# Leaving Religion: Deconversion

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## Abstract

Religious change was an important theme in the psychology of religion from its beginning with a focus on conversion, but with the emergence of new religious movements and the recent growth of religious unaffiliation, religious exiting and deconversion received growing attention. This review evaluates recent progress in deconversion research by the inclusion of key psychological constructs, such as personality, values, attachment, prosociality, well-being, religious socialization and development, and by an engagement in longitudinal investigation. The Outlook calls for exploring more psychological constructs, focusing decisively on longitudinal assessment, accounting for cultural and religious differences, and keeping the balance and complementarity between nomothetic and idiothetic approaches in order to account for the varieties of biographical changes that are denoted by 'deconversion.'

## Keywords

# 1   Introduction

*Leaving religion* is used here as synonymous with *deconversion.* This is a reminder, especially when we focus our review mainly on quantitative studies, that it is a process of biographical change that parallels conversion and involves multiple dimensions [1-3], which may include, finally, the termination of membership in a religious community, but it may also involve the loss of religious experience, intellectual doubt or denial regarding religious beliefs, criticisms of the morality and the values of the religious community, and emotional suffering or crises [2,4,5].

While psychologists of religion, from the beginning of the discipline, focused their attention on conversion [6, 49], investigation on deconversion is relatively young, and is growing with the increasing awareness of religious plurality, particularly in American and European societies—a plurality in which new religious movements (NRM) have emerged. Thus, the majority of early—and mostly interview-based, retrospective—studies on deconversion have focused upon exiters from NRMs [5,7-10] with special attention to their search for freedom and autonomy, but also to their emotional suffering, crises, and wellbeing after deconversion. The study of deconversion from NRMs has continued to the present on a smaller scale, while deconversion research generally expanded its focus to include fundamentalist and evangelical Christians [11,12], Mormons [13,14], Orthodox Jews [15**,16], Muslims [17-19], and deconversions from a broad range of religious traditions [5,20].

A new perspective emerged with the increasing research interest in the growing portions of individuals with no religious affiliation (religious "nones"), atheists, and agnostics [21,22]—survey data for 2018 document, for example, ca. 25% religious nones in the USA [23], ca. 40% in Germany. Thus, "with each generation irreligious socialization will increasingly fuel the growth among religious nones more so than disaffiliation" [24]. Now, the growing number of life-long irreligious and life-long atheists invites comparison with the deconverts who, while raised religiously, later adopt an irreligious or atheist identity. This constitutes a most recent line of research [25-27] that is based on, and provides evidence for, the assumption that people, who have stepped out from their original family's religious community or belief in God into an irreligious or atheist identity, take a middle position between life-long non-affiliates or atheists, on the one side, and life-long religious people, on the other side. This middle position is observable on certain psychological characteristics, as will be detailed below.

Deconversion research is still in the process of identifying the most influential factors that characterize deconversion. Recent research has investigated key constructs in psychology to portray the characteristics of deconverts and the variety of deconversion processes; these include: personality traits, values, attachment, well-being, prejudice, self-rated spirituality, and religious

development. Of these constructs some can be tentatively regarded potential predictors, while others, to be on the safe side, should be regarded characteristics, because only longitudinal investigation may lead to greater confidence regarding their potential function as predictors or outcomes.

## 2   Potential Predictors of Deconversion

### 2.1   Personality

From the five factors of personality [28], especially *emotional stability* (*neuroticism,* reversed), *openness to experience,* and *agreeableness* appear to be related to deconversion—with only partially concurrent results, however. Considerable agreement is presented for *emotional stability*: In one study, *emotional stability* was lower for German deconverts, compared to their former peers in the religious communities [5], which is corroborated in longitudinal analysis [29**]; however, US deconverts in the same study had slightly higher *emotional stability*. A study in Belgium concludes that being emotionally unstable may be among the characteristics of deconverts [26**]. Lower scores on *emotional stability* longitudinally predicted disaffiliation also in a Chinese sample [30**]. But in another longitudinal study using nine waves of the New Zealand Attitudes and Values Study (NZAVS) for estimating piece-wise latent growth models [31*], *emotional stability* was not observed as a predictor of deconversion.

There are less coherent results for *openness to experience*: One study found that *openness to experience* was one standard deviation higher in deconverts in both the USA and Germany, compared to their former religious peers [5], and *openness to experience* predicted deconversion tentatively [5], while another study [26**] found rather marginal effects of *openness to experience* in regard to deconversion. Finally, in the longitudinal New Zealand study [31*], only lower scores for *agreeableness* were a significant predictor for deconversion, but the other big five factors were not.

### 2.2   Values

Schwartz's [32] Portrait Values Questionnaire (PVQ) has been included in studies about deconverts [26**,30**,33]. Using the PVQ in longitudinal research with Chinese deconverts evidenced that "faith exit is predicted by the values of self-direction, stimulation, hedonism, achievement, and power" [30**,33]. Correspondingly, the study in Belgium reveals that deconverts have lower scores on conservation values (security, conformity, tradition), but may maintain "a spiritual emphasis on prioritizing quality in interpersonal relationships over attachment to 'materialistic' values, i.e., hedonism and power" [26**].

## 2.3    Attachment

The first systematic study focusing on attachment [34] for better understanding deconversion [15**] concludes that "the main themes underlying religious conversion and their association with attachment orientations also apply to apostasy." For both (re-)converts to and deconverts from Orthodox Judaism, two developmental pathways were relevant: *Emotional compensation* is the path for those higher in attachment anxiety, and *exploration* is the path for those lower in attachment anxiety and avoidance. Interestingly, the results suggest that those on the *compensation* pathway engage in rather sudden and emotionally turbulent religious change, sometimes very critical towards their highly religious family, while the *exploration* pathway is a rather gradual of seeking out new and alternative identities.

## 2.4    Family and Religious Socialization

Using longitudinal data from the US National Study of Youth and Religion, one study [35*] found that experiencing a rite of passage (such as bar/bat mitzvah, confirmation) before the teenage years predicts a 30% lower chance for religious disaffiliation in early adulthood. Another longitudinal study, based on data from US adolescents and their parents at two times of measurement 2 ½ years apart [36], indicates that adolescents who became religious and had joined the church of their parents at Time 2 were at Time 1 higher in social competence than deconverting adolescents, while adolescents who moved away from their parent's religion were lower in parent communication.

# 3    Further Characteristics of Deconverts

## 3.1    Prosocial Behavior and Interreligious Prejudice

Disaffiliates are more prosocial compared to life-long non-affiliates in prosocial behavior such as volunteering in charitable work [25**], which indicates what the authors interpret as a "residue effect" from their former religiosity. This residue effect was evidenced particularly in their third study using waves 1-9 of the NZAVS. Comparable findings are reported [27*] for people in four nations who abandoned their belief in God: Deconverted atheists, compared to life-long atheists, are higher in self-rated religiosity and spirituality, and lower in inter-religious prejudice toward different religious groups such as the majority religion in their country, minority religions, and Islam in particular.

## 3.2    Well-being

Compared with stable members in religious organizations, deconverts in Germany had lower scores on the Psychological Well-Being and Growth Scale [37] in *environmental mastery*, *positive relations with others, purpose in life*, and *self-acceptance,* which was interpreted as "signs of a loss or a crisis"

[5]—which corresponds to their lower scores on *emotional stability,* which has been noted above; the US deconverts, however, had slightly higher scores on well-being. Longitudinal investigation of the German deconverts [29**] adds to this finding that lower scores on *purpose in life* and *self-acceptance* appear to be associated with deconversions in the more recent years*,* but may improve in a timespan of ten years. The evaluation of in-depth interviews with 24 exiters from fundamentalism in the USA [12] indicates that well-being enhanced with deconversion; and the author concludes that freedom from religious conformity, new secular relationships with mutual emotional exchanges, an enhanced sense of autonomy, and personal freedom may have contributed to their greater well-being.

These contradictory results are reflected in the study with Chinese deconverts [30**]: "changes in psychological well-being are not identical for all faith exiters," but "for some, leaving the religion is psychologically beneficial; for others, leaving the religion has just the opposite consequence." A possible explanation is offered in the study with deconverts and reconverts to Orthodox Judaism: Using the Mental Health Inventory [38], the results indicate that less favorable well-being is associated with attachment anxiety and this association is stronger in deconversions on the compensation pathway [15**].

## 3.3   Spiritual Self-identification

Self-identified spirituality appears to be associated with deconversion. Deconverts show a higher preference for "more spiritual than religious" self-identification: Deconverts from the USA and Germany self-identify as "more spiritual than religious" with double the frequency than people who continued their affiliation to their religious community [5]. This pattern emerged also from the data at Time 2 [29**]. Also, the study with deconverts in Belgium [26**] included attention to spiritual self-identification, but revealed much lower differences between traditionalists and deconverts: 60.2% deconverts self-identify as " spiritual rather than religious," which is slightly higher than the socialized non-believers (56.1%) and socialized believers (47.6%), but lower than the converts (65.6%).

## 3.4   Religious Development

Progress in religious development is associated with deconversion, and religious development may be a potential outcome of deconversion. A perspective on religious development can be based on a cognitive-structural model [41] that assumes a set of hierarchically ordered distinct styles (previously called stages), which are assumed to change and develop over the life-span. Thus, based on a the model of religious styles [39] and religious types [40], which are assessed with the faith development interview [41], deconverts at Time 1 were assigned the Predominantly Individuative-Reflective Type

in much higher numbers (41.9%) than the traditionalists (16.2%), i.e., respondents who remained affiliated with their religious tradition. Correspondingly, the Predominantly Conventional Type was assigned for deconverts (40.9%) less than for traditionists (59.8%) [5,29**]. This pattern was fairly stable for Time 2 of measurement [29**]. Since individuative and autonomous reflection, which is the characteristic of the Predominantly Individuative-Reflective Type, is regarded more advanced and "higher" compared to the Predominantly Conventional Type, who desires to preserve convention, tradition and harmony at the cost of individuative reflection, these results indicate that deconverts are more advanced in religious development, compared to their former fellow-believers.

## 4 A Variety of Biographical Trajectories of Deconverts

Are deconverts always secular exiters? It may seem that way under the impression of the current strong research interest in the question, how people become religious nones [24,25**,27**,42,43] or how fundamentalist Christians become atheists [44]. However, many studies document that deconversion trajectories and their psychological developments are a variety and may differ considerably [2,11,15**,30**]; therefore, "any theory asserting that all faith exiters change in the same way should be viewed with suspicion" [30**]. This variety includes also the change to a "spiritual rather than religious" identity, which may involve an exit into private spiritual practice without any interest in organized religion [45]. But still another possibility is, perhaps years later, a new affiliation of the deconvert with another religious tradition. Finally, the variety also includes the option of multiple deconversions and conversions. The existence and the profile of the so-called "accumulative heretic" is known at least for two decades [46] and is further documented as the "life-long quest—late revisions" type [5]. The variety of deconversion trajectories is ideally based on narrative analysis and on an integration of psychodynamic perspectives [47].

Research in the psychology of religion is beginning to account for the variety of deconversion trajectories, but typologies are rather tentative. Based on narrative interviews and faith development interviews with 99 deconverts in the USA and Germany, a typology of biographical deconversion trajectories has been developed [5] that consists of four types: a) search for autonomy, b) debarred from paradise, c) finding a new frame of reference, and d) life-long quests—late revisions. From the study of deconverts and re-converts in Israel [15**], a typology emerged, which the authors tentatively link to these [5] four types of deconversion trajectories: the *barred from paradise* type may relate to the *compensation* path with higher attachment-anxiety, while the *pursuit of autonomy* and the *life-long quest* type may relate to the *exploration* path with higher secure attachment, and finally, the *finding a new frame of reference* type may correspond to the *socialization* path.

# 5    Conclusions and Recommendations for Future Research

Twenty years ago, it was concluded for conversion research that most studies are retrospective, cross-sectional, and constitute no systematic program of research [48]. This was largely true also for deconversion research ten years ago, and in 2013, deconversion research was regarded to be still in its infancy [49]; but there is progress in the more recent years: Besides our own current study, five longitudinal studies could be identified [25**,30**,31*,35*,36] for this review, but still most other studies are based on cross-sectional data. More longitudinal studies are needed, not only to determine the direction of effects and identify predictors and outcomes with greater confidence, but because deconversion is a dynamic biographical process that eventually has long-term, slowly-changing predictors and outcomes.

Further, considerable progress has been made with the inclusion of psychological key constructs such as personality, values, or well-being—and of special importance: attachment theory—into deconversion research. Where results are contradictory, future research is needed. But also, there may be other constructs still waiting to be explored, such as need for cognition, tolerance of ambiguity, or mysticism. This list is by no means exhaustive, of course, but it may point to "door-openers" for a more comprehensive investigation of how deconversion is related to, and perhaps motivated by, (changes in) *cognition,* such as the appreciation of engaging in thinking and exploring new and eventually ambiguous ideas, or (changes in) *experience*, such as mystical experiences that are associated with the preference for a "more spiritual" self-identification [50] and with a search for own's own spiritual path. There is still some way to go before deconversion research may step out of infancy and arrive at a coherent and systematic program of research.

For a coherent approach and also for the unambiguous comparison of studies, there is need for discussing and clarifying the basic concepts used for 'leaving religion.' Some studies have used the criterion of (dis-)affiliation and talk about "nones" (and "dones") [25**]; others used (rejection of) belief in God and talk about "nonbelievers" or "atheists," etc.; still others rely on self-identification as "religious," self-reports of church going, or assess the participants' (centrality of) religiosity with a scale. The use of 'deconversion' as a label is widely adopted nevertheless; but the multi-dimensional and processual character of deconversion needs to be taken into account more decisively.

In the more recent contributions to deconversion research, the cultural diversity is impressive when samples were collected in China, New Zealand, Israel, Belgium, Germany, the USA, and many other countries (some studies use multi-nation samples).  But eventually, cultural differences, or more specifically: differences between the various religious actors within and across these religious fields, may generate a variety of different versions of deconversion. The differences

between German and US deconverts in *emotional stability* and *well-being* that were documented in one study [5] and noted above are no more than a beginning.

This review has focused in most part on the quantitative, nomothetic approaches to deconversion. In concluding, it should however be emphasized that qualitative studies with ideographic (intra-individual difference) and idiothetic (inter-individual difference) approaches [47], especially when both are longitudinal, could take further and complement the nomothetic results with the analysis of individual biographies—an ideal way to enrich and deepen the account for the variety of deconversion trajectories.

## Acknowledgements

## Conflict of interest statement

Nothing to declare.

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This study demonstrates the benefits of including attachment theory in the study of deconversion. Attachment-related variations (attachment anxiety; avoidance) and their relation to religious change themes (compensation, exploration, socialization) open perspectives on individual differences: attachment anxiety is associated with emotional compensation, and compensation themes are associated with lower well-being at present and a heightened link between attachment anxiety and distress, while attachment security is less related to compensation themes, but rather open for the exploration of new ideas.

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This paper presents three studies using nationally representative samples of religious Western culture (United States), secular Western (Netherlands, New Zealand) and Eastern (Hong Kong) cultures. Results showed evidence of what the authors call a religious residue effect. While Study 1 (*N*=3,071) offered initial cross-cultural evidence, which was extended in a preregistered replication study that also included measures of charitable contribution

(Study 2; *N*=1,626), it is especially Study 3 (*N*=31,464 from the New Zealand Attitudes and Values Study) to demonstrate that individuals who deidentified were still relatively likely to engage in prosocial behavior (e.g., volunteering) after leaving religion.

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This study is important as it relates deconversion with personalty (big five) and values (Schwartz). Results based on data from 404 adults in Belgium indicated that deconverts were more similar to socialised nonbelievers regarding neuroticism and decreased conservative values. But they were midway, approaching socialised believers regarding increased spirituality and benevolence and, partly due to age differences, decreased power and hedonism. Further, the deconverts' abandon of faith may denote search for autonomy, whereas religious education may contribute to their endorsement of self-transcendence over materialistic values.

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This study compared life-long atheists with deconverted atheists in four nations (Australia, Finland, Germany, and Norway) to investigate the relationships between deconversion, religious identity, spiritual identity, and interreligious attitudes. Results demonstrate that higher religious or spiritual identity among deconverts is associated with more positive attitudes towards different religious groups (national religious majority, religious minorities in general, and Muslims specifically).

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This chapter will be included in the book *Deconversion Revisited. Longitudinal Biographical Analyses Ten Years Later*, which is supposed to be published in fall of 2020. The chapter presents quantitative analyses of participants in the Deconversion Study (published 2009) who were re-interviewed recently. Results compare deconverts with traditionalist (that is, people who stayed in their religious group and did not deconvert) and document continuity and change in: religious types, self-rated spirituality, the Religious Schema Scale, personality (NEO-FFI), and well-being (Ryff-Scale). Especially noteworthy are lower scores of deconverts on emotional stability, agreeableness, purpose in life, and self-acceptance in longitudinal perspective.

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This longitudinal study explored psychological changes in deconversion. It identified characteristics of Christians in China who deconverted within a 3-year time frame. Results indicate that about half of the deconverts initially experience an improvement in psychological symptoms, and the other half a deterioration. Low emotional stability predicted deconversion, while the other Big Five factors did not. The findings strongly suggest that changes in beliefs and values might have begun long before the actual faith exit, whereas personality change, if any, might take a long time after the transition.

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This study used a representative national sample of New Zealand adults over 9 years (2009-2017, N= 31,604) and piecewise latent growth models to assess longitudinal change in big five personality and honesty-humility before and after conversion to or deconversion from Christianity (*N*= 540 converts, *N*= 886 deconverts). The researcher did observe no personality changes before conversion or after deconversion. Result regarding deconverts demonstrate increases in honesty-humility and decreases in agreeableness preceding deconversion.

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Using longitudinal data from the US National Study of Youth and Religion, this study examined whether experiencing a religious rite of passage during or before one's teenage years predicts the religious change in young adulthood. Results demonstrate that those who experienced a religious rite of passage such as baptism, bar/bat mitzvah, confirmation were 30% less likely to disaffiliate between data collection points. The authors conclude that the experience of rites of passage matter primarily as durable markers of social identity, binding adherents to their faith community, if only nominally.

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