Barbara Keller / Constantin Klein / Ralph W. Hood / Heinz Streib

# Deconversion and Religious or Spiritual Transformation

## Introduction

Deconversion implies loss of formerly meaningful religious experience, of embeddedness in one's former community, criticism and doubt regarding formerly appreciated beliefs, rituals, and prescriptions, and, finally, disaffiliation from a community (Streib & Keller, 2004; Streib, Hood, Keller, Csöff, & Silver, 2009). Deconversion defined in these terms was explored in depth in the Bielefeld-based Cross-cultural Study on Deconversion in the US and Germany. The design of the study focused on the subsample of 99 deconverts, about whom we have collected deconversion narratives and faith development interviews (Fowler, 1981)[1]: We sampled for deconverts, first from new religious movements and fundamentalist groups, then from mainline denominations or integrated groups. In addition, to allow comparisons between deconverts and their former fellows in faith, 178 faith development interviews with in-tradition members (members of the religious groups from which the focus persons have deconverted) were conducted; also an additional 1,067 in-tradition members have filled out a comprehensive questionnaire. The total quantitative data sample thus consists of 1,197 cases from which we have questionnaire data. The three sorts of data (narrative interview on deconversion, faith development interview and questionnaire data) can be viewed as interrelated building blocks of the triangulation strategies, which we use in our research (Streib, 2005; Streib, Hood, & Keller, 2002).

This chapter is organized according to the research design: We start our exploration of what changes in deconversion with interviews of two deconverts from Jehova's Witnesses, one from each research context, and contrast their deconversion trajectories. We attend to their deconversion experiences as outlined in the narratives, then to their faith development interviews. The results of

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1  The complete subsample of deconverts consisted of 129 subjects.

these steps of analysis will be profiled against the quantitative data of current members – following the triangulation strategy of our study.

## Deconverting from Jehova's Witnesses in Germany and the USA

To explore deconversion and transformation we focus on two case studies, one from the American, one from the German deconversion study sample. Both case studies involve men who were in their fifties when they participated in our study. Both had left Jehova's Witnesses after a membership of three decades. Further similarities are found in their faith development interviews: Both men's biographies are characterized by a troubled childhood with absent fathers and emotionally non-available mothers, and by the experience of war. Franz, in Germany, had lost his older siblings and his father in the Second World War. Tom, in the United States, had after a childhood characterized by neglect, served in the Vietnam War. Both converted to Jehova's Witnesses in their twenties. In their adult lives, both have managed to find a profession and a spouse. Tom reports a divorce from a woman who had, from childhood on, to cope with a physical handicap. Franz is married to a woman with a history of earlier trauma. Neither have children. Both left Jehova's witnesses upon conflict with authorities. Both claim to find themselves in harmony with God when they are alone in the wilderness, in nature. Both claim, in the four-options forced-choice format of our questionnaire, to be more spiritual than religious. However, their deconversions follow different trajectories: Franz has been identified as a type of deconvert who, upon leaving, feels "debarred from Paradise," while Tom has been associated to the type of deconvert who is on a "life long quest" or making "late revisions" (cf. Streib et al, 2009).

### Deconversion Narratives and Trajectories

Now we will provide some biographical background of the deconversion trajectories. Franz, who grew up in a protestant family, states early in his deconversion narrative that he never met his father. "I have lost my father in the war, my mother remarried eventually, and, ahm, for me war was something terrible, because I have not suffered in any, any material way, but psychologically".[2] Another narrative episode centers on his refusal to take part in con-

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2 ("ich hab meinen Vater im Krieg verloren, ne, meine Mutter hat dann wieder geheiratet und, äh, für mich war der Krieg was ganz Furchtbares. Weil ich eben nicht-nicht materiell darunter gelitten hab, aber seelisch.")

firmation, due to religious doubts. These doubts he describes as inspired by his questions regarding the war and religious war propaganda, which were not answered by the pastor:

> "As is right and proper, I was supposed to go to confirmation classes and be confirmed. Then I have talked to this person there and asked questions about the war and how the Church's position is to these issues; and at that time I learned that the soldiers are [...?]; they went to war with "God with us" and with "Hurra," and I was completely disgusted. And he did not give me a sufficient answer to that, and my reaction was then, 'Well, then I will not be confirmed'".[3]

With his experience of confrontation with Nazi crimes and the holocaust, Franz felt left alone by his mother and his stepfather. He states, that they cared well for him as far as material things are concerned, but that he was left alone with fundamental questions of life. Consequentially, his story of his first encounter with Jehova's witnesses is about the "answers" they provided to his big questions, which were left open by parents and pastor. When explaining his conversion, he refers to his seeking for orientation, longing for a father:

> "How much would I have wished, as a boy, [...] someone who takes me by the hand. And explains to me what life is about. Actually, this, this was what I always, still as a young person, ahm, was waiting for".[4]

Franz portrays himself as (having been a) naïve and young layperson who, longing for a father to take him by the hand and explain what life is about, was lured into the ideology of the Witnesses, when, as a young employee, he started life in a new environment. This account stands in a certain tension to other parts of his narrative, which describe that he later held positions of teaching and pastoral care in the JW community:

> "My career then, with the Witnesses, I was, first, as they say, ministerial servant or deacon. Then, two or three years later, elder. Then I did several things, but almost

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3  "Weil sich das eben so gehörte, sollte ich auch zum Konfirmandenunterricht gehen und konfirmiert werden. Dann hab ich mit dem Menschen dort gesprochen und hab ihm über den Krieg Fragen gestellt und überhaupt, wie die Kirche dazu steht und zu der Zeit ist mir dann auch bekannt geworden, dass ja die Soldaten einem [...?] sind. Gott mit uns, in den Kriege gezogen sind und mit "Hurra" und das hat mich also furchtbar abgestoßen. Und er hat mir da keine richtige Antwort drauf gegeben [dann?] und meine Reaktion war dann "gut, dann werd ich auch nicht konfirmiert'."

4  "Wie sehr hätte ich mir gewünscht, als Junge [...] einen, der mich an die Hand nimmt. Und der mir mal das Leben erklärt. Das-das war eigentlich das, worauf ich immer, schon als Jugendlicher noch, äh, gewartet habe."
"Meine Laufbahn dann bei den Zeugen Jehovas, ich wurde, äh, erst, wie man so sagt, Dienstamtsgehilfe oder Diakon. Dann, zwei-drei Jahre später, Ältester. Dann hab ich verschiedene Sachen, aber fast alles da gemacht, vom-vom Saalordner, oder, Rechnungs-, äh, diener, und, äh, die Schule hab ich, äh, lange Zeit geleitet – das Wachtturm-Studium."

everything there, starting with steward, treasurer, äh, servant, and I have directed the school for, ahm, long time – the study of the Watchtower".[5]

Franz was well integrated when conflict arose with a visiting elder who criticized his activities. Then he experienced again, that his questions and objections, although based on Bible studies, were not answered, that authorities did not live up to moral expectations, and that there was no response to his appeals to solve the conflict. Therefore, he stepped from his responsibilities and finally left. He regrets that, due to JW expectations that Armageddon would be in 1975, he and his wife did not have children and also did not invest in buying their own house. He also regrets having discontinued seeing his relatives, due to the command of the Witnesses. Being dis-fellowshipped and shunned after decades of having only had social contact with other Witnesses, he and his wife feel isolated, victims of an ideology that proved false. Franz is reluctant to join a religious group ever again, even while keeping his faith. Therefore we categorized his deconversion as a privatizing exit.

Tom from the United States also tells a childhood story of disorder and early sorrow. His mother led an unstable life, involving multiple moves from one place to another, within and outside of the United States. The children had different fathers and some of them were given up for adoption. The adults in Tom's narrative about his young life are portrayed as emotionally unavailable, neglecting his need for relationship. Later Tom served in the Vietnam War and, upon his return, he worked with computers. In his view, Christianity was linked to the governmental decision to go to war. He has strong criticisms against the corruption of Christianity as reason for both World Wars and the Spanish Inquisition. He later reasoned that what he knew about Christianity stemmed from self-proclaimed Christians who were involved in sinful acts, rather than from the teachings of the Bible. This led him to seek a better understanding of the Bible and to accept the Jehovah's Witnesses' invitation to Bible study and finally to affiliate with the JW. The reason he gives for his conversion is that, having grown up in an "emotional vacuum", he was "looking for structure". In his deconversion narrative he shows appreciation of what he gained: "And, it provided an excellent uhm, environment in which to really get into the scriptures because it's a fundamentalist religion". Tom also tells in the interview that he underwent a process of change: "Bible is the bottom line. Uhm… I gradually got to the point though, where that was no longer working for me". He explains what he came to perceive as shortcomings in the JW community:

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5 "Meine Laufbahn dann bei den Zeugen Jehovas, ich wurde, äh, erst, wie man so sagt, Dienstamtsgehilfe oder Diakon. Dann, zwei-drei Jahre später, Ältester. Dann hab ich verschiedene Sachen, aber fast alles da gemacht, vom-vom Saalordner, oder, Rechnungs-, äh, diener, und, äh, die Schule hab ich, äh, lange Zeit geleitet – das Wachtturm-Studium."

"And so they're missing spirit, they're missing relationships, and I was hungry for that more and more and more … and just not finding it there. Went to all the different elders looking for answers, and uhm, as I got more and more frustrated uhm.. I settled down and I read through the Bible three times in the course of four years."

In these independent Bible studies he discovers that God was, in the New Testament, referred to as father. This is meaningful to him and to his interest in relationship. However, the elders could not share his views; thus the conflict between his new insights in the Christian doctrine culminated in his being disfellowshipped. "And, unlike most who are disfellowshipped, who feel all of a sudden you know, cast out of the life boat, for me it was a sense of relief." Tom does not seem to feel like a victim nor does he report regrets. Tom has moved on to a more liberal denomination, which he believes has filled the void left by the Jehovah's Witness community. We identified Tom's deconversion trajectory as an integrating exit.

## Stages of Faith: Transformation as Structural Deconversion

Fowler's model of faith development is based on the idea of a series of integrative adaptations of cognitive-structural patterns, which he saw as being stretched across the life span. His conception of faith includes seven Aspects: cognitive-structural development (drawn from Piaget), perspective taking (Selman), moral judgment (Kohlberg), adding bounds of social awareness, locus of authority, forms of world coherence, and level of symbolic functioning. These seven aspects of faith are assumed to develop in six stages that may be loosely related to age: Intuitive-projective ($<6$ years), mythic-literal ($7-12$ years), synthetic-conventional (adolescence, adulthood), individuative-reflective (adulthood), conjunctive, and universalizing faith.

In James Fowler's conception of conversion, which is based upon his model of "stages of faith" (Fowler, 1981), the basic distinction is between structural and lateral conversion. Structural conversion involves stage transformation understood as progress to a higher stage, while lateral conversion does not. Applied to deconversion, this means that transformation or structural deconversion consists in moving upward in the invariant sequence of the stages of faith. Lateral deconversion refers to leaving one's faith community without change in faith stage. This change should encompass all of the seven aspects of faith in Fowler's model.

Applying this model of deconversion to our cases, we conclude: Franz' disaffiliation from Jehovah's Witnesses does not show any signs of transformation in terms of faith development. Franz does not give any statements about changes

of his faith, which he rather seeks to defend. Comparing Franz' faith development score (2.4) with the JW in-tradition members (mean score 3.0 for the German subsample, spanning from 2.1 to 3.7), we see him at the lower end of the spectrum. This suggests that Franz' deconversion was a lateral deconversion.

Tom's faith development interview sum score is 3.8 – which indicates the development of Individuative-Reflective Faith. Tom himself comments on his development: "Uhm, just in the past few months have I finally moved over the line between teenager and adult". Taking this together with the comparison against in-tradition members' mean faith development interview score of 3.1 for the U.S. subsample, we have some evidence of a structural deconversion.

## Religious Styles: Transformation as Change of Configuration

Streib has taken up Fowler's approach, criticizing the neglect of important dimensions of the self, such as affects and emotions or life history. He (Streib, 2001, p. 144) referred to Gil Noam's criticism:

> "It is my view that cognitively based theorists have overlooked the central structuring activities of the self by defining the epistemic self as the sole representative of structure. In the process, I believe, the cart was placed before the horse, life history became content to the structure of the epistemic self ... Epistemology replaced life history" (Noam, 1990, p. 378).

Streib (2001) also criticized the neglect of the psychodynamical and relational interpersonal dimensions, of the interpretative, hermeneutic dimension, and of the life-world dimension. He suggested drawing on the philosophical (phenomenological) contributions of Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1988), and Paul Ricœur (1990) to situate faith development in the life worlds of persons and on the psychoanalytical and psychological contributions of Erik Erikson (1968), Ana-Maria Rizzuto (1979) and Gil Noam (1990) to account for the dynamics of individual developmental trajectories (Streib, 2001, pp. 145–147). The religious styles perspective suggests a model of religious development that integrates a broader variety of concepts from discourses such as life span developmental psychology and sociology of religion. Religious styles have been defined as

> "distinct modi of practical-interactive (ritual), psychodynamic (symbolic), and cognitive (narrative) reconstruction and appropriation of religion, that originate in relation to life history and life world and that, in accumulative deposition, constitute the variations and transformations of religion over a life time, corresponding to the style of interpersonal relations" (Streib, 2001, p. 149).

This perspective takes up the descriptions of forms of faith provided by Fowler's model, but understands these from a richer theoretical framework. A hierarchy

of (five) styles is maintained, discarding Fowler's sixth stage as more based on theological reasoning than on empirical findings (Streib, 2003, 2005). Insisting that biography be taken into account, the religious styles perspective allows for "regressions", movements toward, or "revivals" of, less complex or earlier forms of faith, while different styles remain active at the same time. Transformation may thus be understood as change in the configuration of styles.

A closer look into the faith development interview with Franz shows that scores differ across aspects: they vary from 2.0 in Moral Judgment (Aspect C) to 2.9 in Locus of Authority (Aspect E), referring to Franz' emerging criticism of leadership as neglecting needs of the persons in the community. The general interpretation is the preeminence of the mythic-literal style. After leaving the Jehovah's Witnesses, Franz continues to take the guidelines for a Christian life literally from the Bible. With reference to Hood et al. (2005), this can be interpreted as fundamentalist, as an intratextual understanding. His deconversion seems to have been more an issue of rejecting specific prescriptions (or rather their interpretation by the church authorities), than an issue of applying a new level of reasoning about religious matters. In his faith development interview, Franz states that he would rely on the commandments of the Bible if he had to make important decisions, and only secondarily asks whether the decision is reasonable and feasible:

> "Uh, well, I'll think about this. A-firstly, well, in accordance with, uh … the Biblical commands or principles, not commands, we don't have those anymore, okay with the Biblical principles, uh, then reason, this decision, is it reasonable, is it advisable to do something like that? This is the way I would. And then the do-ability of it."

When asked how the evil comes into the world, Franz suggests that everything would be good, if everybody lived according to the rules of the Bible: "And I tell myself if-if all the-the principles that God gave us, exactly and consequently, were done by everybody then we'd be in paradise."

Asked how religious conflicts might be resolved, Franz refers to the unambiguousness of God's word and states:

> "Well, now I can't say that I, I, uh, read this text in the Bible, uh but in fourteen-hundred so and so pope whatshisname said something about this and then a Roman author once, they are all simply commentators, that's not the-the main principle that is here in the Bible. And then people have to uh do only what is said in the Bible."

From the religious styles perspective, Franz does not show many signs of a change of style. His adherence to a mythic-literal form of faith, his reproach against the Witnesses, whom he now sees as misrepresenting the sacred texts, and his image of God as a powerful parental (father) figure, whose commands he has to obey in order to be accepted, point to what Streib has defined as an instrumental-reciprocal religious style.

In Tom's faith development interview, scores range from Stage Three to Stage Five, with lower scores on Aspect F, Form of World Coherence, and G, Symbolic Function (3.5). His scores thus span a range of two stages. From the religious styles perspective, the presence of different styles can be interpreted. For the case of fundamentalist religiosity, heterodyning of styles has been introduced, together with the corollary, that "the mutuality or the individuative reflectiveness resists complete submission and surrender to the fundamentalist demand" and eventually this leads to the perception of contradictions (Streib 2001, p. 154). This may apply to Tom, who throughout his faith development interview shows a reflective and explicit way of dealing not only with issues of truth and interpretation of the Bible, but with his own past. The following passage about current relationships shows Tom's self-reflective explanation of his difficulties to see God as father:

> "Well, with both my fathers, they're significant by virtue of having being just about null. And so, not wilful neglect but neglect, the emptiness none the less. [I.: Right.] That's significant because it leaves me with an emptiness, left me with a real difficulty as seeing God as my father. [I.: Mhm.] because my awareness of what a father is a presence that does nothing. [I.: Mhm.] And… shifting that relative to a father who is out of sight and works indirectly- [I.: Right.] has been a challenge."

Here Tom is reflecting on his own inner life in terms of his developmental history and self-selected worldview.

To illustrate the most advanced style present, we quote from Tom's response to the question how Tom would generally go about decision-making, which has been scored Stage Five, conjunctive faith:

> "Prayer, prayer and meditation and somewhere in the course it will come to me. [I.: How… how or when did you sort of come to that model of decision making?] (long pause for thinking) […] I grew up uhm… extremely left brained. Personal decisions, personal work it out, figure out the logic of it, and come to the conclusions. And parallel with all of that was an intense fear of faith because my understanding of faith was blind faith. [I.: Mhm.] What I saw in Hebrews 11:1 is that we need foundation for our faith. We need evidence. [I.: Mhm.] and as I came to understand that I began to open up to something more than just what I could see, measure, analyze, etc. [I.: Mhm.] and… growing accustomed to that, allowing myself to go in that direction has been a very long process. [I.: Mhm.] Uhm… but I understood- […] that my heart was totally shut down, but heart is what I needed in order to be able to do all this stuff. [I.: Right.] And I didn't have a clue, how do I get the heart to open up the heart? [I.: Yeah.] But I just decided somehow I just got to have it. The scriptures say, „ask and ye shall receive" that's what I am going to do. […]- and so it took years before that process speeded up enough and there had been enough healing and enough faith to allow myself to heal more rapidly. […] So, to answer your question of how and where- [I.: Yeah.] it's just been a very gradual process."

Here, Tom describes how he struggled to move toward a new religious orientation, involving, "the heart", or basic trust in the terms of Rizzuto's (Eriksonian) language, and in line with Streib's description of the dialogical style.

## Traditional Psychodynamic Perspectives – From "Illusion" to "Transitional Space"

Psychoanalysis is traditionally notorious for its critical view of religion (Freud, 1927). According to the summarizing view provided by Pine's (1988) portrayal of "four psychologies", psychoanalysis can focus on drive and instinct, on taming socialization, and gratification of drives. Second, it can, as ego psychology, study the defenses of the internal and the adaptation to the external world. Third, object relations theory explores histories of inner representations of significant relationships with the aim of gaining freedom by understanding patterns no longer functional.

An account of the development of representations of God, starting from her reconstruction of "Freud's implicit theory of object representation" has been put forward by Rizzuto (1979, p. 29). She traces the development of the God representation as a special type of object representation, which is created first in the transitional space (Winnicott, 1953), and then, across the life span, transformed according to life phases and developmental tasks (Rizzuto, 1979, pp. 206–207). Fourth, self-psychology aspires to understand and support the development of a differentiated and whole sense of self (Pine, 1988, pp. 582–583). These psychologies highlight different aspects of transformation of the cases under study: According to the classical assumption we can frame transformation as cancellation of a "crooked cure" (Freud, 1921, p. 142).[6] Tom and Franz corrected, by deconverting, the decisions of the young men who, instead of facing the harsh realities of their respective upbringings, were seeking the consolation of a religious community which provided answers (Franz) and structure (Tom). Deconversion resulted when the search for consolation proved illusionary (Franz) or at least one-sided (Tom). An ego-psychology perspective would emphasize that both men in their respective troubled childhoods had insufficient possibilities to acquire reality testing, adaptive skills, and defenses. Their faith, giving answers and structure, served as compensation for an inner defense against drive, and supported their adaptation to the outside world (Hartmann, 1958). Transformation would then refer to pervasive change in ego-functioning. This

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6 The contemporary and less pathology-minded version of the drive psychology suggested by Ostov allows to portray conversions as motivated by a "spiritual drive", originating from an instinctual need for attachment (Ostov, 2007, p. 61).

might be inferred from Tom's self-reflective and perceptive review of his development, as well as from his statement, that he felt relief upon leaving. For Franz, who feels devastated upon leaving, this seems to be a challenge. An object relations view might focus on early relationship experience condensed in object representations. The conflicts with the elders might be read as repetitions of early drama: Again the father figures showed lack of interest and understanding. Transformation can be inferred from change in God representations, as indicated by Tom's turn to fatherly aspects. On a more sophisticated level, it would involve reflection and self-reflection, tying earlier to current experiences and perspectives, resulting in acknowledgment of one's own and others limitations – as we see in Tom's, less so in Franz' interview data: Tom shows awareness of his difficulties around relationships to others and to God. Franz hardly articulates the deep disappointment he feels, stemming from earlier and later relationships, arguing rather along standards of right and wrong. Self psychology might ask if lack of early mirroring and empathy lead to difficulties in the formation of a self that is experienced as strong, vital, and cohesive. This may have led Franz to look for support in form of a religious community with a reliable doctrine offered by father figures. Still vulnerable to disappointments after deconversion, he finds fault with them, not with his expectations. However, in the exit group he joined, he may find empathy and mirroring when sharing his experience. Tom, who started by looking for structure, to then find himself turning to a new search for "the heart", shows self-awareness when he realizes that this change of direction – transformation – involves his biography and his decisions.

## Relational Perspective: Change of Mode of Relating toward the Transcendent

Recent relational perspectives argue for an even closer rapprochement of psychoanalysis and religion (Sorenson, 2004; Hoffman, 2011). Drawing on recent discussion on primary intersubjectivity, on attachment, and the relational basis of understanding inner and social worlds in psychoanalysis, transformation can be understood as change of the mode of relating to the transcendent, and described according to criteria of integration and complexity.

Stephen Mitchell (2000) has suggested a hierarchy of four modes of interaction according to growing complexity: Mode 1 refers to non-reflective behaviour, to patterns of reciprocal influence, "to what people do with each other" (p. 58). Mode 2 is concerned with affective permeability, that is, with direct affect resonances between people, with empathy. In Mode 2, others participate in affective connections. Mode 3 is "experience organized into self-other-configurations" (p. 58). The self is shaped by different relationships and in relation to different others. In Mode 3, distinct others are symbolized, but play specific

functional roles. Mode 4 means intersubjectivity, that is, mutual recognition as subjects; self-reflective intentionality and dependency. In Mode 4 others are organized as distinct subjects (Mitchell, 2000, pp. 58 – 62; cf. also Keller, 2008). Mitchell stresses the enduring importance of all his four modes of interaction, stating that conventional reality and conscious cognitive processing and communicating of information is but one way of relating to the world – and one that we construct and develop in interaction with other, traditionally regarded as less advanced, modes (Mitchell, 2000, pp.19 – 21). We take Mitchell's model for an inspection of how both deconverts portrayed here relate to God or the transcendent:

Franz' religious search seems mainly concerned with the regulation of interactions, mode 1 – reciprocal influence. He is also thinking about others with whom he can get together, striving to follow Jesus' words and to build a congregation. He is affiliated with a support-group of other ex-witnesses, with whom he can share feelings and experiences (mode 2, affective permeability), positioning himself in the group and his experience against theirs (mode 3, self-other configurations), starting to reflect his story which might eventually open up functioning on mode 4, intersubjectivity – and thus support transformation.

The heterodyning we see in Tom's profile of aspects might be constructed as the joint and dominant presence of mode 1 (non-reflective behavior, reciprocal influence) and 3 (self-other configurations) – indicating, according to his narrative, longstanding concern with these particular modes and challenges toward integration with the other modes of interaction. Relations with others might still be an issue for Tom. When asked what he would like to change about himself he describes his relationship with God as a major concern: "That's an ongoing process. Uhm… the measure of intimacy that I have with God. That relationship…". He is looking for intimacy (mode 2, shared affective experience), which has not played a major role in his life so far, implying that transformation involves change there, and that Tom's self-reflective stance allows him to make this statement.

## Monitoring Transformation

Reflecting on his image of God during his time with the Witnesses Franz states:

> "First, I have well, learned, learned many new things. Scripture, which then again is related to what (clearing his throat) watchtower says. Got some things straight, right? What actually leads us as human beings to salvation, all these precautions ahm, and have also that Christ came as our saviour. No matter what else was written. Was consolidating myself, only, then came, that, what the watchtower society teaches, that this contradicts the bible. But you can't realize that so soon. Not if you are a Witness, for

an active Witness, who is visiting the congregation, it is impossible to look through that."[7]

It seems that in Franz' view religious literature should correspond to scripture and life practice should be in accordance with both. Sacred text is understood as referring to reality, perhaps of another time and place, but referring to what is or was. There is no space for different views or interpretations, or other minds suggesting different readings. What is in the text corresponds to sacred reality not to be played with. Other perspectives, challenging this form of fundamentalism, may feel like a threat to reality per se – and are consequently discounted as wrong. This might be read as indications of the "equivalence mode" in terms of mentalization (Fonagy & Target, 2007). Franz does not show much self-reflection. His own inner states seem opaque to him. The serious depressive states he experienced have only recently gained that label. To him they felt like a fatigue he could not understand, neither could he make sense of the mood swings which he experienced throughout his life. The exit group, which he joined upon deconversion, may provide a secure environment encouraging him to explore his (and others') inner worlds more deeply, and to move toward transformation understood as pervasive change of his relating toward himself as well as toward the transcendent.

Tom claims that his life was without "real connections" to other persons until his early twenties. He reflects on his life, stating, for instance, that the lack of attachment to father figures is a challenge in his relationship to God. He shows awareness of his own and others' inner states, of process, when he discusses relationships and changes in his relationships. This stands in tension to the area of faith, where he strictly adheres to his Christian faith in a rather fundamentalist style. Asked how religious conflicts can be resolved, he states:

> "with a lot of prayer and grace. If they can be resolved at all. A lot of forgiveness… In order to resolve religious differences there needs to be on the part of both parties, a desire to serve Christ. And a faith in his willingness and ability to be the light and then… a lot of prayer as I mentioned and an appreciation that uhm, sometimes because of coming from different backgrounds it may take a lot of work to resolve those

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7 "Da hab ich .. gut, einmal gelernt .. viel Neues gelernt, Schrifttexte, die dann wieder mit dem (räuspert sich) Wachtturm-Bild. dann immer wieder zusammenhingen. Wurde mir über die-, über manche Dinge schon im Klaren, ne? Was überhaupt für uns Menschen zur Rettung führt, diese ganzen Vorkehrungen, äh, und hab also schon [auch…?], auch dass Jesus Christus als unser Retter . gekommen ist. Egal, was (räuspert sich) sonst so geschrieben wurde. Hab mich eigentlich gefestigt, nur, dann kam wieder die, äh .. das, was die Wachtturm-Gesellschaft lehrt, dass das im Widerspruch zu dem steht, was in der Bibel ist. Kommt man aber auch. (hustet) so schnell nicht drauf. Also als Zeuge Jehovas, als tätiger und die Versammlung besuchender Zeuge Jehovas, ist das unmöglich dahinter zu kommen."

> differences, but there has to be flexibility. And humility that allows one to recognize 'I haven't got all the answers."

Notwithstanding the humility offered, everything is to be brought under the authority of Christ, which is not subject to reflection, nor open to transformation.

## Deconverts and Members: What makes a Difference?

Before we compare Franz and Tom with former members of oppositional and accommodative groups, we give an overview on how the deconverts and members in the study differ on the central quantified (FDI-ratings) and quantitative measures (scales assessing personality, well-being, and fundamentalism) in the respective research contexts.

### Differences in FDI-Scores

The quantified result of faith development interview evaluation is the assignment of stage scores to the faith development interviews. Two thirds of our faith development interviewees in the total sample (63.2 %) are assigned to Stage Three of synthetic-conventional faith and 30.3 % to Stage Four of individuative-reflective faith. Stage Two of mythic-literal faith was assigned to 5.1 % of faith development interviews; Stage Five of conjunctive faith to only 1.4 %. Stage One and Stage Six were not assigned at all.

In terms of groups and their relation to society, the no-tension (integrated) religious organizations show a stronger presence of Stage Three (Germany: 80.0 %; United States: 90.0 %). This could reflect a difference between tension and no-tension groups: members in integrated religious organization may tend to be more conventional and need less individuative reflection than members of religious groups which are in tension with their host culture. Oppositional and accommodating attitudes may require more explicit reasoning and argumentative justification. The majority of in-tradition members in both cultures and in both tension groups show Stage Three orientations. This appears to be the characteristic of in-tradition groups, while Stage Four assignments are the minority.

In contrast, Stage Four orientations apparently are more frequent among deconverts and amount to about 50 %. In Tom's and other cases we observed indicators of synthetic-conventional or individuative-reflective structures, together with indicators of mythic-literal orientations in the interview texts. Tom
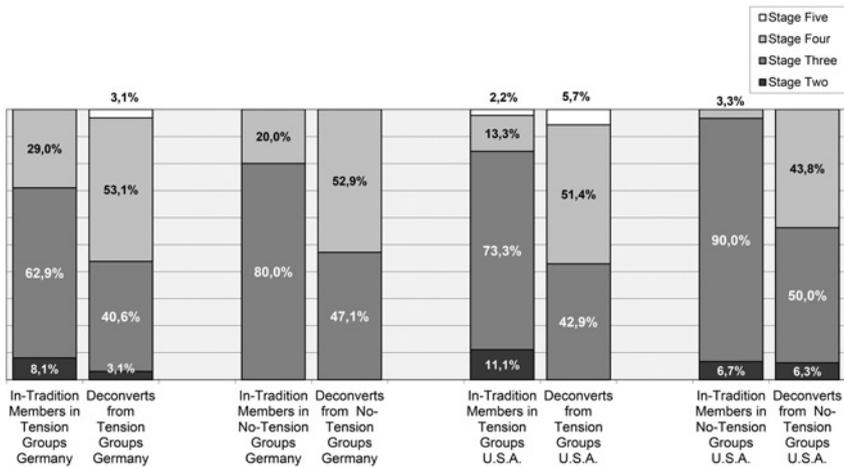
Figure 1: Stage Scores of In-Tradition Members and Deconverts for Tension and No-Tension Groups (cf. Streib et al., 2009, p. 102).

belongs, moreover, to a segment of respondents whose faith development interviews are assigned to Stage Three or above, but who showed a strong fundamentalist orientation: Of all interviewees whose faith development interview was assigned Stage Three, 26.5 % agree and 4.2 % strongly agree to the fundamentalist statements on the Religious Fundamentalism Scale (RF; Altemeyer & Hunsberger, 1992).

The deconverts in both cultures in general have higher faith development scores than the in-tradition members. (Streib et al., 2009, p. 104). When discussing Franz's scores, we have seen however that the faith development score of a particular deconvert can be lower than that of the in-tradition members of the respective group the deconvert has left.

## Personality, Well-being, and Fundamentalism

For the quantitative personality assessment of deconverts and members we used the Five-Factor Model ("Big Five", consisting of extraversion, openness, neuroticism, agreeableness, conscientiousness) in its current (revised) NEO-FFI version (Costa & McCrae, 1985) for which an official German translation is available (Borkenau & Ostendorf, 1993; Streib et al., 2009, p. 59). This model has been defined as a broad internal dimensional spectrum of personality, which accounts for general consistencies in behavior, thought, and feeling observed across situations (McAdams & Olson, 2010, p. 519). In the German sub-sample

the deconverts significantly differed on all subscales of the Big Five. Openness to experience was higher for deconverts while all other subscales of the Big Five were lower. (Streib et al., 2009, p. 75). Openness to experience also accounted for differences in the US sample. While this finding parallels that of Germany with respect to the openness to experience measure, it is radically different in that, unlike German deconverts, American deconverts do not significantly differ from American members on any of the other four subscales of the Big Five (Streib et al., 2009, p. 76). These results lie in the direction of expectations.

Table 1: Big Five personality profiles for deconverts and in-tradition members in Germany and the U.S. (cf. Streib et al., 2009, p. 74)

| | Germany | | | | USA | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | In-Tradition | | Deconvert | | In-Tradition | | Deconvert | |
| | Mean | SD | Mean | SD | Mean | SD | Mean | SD |
| | *n*=368 | | *n*=53* | | *n*=658 | | *n*=66 | |
| Big Five Personality Factors | | | | | | | | |
| *Emotional Stabil.* | 41.66 | 7.07 | **35.43** | **10.15** | 39.28 | 7.61 | 41.26 | 6.65 |
| *Extraversion* | 40.57 | 5.75 | **38.23** | **7.52** | 42.73 | 6.12 | 42.08 | 7.30 |
| *Openness* | 41.22 | 5.82 | **46.00** | **5.75** | 38.63 | 6.24 | **46.91** | **6.00** |
| *Agreeableness* | 46.34 | 4.82 | **44.15** | **5.57** | 43.20 | 5.81 | 44.29 | 5.07 |
| *Conscientiousness* | 45.26 | 6.03 | **41.30** | **7.23** | 43.55 | 6.07 | 42.74 | 6.06 |
| Psychological Well-Being and Growth | N=367 | | N=53* | | N=660 | | N=66 | |
| *Well-Being (total)* | 204.63 | 19.02 | **194.09** | **27.15** | 200.58 | 23.31 | **210.49** | **19.57** |
| *Autonomy* | 31.66 | 4.47 | 32.60 | 4.97 | 32.20 | 4.76 | **35.56** | **4.32** |
| *Envir. Mastery* | 33.61 | 4.59 | **29.66** | **6.74** | 32.16 | 4.87 | 32.55 | 4.58 |
| *Positive Relations* | 34.98 | 4.26 | **31.98** | **6.19** | 34.05 | 5.53 | 34.03 | 5.63 |
| *Purpose in Life* | 35.09 | 4.09 | **32.28** | **5.06** | 34.30 | 4.90 | 35.12 | 4.35 |
| *Self-Acceptance* | 34.27 | 4.52 | **31.09** | **7.34** | 33.46 | 5.10 | 35.02 | 4.67 |
| *Personal Growth* | 35.05 | 4.18 | 36.47 | 4.14 | 34.38 | 4.56 | **38.08** | **4.46** |
| Fundamentalism/Authoritarianism | | | | | | | | |
| | N=363 | | N=53* | | N=657 | | N=66 | |
| *RF* | 61.15 | 17.17 | **42.55** | **16.31** | 61.89 | 15.01 | **40.79** | **14.49** |
| | N=363 | | N=53* | | N=655 | | N=65 | |
| *RWA* | 79.28 | 19.93 | **60.86** | **17.52** | 89.36 | 18.07 | **61.17** | **19.86** |

* Due to the sensitive subject we explored we do not have all types of data from all focus persons. Therefore, we have quantitative data for 119 (53/66) deconverts while we have 99 interviews of deconverts.

We also included C. Ryff's scale of Psychological Well-Being and Growth (Ryff & Singer, 1996) as a multidimensional measure of development. The Well-Being and Growth Scale was first developed by C. Ryff and B. H. Singer. The scale directly assesses six characteristics related to personal growth and well-being (Ryff, 1989; Ryff & Singer, 1998a, 1998b). The first is autonomy, which measures the extent to which an individual perceives himself or herself to be able to function independently of others. The second is environmental mastery or how well individuals adapt to and function in the world around them. The third is personal growth or the self-assessment of healthy psychological development over time. The forth characteristic is positive relationships with others. This taps into assessing how well people are able to form meaningful relationships. The fifth characteristic is purpose in life. This is an assessment of meaning often found through purposeful striving. The final characteristic of the Ryff-Scale is self-acceptance or how comfortable one is with one's self. We suggest viewing differences in the dimensions of the Ryff-Scale between deconverts and in-tradition members in order to reflect changes in self-reported well-being as a function of deconversion. However, we are aware that to test this hypothesis directly would afford a prospective design.

On the Ryff-Scale, the deconverts for our German sample score lower on the total scale and lower on four subscales (environmental mastery, positive relations with others, purpose in life, and self-acceptance). However, they do not differ significantly from in-tradition members in autonomy or personal growth (Streib et al., 2009, p. 75). In contrast, compared to members, U.S. deconverts score higher on the total Ryff-Scale, which is accounted for largely by the subscales autonomy and personal growth (Streib et al., 2009, p. 76).

As measures of religious fundamentalism and authoritarianism we selected the Religious Fundamentalism Scale (RF) and the Right-wing Authoritarianism Scale (RWA; cf. Altemeyer & Hunsberger, 1992, for both scales). As expected, deconverts score significantly lower on these scales, compared to members, making our cases exceptions (see below).

Summarizing the comparison of deconverts and members in Germany and the United States on the measures displayed we see: Deconversion in Germany is characterized by higher openness, and lower extraversion, emotional stability, agreeableness, and conscientiousness. Also, self-ratings of psychological well-being display lower scores in purpose in life, self-acceptance, positive relations and environmental mastery. These differences were interpreted as developmental gains and losses involved in deconversion in the German sample.

In the United States by contrast, deconversion is mainly associated with openness from the Big Five, and with personal growth and autonomy as measured by the appropriate subscales of Ryff's measure of psychological well-being.

German and American deconverts score considerably lower on Religious Fundamentalism (Streib et al., 2009, pp. 75 – 76).

## Triangulation: Single trajectories, individual and group-related quantitative profiles

Finally, we compare Franz' and Tom's individual quantitative profiles with those of current members in their respective religious groups and triangulate them with the trajectories reconstructed from the narratives.

Franz scores significantly lower on emotional stability and extraversion from the Big Five, and comparable to current members on openness, agreeableness and conscientiousness. His scores on all the well-being scales are also significantly lower than those of current members. His scores on the religious fundamentalism scale are lower than the mean for in-tradition members, but higher when compared to other deconverts; and his scores on right-wing authoritarianism are even higher than for current in-tradition members. This may imply that for him deconversion, at least at the time of the interview, involved a loss rather than a gain. This profile corresponds to the interview data, which reveal vulnerability regarding his outlook on his situation as well as rigidity of judgment.

Table 2: Single case questionnaire data of Franz compared to In-Tradition members of oppositional and accommodating groups in Germany (cf. Streib et al., 2009, pp. 78 and 159)

| | Single Case Questionnaire Data of Franz | In-Tradition Members in Oppositional and Accomodating Religious Organizations in Germany ($n = 215$) | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | | Mean | SD |
| Big Five Personality Factors | | | |
| *Emotional Stabil.* | **23.00** | 42.25 | 6.77 |
| *Extraversion* | **25.00** | 40.87 | 5.71 |
| *Openness* | **40.00** | 40.65 | 6.04 |
| *Agreeableness* | **44.00** | 46.79 | 4.48 |
| *Conscientiousness* | **42.00** | 45.17 | 6.15 |
| Psychological Well-Being and Growth | | | |
| *Well-Being (total)* | **137.00** | 204.99 | 18.74 |
| *Autonomy* | **34.00** | 31.51 | 4.52 |

Table 2 *(Continued)*

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| *Envir. Mastery* | **22.00** | 33.62 | 4.66 |
| *Positive Relations* | **22.00** | 35.40 | 4.04 |
| *Purpose in Life* | **21.00** | 35.34 | 3.92 |
| *Self-Acceptance* | **16.00** | 34.18 | 4.48 |
| *Personal Growth* | **22.00** | 34.93 | 3.91 |
| Fundamentalism/Authoritarianism | | | |
| *RF* | **53.00** | 68.00 | 14.67 |
| *RWA* | **95.00** | 84.37 | 18.76 |

For Tom the comparison with current members looks different:

Table 3: Single case questionnaire data of Tom compared to In-Tradition members of oppositional and accommodating groups in the USA (cf. Streib et al., 2009, pp. 78 and 203)

| | Single Case Questionnaire Data of Tom | In-Tradition Members in Oppositional and Accomodating Religious Organizations in the U. S. ($n = 357$) | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | | Mean | SD |
| Big Five Personality Factors | | | |
| *Emotional Stabil.* | **30.00** | 39.30 | 8.16 |
| *Extraversion* | **26.00** | 42.62 | 6.36 |
| *Openness* | **50.00** | 39.22 | 6.21 |
| *Agreeableness* | **50.00** | 43.32 | 6.01 |
| *Conscientiousness* | **40.00** | 43.40 | 6.22 |
| Psychological Well-Being and Growth | | | |
| *Well-Being (total)* | **230.00** | 200.45 | 24.58 |
| *Autonomy* | **43.00** | 32.28 | 4.86 |
| *Envir. Mastery* | **31.00** | 32.09 | 5.18 |
| *Positive Relations* | **37.00** | 34.08 | 5.61 |
| *Purpose in Life* | **38.00** | 34.20 | 5.08 |
| *Self-Acceptance* | **40.00** | 33.34 | 5.36 |
| *Personal Growth* | **41.00** | 34.36 | 4.60 |
| Fundamentalism/Authoritarianism | | | |
| *RF* | **53.00** | 59.73 | 15.85 |
| *RWA* | **91.00** | 87.29 | 18.96 |

Tom's higher scores on openness make him different from current members. He scores also higher on well-being in general, in particular on autonomy and personal growth, which may imply that his deconversion brought more gains than losses. His scores on fundamentalism and right-wing authoritarianism are not very different from those of current members. This corresponds to his fundamentalist religious attitude, which was apparent in the interviews, together with his open and reflective stance.

There may be a cultural aspect to the differences between Tom's and Franz' deconversions: In the USA, the majority of the population believe in God, there is a tradition of religious freedom, and a deconvert finds a multitude of religious alternatives. In Germany, the Catholic and the Protestant Churches are organized close to state institutions, and they dominate the religious field. Therefore, in Germany a move toward a tension group, like Jehova's Witnesses, means a move further away from the mainstream of society. Moving back, after deconversion, into the cultural mainstream may consequently involve more of an effort.

## Conclusion

We have contrasted two deconversion trajectories, one from Germany, one from the United States. While Tom and Franz both deconverted from Jehova's Witnesses after three decades of membership, their trajectories show similarities as well as differences. When comparing Tom and Franz from a structural faith development perspective, we see Franz making a lateral, Tom making a structural deconversion. Franz's religious style stays predominantly instrumental-reciprocal, Tom shows a heterodyning of styles, with even a dialogical style in the foreground, when he reflects on personal relationships. When it comes to his religion, however, a strong foundation in instrumental-reciprocal and mutual styles appears. The traditional analytic perspectives highlight different compensatory aspects of conversion as well as transformational aspects of deconversion. From a relational view, modes of relating to the transcendent can be described as follows: for Franz, intersubjectivity appears to present a challenge, while shared affectivity may pose a developmental task for Tom. Mentalization seems to be available for Tom, excepting aspects of his religious life. In this dimension of his life, he relies on the truth of scripture. Franz shows indications of a mode of psychic equivalence, especially, but not only, when discussing religion. The quantitative data exploring personality and psychological well-being correspond to these results, displaying for Tom openness along with fundamentalism, and, for Franz, a profile suggesting losses upon deconversion.

## Further Perspectives

When does deconversion involve transformation? From a psychological perspective, amelioration of suffering, or realization of the potential of an individual are important criteria with respect to individual development and transformation. Standardized measures allow the comparison of deconverts and members with reference to dimensions of personality and psychological well-being. Psychodynamic models highlight different aspects of religious affiliation as well as disaffiliation. Current models introduce a hierarchy of modes, or outline the developmental trajectory toward mentalization. These concepts, measures and theories deserve to be considered for interdisciplinary dialogue with theology and philosophy of religion – a dialogue, which should integrate the perspectives of individual development with that of social and historical development, including the development of religious organizations and doctrine. Exploring the interface of individual and social development, longitudinal studies are needed as well as reflections on transformations of theoretical perspectives and their contexts.

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