in relation to secularisation, (irreligious) “counterculture,” and emerging Marxist theory in modern Western societies. The type of religion emblematic of post-1960s America, as outlined by Robert Bellah and Richard Madsen in *Habits of the Heart* (1985: 221), embraces individualism, anti-authoritarianism, religious bricolage, religious experiences and emotions, self-centeredness, and (not least) disaffiliation from conventional religious groups and established religious organisations and structures.⁵

In *Toward a Sociology of Irreligion*, Colin Campbell suggested that the debate on secularisation encouraged sociologists to study irreligiosity. “The blunt fact is that until very recently sociologists have entirely ignored irreligion” (Campbell 1971: 8). Furthermore, he warned of a tendency to over-intellectualise the study of irreligiosity: “There is a considerable body of evidence to suggest that the actual transition from religious commitment to religious rejection is much more a matter of moral outrage and ethical rebellion than one of intellectual doubt and rational persuasion” (Campbell 1971: 125).⁶ Robert Bellah addressed a similar problem in *The Culture of Unbelief* with the term “objectivist fallacy,” that is a “sophisticated error in understanding the religious life of the ordinary

3 Parts of the following part have been published elsewhere (see Enstedt 2018).

4 This symposium was attended by Talcott Parsons, Robert Bellah, Thomas Luckmann, Charles Glock, Harvey Cox, Bryan Wilson, and others who have since influenced the sociological study of religion.

5 In *Habits of the Heart* (1985), sociologists Robert Bellah and Richard Madsen coined the oft-cited term “Sheilism” to cover this type of individual religiosity.

6 Campbell's book had a minor impact, but gained some attention 40 years later when it was republished and more research was conducted in the field of irreligiosity. Lois Lee follows Campbell in *Recognizing the Non-Religious* (2015) when she scrutinizes secular, non-believing subjectivities in north London. Lee's interest is not primarily on leaving religion but instead on secular and non-believing positions in contemporary society.

man, which has never been primarily a matter of objectivist belief" (1971: 43). In addition to the objectivist fallacy, one should also consider the overall emphasis on religion and non-religion as "belief" and the neglect of other aspects of (non)religiosity such as practice, habits, emotions, values, and power.

According to Wade Clark Roof, religious defection is part of a larger (counter)cultural trend of criticism and mistrust of institutional religion as part of the established order that guards and reproduces the dominant cultural values and morals of a society (Roof 1978: 44). Roof concluded, based on United States (hereafter US) census data, that religious defection "follows clearly along age, sex, educational, and regional lines. Secular influences in modern society are generally greater among the young, the educated, [...and] men more than woman" (43). Furthermore, "young defectors are prone to come from affluent, middle-class families, and are likely to be married and hold jobs" (Roof 1978: 43). In a survey of Berkeley students, Robert Wuthnow and Charles Y. Glock also concluded that religious defection from "conventional" religion is closely aligned with countercultural behaviour and with "a more general disenchantment with the conventional" and "dissatisfaction with the life that conventional society offers" (Wuthnow and Glock 1973: 175). In a follow-up study, Robert Wuthnow and Glen Mellinger (1978) noted that the tendency to religious defection in the 1960s and early 1970s had halted, at least among the Berkeley students in their study, but not reversed.

In *The Religious Drop-Outs* (1977), David Caplovitz and Fred Sherrow aimed to identify the causes of religious apostasy among Jewish, Catholic, and Protestant college students in the US. They suggested that a wider range of various traits could "be seen as questioning either religiosity or the commitment to social groups" (Caplovitz and Sherrow 1977: 182). These conclusions from the 1970s exemplify how leaving religion has been explained and understood in the sociology of religion through the concepts of religious belief (religiosity) and religious belonging (commitment to social groups). "Of all the factors related to apostasy, the most significant, not surprisingly, was religious belief" (Caplovitz and Sherrow 1977: 182). The most "intellectual students" were most likely to question religious articles of faith and to abandon them when they collided with rational arguments. I will return later in the chapter to the questions raised by understanding religion as belief/believing and as belonging.

Caplovitz and Sherrow also pose apostasy "as a form of rebellion against parents" and against the parents' religion (1977: 50). Much of their findings were later criticised by psychologist Bruce Hunsberger: "the assumption that change of religious identification necessarily represents rebellion against parents and rejection of religious identification is, at best, speculation." (Hunsberger 1980: 159; see also Hunsberger 1983, and Altemeyer and Hunsberger 1997).

One of the earliest attempts to define religious defection is found in Armand L. Mauss's article "Dimensions of Religious Defection" (1969). Mauss noted the lack of research about religious defection, and strove to contribute to the field theoretically by stipulating three dimensions of religious defection: (1) the intellectual (or belief) dimension, (2) the social dimension, and (3), the emotional dimension (1969: 129–139). Combining these three dimensions, a hypothetical eight-celled typology emerges, in which, for example, a person who scores high in all dimensions will be a "total defector," while others can be intellectual or emotional defectors, but still participate regularly in religious activities (Mauss 1969: 131). This typology can help to distinguish various kinds of defection, but it does not explain much about the causes, consequences, and processes of leaving religion.⁷

Merlin B. Brinkerhoff and Kathryn L. Burke (1980) argued for a typology based on the symbolic interactionist perspective, rather than theories about secularisation and demographic factors. Their focus was on leaving "sects," and they concluded that religious "disaffiliation is a gradual, cumulative social process in which negative labeling may act as a "catalyst" accelerating the journey to apostasy while giving it form and direction [...]. Social expectations, consistent with the tag, are communicated to the dissident through interaction." (Brinkerhoff and Burke 1980: 52). Although leaving religion is still a one-way process, from one position (the believer) to another (the non-believer). As James T. Richardson has pointed out, studies on leaving religion should assume that leaving is not a single event, but rather consider it a "multi-event," that is a more complex, fluid, and sequential process, with no necessary "end station" (Richardson 1978; Richardson 1980). Even so, Richardson continued to view the process as a unidirectional linear process, however complex.

Helen Ebaugh's influential study, *Becoming an Ex* (1988) must be mentioned in any discussion of the symbolic interactionist perspective on leaving religion. According to Ebaugh, life in modern society is characterised by shifting from role to role. In her analysis of a wide range of different roles during the exit process, Ebaugh (an ex-nun) extracted a set of defined stages passed through before the exit role is internalised. The exit process differs significantly from

7 An elaborated model of the apostasy process is found in *Deconversion* by Heinz Streib et al. (2009). The authors point out five characteristics of deconversion: "1. Loss of specific religious experiences; 2. intellectual doubt, denial or disagreement with specific beliefs; 3. moral criticism; 4. emotional suffering; 5. disaffiliation from the community" (Streib et al. 2009: 22). Besides these aspects, they also lists a range of possible "deconversion avenues," or possible outcomes of the deconversion process, such as (1) leaving religion, (2) finding a new religion, or (3) leaving the religious group while keeping some aspects of the religious faith (Streib et al. 2009: 26–28).

other socialisations into roles, and also differs in type between whether it leads to another major role (as during conversion from one religion to another) or solely to the antithetical exit role. What characterises the exit role in the second case is that the “identity as an ex rests not on one’s current role but on who one was in the past” (Ebaugh 1988: 180). While studies on conversion have focused on the process that leads to the new role, studies on deconversion and apostasy focus on the process of leaving a role.⁸ “In the process of role exit, there tends to be mutual disengagement in that the individual moves away from the group while the former group simultaneously withdraws from the individual with regard to expectations and social obligations” (Ebaugh 1988: 181–182). The first three stages of exiting a role in this model are (1) doubting, usually because of a change in life situation (for example, unemployment, migration, or change in organisation or relations), (2) seeking alternatives that also reinforce initial doubts, (3) coming to a turning point and its three functions: “the reduction of cognitive dissonance, the opportunity to announce the decision to others, and the mobilisation of the resources needed to exit.” (Ebaugh 1988: 184). After the significant turning point, the fourth and last stage consists of creating the exit role that includes a new self-presentation.

Another perspective on leaving religion that gained much attention during the 1980s was aligned with studies of “cults” and the brainwashing hypothesis. But as Stuart A. Wright noted in *Leaving Cults: The Dynamics of Defection* (1987), the image of the brainwashed cult member was based on popular “misconceptions [that] derive, in part, from accounts by deprogrammed ex-members, anticult organisations, and the resulting images often perpetuated by the media [...]” (Wright 1987: 93). The narrated experiences of critical ex-members became characteristic not only of the general understanding of cults, but also of understandings of religion per se; as an anti-cult organisation quoted by Wright (1987: 94) put it, “All religion is brainwashing.” The discourse about “cults” and their strategies of recruiting potential members, frequently reproduced in popular culture and media, has usually been stereotypical and prejudicial. In this discourse, the member is described as a victim, kidnapped or in some way manipulated to join the group. Terms like “mind control” and “brainwashed” are frequently used, and the leader of the religious group is depicted as a pathological individual motivated by money, glory, or sex (Wessinger 2000: 6). The understanding of sect or cult members as victims has been countered by substantial criticism (Richardson and Introvigne 2001: 163).

8 See also Stuart Wright’s (1988) “Evaluation of Three Analytical Frameworks on Leaving Religion: Role Theory, Causal Process Model, and Organisational Model.”

Falling from the Faith (1988), edited by David G. Bromley, is divided between discussions of disaffiliation from mainline churches and disaffiliation from NRMS, mainly in an American religious context (Bromley 1988: 9). In the chapter on leaving Mormonism (Church of Latter Day Saints), Albrecht et al. note that religious leave-takers may, may return to the religion they left as young adults or join another church when they are older and about to form a family. One reason given for such a return was the desire to give their children a religious upbringing; another was the feeling of something missing in life. Apostasy was found to be more likely if the original religious socialisation was weak, and a reoccurring sign of immanent apostasy was “a long period of disengagement that preceded disaffiliation” (Albrecht et al. 1988: 79). Religious doctrinal issues are rarely a significant problem that precedes dropping out of religion: “disengagement and disaffiliation are not necessarily accompanied by a rejection of Mormon belief” (Albrecht et al. 1988: 80).⁹ Kirk Hadaway (1989) noted, in line with Albrecht et al., that “it is likely that many of the younger apostates will find their way back to a religious identity.” Hadaway conducted a cluster analysis that distinguished between five well-defined subgroups among apostates in the US,¹⁰ and wrote that “some apostates may reject a religious identity out of consistency with their unbelief, while others may retain belief and even hold a strong religious faith, but reject labeling themselves with the name of a religious institution” (Hadaway 1989: 213).

In the beginning of the 1990s, family formation and gender were analysed in relation to apostasy and religious switching (Sandomirsky and Wilson 1990), different types of religious “careers” (apostates, switchers, converts, and stalwarts), engagement in community, and family (Brinkerhoff and Mackie 1993), and religious mobility such as apostasy and switching on the religious marketplace, where apostasy is a form of cultural consumption restricted by family and organisational variables. In their 1995 article about religious mobility, religious switching, and apostasy, Darren E. Sherkat and John Wilson emphasis the “new paradigm” in the sociology of religion, based on rational choice theory. They complement the focus on the supply side, and the competition between religious institutions and other cultural institution within an open market, by

9 Another aspect of apostasy concerns the apostate’s political values, as discussed in Lynn D. Nelson’s chapter. Nelson notes that the apostates’ political values are liberal in terms of morals and legislation, that “[d]rop-outs are more liberal than the unchurched and church members of all attendance levels,” and that “[d]isaffiliation notably increases political liberalism” (Nelson 1988: 133).

10 The subgroups are (1) successful swinging singles, (2) sidetracked singles, (3) young settled liberals, (4) young libertarians, and (5) irreligious traditionalists.

highlighting the importance of the demand side and the social influence on people's religious choices and preferences (Sherkat and Wilson 1995).

In their *Amazing Conversions: Why Some Turn to Faith & Others Abandon Religion* (1997), Bob Altemeyer and Bruce Hunsberger asked about what happens when the predictions made by the socialisation theory fail: when a strong emphasis on religion during childhood leads to apostasy and when a nonreligious upbringing results in religiosity (Altemeyer and Hunsberger 1997: 12). The "amazing" apostates, according to psychologists Altemeyer and Hunsberger, those relatively few who had have an intensive religious upbringing and yet left their parents' or primary caregivers' religion. In contrast, sociologist Matthew T. Loveland concludes his article on religious switching by downplaying religious socialisation, involvement, and education during childhood. Those with a religious upbringing "are no less likely to switch than are those who spent less time learning religious ways of life" (Loveland 2003: 154).

The anthology *Leaving Religion and Religious Life* (1997), edited by David G. Bromley, William Shaffir and Mordechai Bar-Lev, includes chapters on Canada, the US, Germany, Australia, Israel, and Denmark, and thus somewhat broadens the scope, but the focus remains primarily on Christianity in Western societies, except for two chapters on Judaism. Attempts to contribute theoretically are evident in several of the chapters, emphasising the complex process of leaving religion and its multidimensional outcomes and consequences. Leaving religion in the US is best understood, according to Roof and Landres, more as a "continuing dynamic of religious exit and re-entry than a momentous shift in the religious system as a whole" (Roof and Landres 1997: 94).

The Politics of Religious Apostasy (1998), another volume edited by David G. Bromley, also highlights the role and process of apostasy mainly in relation to Christian groups and NRMS. While one part of the anthology deals with the social construction of the apostate role and the social factors, personal motivations, and individual narratives aligned with it, the other part discusses the role and impact of the apostate in the conflict between NRMS and mainstream society. Interestingly, in this volume emphasis was put on the narratives produced by the apostates, especially in Stuart A. Wright's and Daniel Carson Johnson's chapters.¹¹ The anthology *Joining and Leaving Religion: Research Perspectives* (2000), edited by Francis and Katz, contains not only sociological perspectives on leaving religion, but also educational and theological perspectives. It focuses mainly on Christianity, with some inclusion of Judaism and mention of NRMS. Andrew Yip's chapter on religious leave-taking in non-heterosexual

11 The focus on the narrative aspects of apostasy is highlighted by John D. Barbour in *Versions of Deconversion* (1994). See Peter Stomberg's chapter in this handbook.

Christians is particularly interesting in attributing exit in this population not to their loss of faith, but to their wish “to keep their Christian faith intact” (Yip 2000: 142).¹²

In *Society without God* (2008) and *Faith No More* (2012), Phil Zuckerman addresses the question of unbelief and apostasy. *Society without God* examines the “godless” societies of Sweden and Denmark and is based on interviews with nearly 150 Swedes and Danes. Zuckerman gives three theoretical answers for why Sweden and Denmark are so irreligious: “a lazy church monopoly, secure societies, and working women” (Zuckerman 2008: 117). Without competition on a religious market, social and economic deprivation, and someone at home to care for the children’s religious upbringing and the family’s religiosity, the population becomes more irreligious than before. In *Faith No More*, Zuckerman turns to the US, examines the experience of leaving religion through in-depth interviews, and finds that in the United States, compared with Scandinavia, “apostasy is more controversial, more deviant, and thus personally more intense and dramatic” (Zuckerman 2012: 171). The reason for this, Zuckerman argues, is that non-religion is the norm in Denmark and Sweden, while the opposite is true in the US. In *(Un)believing in Modern Society* (2016), Jörg Stolz et al. scrutinise the changing religious landscape in Switzerland from the 1960s until the present day and argue that increased individualisation has led to a “me-society” with a “secular drift” – a tendency to leave institutionalised religion (Stolz et al. 2016: 194).¹³ In contrast to Zuckerman, who mentions religious monopoly as a contributor to secularisation, Stolz et al. claim that religious–secular competition, not religious monopoly, fuels the secular drift (Stolz et al. 2016:11–50).

Simon Cottee’s *The Apostates* (2015) is based on thirty-five life-story interviews with ex-Muslims in Canada and the UK. The process of leaving Islam follows a “coming out of the closet” structure and consists of three phases: before, during, and after apostasy. Cottee describes the phases in detail, ranging from the apostates’ changing relationships to food, alcohol, and sex, to what seems to be the hardest part of the process: coming out in front of their religious parents. After leaving their religion, ex-Muslims reported being unable to find a reliable “ex-Muslim post-apostasy script” (Cottee 2015: 173). They described the post-apostasy period as a struggle with their “inner Muslim” and their “halal voice” (Cottee 2015: 176–177). In *Becoming Un-Orthodox: Stories of Ex-Hasidic Jews* (2015), Lynn Davidman examines the stories of forty ex-Hasidic

12 See also Erica Li Lundqvist’s chapter in this handbook.

13 Their study is based on life-story interviews with seventy-one people in Switzerland and surveys with 1229 persons in Switzerland.

Jews living in the US.¹⁴ Her emphasis is not only on narrative, but also embodiment and ritual practices, which have generally been missing in previous studies about leaving religion, and she highlights the process of unlearning and “disinscribing” a religion. Like Cottee, Davidman follows the process of leaving religion, or in this case becoming un-Orthodox, from small first transgressions to overt stepping out. She concludes that “elements of our inbred bodily practices and original cultural tool kits can never be fully abandoned” (Davidman 2015: 195). In *When Art Disrupts Religion* (2017), Philip S. Francis analyses life stories, memoirs, and field notes from eighty-two Evangelicals to investigate how aesthetic experiences unsettle, undo, and even replace religion. Francis, like Davidman and Cottee, also highlights religious bodily practices, and problematises the one-sided focus on the belief aspect of religion (see also Francis’ chapter in this handbook).

3 Methodological Perspectives and Turning Points

From the 1960s, a variety of methodological approaches and various kinds of material have been used to develop the sociological study of leaving religion. The most common approaches in the abovementioned research have been formal and informal interviews, collection of observational data, small surveys directed to respondents, and (to a lesser extent) public opinion polls. Previous sociological studies have also tended to be case studies of religious groups such as the Church of Latter Day Saints, the Unitarian Church, and Hasidic Jews, or of specific cohorts such as college students in the US.

Charles Glock suggested, in *Culture of Unbelief*, that unbelief should be studied by examining first the nature and varieties, and then the causes and effects, of unbelief (Glock 1971). Several sociological studies emphasise the demographic characteristics (education, gender, socioeconomic status, etc.) of those leaving religion. However, an increasing number of studies about the process and various phases of leaving religion have been conducted and have raised questions about the causes and consequences of the process. This development has led to a more nuanced understanding, in which leaving religion is understood as a more fluid and sequential process, with no defined destination. Later in life, leave-takers can even return to the religion they left, for example when they begin to have children and form a family.

14 See Davidman and Greil (2007) for a previous study about exit-narratives of Orthodox Jews. See also Roni Berger’s 2014 study about leaving an ultra-Orthodox Jewish community, and Shaffir (1997) for an earlier study about disaffiliates from Jewish group.

Most sociological studies on people leaving their religion have examined the phenomenon in Christian groups and NRMs, although Judaism has occasionally been included. More recently, there has been a noticeably greater interest in conducting long-term ethnographical fieldwork among other religious traditions, such as Islam, paired with a more theoretically elaborated and critical understanding of the apostasy narrative. One ethical issue that should be considered is the potential risk for researchers to reproduce negative, stereotypical, or even prejudicial images of the religious groups that the apostates have left (see Carter 1998). This risk is evident in studies about the exit process from NRMs, where the discourse about “brainwashing” and manipulative leaders often emerges in apostasy narratives. This is also true for Islam; ex-Muslims’ witness narratives are often used in anti-Muslim rhetoric to confirm such an image (Larsson 2016; Enstedt and Larsson 2013).

4 Critical Reflections, Evaluations, and Predictions

Previous sociological research has examined the characteristics of religious leave-takers (religious affiliation and upbringing, age, gender, education, and socioeconomic status) and the diverse consequences and outcomes of the apostasy process. The main problems with the prevailing research about leaving religion, as noted by Brinkerhoff and Burke, are that “the process by which the individual disaffiliates [from a religion] has not been systematically examined” and that the prevailing studies provide “rather static pictures of disaffiliation” (Brinkerhoff and Burke 1980: 41). Kirk Hadaway also noted that “[w]e know more about who the apostates are, but we still do not know enough about why people become apostates,” and suggested that further research include case studies of apostates and former apostates to “add valuable information to our understanding of the process through which persons reject religion or reaffirm a previously held religious identity” (Hadaway 1989: 214). This critique was repeated in 1997 by William Shaffir wrote that there is only “sparse knowledge about the total process through which individuals disengage and disaffiliate” and that the “long-term consequences flowing from disaffiliation” are not fully understood (1997: 12).

Theories about leaving religion are related to other theories about religious change, often expressed on a personal level. One fundamental distinction needs to be made between disaffiliation as change in religious belief and disaffiliation as a change in religious practice (Yang and Abel 2014: 143). On the one hand, religious belief can remain ostensibly the same, while religious group and group-related practice is abandoned. Hence, a person can leave a religion but still be religious, in what Grace Davie and others have called “believing

without belonging” (Davie 1994). On the other hand, religious belief can be abandoned, while religious practices, habits, norms and values, which are deeply connected with the religion that has been left, can be kept intact. One can therefore leave the social and belief aspects of religion but still be religious in other aspects (see also Mauss 1969).

The studies by Francis, Davidman, and Cottee mentioned above, show several ways to study leaving religion. Francis’ analysis of how aesthetic experiences can unsettle, undo, and even replace religion widens the field by bringing in other materials, and Davidman and Cottee, in their respective studies, discusses the process of leaving religion in relation to bodily practices, and by doing so put the one-sided focus on the belief aspect of religion into question. In addition to these new perspectives and emerging theoretical and methodological developments, it is important to include more religious groups in the study of leaving religion. While more attention has recent been paid to Islam, the lack of research on Hinduism, Buddhism, Shintoism, Sikhism, and Jainism, for example, is evident in this handbook and elsewhere.

5 Suggestions How to Do It

William Shaffir suggested some future directions in the sociological study of leaving religion, calling for longitudinal studies into the longer consequences of religious leave-taking, and argued for follow-up research into apostates’ movements in and out of religion through their lifespans (Shaffir 1997: 12–14). Studying variations in religious change over a lifespan, putting leaving religion in the context of individuals’ lives, can help us relate this process to other intrinsic aspects of religiosity, such as teachings, narratives, beliefs, and practices, and extrinsic aspects, such as issues related to religious and family groups, unemployment, migration, health, and economy. Questions about power, gender, and intersectionality should also be addressed more thoroughly. Furthermore, it is also necessary to stress that the question of apostasy is often used as a tool for fighting so-called deviant and competing interpretations and practices within a religious tradition. This is not a new phenomenon, but it has gained a new momentum within for example Islamic traditions, especially after the wars in Syria and Iraq and with the rise of violent interpretations of Islam (Larsson 2017).

Questions could also be asked about how religious groups themselves create apostates, both on an individual level (as examined in most previous research) and on a group level. Such a perspective would focus the century-old sociological question concerning structure and agency on the extent to which

structural preconditions affect a person leaving religion and ask how far the exit role is already embedded in the structure of the religious community, apostasy narratives, and other expressions of leaving religion. Parts of the left religion – norms, values, and habits – can often still be observed in leave-takers, even if these practices change after exiting the religion: for ex-Muslims, there “is no ‘beyond Islam’ [...] Islam won’t let them go” (Cottee 2015:203; see also Enstedt 2018). A greater focus on everyday life and bodily practices has been suggested to open up the study of leaving religion (McGuire 2008; Ammerman 2014). Studies into areas such as clothing, norms, values, spatiality, theories of multiple religious belonging in a global context, social and emotional factors (Woodhead and Riis 2010), food (Harvey 2015), and materiality (Houtman and Meyer 2012) could all provide valuable insights into the processes, consequences, and even the ambiguity of exiting a religion.

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Psychological Approaches to Leaving Religion

Kyle Messick and Miguel Farias

1 Introducing Psychological Approaches to Leaving Religion

Why do some people leave the religion they were brought up in? Are there individual differences between believers and unbelievers? These are some of the questions that have sparked a recent interest in the cognitive, socio-cultural, and neurological study of the non-religious individual. This chapter will summarise and discuss some of these perspectives.

We will use the terms “unbelief” and “unbelievers” as blanket terms to refer to atheists and others who perceive themselves as having no religious belief or affiliation. For the purposes of this chapter, unbelief is defined as an explicit absence or rejection of supernatural belief. There are, of course, different types of unbelievers; one only needs to recall that Socrates was sentenced to death for not believing in the Homeric gods, although he still believed in a metaphysical being that guided the universe. He was only an unbeliever to the culture he found himself in. This chapter focuses on those who do not believe in the existence of any god(s), but this does not mean that these individuals are devoid of other kinds of non-supernatural beliefs, or they may even, at least unconsciously, espouse some kinds of supernatural beliefs.

2 Theoretical Perspectives and Turning Points

Psychology is a fractured discipline, where many of its sub-areas are in tension or open disagreement. The study of unbelievers is not an exception, just as it was not for the study of believers either (Ladd and Messick 2016). There have been various proposals about why individuals leave religion or are unbelievers, ranging from the lack of a father figure to a more prominent analytical style of processing information (Vitz 1999; Leuba 1916, Leuba 1934). It is good to remember that there is a history of psychological perspectives which has looked somewhat unfavourably towards religious belief: Freud, for example, famously argued that the image of God worked as an infantile and pre-conscious desire for a father figure (Armstrong 1993). Similarly, ecstatic religious experiences

such as “oceanic feelings” of merging with the universe were understood as a regression to a pre-personal, early infantile state or, in the case of the experiences of some Christian mystics, such as St Theresa of Avila, these were interpreted as hysterical symptoms (Mazzoni 1996). With hindsight, what is interesting from such psychological perspective is that the default position of a mature individual is understood to be unbelief; a fully grown, autonomous and educated adult, who has explored and understood his or her own psychic history, should be freed of religious belief and longings for any god.

William James (1902) presented a somewhat different, certainly more positive perspective on religion, which has been influential. This influence was probably less due to the scientific merit of James’ ideas but to the fact that he captured a cultural mood: religion as an individual experience, not so much a set of beliefs or a set of communal rituals, but a variety of feelings and affects happening to an isolated individual. By framing religion as a natural phenomenon he also, indirectly, inspired subsequent generations of psychological scientists who postulated that to be religious or to believe in religious ideas is not only normal, but the default position of all humans. At the extreme of this position, we find attempts to locate “God” genes or specific brain regions responsible for generating religious-like experiences. A more moderate position considers that we possess a set of cognitive characteristics that bias us towards seeking human or super-human agency in nature, such as anthropomorphism, or that our description of gods is constrained by our way of conceiving intuitive and counter-intuitive abilities so that, for example, a god can walk through walls or on water as these are mildly, but not extremely counter-intuitive actions (Bloom 2007; Boyer 2008; Whitehouse 2016).

A number of studies in the last decade have attempted to show that religious belief is in part the outcome of an intuitive thinking style (for example Shenhav, Rand, and Greene 2012) without noting that other cognitive processing styles can be associated with unbelief (Caldwell-Harris et al. 2011). Cognitive theories that try to establish religious belief as intuitive or “natural” must, however, account for the existence of unbelief. Can cognitive dispositions towards belief be muted or overridden (Gervais and Norenzayan 2012)? One possibility is that one becomes an unbeliever by violating one of various cognitive mechanisms that make us “born believers” (Barret 2012; Norenzayan and Gervais 2013). Thus, we would need to violate: our intuitive mental representations of supernatural agents and our motivation to seek them out as sources of meaning, comfort, and control; further, we would have to resist or break away from the cultural reinforcement for the existence of these supernatural agents and, lastly, to engage in analytical processing instead of accepting our intuitions about these agents. This model is not universally accepted and there are growing criticisms about lack of supporting evidence or contradictory data (Szocik 2018; Lindeman and Svedholm-Häkkinen 2016; van Eyghen 2016

Caldwell-Harris 2012; Kalkman 2014). One recent study, which calls into question the “naturalness” and “intuitiveness” of belief, consists of a set of three experiments conducted as a field study (in the pilgrimage route to Santiago) in the lab using brain stimulation: it failed to find any significant association between intuitive/analytical processing, or cognitive inhibition, and supernatural belief (Farias, van Mulukom, Kahane, et al. 2017). Instead, the authors suggest that the sociological and anthropological data in support of a social-educational origin and modulation of belief are more robust than the available cognitive evidence for the naturalness of religion. They also argue that the possibility that some individuals would have to override cognitive dispositions to become unbelievers is a deeply implausible one from an evolutionary perspective, as this would require a very considerable effort with no obvious gains.

From an early age we tend to build relationships with non-physical agents, such as fictional characters, imaginary friends, and religious entities like gods and spirits (Barrett 2012; Boyer 2008). Supernatural agents often have a social role and a place in the upbringing of children, along with ritual practices. Within secular families, though, children are less likely to be exposed to metaphysical agents (Corriveau, Chen, and Harris 2015). It is a kind of truism to affirm that individuals growing up within secular families have never lost a religion—they were simply never socialised into it.

The social psychological literature has examined why some individuals leave or de-convert from their religion. Most de-converts do not necessarily reject their belief in god(s) and thus do not become unbelievers. They may simply change the content of their religious beliefs, as it happens when a Christian becomes a Muslim, or even keep the same beliefs but reject the institutional side of religion, which often entails no longer engaging in religious practices. On the other hand, developing a negative bias towards an established religion can also affect the endorsement of religious beliefs and enactment of rituals (Greer and Francis 1992). An example of this taken from popular culture was the announced break with the Roman Catholic Church by best-selling author Anne Rice, who wrote the *Vampire Chronicles* series of books. She explained that despite continuing to believe in and follow the teachings of Jesus Christ, her conscience would no longer allow her to be associated with an institution that she perceived as anti-gay and anti-science (Kunhardt 2010). This has been called a “secularizing” or “privatizing exit” – two of six potential forms of de-conversion where an individual moves away from religion altogether or chooses to keep some beliefs and even rituals (Streib 2014). Other types of de-conversion actually do not lead the individual towards unbelief but, rather, to adopt a similar or even more conservative system of religious beliefs.

There are then various social and emotional factors that may cause an individual to leave religion: a sudden rejection of God is more likely to be led by emotional factors, whereas a more gradual de-conversion may be rooted in

intellectual reasons (Hood and Chen 2013). Gradual de-conversion in the USA has been positively associated with a higher level of education (Walters 2010), although the inverse has been reported in different cultural contexts (Lee and Bullivant 2010). One emotional reason for leaving religion, which theologians have considered for a long time and has recently been examined by social psychologists, is anger towards God (Exline, Crystal, Smyth, and Carey 2011).

Leaving religion generally involves a combination of four social and emotional domains: (1) intellectual doubt or denial about the truth of a belief system; (2) moral criticism: rejection of an entire way of life of a religious group; (3) emotional suffering: grief, guilt, loneliness, despair; and (4) disaffiliation from the community (Barbour 1994). In addition to socio-emotional factors, there are some indications that personality may also play a role in de-conversion (Streib et al. 2011). In US and German samples, de-converts were found to have lower levels of religious fundamentalism and right-wing authoritarianism, as well as higher levels of openness to experience – when compared to their religious peers.

Particularly in countries dominated by religious traditions, leaving religion can have important personal consequences. US de-converts have reported to experience negative social, existential, and career consequences, while justifying their resolution in moving away from what they perceive as a “rigid and oppressive way of life” (Marriott 2015). Although they report prejudice and discrimination, they also report greater well-being after converting to unbelief (Doane and Elliot 2015). There is growing evidence that unbelievers are some of the least liked people in areas of the world with religious majorities (Gervais, Shariff, and Norenzayan 2011). For further non-European examples, see Schirmacher’s chapter.

Neuroscience studies suggest that there might be biological factors associated with unbelief. It has been argued that the dopamine system and the frontal lobes play important roles in the generation of religious belief (McNamara, Durso, Brown, and Harris 2009)—but what accounts for unbelief? Whereas most studies deal with healthy individuals, the literature investigating neurological deficits presents interesting insights concerning the biological processes of unbelief. One study, which included an assessment of beliefs before and after brain surgery, found that the cerebrum was associated with religiosity levels of participants. The cerebrum is known to be involved in movement, sensory processing, language, learning, and memory. In this study, it was found that individuals with anterior cortical lesions (front of the cerebrum) were less religious than those with posterior lesions (back of the cerebrum; Urgesi, Aglioti, Skrap, and Fabbro 2010). In other words, some areas of the brain seem to play a role in deciding if an individual holds stronger religious beliefs.

Further evidence from lesion studies shows that among patients with dementia within the frontal and temporal lobes, and in those with Parkinson's disease, the changes that occur in the frontotemporal lobe can be associated with a loss of interest in religion and a simultaneous decrease in the neurotransmitter dopamine.

The frontal lobes seem to play an active role in religious practices (Johnstone et al. 2012), and alterations of brain frontal functions have been shown to result in an increase or decrease of religious belief (Devinsky and Lai 2008; Mendez, Lauterbach, and Sampson 2008). One neurobiological theory of belief and unbelief argues that the prefrontal cortex is critical for *doubt processing*, so that damage to the prefrontal cortex would result in less doubt and a higher probability of increased religiosity (Asp, Ramchandran, and Tranel 2012). They hypothesize that those with a doubt-deficit will be more religious, whereas the less religious would have a higher doubt-processing capacity. One small study showed that patients with damage to the prefrontal cortex had an increase in religiosity and a correspondent decrease in doubt processing, when compared to non-patients. The authors further suggest that there is a neurodevelopmental basis for this theory: religious beliefs are generally strong in children, but with adolescence there is increased growth in the prefrontal cortex and of doubt processing, and adolescence is known to be a period when many report to lose their religion temporarily or for good (Asp and Tranel 2013).

Other studies have focused on the role of the medial prefrontal cortex (part of the frontal lobe) in relation to religious belief and unbelief, as this brain area is known to regulate self-reflection, compliance to social norms, error detection, and theory of mind—all these potentially being cognitive prerequisites to religious belief (Muramoto 2004). Thus, strong religiosity would result from a hyper-activation of the medial prefrontal cortex, whereas an underperforming medial prefrontal cortex could result in an absence of religious ideas. The underlying hypothesis is that unbelievers would show lower levels of self-reflection and endorsement of cultural norms, error detection, and theory of mind. One brain imaging study on religious belief and pain processing has showed that unbelievers show a lower activation of the ventromedial pre-frontal cortex, a specific part of the prefrontal cortex, when compared to religious individuals while looking at a religious-themed image (Wiech, Farias, Kahane, et al. 2009); however, this was explained by a process of emotional reappraisal of the pain by religious individuals, and it's not reasonable to suggest that, overall, unbelievers would have lower levels of activation of the medial pre-frontal cortex.

Dopamine-rich midbrain regions have also been associated with shifts in belief and belief formation (Schmack et al. 2015; Schwartenbeck, FitzGerald, and

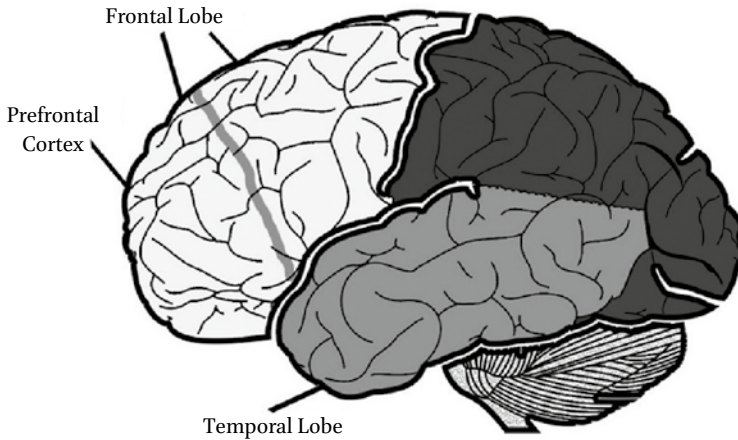


FIGURE 25.1 There is increasing evidence that numerous areas of the brain influence unbelief

Dolan 2016), as with religious belief and rituals (Perroud 2009). As increased availability of dopamine increases religious belief, the opposite has been found for a deficit of dopamine, such is the case with Parkinson's patients, who show a dopamine deficiency and lower levels of religiosity (Harris and McNamara 2009). Further, particular types of Parkinson's disease seem to differentially affect religious ideation; for example, left-onset Parkinson's patients experience a severe inability to activate religious concepts and accessing aesthetic-based religious cognition (Butler et al., 2011 Butler, McNamara, and Durso 2010), while patients with right-onset Parkinson's showed greater difficulty accessing ritual-based religious cognition (Butler, McNamara, and Durso 2011).

Although this body of work provides some evidence that religious unbelief is associated with or underpinned by biological variables, the findings are very preliminary, showing ambiguous or even contradictory results. For example, concerning the role of dopamine in the increase of unbelief, it has been suggested that religious practices may decrease with Parkinson's onset, but qualitative data show that religion and spirituality are still regarded as important by these patients (Redfern and Coles 2015; Edwards et al. 1997). In addition to conflicting findings, there are also shortcomings in the literature in relation to how religiosity is defined and measured.

Some psychologists have argued that leaving religion is counterintuitive or a sub-optimal strategy, as subjective well-being is apparently higher among religious people (Hayward et al. 2016; Aghababaei 2014; Aghababaei et al. 2016; though see Horning et al. 2011). However, recent research has found that

well-being is associated with *certainty* of belief, so that people with a higher certainty in their religious beliefs or unbelief report higher levels of well-being (Galen and Kloet 2011). Additionally, religious beliefs are associated with satisfaction in life (Ellison 1991; Pollner 1989), happiness (Myers and Diener 1996), and coping with the death of a loved one (Palmer and Noble 1986) and difficult life events (McIntosh et al. 1993). But these effects largely disappear when controlling for a variety of life circumstances, particularly societal factors that regulate the satisfaction of basic needs (food, health, housing; see Maslow 1943). In more affluent societies, levels of subjective well-being are similar among believers and unbelievers (Diener 2011). Subjective well-being is further boosted in unbelievers when the level of social engagement and embeddedness are high, similarly to what has been found for religious believers with high levels of communal involvement (Galen 2015).

Evidence from experimental social psychology indicates that unbelievers might cling on to belief systems based on the intrinsic value of science or ideas of humanity's moral progress (Farias, Newheiser, Kahane, and de Toledo 2013; Rutjens, van Harreveld, and van der Pligt 2010; Rutjens et al. 2016). These unbelievers would find in such secular ideas the same kind of cognitive-emotive comfort that religious believers do, by using secular explanations to provide meaning and order in their lives (Stavrova, Ehlebracht, and Fetchenhauer 2016). One possibility is that within growing secular societies individuals will find other non-religious sources of existential meaning that provide them with psychological comfort and well-being. To what an extent these non-religious sources engage the same kind of psychological processes as religious beliefs in regard to meaning-making is still an open question.

3 Methodological Perspectives and Turning Points

Above we have highlighted different theoretical approaches which rely on various methods, from social psychological experiments using self-report measures to brain-imaging and lesion studies. Table 1 gives examples of some of the key methods used by the various domains of the study of unbelief. Note that there are potential overlaps between some of these domains; for example, cognitive studies of religion sometimes use paradigms that are very common in experimental social psychology (for example various priming studies in Gervais and Norenzayan 2012).

The recent focus on unbelief clearly follows contemporary trends that emphasize cognitive, evolutionary, and biological perspectives instead of,

TABLE 25.1 Examples of Methodological Approaches to the Study of Unbelief

Cognitive	Social-Psychological	Biological	Well-being and Meaning
Priming experiments using tests of intuitive and analytical thinking with self-report measures of religious belief (Gervais and Norenzayan 2012)	Field and lab experiments that manipulate stress and existential anxiety with self-report measure of belief in science (Farias, Newheiser, Kahane, and Toledo 2013)	Brain lesion study with self-report measure of spirituality (Urgesi, Aglioti, Skrap, and Fabbro 2010)	Large sample surveys of well-being, socio-economical status, and levels of religiosity (Diener, Tay, and Myers (2011))
Survey using tests of intuitive and analytical thinking with self-report measures of religious belief (Shenhav, Rand, and Greene 2012)	Bereaved and cancer patient samples with self-report measures of religiosity and anger towards God (Exline, Crystal, Smyth, and Carey 2011)	Double-blind brain stimulation study of the right inferior frontal gyrus using implicit tests of supernatural belief (Farias et al. 2017)	Nationally representative sample with measures of personal control, life satisfaction, and belief in scientific progress (Stavrova, Ehlebracht, and Fetchenhauer 2016).

say, developmental perspectives. There have also been some attempts at categorising unbelievers through the development of empirical-based typologies (Schnell 2015; Silver et al. 2014). Despite the interest and expansion of this literature, it is hard to pinpoint any particular methodological turning points with one exception: the attempt to understand and measure unbelief as a positive phenomenon, instead of as simply the absence or low levels of belief, as Beit-Hallami (Martin 2006) proposed in one of the early writings on this subject. This turn has led researchers to not only propose typologies of unbelievers but to map out potential kinds of unbelief, such as Humanism, Science, Progress, and Existentialism.

4 Critical Reflections, Evaluations and Predictions

Much work on religion and unbelief is likely to suffer from personal biases as researchers lean towards or against religious belief. One cannot forget that much of the research in the psychology of religion and health has been inextricably associated with an US-based agenda to promote religion as a source of physical and mental health. Conversely, there have been efforts by North American researchers to promote the idea that unbelievers are more analytical or reflective than believers (Pennycook, Ross, Koehler, and Fugelsang 2016).

These personal biases are inscribed in historical processes which psychologists tend to overlook. For example, cognitive theories that claim religious belief to be innate reflect an earlier historical understanding of belief as being God-given (Brooke 1991), which means that those who are not believers are either acting against God, or against their human nature (Barrett and Church 2013). It is curious that cognitive theories of religion are partly regurgitating this innateness idea, but using updated concepts and methods, instead of studying unbelief in its own right.

It is also unclear how much psychological variables can contribute to explaining the emergence of unbelief, after taking into account broader socio-cultural and educational factors (Banerjee and Bloom 2013; Voas and MacAndrew 2012; Willard and Cingl 2017). Understanding these broader variables is also crucial for the purpose of definition and categorisation. A variety of partly overlapping terms such as “non-religious,” “nones,” and “atheists” are used in the field, but there has been little effort in attempting to clarify and refine these concepts (Conrad 2018; Lee 2014).

Unlike sociology and anthropology, psychology has never formulated specific theories for religious belief and is unlikely to do it for unbelief. Psychology has considered that religious belief is underpinned by or associated with general developmental, cognitive, and social-psychological processes. Probably the most enduring and successful psychological explanatory efforts have been *functionalist* – how does religious belief and practices help individuals to cope with adversity, uncertainty, fear or to make sense of our lives? It is likely that the study of unbelief will follow a similar route in looking at how various forms of unbelief fulfil psychological functions or motivational needs.

5 Suggestions on How to Do It

There are two exciting things about the study of unbelief: one is the novelty of the field concomitant with large national surveys showing the growth of

unbelievers; the second is its interdisciplinary nature. Recent journals and organisations such as the journal *Secularism and NonReligion* and the *NonReligion and Secularity Research Network* (NSRN) feature articles from various disciplinary fields, including psychology, sociology, anthropology, religious studies and cultural studies. There is a very clear awareness of the need to understand where each particular field is coming from, including methodologically. This has led to the development of contributions focusing on various methods to studying unbelief, from the use of brain stimulation and implicit association tests to large-scale surveys and interviews.¹ This is an excellent example of how a field can grow benefitting from the insights of other disciplines.

The rapid pace at which non-religion studies are expanding means that it needs to pay closer attention to terminology and definition (Lee 2012), as well as adapting methods for different cultural settings (Sevinç, Coleman III, and Hood 2018). With so many different types of unbelievers and cultural differences among those in different areas of the world, it is hard to find definitions apply easily across countries. One recent ongoing effort to advance the field and terminological concerns is a large cross-cultural and interdisciplinary project on mapping unbelief, which include large and small grants with over 40 participating research groups worldwide.² This programme of research will advance our understanding of the kinds of unbelief we can find, who are the unbelievers regarding socio-demographic characteristics, and also explore the alternative meaning-making systems available to individuals growing without belief or who have left their religious beliefs behind.

We have started this part by stating that there are two exciting things about the study of unbelief: its novelty and its interdisciplinary nature. There is a third less acknowledged factor though, which is a real potential to demolish and reconstruct how we have to come to understand religion and religious belief in particular. Recent cognitive and evolutionary approaches to religion have been criticised for neglecting or distorting historical and anthropological records showing the existence of unbelief in Ancient India and Greece, and in small pre-literate societies (Brazil and Farias 2016). The developing study of unbelief has the potential to very quickly change or obliterate the field of cognitive science of religion, with its key assumptions of the naturalness or innateness of religious belief. It may be the case that as the study of unbelief advances, in a decade or two many of the current cognitive assumptions on religious belief will be regarded no differently from nineteenth century theories suggesting that Mars and Venus were populated by human-like societies.

1 <https://nsrn.net/2016/04/27/blog-series-research-methods-for-the-scientific-study-of-nonreligion/> Accessed 25/02/2019.

2 <https://research.kent.ac.uk/understandingunbelief/> Accessed 25/02/2019.

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Narrative and Autobiographical Approaches to Leaving Religion

Peter G. Stromberg

1 Introducing Narrative and Autobiographical Approaches to Leaving Religion

People leave religious institutions or change their religious beliefs for many different reasons. A person might change their religious affiliation because a political transformation has rendered that affiliation dangerous or economically undesirable; there may be some form of coercion involved. For example, the colonisation process with its attendant Christian missionisation entailed a massive replacement, on several continents, of indigenous religions with some version of Christianity. Did the people who abandoned indigenous religions deconvert? Of course, this is but one of many possible scenarios of religious change. A person might gradually abandon the faith in which they were raised, or might encounter a religious tradition that for one reason or another seems extraordinarily compelling, and for that reason leave her old faith for a new one.

Whether all of these phenomena should be considered instances of deconversion is by no means resolved. Furthermore, the similarity between such instances of leaving religion may be only superficial, and thus a single theoretical framework—a single general explanation for all of these cases—may not be possible. For these reasons, writing coherently about leaving religion requires one to specify which sort of leaving is being explained. In most of the literature on leaving religion, the phenomenon is studied in the context of the contested ideological situations in contemporary societies (although important exceptions are found in Part 1 and 2 of this book). As Gooren (2011) notes, in practice the study of deconversion was shaped by its origins in the context of sociological study of new religious movements that arose in the early 1970s. Since that time the purview of the topic has expanded considerably, but it is fair to note that to some extent the concerns of these early studies established the paradigm in this literature.

Above all—and Gooren's (2010) thorough review and synthesis of the literature on conversion and disaffiliation makes this clear—across several

disciplines, research on the topic has been oriented around questions about the “religious marketplace.” This terminology alerts us to the fact that most of this work has been carried out in situations not only of religious pluralism, but in contexts in which religious groups are in some sense in competition for members. It is the study of such situations that constitutes the prototypical case of leaving religion in the literature, and this fact to some extent determines the questions that will be asked about the phenomenon. In the current chapter, I will stay within the boundaries established by these broad trends in this area of study. And within these boundaries, I am concerned to review, evaluate, and perhaps help to develop approaches based on the study of autobiography and narrative. As such, this chapter is primarily methodological. Collection of narratives is a research method, and the question is, what are the advantages, disadvantages, and implications of this method?

2 Theoretical Perspectives and Turning Points

Probably the dominant strain of the research literature on narrative and deconversion has its origins in sociology and social psychology of religion, and adopts a generally positivist approach. In such an approach, language is assumed to transparently reflect underlying forces that are the true target of analysis. As is the case in the natural sciences, the analyst assumes that empirical phenomena (such as narratives) can be explained by discovering underlying stable principles that produce those phenomena. In this approach, the analyst does not focus on language or narrative in itself. Rather, narratives are used to discover and document underlying social factors that are in themselves considered causal.

An example is Janet Jacobs (1987) study entitled “Deconversion from Religious Movements: An Analysis of Charismatic Bonding and Spiritual Commitment.” Based on 40 intensive interviews with previous members of several movements she characterizes as “authoritarian,” Jacobs reports two significant findings. First, her subjects report that their deconversions were—in her terms—“evolutionary,” that is, gradual rather than sudden.¹ Second, the process of deconversion was driven by disenchantment with the leader of the group.

The year after Jacobs' study, an edited collection entitled *Falling from the Faith: Causes and Consequences of Religious Apostasy* (Bromley 1988) appeared.

¹ The term “evolutionary” here seems unnecessarily confusing, in that it is usually used to denote a process of development.

Although not all of the studies contain narrative material, a number of them do, and they utilize narrative material in a manner similar to Jacobs. Perhaps the most interesting of these studies, from the perspective of developing narrative analysis, is Susan Rothbaum's chapter entitled "Between Two Worlds: Issues of Separation and Identity after Leaving a Religious Community." Rothbaum (1988) offers an insightful analysis of narrative materials to document the emergence, in deconversion stories, of a sense of personal identity that contrasts to the more collective identity fostered by participation in the religious group.

Another, more recent example of this approach is Wright et al. (2011), "Explaining Deconversion from Christianity: A study of Online Narratives." Working within a rational choice paradigm, the authors seek to understand deconversion by studying written autobiographical narratives posted online. The narratives are analysed using a coding system that classifies subjects' explanations into a few general categories that occurred repeatedly in the corpus of fifty narratives. The authors find three explanations that occur frequently, and one more that occurs less often. The three common explanations are: "intellectual and theological concerns, God's shortcomings, and interactions with Christians." (Wright et al. 2011: 6). The final reason is interaction with non-Christians. By intellectual and theological concerns, the authors mean to refer to statements to the effect that the tenets of Christianity often contradict basic principles of science or provide a weak explanation for such problems as human suffering. "God's shortcomings" refers most frequently to subjects' experiences of praying for help with personal problems and failing to find it. "Interactions with Christians" concerns matters such as hypocrisy among Christians, their failing to live up to their professed moral standards. Finally, interaction with non-Christians covers stories about being convinced to abandon Christianity by the arguments of non-believers.

Perhaps the most ambitious and thorough studies of deconversion narratives within the positivist approach have been carried out by Heinz Streib and his colleagues. Like Jacobs, they find that the most common trajectory in the deconversion story is that of a gradual disaffiliation from a faith tradition (Streib et al. 2009: 95). However, they expand on this finding. Their analysis of deconversion stories eventually leads them to identify four general types of deconversion stories or trajectories. The first is "Pursuit of Autonomy," by which they mean separation from a religious tradition in which the subject was raised and which the subject adopted in a generally unquestioning way. The second is "Debarred from Paradise," referring to leaving a religious tradition to which the subject had previously made a strong emotional commitment. In other words, the central contrast between the first and second narrative themes has

to do with whether one is leaving a religion that one has accepted as a matter of course or one that one has embraced through a strong emotional commitment, either through growing up in the religion or converting to it. The third trajectory, "Finding a New Frame of Reference," embraces stories of loss of faith followed by conversion to a tradition that the subject, for one reason or another, finds to be more engaging. (The narratives in this category could equally well be labelled conversion stories.) Finally, the authors suggest a category of "Life-Long Quests—Late Revisions." These stories are in essence extended versions of the ones found in the previous category; they entail what is often called a "seeker" orientation, which may be realised as commitment to and subsequent deconversion from multiple religious traditions.

I should note that although primarily positivist in its research method, the analysis here introduces a value orientation through its reliance on James W. Fowler's (1991) scheme of religious development.² That is, the authors integrate the question of whether deconversion entails faith development into their research design (Streib et al. 2009: 100–101). Their general, and heavily qualified, conclusion about religious development is that more often than not deconversion results in a psychological situation that is higher in openness to experience and lower in right-wing authoritarianism, religious fundamentalism and absolutism (Streib et al. 2009: 232).

The other central (although somewhat less prominent) theoretical stance underlying work on narrative and the deconversion can be labelled "discursive" and is distinguished from the positivist approach in the first place by a different conception of the role of language. Rather than seeing language as a medium that transparently reflects aspects of the world, discourse analysts assume that language plays a significant part in determining how humans perceive and understand the world. Hence studies undertaken from this theoretical stance unfold not as quests to discover what social, cultural, and psychological factors cause deconversion but rather to illuminate how language itself (and by extension, narrative) constructs the deconversion.

Those who adopt this approach do not necessarily give up on finding underlying social or psychological factors that contribute to deconversion, however they hold that such factors can only be revealed through careful analysis of the language of the deconversion narrative. Furthermore, the emphasis on how the believer's language constructs the deconversion leads naturally to an

2 Considering some forms of belief to be "higher" than others in a developmental sense is not a judgment that I personally consider to be sustainable. However, I recognize that some disciplines approach such questions differently than anthropologists typically do. This dispute is not central to the present endeavor, and I will not pursue it here.

emphasis on the deconversion narrative as a means whereby believers construct meaning in their lives. In sum, the discursive approach is typically oriented around how a believer uses language and narrative to make sense of his or her situation, and it may also go beyond this to seek regularities in the social and psychological factors that underpin the deconversion.

An example of the latter is Gooren's (2010) "conversion career" approach, which is built on the conviction that at bottom deconversion is about subjects trying to find coherence and meaning. (I would agree with Gooren and other authors such as Barbour (1994) and Larsson (2017) that in this sense deconversion and conversion are the same). Since none of us has the option of adopting a neutral point of view, every position in the world entails a set of assumptions about the nature of reality. "All human beings need a philosophy, whether atheism or a religion, to give meaning to their lives" (Gooren 2010: 131). From this perspective, what is at stake in the study of deconversion (or conversion) are the processes whereby persons manage to change the context of meaning in which they are embedded. How is this accomplished, and what are its social and psychic consequences?

In attempting to clarify this process, Gooren turns to the study of believers' narratives, illustrating that narrative analysis is often the favoured means for analysing questions about meaning. It is a significant clue that many conversion stories turn around moments of anguish, experiences when the believer faces the despair born of meaninglessness.

It will be useful to look at one of Gooren's narratives in a bit more detail, and I will choose one that I know well, in that it is taken from my own work (Stromberg 1993). Gooren introduces the case of evangelical Christian George by citing a passage in which George talks about his father, a committed Christian who hoped George would follow in his religious footsteps. However, George strayed from the path, and eventually abandoned his wife and young children. On a subsequent visit with his family, George was overcome with regret when he recognized that he had in effect abandoned his children, and shortly thereafter he returned to his father's faith. Gooren (2010: 87) cites this as an example of "the importance of social factors in the conversion process" since the conversion is precipitated by George's profound feelings of pain upon realising his separation from his children. However, Gooren could also have noted that in converting, George was simultaneously embracing his father's religion and devotion to his family. It is this alignment with his own personal history that strongly contributes to George's conviction that his conversion restored a sense of meaning in his life.

Gooren, then, combines the quest to find underlying social and psychological factors that account for conversion and deconversion with a discursive

approach that seeks to illuminate how believers use narratives to fashion a context of meaning. Barbour (1994) illustrates another approach that is more closely attentive to the language of the narrative in order to illuminate processes of meaning-creation. One might imagine that the conventions whereby the deconversion narrative takes shape are frills that can be dispensed with in studying the deconversion itself. But Barbour would ask (as I would), where is this deconversion itself, where in the universe does it reside? If the answer is that it is an event or series of events that occurred in the past and caused certain changes in the narrator, then our access to the deconversion is forever blocked. In fact, we have access to the deconversion only through what the subject reports, which is for the most part the deconversion narrative. In this sense the conventions used in the deconversion narrative not only recount but actually constitute the deconversion (Stromberg 1993, Avance 2013).

The deconversion is also, as Barbour points out in discussing John Stuart Mill (1806–1873), a transformation of self that may affect the entire person, including their emotions and the moral environment in which he or she dwells (Barbour 1994: 46). Mill's narrative account of his deconversion centers on an abandonment of his father's view of an approach to life—symbolic of “the most disagreeable aspects of the Calvinist God” (1994: 47)—for the more humanist views of his wife, Harriet Taylor. The deconversion is at once a change in belief, a coming of age, and the emergence of a literary and philosophical voice. Such a case study makes that point that deconversion may be intertwined with a wide range of issues that impinge upon personal experience and history. Studying this process allows us to understand conversion and deconversion as they illustrate the broader processes whereby human beings integrate themselves with moral communities.

3 Methodological Perspectives and Turning Points

The two theoretical orientations I have identified correspond rather neatly to two different methods. While both orientations begin with collecting narratives, how the narratives are collected, presented, and analysed tends to differ between the two orientations. From the positivist perspective, the narrative is of interest not in itself but rather to the extent it provides evidence for underlying causal factors. For example, Streib and his colleagues adopt a mixed methods approach that combines questionnaire research with 99 open ended narrative interviews with persons who deconverted (Streib et al. 2009: 93). However, in their analysis narrative is used almost exclusively as an extended form of questionnaire research. This is evident in their dependence on the

practice—widespread within the positivist orientation—of substituting for the narrative itself a series of codes that attempt to capture common themes in the corpus of interviews. I will comment on the implications of this practice below; for now it is sufficient to note that this approach is clearly distinct from that taken in discourse analysis.

Although there are a wide variety of methods brought to bear by discourse analysts, they share a close attention to the role of language and speech in the deconversion narrative itself. Here the focus is on the various conventions of narrative itself: metaphor, plot devices, figuration, and so on. A common analytic device (see for example Enstedt and Larsson 2013) is to seek to understand the persistence of certain themes and figures in the narratives that take shape through a historical tradition. Furthermore, as Barbour repeatedly points out, such narratives then become the patterns for subsequent ones. That is, the narrative conventions whereby a person constructs their deconversion serve as a model for those who follow after. A good example of this is the models of deconversion that appeared during the Romantic period. Barbour summarises the argument of M.H. Abrams (1971), who holds that Romantic writers were prone to reproduce a secularised form of older models of spiritual autobiography, wherein they construed their artistic calling as a transformation of their earlier religious commitments. In such autobiographies, the plot does not recount a separate level of events, rather the writer understands the plot as the deconversion itself. The pinnacle of human achievement in Romanticism is artistic creation, and hence the literary account of transformation accomplishes what it describes, the substitution of an artistic orientation for a religious one.

In his paper entitled “Belief, Deconversion, and Authenticity among U.S. Emerging Evangelicals,” James Bielo (2012) illustrates the constitutive role of narrative in processes of religious change. Bielo presents something of a special case in discussing deconversion narratives among what he calls emerging evangelicals. A central notion among such groups is that traditional Christianity overemphasises belief—assent to certain canonical propositions—as the essence of the faith. In narratives that describe their abandoning of this position, these emerging evangelicals are in essence displaying their new faith by narrating it. That is, the key element of their new faith is precisely a denial of the importance of belief as traditionally understood, so the deconversion narrative cannot take shape around transition between beliefs. In light of this, the narrative assumes a special importance in articulating what it is that the believer has come to accept. There is no institution or proposition to which the deconversion can be tied, rather there is only the narrative to formulate the coherence of the new faith. In the case of one of Bielo’s subjects, Glenn, this narrative concerns a particular sort of social relationship, “the collective

experience of everyday life with his house church members." (Bielo 2012: 269). It is this story, and others like it, that constitutes faith.

4 Critical Reflections, Evaluations and Predictions

Streib and his colleagues, in the study discussed above, include a considerable amount of narrative material in their analysis, using long direct quotes from the interviews. However, in that they adopt a generally positivist orientation, this aspect of the work to some extent undermines the overall thrust of their analysis. The story of Gina, for example, is presented as a paradigmatic narrative of one of their four categories, pursuit of autonomy. Yet the narrative itself centers on the role of a romantic relationship in triggering Gina's exit from the Mormon faith. The man she loves loses his faith, and her inability to remain apart from him eventually leads her to also leave the church. This is, as the authors say, a process of separation from the religious community into which the subject was born, and hence fairly described as the pursuit of autonomy. But Gina's deconversion might just as accurately be described as driven by the effort to preserve a valued social relationship, which is quite different from a pursuit of autonomy.

The problem here is that the coding methods that are typical of the positivist orientation, by design, abstract from the rich details of a narrative account in order to identify simplified factors that characterise some social phenomenon. The more one moves in the direction of reporting narrative detail, the more one undermines one's efforts to extract a few general explanatory elements from the narratives.

More broadly, the positivist approach has two sorts of disadvantages. First, it is fair to say that these approaches to narratives ignore the bulk of the narratives they examine. The analyst strips away the vast majority of what the narrator actually says, on the grounds that it is not relevant to the basic categories the researcher has developed for his or her coding system. What is removed may contain much that is vital to the narrative. In addition to neglecting all parts of the narrative that are not captured by the coding system, this process removes many of the narrator's values, their sense of how different experiences fit together into a cohesive plot, the way they use symbolic resources to map the idiosyncrasies of their own biography and temperament, the rhetorical and other discursive resources the narrator uses, aspects of narrative performance such as voicing and timing, and so on.

The effect of all this is that in this approach one necessarily ignores the narrative conventions that structure stories of deconversion, and consequently

the ways in which such conventions may condition understandings of self and history. This is the second disadvantage of the positivist approach: it ignores the possibility that narrative itself may play a role in the phenomenon of deconversion. That is, narrative is not only a research method, it is a cultural mechanism whereby persons make sense of their lives. For this reason, changing narratives may just as well constitute as describe the phenomenon of religious change. Barbour's and Bielo's close attention to full narratives of deconversion help to illustrate that the practice of reducing narratives to the assertion of various social and psychological factors not only misses much of the narratives, but much of deconversion. This is not to deny the value of positivist approaches, which I have used at times in my own work (Stromberg et al. 2007). Such approaches can allow us to gain a sense of the typical patterns in a corpus of interviews, and ultimately begin to develop an understanding of the sorts of social and psychological factors that are implicated in leaving religions. However, in that the topic of this chapter is narrative and autobiographical analysis, it must be noted that in the positivist approach narrative is typically used as an extended form of questionnaire research. One hopes, in the long term, for the development of mixed methods approaches that can combine the strength of both positivist and discursive orientations.

5 Suggestions How to Do It

In this final part I will briefly outline an expansion of the discursive approach that I believe may prove of considerable value in the study of narratives about religious change. In several recent publications (Stromberg 2018; Stromberg 2019), I have attempted to lay the foundation for a style of narrative analysis that builds on my earlier work (Stromberg 1993) by focusing on performative and discursive aspects of narratives. Very often narratives go beyond describing distant situations, rather they attempt to depict them. Especially where a speaker is concerned with something emotionally salient—such as a story about a change in her faith—she will, both intentionally and unintentionally, make that change present in the moment of telling. This means that her story will likely be rich in the numerous methods speakers use to depict: manual gestures, facial portrayals, direct quotation, analogies and metaphors, incorporation of other narratives, and so on (see Keane 2008)

Focusing on these discursive features allows us to understand narratives as tools used by speakers and hearers to build cultural environments. In narratives, participants build a world. The theoretical impetus for this conceptualisation cannot be fully presented here, but is rooted in contemporary attempts

to understand the close relationship between cognition in general and the environment. Anthropologist Tim Ingold (2000), for example, points out that the mind “is immanent in the network of sensory pathways that are set up by virtue of the perceiver’s immersion in his or her environment.” (Ingold 2000:3)

Rather than approaching thinking as a process carried out exclusively in a brain separated from the world, we should study the ways that thinking is embedded in the world. Such attempts are prefigured in the American pragmatist tradition. Shaun Gallagher (2014: 115–116) summarises John Dewey’s view of cognition as follows: “For Dewey’s understanding of cognition, the unit of explanation is not the biological individual, the body by itself, or the brain, but the organism-environment...Dewey was influenced by Peirce’s view that in coping with a problematic situation, we use physical tools as well as ideas to physically reshape the environment. This includes linguistic tools, which in communicative contexts may be used to reshape the dynamics of the situation.” To see narratives in this way is to open up new possibilities for understanding such matters as—to take the matter before us here—how believers use stories to conceptualise and re-conceptualise their situations.

An example, taken from a different realm of discourse, provides a small but powerful example. In a recent paper (Stromberg 2018), I discussed a psychotherapy patient—pseudonym Darby—with whom I worked with many years ago. I want to focus on one brief moment in our final session together. Darby was relating a dream about a long lost boyfriend. As we talked about the dream, it emerged that its setting was much like the office in which we were sitting. I pointed out that the long-lost boyfriend could also be me, and Darby said, “but I wouldn’t take you to a place like that.” When I asked where she would take me, she said “out to lunch.” My point here is the way that response served to transform the situation created by the narrative. It suggests a completely new reading of the dream narrative, which is associated with a transformed relationship between Darby and myself, and hence a transformed moral context. The fact that this new relationship and moral context would have been completely inappropriate serves to underline how this small change in the narrative utterly transformed the environment in which Darby and I were operating.

The way that even minor changes can change an environment, including such matters as the underlying moral basis of the situation, illustrates the point I want to emphasise here. From this perspective, leaving a religion can be conceptualised as leaving the institutional, cultural, and communal territory of the religion. Of course, one can only move by going somewhere else, and hence leaving will inevitably entail taking up a new set of images and ideas and beliefs. What we should be looking for in narrative approaches, then, is why

and how old symbolic environments are traded for new ones, and the ongoing implications of this change.

As I have emphasised, such understanding can only grow out of detailed and careful attention to full narratives and their performance. While the sort of analysis that I labelled positivist above has its place, it cannot fairly be labelled the study of narrative. Instead, it uses narrative as a research method to extend and supplement a reductive approach to the matter of deconversion. This may sound like a criticism, but I do not intend it as such. This sort of work has an important role to play in the investigation of leaving religion, however it is not to be confused with narrative analysis.

The analyst should treat a deconversion narrative or autobiography as the present instantiation of the social process of leaving religion. Even if that leaving occurred decades ago, its traces upon history and the person exist only as they are formulated in the present, only as they constitute the current environment of the narrator. Careful attention to the myriad linguistic and paralinguistic features of the narrative and—if possible—its performance, will be rewarded by subtle insights into how the narrative creates a cognitive environment appropriate to a particular form of faith. Such information will provide new avenues for understanding why people leave religions, and what happens as a result.

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Media and Communication Approaches to Leaving Religion

Teemu Taira

1 Introducing Media and Communication Approaches to Leaving Religion

Long research traditions exist behind both the theorisation of the relationship between religion and media (Arthur 1993; Hoover and Lundby 1997; Mitchell and Marriage 2003; Lynch et al. 2012) and that of the conversion to and renunciation of religion. For some reason, however, these two traditions have rarely overlapped. Neither in the study of leaving religion nor in that of religious conversion—one of the main research areas in the psychology of religion and religious experience—has there been a focus on the role of media. There is, for instance, no chapter on media in *The Oxford Handbook of Religious Conversation* (Rambo and Farhadian 2014), and the word “media” is not even indexed in the volume, though “internet” is. One of the reasons might be that the studies of converting to and renouncing religion have focused on individuals—their life stories, psychological factors and social status—ignoring some of the factors that facilitate and influence those individuals’ decision-making. While media cannot be said to be the main reason behind or motivation for renouncing any given religion, it is nevertheless crucial not to discount its role in facilitating the leaving of religion and maintaining the apostate’s new identity. As research focusing primarily on the significance of the role played by media in one’s decision to leave religion is scarce, the main aim of this chapter is to provide some tools for thinking about the relevance of media and communication to leaving religion. Most of the views presented here apply primarily to countries with relatively free and uncensored media and access to online media.

2 Theoretical Perspectives and Turning Points

There are many ways to map how to study the role of media in leaving religion; this chapter focuses on media logics, media discourses and media use. The reason for this three-pronged approach is that these areas cover a broad range of

material, from the very abstract level of media logics to more concrete ways in which media facilitates and, in some cases, prompts people to leave religion.

The concept of media logic refers, in its early formulation, to the production of media culture in general and to news in particular and its influence on different areas of life (Altheide and Snow 1979). In studies concerning religion and media, the media logic has been discussed by focusing on the concept of mediatisation. Mediatisation refers to the development of media as a semi-autonomous institution which begins to direct the ways in which people relate to other areas of life and what information they get out of particular areas of life. In the context of religion, mediatisation has been forcefully argued for by Stig Hjarvard (2012, 2013), according to whom, the outcome of mediatisation of religion is “a new social and cultural condition in which the power to define and practice religion has been altered” (Hjarvard 2013: 83). This new condition means that media as an institution, rather than face-to-face contacts between believers or authorities of religious institutions, provides the primary interface for information about religion. That is, media not only transmits information but also takes an active role in the producing and framing religious issues. Furthermore, media tends to favour secular views over religious ones, thus adding pressure for religious groups and institutions to retain their adherents (Castells 2002: 406). Although this development does not explain why individuals leave religion or switch from one to another, it suggests that the ways in which media operates may have a secularising impact.

It is, nevertheless, debatable whether media does indeed play a strong secularising role. This is because the mainstream media tends to be a liberalising rather than simply a secularising force (Taira 2015), and religious authority may be exercised in previously unseen ways through new media technologies (Herbert 2011: 635–637; Larsson 2011). However, Hjarvard's perspective on the mediatisation of religion provides a theoretical framework for thinking about and testing the media's operating logic and its role in facilitating the leaving of religion in contemporary societies.

In some cases, the mainstream media takes a position of defending the dominant religion (Knott et al. 2013). For instance, after a trend emerged of individuals renouncing the Evangelical-Lutheran Church of Finland because of comments made on television in a current affairs programme about the rights of homosexuals in 2010, mainstream newspapers, in spite of their wish to take the liberal rather than conservative side in the debate, explicitly encouraged people not to leave the church, arguing that change had to be effected from within not without the church. In this case, the logic of news production in highlighting conflicts and unexpected events resulted in the preservation and repetition of the topic in daily headlines, thus in fact accelerating the rate by

which Finns renounced the church in spite of the explicitly contrary standpoint of newspapers. This case demonstrates that the media logic cannot be boiled down to the opinions of individual media professionals or even to the views of media outlets generally. Likewise, this case demonstrates why the theorisation of media and its procedures, mechanics and habits, jointly with actual media content, is relevant for the study of the media's role in leaving religion.

Another dimension of mediatisation is how media takes the place of religion. Effects of mediatisation include the reduction of the time people spend with religious institutions and the decline of the need for such institutions. That is, media offers a substitute and constitutes a new framework for meaning, or "sacred canopy" (Berger 1990). If media operates increasingly as a space of meaning-making, it eventually robs one typical function of the religious framework. In this sense, it can be argued that the more media has an influence on individuals' lives, the more likely they are to find the religious context irrelevant. However, media also produces and reproduces religious imagery constituting popular narratives and detached symbols (Hjarvard 2012: 34–39). These weakly institutionalised and somewhat individualised and aestheticised forms in turn offer a new religious identity for some, but the development is concomitant with the more general argument about media's overall detrimental role to institutionalised religion. This is because the media uproots established religious symbols from their traditions and institutions and the attachment to other, more recent religious forms is typically weak, often expressed by fascination and interest rather than by commitment.

In addition to theorising media logics and its possible contribution to individuals leaving religion, one can focus on the discourses, representations and narratives media produces about religion. By media discourses relevant to the leaving of religion, I do not mean only news stories and features about individuals who leave religion but also the overall portrayal of religion and non-religion in media that altogether provide a set of information, images and stories and thus potentially affect people's relation to religion.

When an individual leaves a dominant tradition or church, there is no news story. Individuals are interesting only if they are celebrities, politicians, controversial critics, "career apostates" or the like (Foster 1984; Royle 2012; Larsson 2016). However, when people leave the dominant church en masse, then there is a story for the media to cover and assess. This applies to specific events that prompt people to leave religion as well as to wider social developments. An example of the former is the aforementioned trend of the renunciation of the Evangelical-Lutheran Church of Finland in 2010 following its public statements on the rights of homosexuals. Despite the mainstream media's relatively

positive attitude towards the Lutheran Church, the newsworthiness of the mass renunciations widely prolonged the crisis, prompting Finns to evaluate whether or not they wanted to preserve their church membership. An example of the latter surrounds “the rise of nones” in the US and in Europe. The fact that the media have started to write about “nones” as if they had formed a cohesive group or community (see Bullard 2016) potentially presents people with a new identification that had otherwise been rather marginal a couple of decades ago. It is well known that “nones” are a very heterogeneous group (Lipka 2015; Woodhead 2016): some hold strong religious beliefs but do not have an affiliation, some atheists strongly reject all religious beliefs and actively campaign against religions. Nevertheless, when the media writes about “the rise of the nones,” backed up by recent statistical data, the narrative creates a coherence and identity that is alluring to those who consider leaving religion.

A further complication is that groups labelled as “sects” or “cults” in the media are treated differently from mainstream churches. In such a case, an individual’s decision to leave the group is potentially relevant to the media, as an interview with such an individual offers the opportunity to valorise concerns about control, protection, government intervention and the possibility of brainwashing. Media stories about individuals leaving groups deemed closed, conservative, oppressive and otherwise suspicious offer protreptic models for those involved and function as reminders of the dangers of such “cults.” Indeed, scholars have suggested that there is clear media bias against New Religious Movements (Beckford 1985; Richardson and van Driel 1997; van Driel and Richardson 1988); the media acts as if it were an authority on acceptable religions, condoning the renunciation of less acceptable ones.

Media discourse about leaving established minority religions, on the other hand, is more ambiguous. Leaving Buddhism, Hinduism or Judaism is not usually the media’s primary interest, but the situation is different in the case of Islam. Western media has proven to have an insatiable appetite for stories about people leaving Islam, partly because of support groups and activist organisations for ex-Muslims in social media, such as the Council of Ex-Muslims of Britain, the Ex-Muslims of North America and WikiIslam (Larsson 2007; Enstedt and Larsson 2013; Cottee 2015). For instance, the Finnish public broadcasting company’s story “Fatima gave up Islam, but cannot remove her veil—leaving Islam is a taboo in Finland” (Vatanen 2016) was significant because of the uniqueness of its tale. The article told of two ex-Muslims of Somali background who were still wearing the veil, because they were afraid that their family and relatives would not approve otherwise. These women discovered a Finnish ex-Muslim’s blog, which encourage them now to speak in the national

media about being ex-Muslims. Although the article offered a sympathetic view on the trials and tribulations of ex-Muslims, recapitulating the problems they have experienced, it was not attempting to paint Islam in broad strokes. Rather, the article was typical in its defence of individual choices—that Islam is one among many possibilities that should be allowed to be chosen from in the same open way that leaving Islam should be a viable option without having to weather pressure from the religious group or relatives of the same faith.

One of the significant aspects in the media's involvement is what kind of publicity is given to non-religious people and organisations. Studies suggest that, while atheist activists are often covered in media, the media does not always approve of their mission. Richard Dawkins, for instance, is a frequent face on media, but he is often perceived as too aggressive, provocative and uninformed in his views about religion (Knott et al. 2013; Taira 2015). This suggests that, while the media gives space for critical voices, it does not necessarily encourage people to leave religion, except in cases where the religious group in question is considered too limiting, repressive or conservative—that is, in comparison to the media's relatively liberal values. The sheer presence of such stories about non-religious people and their activities, however, is likely to keep fast the possibility of leaving religion in people's minds. Non-religious organisations are thus keen on their campaigns gaining media visibility.

One of the most famous campaigns is the atheist bus campaign which ran the slogan "There's Probably No God. Now Stop Worrying and Enjoy Your Life" in its original UK form in 2009 and, in a slightly amended form, in thirteen other countries (Tomlins and Bullivant 2017). It is difficult to estimate how influential such campaigns have been, but, based on individual testimonies, they have contributed to some people becoming non-religious (Cimino and Smith 2014; Kontala 2016).

The campaigns fostered momentum for people leaving religion, but they always come with the risk of unintended consequences. The media narrative is often delicate, and there are times when neutral or somewhat positive coverage turns sour. One example of such a campaign can be found in 2010, when Finnish Freethinkers replicated the example in the US of the Atheist Agenda offering *Hustler* magazines in exchange for religious books at the University of Texas, San Antonio. The same public stunt, swapping porn magazines for Bibles, was frowned upon in the Finnish public sphere, not only by the media but also by many activists in non-religious organisations (Taira 2012: 31–32).

Although the media is not opposed to religion in general (Knott et al. 2013), some media companies co-operate with those who wish for people to leave religion. One interesting example is Richard Dawkins, whose purpose is

consciousness-raising and helping people to come out as atheists. Dawkins has featured in many antireligious documentaries shown on the main television channels in Britain and are widely available on DVD and YouTube.

Similar antireligious discourses are present in social media without the mediation of traditional media companies and houses. Blogs, for instance, are easily available for those thinking of leaving religion. Some websites, such as WikiIslam, focus on particular tradition, while others campaign for atheism in general. An example of the latter is Pharyngula, administrated by biology professor PZ Myers. The blog conjures up an image of conflict between religion and science, one in which everyone must choose a side: “Science and religion are two different ways of looking at the universe and changing the world, and I believe that you must set one aside to follow the other.” (Myers 2013: 146). This is one of the ways in which media discourses offer alternative points of identification—science, in this case—for those who do not identify with a particular faith.

The analysis of media discourses supports the idea that the overall media logic contributes to the media’s liberalising effect, but it does not mean that media is antireligious as such. While media discourses are powerful, they are rarely the sole factor that motivates someone to leave any given religion. Hence, it is necessary to explore how people utilise media, particularly social media, to achieve a better understanding of how the media facilitates and influences people’s decisions to leave religion.

Online environments create favourable circumstances for small religious groups to disseminate their message and reach potentially interested people without the mediation of mainstream media. Furthermore, it provides the space for like-minded people to seek information not otherwise featured on mainstream media (Campbell 2010; Taira 2013: 213). However, the same holds true for people interested in leaving religion. Just as Muslims post their conversion narratives on the internet (van Nieuwkerk 2014), so do people who leave any religious tradition (Enstedt and Larsson 2013). Similarly, just as the internet has been dubbed a “recruitment tool for cults” (Rick Ross, quoted in Cowan 2014: 698), there is equally evidence for people leaving religion because of opportunities opened up by free online access to information and like-minded people.

A useful example about the significance of media in general and social media in particular can be found in the example of people who have left Conservative Læstadianism in Finland. Læstadianism is a Lutheran revival movement that started in Lapland in the middle of the nineteenth century. In the twenty first century, the movement has been under scrutiny by the liberal media, partly because of practices in the faith perceived as oppressive. The

movement is also somewhat closed, with problems typically being dealt with in the community, without involvement from outsiders, the police or a secular court of justice. Members usually also cut ties with people who abandon the movement.

Stories by former Læstadians on the internet empower individuals on the brink of leaving the movement. When people write anonymously in a discussion forum, they find that other people have had similar experiences and concerns. This sharing of narratives encourages such individuals to come out in public, and the mainstream media, in turn, is eager to publish their stories and explore the cases further, forcing leaders of the group to comment on accusations made in the public. The ensuing publicity and scandal further empower those who have been nursing doubts that they have yet acted on to share their viewpoints (Hintsala 2016; Rova 2016.). The opportunities offered by online environments to members of the movement create an accretion of scandal, aided from the outside by the media. Despite the crucial role of the online environment, the decision to leave religion usually necessitates some kind of face-to-face contact with people that can be trusted (Richardson 2014: 745). In the case of Læstadianism, apostates have noted public speeches, partisan associations and scholarly writings as facilitators relevant to their decision to leave the movement (Rova 2016).

Another example is an American 21-year-old, “Lynnette,” a former Evangelical Christian who writes about how her brother came out on his Facebook page as an atheist, which in turn helped her to “separate actual atheist beliefs from the stigma against atheism” (Lynnette 2014: 38). After a couple of months, she began to explore atheist blogs and concluded that atheists, too, can be good people. When Lynnette had been an atheist for almost two years, she thought that she was still only halfway out of the closet. She has mentioned her atheism on Facebook profile information, but has been afraid to announce it elsewhere. (Lynnette 2014: 38–39). This example includes both trusted people and lesser-known blog contributors, demonstrating that media matters, though it is not the sole factor operating behind one’s choice to leave religion.

The role media plays in facilitating apostasy is further evidenced among former Mormons in America. A study of people leaving Mormonism confirms three relevant aspects of the online environment: first, even innocent queries for information lead to “anti-Mormon” websites that can sow seeds of doubt and serve as catalysts for people to abandon the religion; second, online communities of former Mormons can function as sanctuaries in which people can share their stories with like-minded people, get recognition for their new ex-Mormon identity and sustain themselves in a new community; third, rather than offering a neutral space for individuals to share their stories, the websites

encourage “users to post their ‘exit stories’ and to offer ‘support’ to one another” (Avance 2013: 21).

Interviews with people affiliated to non-religious organisations reveal that some have found inspiration for leaving religion and joining non-religious activities by watching Dawkins on YouTube or reading books on atheism (Kontala 2016: 109). While the book has been an important medium for a long time, the online environment has become increasingly relevant in recent years in empowering and inspiring people to come out as atheists (Cimino and Smith 2014). In addition to watching and reading online about non-religiosity and atheism, people find websites sharing information about the experiences of their peers. For example, on the website of Richard Dawkins, the Foundation for Science and Reason, is a Convert’s Corner—a page where users can leave testimonies on how they became non-religious and read about the experiences of others. As of the beginning of 2017, more than 2000 testimonies are published there.

User testimonies can also be found on select Facebook groups. One particularly interesting example is the Facebook page of the film *Religulous* (2008). On 4 October 2013, the administrator posted the following message: “Religulous opened 5 yrs ago today; still religious people in the world (damn!) but to thousands who told me they quit, congrats and Thank YOU!” Users commented on this in many ways. In addition to praise and stories about attempts to convert others, some offered testimonies about the film’s life-changing experience, such as the following: “I honestly have to thank you, because I saw this movie when I was 13 and it changed my life. Thank you for questioning every religion. I’m a big fan and congratulations.”

Yet another example is The Institute for the Secularisation of Islamic Societies, which mainly opposes Islam as a political doctrine not as a personal faith, though the institute nevertheless supports people leaving Islam. Even in their classic publication, *Leaving Islam* (Warraq 2003), the institute advertised their own website, including a list of websites where assistance and support could be found. They understood the potential of the online environment in these matters already at the beginning of twenty first century. More recently, the importance of the internet and social media in the Islamic context has been emphasised by Brian Whitaker, who suggests that non-believers in the Middle East have “begun to find a voice” and “social media have provided them with the tools to express themselves.” (Whitaker 2014: 5). Although there are broader demands for political and social changes that come with the interest in leaving religion, the development of media technology and easy access thereto means that “young Arabs today are far more aware of the outside world than previous generations and, when they hold up their own countries to the mirror, many

dislike what they see” (Whitaker 2014: 6). Leaving Islam, facilitated by media use, is one possible response to this cognitive dissonance.

The potential power of individuals' media use is also recognized by state officials, since “most of those arrested for ‘defaming’ religion have got[ten] into trouble as a result of their internet activity” (Whitaker 2014: 27). The significance of the internet is further emphasised by an ex-Muslim, Ali A. Rizvi, the author of *The Atheist Muslim* (2016), who claims to have received “thousands of emails” from atheist Muslims (or people wishing to become one but cannot do so in public). He suggests that especially young people are now interconnected, and they are “getting access to ideas through the Internet. They are becoming more skeptical.” (Rizvi 2017).

Given the ubiquity of mediated information about the possibilities of leaving religion and supporting networks, it has become clear that the outside of religion is not somewhere “out there” but rather “here”—available after a couple of clicks. It is not simply the easy accessibility of information; the online environment allows people to imagine themselves as potentially a part of a non-religious community (Cottee 2015). As Cimino and Smith (2014: 64) put it, “the substantial transformations in our contemporary communication technologies are creating a new way for atheists to come out, speak out, and meet up in a still largely religious society.” This does not explain why individuals leave religion, but it does suggest that it would be unwise not to consider the role played by the consumption of media and communication technologies in the process of leaving religion.

3 Methodological Perspectives and Turning Points

The methods for studying the role of media and communication in leaving religion are not very different from standard humanistic and social scientific methods. However, some methods are more suitable than others for studying the different aspects highlighted in this chapter.

First, the study of media logics calls for methods that help grapple with the roles and functions of media institutions generally and also the relationship between the media and other institutions in contemporary society. The most appropriate way to study media logics in relation to leaving religion is the development of theories based on case studies. Second, media discourses can be studied by utilising standard qualitative methods such as discourse analysis, content analysis and narrative analysis. It is also possible to add quantitative content analysis to the methodical repertoire, particularly if the hypothesis is that the availability of certain kinds of stories pertaining to religion affects

people's decisions to leave religion. Third, media use can be analysed by means of ethnographic methods, such as interviews, observation, media ethnography and audience research. Furthermore, the increased digitalisation of society and the growing significance of the online environment carry methodological implications. Netnography, online surveys, video analysis and digital methods operating with "big data" are likely to increase in the near future.

It would be unrealistic to propose that an individual researcher would be able to cover all the aspects highlighted in this chapter. From the individual's point of view, it is rather a question of singling out the most relevant and interesting approach, hoping that different studies will cumulatively foster a dialogue that results in a more coherent and rigorous understanding of the role media plays in leaving religion. In addition to an exploration of the individual testimonies people share on such websites as Dawkins's Convert's Corner and WikiIslam, a more general study of the media's role could proceed in two steps.

The first step would be to investigate what role, if any, the media plays in people's decisions to leave religion. Although media ethnography is often enough for studying the role of media use, one option would be to collect writings by people who have left religion, and select for interviews individuals in whose writings the role of media has been addressed directly.

The second step would be to explore media coverage of leaving religion. Although there are plenty of studies focusing on media discourses, representations and narratives pertaining to religion, few studies investigate the way the media covers the leaving of religion.

Together, these two steps could provide building blocks for a more comprehensive understanding of media logics, media discourses and media use in relation to the study of leaving religion.

4 Critical Reflections, Evaluations and Predictions

I have suggested that the significance of the role played by media in leaving religion has not been examined thoroughly enough. However, if the assertions about the ubiquity of media are to be believed, it can be expected that media will become more relevant in the future. There is thus a need for studies to specify which roles media play in leaving religion, but it may be more precise to anticipate that media are becoming common factors in facilitating people's decisions but also in creating new circumstances in which various options emphasising individual choice are introduced. Therefore, it is likely that the study of leaving religion will have to take media and communications into consideration in order to understand apostates in general.

5 Suggestions How to Do It

This chapter has outlined various focal points for the study of the role of media and communication in leaving religion and suggested some methods. This inclusion of a variety of media means that thinking about media convergence is significant for future studies. Convergence means simply the “coming together of things that were previously separate” (Meikle and Young 2012: 2), while media convergence refers specifically to “the flow of content across multiple media platforms, the cooperation of media industries, and the migratory behaviour of media audiences” (Jenkins 2008: 2). What this means in the context of studying leaving religion is that researchers have to pay attention to the interplay of various media—newspapers, radio, television, social media and other online environments at the levels of media logics and discourses—as well as the multiple ways people use them. While specific media technologies privilege some opportunities over others, as suggested by traditional medium theory, the media convergence means that no single medium exists in a vacuum.

One possible example to highlight media convergences and combine the three areas examined in this chapter—usage, discourses and media logics—would be the Finnish website *Eroa kirkosta*¹ (“Divorce from the Church”) and the role it plays in people giving up faith. At the level of media use, it has been shown that most Finns who resigned from the church in recent times have done so through this website.² Furthermore, through the website, people have familiarised themselves with associations and networks that support those without a religion. At the level of media discourse, it would be relevant to focus on the strong public presence of the website in the mainstream media. The website publishes press releases with information pertaining to the number of apostates and reasons people give for leaving the church. Often, documents prompt other media outlets to publish stories about resignations, referring to the website’s press releases—quoting reasons from testimonies and the statistical data published there—with little alteration. This likewise offers a glimpse into the media logic. Writing stories about mass resignations is considered relevant news material; it is cheap news production for media houses, as reliable data and sound bites are provided in the press release, and the message of the press release—that is leaving religion if you have any reason to do so—is not too far from the liberal standpoint of the mainstream media.

This example suggests a more general point: it is not simply the media that matters but the articulations between media and people’s social practices. The

1 <https://eroakirkosta.fi/dynamic/index.php/> Accessed 25/02/2019.

2 <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eroakirkosta.fi> Accessed 25/02/2019.

media is an integral part of the ways in which people practice their religiosity, but also their considerations to leave religion, and opens up opportunities for people who wish to leave their religion, though the media is rarely the primary factor for doing so. Media help people find information and seek out support; this fact underlines the significance of thinking about how media is articulated in the process of leaving religion.

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