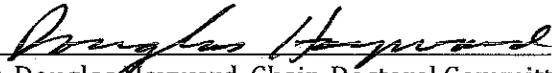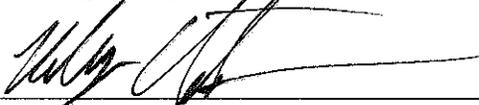THE COST OF FREEDOM: A GROUNDED THEORY STUDY ON THE IMPACT OF

DECONVERSION FROM CHRISTIANITY TO ATHEISM

BY

Robert John Marriott

APPROVED:

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THE COST OF FREEDOM: A GROUNDED THEORY STUDY ON THE IMPACT OF
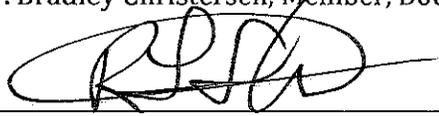DECONVERSION FROM CHRISTIANITY TO ATHEISM

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A Dissertation

Presented to

the Faculty of the Cook School of Intercultural Studies

Biola University

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In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Philosophy

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by

Robert John Marriott

December 23, 2014

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Finally I would like to thank the participants who trusted me with their stories. Although we were strangers, each participant graciously shared their stories and were willing to trust me with very personal information. It is my hope that participants will find this study profitable and contribute to their wellbeing. Despite the fact that we see things differently, I wish the best for them. Ultimately, I hope that one day they will return to their faith.

ABSTRACT

THE COST OF FREEDOM: A GROUNDED THEORY STUDY OF THE IMPACT OF
DECONVERSION FROM CHRISTIANITY TO ATHEISM

Robert J. Marriott

The purpose of this study was to investigate the impact of deconversion on the

lives of former Christians now identifying as atheists. Participants were adults throughout

the United States who at one time self-identified as conservative Christians but are now

atheists. This study used grounded theory methodology (Glaser & Strauss, 2006) with

semi-structured interviews. Contributing factors leading to deconversion were identified

along with a model of deconversion. The contributing factors which appeared in the data

were both cognitive and emotional. Intellectual problems and being hurt by Christians

played a major contributing role in deconversion of participants. A model of the

deconversion process was constructed from the narratives which consisted of a five stage

process. The contributing factors and the model are important to understanding the

study's central finding in that they both shed light on what kind of Christianity

participant's deconverted from. Various contexts which formed the basis from which

participants deconverted were also investigated in order to further flesh out the

background conditions of the former faith of participants. Both negative and positive

consequences of deconverting to atheism were identified. Participants experienced

significant negative consequences socially, existentially and in terms of their

employment. However, despite the negative consequences, participants testified that the

freedom experienced from what they perceived as rigid and oppressive expressions of

Christianity was worth it.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Among websites advocating atheism on the Internet, there exists a large number

dedicated to cataloging deconversion stories of former Christians who now self-identify

as atheists. These testimonies number in the tens of thousands and are increasing.

Moreover, the testimonies range from those new to the faith and leave it soon after, to

former pastors, former missionaries, and professors.

Such is the case of philosopher and author, John Loftus. According to Loftus's

(2008) testimony, at 18 he became a Christian and subsequently enrolled in a midwest

Bible college. After graduating, Loftus took a position as an associate pastor at a church

in Kalkaska, Michigan. Concurrently, he enrolled in and graduated from an evangelical

seminary with an M.A. in theology and an M.Div. While in seminary Loftus founded and

edited the now defunct *Apologetics Quarterly*: *A Journal for Christian Studies*. In 1985,

Loftus attended Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, studied under noted apologist

William Lane Craig, and earned a Th.M. degree. Subsequently, he became the senior

pastor at Angola Christian Church in Angola, Indiana. In Loftus's own words, "I was a

Christian apologist with several master's degrees set for the express purpose of defending

Christianity from intellectual attacks" (Loftus, 2008, p. 13). Today, Loftus is one of

America's foremost apologists for atheism.

Deconversion is a type of religious transition (Regnerus & Uecker, 2006). Wright, Giovanelli, Dolan, and Edwards (2008), pointed out that this type of transition from religion has been identified by different terms in the literature. The names are as follows: drop-outs (Caplovitz & Sherrow, 1977), apostasy (Hunsberger, 1983), religious disaffiliation (Richter, 2011; Vargas, 2012), and deconversion (Streib, 2012). Although the essence of what constitutes deconversion is nebulous, there is a correlation among the terms that allows researchers to speak cohesively of the concept. In each case, the concept labeled by the terms involves the rejection of religious beliefs and corresponding disengagement from a religious community (Brinkerhoff & Burke, 1980). For the purposes of this study, deconversion refers to the rejection of Christian beliefs, disengagement from a Christian community, and the adoption of atheism. It may be argued that adding the adoption of atheism to the definition conflates two different religious transitions, deconversion and conversion. That argument, however, is incorrect. While there is some truth to the claim "Every conversion to one position is a deconversion from another," deconversion from a faith tradition to atheism is not the same as other religious transitions such as conversion. In her work on deconversion Fazzino (2014), an atheist, has identified a number of differences that characterize transitioning out of a faith tradition to becoming an atheist that are different from converting to a faith tradition. For example, Fazzino pointed out that conversion to a faith tradition nearly always includes adopting a comprehensive set of doctrines and becoming embedded in a religious community. That is not the case when one adopts atheism that lacks a comprehensive set of doctrines and an identifiable community.

The research associated with deconversion has not received due attention. Streib and Keller (2004, p. 1) noted that "Searching for 'deconversion' in electronic databases results in a relatively small number of books, articles or dissertations." Religious defections continue to be studied less than other religious transitions despite the fact that a significant number of Americans leave a religion that they once held dear (Wright, Giovanelli, Dolan, and Edwards, 2008). Bromley (1988) mentioned that there was an increase in the literature discussing religious affiliation and disaffiliation but pointed out that the former had received considerably more attention than the latter. When researchers have turned their attention toward disaffiliation, the majority has dealt with contributing factors that relate to generic religious deconversions. Those studies were specifically concerned with identifying contributing factors that lead to deconversion from religion in general, and little analysis was done of other aspects such as the process or impact of deconversion.

The absence of knowledge concerning the process of deconversion did not go unnoticed and was pointed out by several researchers (Mauss, 1969; Currie, Gilbert & Horsley, 1977). Questions such as the following were largely unanswered: What are the steps or the various phases that a person goes through as they reject faith? Are there identifiable stages in the deconversion process analogous to the stages in the process of grief and loss? Are phases of the process predictable given enough information? And, in the process, is there an identifiable tipping point or a point of no return? In 1980, Gaede maintained:

Clearly, the next step in the development of a sociology of irreligion must be both the delineation of the various forms of irreligiousity along with an analysis of the process by which the forms take, are transformed and also disappear. (p. 42)

Likewise, in the same year Brinkerhoff and Burke (1980) noted, "Though the correlates or characteristics describing the apostate are outlined, the process by which the individual disaffiliates has not been systematically examined" (p. 35). As recently as 2007, Wright et al. echoed Brinkerhoff and Burke (1980) and argued that despite the fact that people often defect from religion, the process of deconversion has received relatively little attention from researchers. Even though nearly 45 years had passed since Mauss (1969) pointed out the need to study the process of deconversion, Wright et al. (2008) could still say:

Further research of the process of deconversion is needed. This article identified the "why" deconversion happens, but another interesting question is "how" it happens. Are there particular steps and stages common in the deconversion process? Examining both the "why" and "how" of deconversion would lead to much richer understanding than either one by itself. (p. 31)

Surprisingly, however, in the short span of only six years since those words were penned, things have changed. Today, the process of deconversion is no longer such a mystery, thanks to the work of a growing number of contemporary researchers. The change is in large measure due to deconverts taking an interest in the process of deconversion. As a result, significant contributions to the literature have been made regarding the process of deconversion closing the gap noted by the aforementioned researchers.

Recently, a small number of books have been published that focus less on identifying contributing factors that lead to deconversion or the process of deconversion and more on deconversion from a pastoral perspective (Calver, 2004; Simmons, 2008).

The purpose of these books was to aid pastors in staunching the flow of believers leaving the church. These works provide little in the way of research into the issue of deconversion but indicate that the issue is appearing on the radar of church practitioners.

Although the contributing factors of deconversion have been investigated by researchers and the process of deconversion is better understood today than as recently as six years ago, the impact that deconversion has on the lives of former Christians is almost entirely unknown. Other than tangential insights gleaned from the most recent studies on the process of deconversion, there presently exist no studies focused on the broad impact adopting atheism has on the lives of former Christians; therefore, academically, the effects on the lives of former Christians are largely unknown.

That the impact of deconverting is unknown is somewhat surprising when one considers the perception of atheists held by the general public. Two recent studies paint a very negative picture of how Americans view atheists. University of Minnesota sociologists Edgell, Gerteis, and Hartmann (2006) conducted a study on how moral boundaries and cultural membership particularly limit Americans' acceptance of atheists. Over 2000 participants were asked to rank a selection of minority groups according to the following two statements: "*This group does not at all agree with my view of American society,*" and "*I would disapprove if my child were to marry a member of this group.*" Atheists topped the list for both statements. Thirty-nine percent (39%) of respondents said that atheists, above Muslims, homosexuals, and recent immigrants, are most at odds with their view for America. Forty-seven percent (47%) said that they would disapprove if their child were to marry an atheist, again ranking atheists negatively above all other

minorities. Moreover, the study concluded that tolerance toward every minority group included in the study, with the exception of atheists, had increased over the previous 30 years.

In 2011, a joint study conducted by the University of British Columbia and the University of Oregon (Gervais, Shariff, & Norenzayan, 2011), supported the findings of Edgell, Gerteis, and Hartmann. Nearly 800 participants were presented with a scenario that described a selfish man who behaves unethically when he knows that others will not find out. Participants were then asked who is more likely to commit the inappropriate action: a teacher, an individual who is a teacher and a Christian, an individual who is a teacher and a Muslim, an individual who is a teacher and a rapist, or an individual who is a teacher and an atheist. Respondents selected the individual who was a "teacher and an atheist" as the more likely culprit to commit the act than the person who was a "teacher and a rapist." What this implies is that in eyes of the general public, when it comes to issues of trust, atheists rank below some of the most degenerate members of society, rapists.

A Pew Research survey (2008) that investigated the religious landscape of the United States reported that 78.4% percent of American adults identified as belonging to a Christian denomination. This is by far one of the largest demographics of any kind in the United States. Contrastingly, those who identified as atheists registered as only 1.6% of the general population. Therefore, it is no surprise that Americans typically view Christianity favorably. In a more recent Pew Research survey (2014), it was reported that 61% of Americans have "warm" feelings toward Christian evangelicals, but only 41%

had similar feelings toward atheists. In 2008, Lifeway Research surveyed 1,402 unchurched adults on their perceptions of Christianity. Seventy-one percent (71%) of those surveyed said that they believed that Jesus makes a positive difference in people's lives, and 78% said they would be willing to listen to someone who wanted to talk to them about Christianity. Atheism, on the other hand, is not viewed as sympathetically; in 2002 Pew reported that 53.8% of the general public described atheism as mostly or very unfavorable.

Americans clearly possess a generally favorable attitude toward Christianity and a disapproval of atheism. Furthermore, atheism is a very small, minority subgroup in a country that is at least nominally Christian. Yet, one needs only to conduct a quick Internet search to discover that many believers have rejected their faith and have chosen to self-identify as atheists. These facts raise the following question: Given American public opinions on Christianity and atheism, what is the impact on the lives of those who leave Christianity and adopt atheism? The answer to this question is unknown.

Religious deconversion has sociological, psychological, and theological elements, making it both an interesting and a commendable crossdisciplinary research topic. In terms of intercultural studies, interest lies in discovering the broad impact that leaving the Christian faith and adopting atheism has on former Christians. Deconversion involves numerous and significant changes for ex-Christians as they relinquish their Christian worldview for its polar opposite, atheism. Because worldviews both construct and provide access to reality, the exchange of worldviews that are so contrary to each other will a have major impact on the life of the former Christian. Important questions about

how adopting atheism affects the lives of former Christians remain uninvestigated. Questions about how has adopting an atheistic worldview changes or affects the values, a sense of identity, social relationships, and the moral beliefs and behaviors of former Christians remain open to investigation, given the present state of the literature that addresses Christian deconversion to atheism. This study seeks to provide answers to those questions as it investigates the impact that deconverting from Christianity to atheism has on former Christians.

Located throughout the United States are numerous social groups and clubs consisting of former Christians. There are also many atheist websites and forums online. Interacting with and interviewing members of such groups can provide the raw data needed to support a theory that sheds light on the impact of deconversion that is lacking in the literature. The analysis of interviews offers hope that discovering the impact of deconversion to atheism has on former Christians is possible. The purpose of this study is to conduct and analyze interviews with former Christians in order to contribute to the scholarly literature on deconversion. This will be accomplished by investigating the broad impact that deconversion from Christianity to atheism has on an individual and thus fill a gap in the literature.

Problem Statement

The reasons for and process of religious conversion in general are well documented. Likewise, the reasons for and process of conversion to Christianity have proven of interest to a number of different disciplines, including, but not limited to, psychology, sociology, and anthropology. The body of literature addressing the reasons

for and process of deconversion from religious faith, while not as extensive as that of conversion, is growing. More specifically, the subject of deconversion from Christianity to atheism has become an area of increased interest among scholars. This interest is in part due to the proliferation of Internet websites that catalogue deconversion stories of former Christians who have adopted atheism. In an attempt to understand deconversion from Christianity to atheism, several authors have attempted to identify the primary reasons former Christians give for their deconversion and the process they go through as they leave their faith. However, the same cannot be said about the impact of deconversion from Christianity to atheism on the lives of former Christians. Presently there exists a gap in the literature that addresses the impact deconversion has on the lives of former Christians.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this grounded theory study is to discover how adopting atheism impacts former Christians. Study participants are former conservative Christians (evangelicals or fundamentalists) who now identify as atheists.

Central Question

How does deconverting to atheism impact the lives of ex-Christians?

Sub-questions

1. How does adopting atheism impact ethics?

2. How does adopting atheism impact motivations?

3. How does adopting atheism impact behavior/conduct?

4.   How does adopting atheism impact social relationships?

5.   How does adopting atheism impact epistemology?

6.   How does adopting atheism impact personal identity?

Scope

1.   The research is only of ex-Christians living in the United States. The United States maintains a favorable view of Christianity but a decidedly negative view of atheism. The stark contrast in public opinion offers reason to believe that the impact of deconversion for American apostates will be considerable and, therefore, worthy of limiting the scope to their experiences.

2.   The research is confined to those who have deconverted from fundamental or evangelical forms of Christianity. The reason for focusing on conservative Christians is mainly personal. I identify as an evangelical Christian and find such deconversion to atheism fascinating. At the same time, the fact that Christianity is the largest religion in the United States makes the impact of deconversion from it of interest to a broad audience.

Limitations

1.   As this study is limited to Christian deconverts to atheism in the United States, its findings are not necessarily transferable to Christian deconverts elsewhere. Unless one could find a country or region that holds similar opinions towards both Christianity and atheism, the findings of this study will be limited to the American atheist experience.

2.   The study is limited to interviews with former Christians who were conservative or evangelical in their affiliations. Hence, it is unknown if the findings of this study will be applicable to Christian deconverts who were members of either mainline or liberal churches. Theological issues play an important role in deconversion, so it is unlikely that the results can be transferred to liberal Christians. For example, a distinctive theological difference is that a liberal Christian might not believe in the virgin birth or the bodily resurrection of Christ.

Definitions

1.   *Agnosticism*, used primarily in reference to the existence of God, means lacking knowledge and has both a strong and weak form. The strong form holds that knowledge of God is unobtainable in principle. Weak agnosticism holds that while knowledge of God may be obtainable, it is lacking for a specific individual.

2.   *Antitheism,* a stronger form of atheism that maintains not only that God does not exist but that it would be bad if God did exist.

3.   *Apologetics,* the discipline or practice of defending or speaking away objections. In this study, apologetics refers to Christian apologetics, unless otherwise noted.

4.   *Apostasy,* from the Greek meaning "to revolt from." Apostates repudiate their former faith. Apostate is synonymous with deconvert.

5.   *Atheism,* traditionally understood as the claim or belief that God does not exist. Recently atheists have argued that atheism does not make a claim about God's existence but should be understood as merely lacking a belief in God due to insufficient evidence.

6. *Axiology,* the study of the nature of value and value judgments.

7. *Belief,* in this dissertation, refers to the having of a positive attitude toward a proposition such as "God exists."

8. *Christianity,* theistic religion centered on Jesus Christ.

9. *Conversion,* the acceptance of beliefs and engagement with a particular community.

10. *Deconversion,* the rejection of religious belief and disengagement from a religious community. In this study, it applies to Christian deconversion unless otherwise stated.

11. *Deism,* the belief in a personal God who created but does not interact with the world.

12. *Empiricism,* the epistemological position that knowledge is acquired by way of sense experience. Strong forms of empiricism claim that knowledge is acquired only by way of the senses.

13. *Evangelical,* a Christian who subscribes to the views espoused by evangelicalism.

14. *Evangelicalism,* a subset of conservative Christianity that is typically identified with the following four characteristics: a) the authority of the Bible for faith and practice, a) salvation only is by God's grace through faith, in Christ's finished work on the cross, c) orthodox beliefs shaped by Church fathers and the reformers, and d) personal conversion to Christ as a necessary requirement for salvation.

15. *Fundamentalism,* a conservative Christian movement originating in the early 20th century in response to the challenges raised against the trustworthiness of the Bible. Contrary to evangelicalism's narrow set of doctrines one needs to accept in order to be considered a believer, fundamentalism is characterized by strict adherence to a wide array of doctrines that serve to identify who is and who is not a Christian. Besides the need to affirm a more detailed doctrinal statement, fundamentalism requires keeping oneself separate from the world by identifying an ever-changing set of behaviors, practices, and fashions that are out of bounds for Christians to partake in.

16. *Naturalism,* the philosophy that holds that reality is comprised of only natural entities, where natural is contrasted with supernatural entities such as God, spirits and souls.

17. *New atheism,* a recent manifestation of atheism motivated by the attacks of September 11, 2001. New atheism argues that religion is a force for evil and should be abandoned.

18. *Religion,* a commitment or devotion to religious observances that typically includes worship of God or the supernatural.

19. *Religious transition,* the adopting, rejecting or switching of religious affiliation.

20. *Socio-cultural,* of or pertaining to both society and culture.

21. *The Problem of Evil,* an objection leveled against the existence of God based on the incompatibility of both God and evil.

22. *Theism,* the belief in a personal God who created and interacts with the world.

Significance

This study contributes to filling a gap in the scholarly literature. It has been noted above that, while there does exist a growing body of literature in relation to conversion, there is notably less research on deconversion. Where research on deconversion does exist, it primarily focuses on the contributing reasons for deconversion and, more recently, on the process of deconversion by Christians. There is a near absence in the literature dealing with the impact of deconversion and the adoption of atheism on the lives of former Christians.

A further significance exists for those who work with and are in some way responsible for reaching out to those who have left the faith. I am thinking specifically of pastors, teachers, counselors, and family members, all who have a vested interest in dialoging with former Christians. This study will aid such people in making sense of the impact of deconversion that often manifests in major changes in beliefs and behaviors. Such changes are often bewildering and hard for Christians to comprehend. This study can provide a measure of clarity for Christians in dialogue with former Christians as to why those who once identified with the Christian world and life view now live so differently. Perhaps such clarity can lead to fruitful dialogue between both groups.

Those who have deconverted to atheism will also benefit from this study. By analyzing the impact of deconversion, this study may help former Christians understand and make sense out of their journeys from faith to unbelief. It will allow them to compare the impact deconversion has had on their lives with those of others who have experienced it. Both the participants in this study and those who read it can share a certain measure of

solidarity through shared experiences. Knowing that others have shared and are sharing similar experiences can prove valuable to those who have deconverted and those who are in the process of it.

Finally, this study will be of interest to Christian apologists who defend the faith. For them, understanding deconversion from Christianity to atheism, specifically the impact it produces in the lives of former Christians, could be of value as they craft their defenses of the faith and in mounting offensive responses against atheism as a worldview. An example of this would be the benefit apologists would derive if the results of the study demonstrate that deconversion to atheism produces a negative impact on moral beliefs and behaviors.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter situates the focus of the study within the limited scope of literature

that deals with deconversion. As one looks at the extant research, it becomes evident that

the study of deconversion has received less attention than the study of conversion. Heinz

Streib, widely recognized as the leading scholar on deconversion, maintains:

> A search for 'deconversion' in electronic databases results in a relatively small
> number of hits or references – and even less when we limit our search to
> empirical studies. Deconversion is not a well-established keyword in the
> literature, neither in the psychology or sociology of religion nor in practical
> theology, and even less so in religious communities (Streib, Wood, Keller, Csoff,
> & Silver, 2009, p. 9).

Likewise, sociologist Stuart Wright (1987) reported that he could document only three

studies of deconversion prior to 1980. To be sure, there have been studies done with

related terms, such as apostasy, disaffiliation, and leave taking, that show that the subject

of religious defection was not completely neglected. At the same time, those studies

revealed that the definitions of those terms varied significantly and were not necessarily

describing the same concept (Bromley, 1988). Recently, however, the tide has begun to

turn, and studies utilizing the term deconversion are beginning to appear in databases.

The literature on deconversion is growing, and studies focusing on the nature and process

of deconversion can be found in multiple academic disciplines, including, but not limited to, sociology of religion, psychology of religion, and religious anthropology.

The Nature of Deconversion

If there are studies on apostasy, disaffiliation, and leave taking, among other related terms in the literature, a natural question arises about what separates deconversion from the other related terms. Likewise, why is deconversion the preferred term used in this study as opposed to others used to describe religious disassociation? As previously mentioned, while one can find numerous terms that relate to deconversion, they do not necessarily mean the same thing. For example, the terms disaffiliation, apostasy, disengagement, defection, and drop outs have all been applied to various forms of migration out of religious faith. The questions are then, to what do those terms refer, and how do they differ from the term deconversion? An examination of the studies employing the above terms reveals that those terms speak primarily to disassociation from a religious practice or community. For example, Gooren (2010) utilized the term disaffiliation, defining it as "the process of detaching one's involvement in an organized religious group" (p. 4). Hunsberger (1983), classifying apostates, described them as "individuals who, report being raised in a religious denomination but who later change their religious orientation to 'none'" (p. 21). Similarly, Roozen (1980) characterized the term disengagement as the process of dropping out of active participation in a Christian religious community. Mauss (1969) used the term defection to refer "to the withdrawal from fellowship or activity by church members who have had some history of regular attendance and involvement in the church, not merely nominal affiliation" (p. 128).

Finally, Caplovitz and Sherrow (1977) used the term drop outs as those who once identified with a particular faith but have not attended church in the last two years. While each of the above examples relates to the concept of deconversion, none sufficiently capture it. In fact, what the above terms reveal is that, according to the literature, the loss of faith is primarily determined by leaving a community of practice. However, deconversion involves much more than simply disassociation.

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

Despite the body of literature dealing with religious migration, Heinz Streib's (2009) observation on the paucity of deconversion studies stands. Deconversion studies are relatively new in the literature, but they are growing. Therefore, whatever deconversion is, it must entail more than simply religious disassociation.

What is the contemporary understanding of deconversion in the literature? Two scholars influential in conceptualizing deconversion are John D. Barbour and the

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

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

mainline religious tradition. The results of Streib's work contributed to the deconversion

literature in two important ways. First, he discovered that, although Barbour's

characterization of deconversion was essentially accurate, it was incomplete. Streib found

that, among deconverts, a neglected aspect of their deconversions was the role that

religious experience had played. For many in Streib's study, the loss of meaning in

religious experience contributed as much as, or was a precursor to, the intellectual

problems. The loss of meaning of specific religious experiences may occur early in the

deconversion process and may be as important for the process as intellectual doubts. This

discovery should cause future researchers to look at the role religious experience plays in

the lives of those who leave their faith. The second major finding in the study was the

differences in the deconversion experiences of Germans and Americans. Streib found that

deconversion narratives displayed four identifiable typologies: "the pursuit of autonomy,"

"debarred from paradise," "finding a new frame of reference," and "life long quests." For

Streib, the "pursuit of autonomy" is marked by a search for "individuation and critical

development of new perspectives in a long-term gradual process of stepping out and

distancing" (p. 136) the self from one's religious hegemonic control. Those characterized

by the "pursuit of autonomy" had a trajectory that led to a secular exit. The second type

of deconvert Streib labeled are those "debarred from paradise" who had a deep,

emotional connection to the faith that many had willfully adopted. Their deconversions

are typically marked by the emotional stress of leaving a group self-identified as the sole

guardian of the truth and removed from prevailing contemporary culture. Belonging to

small, elite religious groups who saw themselves as the only true faith produced "high

expectations and hopes which in the course of time were disappointed or abandoned" (p. 169). Streib identified "finding a new frame of reference*"* as the third typology. This typology exhibits a number of similar attributes, such as "searching and finding more intensity, guidance and structure in religious life" (p. 192). The majority of these deconverts left the mainline religious institutions in which they grew up and became members of another religious perspective that is often oppositional in nature to the original perspectives. In many cases, deconverts in this category leave a religious practice, or "meta-story," and adopt an equally comprehensive narrative (p. 193). Streib's final typology is the "life long quest." Life-long questers are those who have deconverted from several religious communities because the communities did not meet their expectations or were not tolerant enough of their ongoing quests (p. 216). A consistent characteristic of life-long questers is that their search for truth emerges in adolescence and often leads to conversions to fringe religious groups, often multiple times. They exhibit low levels of commitment, and their deconversions are low key and low tension affairs as they migrate out of whatever faith they had been inhabiting (p. 216).

A third conclusion was that deconversion needs to be distinguished from religious disassociation and disaffiliation. Streib (2009) says:

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

criteria aims at a more open and multi-perspective interpretation of deconversion. (p. 22)

Deconversion entails much more than disaffiliation. For Streib (2009) deconversion is a multifaceted concept including the loss of religious experience, which can often lead to cognitive dissonance including doubt and unbelief, and a moral critique of the entire religious system and way of life, which precipitates an emotional upheaval that ultimately results in a disassociation from the former community. This study adopted Streib's definition of deconversion and used it to characterize those participants who have migrated out of evangelical Christianity and adopted a form of explicit atheism.

The studies cited above have helped to circumscribe the concept of deconversion. As with most conceptual categories, it is difficult to list the necessary and sufficient conditions that constitute deconversion, but such is the case with many of our most useful concepts. What the above studies do not tell us, however, are the factors leading to deconversion. For that, we must turn to other sources.

Literature Related to Deconversion

Although the extant research on deconversion to non-belief is relatively small, a survey of the field reveals that the subject is gaining attention among scholars. Distinct areas of research regarding deconversion-related topics are discernable in the literature. The following is an overview of the current state of the literature. It interacts with the the major works from various disciplines dealing with religious disassociation. It does so by addressing the general subject of religious disassociation (of which deconversion is

one kind) according to the following categories: religious deconversion, Christian deconversion, reasons for deconversion, the process of deconversion, autobiographical deconversion narratives, and deconversion studies specifically focused on atheism.

Religious Deconversion

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

One reason for the proliferation of research in the 1980s on religious disassociation can be attributed to public interest and, in some cases, concern over the

many new religious movements (NRMs) then appearing in the United States. Skonovd (1981) interviewed 30 apostates from the Unification Church and 30 apostates from other NRMs. His approach differed from much of the literature of the time by focusing on the process that a person goes through as they lose their faith as opposed to who is likely to lose faith. In choosing to refer to the process of abandoning religious faith as deconversion, Skonovd became one of the first to use the term in the literature. In a second study Skonovd (1983) investigated former members of Christian fundamentalist churches, ex-Scientologists, ex-Unification Church members, ex-People's Temple members, and various eastern groups. In doing so, he developed a six-stage model of the deconversion process: a) precipitating crisis, b) review, c) reflection, d) disaffection, e) withdrawal, and f) cognitive reorganization. Skonovd's attempt to identify the process of deconversion was the one of the earliest in the field of deconversion studies.

In a massive study, Canadian psychologist Saul Levine (1984) interviewed over 800 members of NRMs over a 15-year period. He discovered that the majority of the members who joined the NRMs did so in order to establish personal autonomy and to rebel against parental authority. However, after a two-year period, most had left the movements and returned to more traditional lives. In a similar study, Stuart Wright (1984) examined 45 ex-members of NRMs to gain insight on their attitudes toward their former groups. He focused on defections as a major life transition but was careful not to assume that such transitions are always negative. Obviously, there are numerous consequences when joining and leaving a new religious movement, but Wright allowed the ex-members to speak for themselves; this produced some surprising results. For

example, 67% of the participants said they were wiser for the experience, 9% said they were duped or brainwashed, and 7% were angry (p. 175). Furthermore, Wright discovered that defection from the group was often precipitated by a significant dissonance between the NRMs' promises and the results. Participants identified frustration at the lack of personal growth or the inability to change the world as initial reasons for considering leaving. However, the dissonance between promises and results was often not enough to motivate defectors. A number of participants cited the pull of social relationships as helping legitimize their decisions to leave. Despite their frustrations with the NRMs, a number of ex-members found it difficult to replace the relationships they once enjoyed within the groups. In fact, while they may have strongly critiqued the ideologies of their former beliefs, they also spoke fondly of the interpersonal relationships they experienced as members of the groups, which they found difficult to replace in the broader society.

In 1987, Wright again conducted research on religious leave taking by investigating 15 former members of Hare Krishna, 15 former members of the Children of God, and 15 former members of the Unification Church in order to determine the factors that caused the defections. As Streib (2009) noted, Wright's (1987) work demonstrated that either emotional or cognitive factors can trigger the deconversion process and that the process can be sudden or gradual, depending on factors unique to each case. Wright also discovered several reasons that accounted for member deconversion, including: a) contact with the outside world, b) unsupervised friendships, c) lack of success in changing the world, and d) general disillusionment. A final but interesting discovery of

Wright's work was the way in which people left the groups. The majority of those who left after one year did so with little or no fanfare, choosing instead to leave quietly and without direct confrontation. Those who were involved with the groups for more than one year, however, often departed in overtly hostile manners.

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

Falling from the faith: Causes and consequences of religious apostasy, an important volume of essays on religious disassociation, was compiled by Bromely (1988); it contributed to the growing body of literature on religious exiting. Part one dealt with disaffiliation from traditional/mainline churches. Unfortunately, when addressing disaffiliation from Christian churches, Bromely's choice of language is imprecise. He includes Mormons and conservative Christians along with Episcopalians and Roman Catholics under the broad category of "mainline churches." Historically, however, Mormons have not been recognized as a Christian denomination due to their unorthodox

beliefs. Furthermore, the term mainline commonly refers to liberal Protestant churches that often deny key doctrines of the orthodox Christian faith. Conservative Christians and Roman Catholics would not consider themselves members of a "mainline" church. If by "mainline churches," Bromely simply meant significant religious denominations, he might have chosen a term other than "mainline" to categorize the above churches. Part two of the book focused on disaffiliation from non-mainline churches, such as new religions and cults. Because Bromley chose to include research on disassociation from both NRMs and various Christian denominations, his work brought together for the first time, in one volume, research from both fields. This approach provided researchers with the context to compare and contrast the biographical changes that occurred between mainstream religious disassociation and fringe groups. The conclusion of the volume indicated that patterns of religious deconversion reveal a discernible reorganization of the role religion plays in society.

Although not a NRM, Mormonism in the 1980s remained outside the mainstream of American religious life. Religious disassociation among Mormons attracted the attention of Albrecht and Bahr (1989) who studied 40 former Mormons identified as belonging to several existing typologies, including: a) conversion, b) dropping out, and c) apostasy. Using Brinkerhoff and Burke's (1980) four categories of deconversion, they discovered that many deconverts were marginal members initially. The few committed Mormons who deconverted identified family break up, intellectual problems with Mormonism, and the exclusive nature of Mormon theology as the causes for their migrations out of Mormonism. Commenting on the value of disaffiliation studies,

Albrecht and Bahr stated, "We cannot say that one learns more from the disaffiliate than from the convert, but one learns different things, and sees both the individual in passage and the institution of origin in a different light" (p. 199).

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

questions. Consequently, they intentionally decided to abandon their faiths for a nonreligious path.

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

Why is this? The authors offered several suggestions, including the fact that many young Americans are so "under socialized" when it comes to their religious beliefs that they would not recognize a challenge to them were they presented with any. Rather than looking to higher education as the primary cause for the decline in religiosity among young adults, Uecker, Regnerus and Vaaler (2007) pointed to alternative theories. Some evidence exists that the desire to carry on a lifestyle that is typically recognized as outside the bounds of the religious system was to blame. Consuming alcohol, sex outside of marriage, and use of recreational drugs were cited. Social factors related to the decline in religiosity included marriage, cohabitation, and parental status. Marriage, it seemed, affected religiosity in a positive way and acted as a hindrance to religious decline. The reason for this may simply be that marriage, like religion, is a social commitment, and a young adult who is prone to make one such commitment may also be prone to make others. Cohabitation, on the other hand, has a clear negative impact on the level of

religiosity among young adults. The authors speculated that the reason for this might be in the fact that, unlike sexual relations outside of marriage, cohabitation cannot be done in secret. That being the case, young adults who chose to cohabitate may either have anticipated or have experienced censure from their faith communities and have chosen to withdraw from it, or perhaps they had already shed their religious faiths and practices, which then allowed them to cohabitate without cognitive dissonance. Regardless of which it is, cohabitation and decline in religiosity among young adults are highly correlated. Finally, parental status was looked at as a possible contributor toward the loss of religiosity among young adults. What was discovered was that, in terms of their religious involvements, it made little difference whether or not the participants had children. This may seem counterintuitive given that a commonly offered reason for returning to a faith community by former defectors was because of their desires to provide positive environments for their children. However, the authors cited research that argued for school-age children, not infants and toddlers, as being the catalyst for returning to church. In the case of the respondents in the Uecker, Regnerus, and Vaaler (2007) study, those with children were young, college students with only infants and toddlers, not school-aged children.

Buxant and Saroglou (2008) looked at the mental health of participants during three stages of their conversions and subsequent deconversions from the new religious group: a) mental health before making contact with the new religion, b) mental health during their membership, and c) mental health after their departures. It is the last of those three that concerns this study, specifically the impact that leaving the group had both

mentally and socially. Twenty (20) participants were selected from 10 NRMs, and the

mean age was 44 years old. What Buxant and Saroglou found was that defection from a

new religious movement was accompanied by social rupture for most ex-members. In the

case of four participants, they severed their ties with parents who remained members. An

unspecified number of members reported that, after leaving the group, they were harassed

by current members who attempted to bring them back to the fold. The result of leaving

the group manifested an individualization of faith for many participants who said that

they could no longer enjoy a religious community. Moreover, they exhibit hesitancy in

joining any group due to the negative socialization they experienced while members of

their former religious communities. Out the 20 ex-members interviewed, only four have

transitioned into another religious community of faith.

Christian Deconversion.

In the literature on Christian deconversion, several studies concentrated on the

topic of deconversion in general. These studies did not identify reasons for deconversion,

the process of deconversion, or typologies of deconversion. As such, they have little in

common that united them other than their overall relation to deconversion from

Christianity.

In an interesting and theologically informative study, Boldt, Roberts, and

Whitaker (1982) investigated the process of deconversion among the Hutterites.

Hutterites are a small group of Anabaptists that now exists only in North America. They

are related to and similar to the Amish and Mennonites with one major distinction—they

share all of their possessions. As an old order group that keeps itself separate from the

"world," the Hutterites battle against the temptations that the host society offers its members. A recent and powerful temptation to defect from the Hutterite community is the appeal of evangelical Protestantism. A combination of dissatisfaction with Hutterite culture and the freedom provided by Evangelical churches were identified as the contributing factors to the large number of Hutterites leaving the colony and converting to evangelicalism.

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

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

1. Those governed by tradition because they were born into fundamentalist families;

2. The mono convert who has a one-time conversion to fundamentalism from a different background; and

3.   The accumulative heretic whose life is a tour through a number of different

religious orientations, ending in fundamentalism.

Streib's second significant discovery was an insight into the motivational impact of life

themes that lead to or impede a fit between the convert and the setting of the group. A

framework of religious styles was then used by Streib to understand the formation and

transformation of fundamentalist perspectives.

Christians who, at one point, identified with conservative evangelical

denominations and, subsequently, left to become participants in the more theologically

open and fluid movement typically comprise the emerging church. Philip Harrold (2006)

studied deconversion to emerging church. Harrold's work examined the trend among

those in the emerging church to identify their religious migrations as a rejection of the

contemporary church model. Harrold used Barbour's model of intellectual doubt, moral

criticism, emotionally charged metaphors, and narratives of disaffiliation as a guide to

classify those who have deconverted from traditional churches to emerging churches.

Brain McLaren and Doug Pagitt were highlighted as leaders of the emerging church.

Despite the fact that this study did not deal directly with Christian apostasy, it is helpful

for understanding the shift in thinking that is taking place among postmoderns and is

relevant for understanding the leave-taking process in general.

Another category of research related to deconversion studies is that which seeks

to identify the reasons people choose to deconvert from their faith. Research has

primarily been directed at why Christians choose to leave their faith, but it is not limited

to them. Caplovitz and Sherrow (1977) conducted an early study regarding the loss of

religious practice. The study is both well known and controversial among religious migration studies. The purpose of their study was to uncover the reasons for the deconversion of Jewish, Catholic, and Protestant college graduates in the 1960s and 1970s. Their conclusion was that disaffiliation, while related to leftist political leanings and commitment to intellectualism, was largely the result of rebellion toward parents. They also found that Catholic colleges no longer provided the barrier to apostasy that they once did, and deconversion at Catholic colleges was equal to that at Jewish and Protestant schools. Bruce Hunsberger (1980) revaluated the work of Caplovitz and Sherrow in order to determine if their conclusions were sound. Hunsberger questioned the conclusions of Caplovitz and Sherrow regarding rebellion to parents by pointing to methodological problems with the original research. He performed a similar evaluation of college apostates in order to discover if the original research conclusion was valid. The results from Hunsbeger's study were partially consistent with Caplovitz and Sherrow's (1977) contention that family relationships and youthful rebellion relate to apostasy, yet the results were not clear cut and differed enough to cast serious doubt on the original study.

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

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

Richter and Francis (1998) conducted a further study on the precipitating causes of deconversion among Christians. In a mixed-methods approach that consisted of 27 interviews and 400 questionnaires, they discovered that many church-leavers still held on to their beliefs in God even after leaving and stated that they were still involved in a "spiritual quest" (p. 38). The authors offered a common rationale for the loss of involvement in religious communities of practice. The eight reasons given can be grouped into four general categories: a) social change, b) change of values, c) critical life events, and d) childhood socialization. Streib was persuaded that the Richter and Francis study made a novel contribution to the literature of deconversion in that it attempted to account for changes in faith development in relation to disaffiliation (Streib et al., 2009, p. 48). Richter and Francis looked at the relationship between the faith stage of church attendees and the level of faith development of the churches they attended and "their possible common growth and advancement" (Streib et al., 2009, p. 48).

Garry Calver (2004) chronicled the stories of 14 young people who gave up their Christian faiths. The purpose of the research was to help readers understand the reasons

why many in their late teens walk away from their faiths and what can be done to turn the tide. Calver's study was intended to be utilized for pastoral purposes, for Christian leaders, and Christian teens who are struggling with their faith. It is not in any way an apologetic, but it could help adolescents make it through their teen years by informing them that they are not alone in their inner turmoils. Through interviews Calver identified many reasons given by Christian teens as to why they are tempted to leave the faith.

An important study in terms of identifying reasons why deconversion occurs among Christians was recently conducted by Wright, Giovanelli, Dolan and Edwards (2008). The authors of the study analyzed hundreds of autobiographical deconversion narratives posted to ex-Christian websites. Their findings are valuable because they are a primary source of narratives authored by those who posted their narratives in order to identify their reasons for abandoning Christianity. The four primary reasons identified by Wright, Giovanelli, and Dolan are the following: a) intellectual and theological problems with Christianity, b) God's supposed failures, c) negative interactions with Christians, d) and positive interactions with non-Christians. The findings of this study are revealing and often not what traditional Christian apologetics is directed at. The authors made a recommendation for further study, to which this literature review will shortly turn; that is, the need to uncover what the process is of deconversion from Christianity to nonbelief.

Of the more recent offerings in contributing factors in Christian deconversion is Zuckerman (2011). Zuckerman's purpose was to contribute to the field of deconversion studies by filling in a gap in the literature. He noted that most of the studies on

deconversion are based on empirical survey data and not on interviews with deconverts. In this work, he identified different kinds of apostates, which he labeled as:

1.   Early and late apostasy;

2.   Early adoption of the faith and rejection in teens and twenties;

3.   Late adoption of religion in adult years and then abandonment late in life;

4.   Deep and shallow apostasy, which refers to the levels of rejection and adoption of secularity; and

5.   Mild and transformative deconversion, which highlights the degrees of commitment before deconversion.

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

As Wright, Giovanelli, Dolan and Edwards (2008) noted in their study of deconversion narratives posted on the Internet, there exists a gap in the literature in relation to the process of deconversion. This gap was indicated by Bromely as far back as 1988. Recently, several studies have been done that begin to address the process of deconversion. One such study was that conducted by Sandomirsky and Wilson (1990), analyzing the process of disaffiliation. Their specific focus was the religious mobility among men and women. Their research resulted in constructing models intended to account for both apostasy and switching. What they discovered is that family status, such as having parents who did not share the same faith or marrying a spouse who lacks a religious faith, increases the likelihood of apostasy but not the likelihood of switching faiths. Moreover, men are more affected by family changes than women, resulting in men

being more likely to deconvert than women. The results point to the importance of family in unlocking the nature of apostasy.

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

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

Ross (2009) touched on the social impact of losing one's faith in Christianity in her doctoral dissertation. The purpose of her study was to focus "on the experience of losing faith rather than on the process of leaving one's religion" (p. 12). Specifically, Ross looked at the emotional and cognitive experiences of losing faith in order to provide

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

Ross's (2009) participants reported that their deconversions caused great tension and stress in their marriages. In some cases, the marriages dissolved due to irreconcilable differences. Although it is not surprising that such a radical life change would threaten the marriage relationship, it is interesting that the participants reported that they felt dissolution was inevitable given the "non-negotiable" nature of their new-found atheistic

beliefs (p. 153). Consequently, if the marriage was going to survive, it was up to the Christian spouse to come to terms with the partner's loss of faith and find some ways to deal with it.

Participants reported a variety of consequences in their relationships with their children as a result of their deconversions. For some children, the news that their parent had lost faith was devastating. For others, it was of little consequence because they themselves had also lost faith and were not troubled by their parents' deconversions. Ross' (2009) data on the social impacts on the parent-child relationships in the aftermath of deconversion is rather thin. Of Ross' participants, only three had children, and all of the children were adults when their parents deconverted.

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

Ross' (2009) participants described a variety of responses from their church communities. Amber experienced harsh judgment from her former church community. She was threatened with punishment from God and was called derogatory names.

Amber's experiences were extreme when compared to Ross' other participants'

experiences, but they, too, received negative treatment. Only in a small number of cases

did the deconvert find an attitude of respect and concern that was perceived positively.

Smith (2010) investigated the process of constructing a new identity after

relinquishing religious faith. Smith interviewed 30 apostates who self-identified as

atheists. From this experience, four major elements in the deconversion and identity-

construction process were noted. First, the ubiquity of theism is the backdrop to

deconversion. Because theism has such a significant influence in American culture,

creating an atheist identity is always seen in contrast to what it is not. Second, the

deconverts often questioned theism and found their doubts bolstered by others. Third, the

deconverts rejected theism prior to actually identifying publically as atheists, often a long

time prior. Fourth, the final stage in the process is coming out publically as an atheist.

Smith's conclusions are consistent with the findings of others (Ross, 2009; Mahala, 2006;

Fazzino, 2014; Downs, 2012).

Fazzino (2014) provided an in-depth look at the process of deconversion from

evangelical Christianity to atheism. Like Downs (2012) Fazzino (2014) approached their

study from a phenomenological perspective in examining narratives of deconversion.

Fazzino, a former evangelical, wrote as a researcher and an advocate for former

Christians who now identify with some form of secularity. Fazzino's (2014) study of 20

former evangelicals revealed that they tend to emphasize their "breaking away from the

constraints of hegemonic Christianity rather than turning to secularity" (p. 1). Fazzino

believed that it is important, therefore, to characterize exit narratives as deconversions

because doing so changes them into a "necessary cultural repertoire" that encourages individuals to challenge the control of religion and allows for easier establishment in a community of non-believers (p.1). It is in concentrating on the negative aspects of religion, even after adopting secular worldviews, that deconverts form their identities.

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

gay individual is prepared to present him or herself to the majority heterosexual society as gay. Pride and immersion into the gay community often characterizes the fifth stage of development known as identity pride. The final stage of identity development, according to Cass, is known as identity synthesis. Here, the private and public lives of the homosexual individual are merged and integrated with the rest of one's identity producing a "more congruent self" (p. 8).

Downs' (2012) observation that identity formation among homosexuals offers insights into deconversion, particularly deconversion to atheism, appears to have merit. Indeed, parallels were found for each of the six stages of homosexual identity formation in the deconversion process to atheism. First-stage deconverts, like homosexuals, often reported identity confusion as they tried to make sense of who they were, believers or nonbelievers. Like homosexuals, atheists commonly reported feelings of isolation and anxiety, as they began to consider themselves atheists. Cass (1979) also found congruence between homosexuals and atheists in terms of self-acceptance and labeling. In this third stage, deconverts had come to acknowledge that they were a part of a social minority and had adopted the label of "atheist." In the fourth stage of deconversion, Cass discovered that, like homosexuals, atheists had come to believe that the label "atheist" is a positive term, despite not being ready to publicly identify as an atheist. In the fifth stage, deconverts were willing to identify publicly and, in fact, were proud of their atheist beliefs and associations. Finally, in the sixth stage, the public and private lives of deconverts were merged, and the bifurcation of the atheist self that existed in earlier stages was reconciled.

That the Cass (1979) identity development model applies so well to both cases of identity formation suggests that it may prove a valuable tool not only in cases of homosexuality or atheism, but also for any life change where an individual moves from the visible majority to the invisible and often unaccepted minority.

Another recent study, conducted at the University of Wisconsin by Krueger (2013) on the relationship between deconversion and identity formation sought to investigate not merely the adoption of atheism as a worldview, but also "the individual's larger relation to religion and to religious identity" (p. 3). Krueger interviewed 16 atheists at a midwestern university between 18 and 22 years of age. She identified five phases of the deconversion process that related to an individual's adoption of the atheist identity. These stages included the following: a) detachment, b) doubt, c) disassociation, d) transition, and e) declaration. An interesting discovery was that social detachment might be a precursor to deconversion. Characteristic of the detachment phase, as identified by Krueger, was that the participants in her study reported never being closely connected to their previous religious communities and did not feel a strong inclination to maintain their beliefs in the face of encroaching doubt. For others in the study, the social alienation they experienced from their church communities allowed them to leave their religious commitments with fewer qualms than had they been socially embedded in the church communities. Krueger said:

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

In the fifth stage, declaration, respondents "came out," as it were, to others, often those closest to them, which, in Krueger's (2013) terms, "finalized" their decisions. The decision to do so is not without consequence. For some, the disclosures were met with positive responses. Others experienced "intolerance, shock and disappointment" (p. 7). For Krueger, this step in the deconversion process is essential to taking on an atheist identity and is only complete when "the individual validates their atheist identity in social interaction" because it allows them to "locate themselves in the social landscape of American society" (p. 7). There are clear parallels in the conclusions of Krueger and Ross (2009), Downs (2012), and Smith (2013). The overlap in stages identified by the different studies provides a measure of confirmation that such stages do, in fact, exist for many who deconvert to atheism.

Hundreds, if not thousands, of first-person deconversion narratives can be found on the Internet. Websites such as newexChristian.net, richarddawkins.net, positiveatheism.org and numerous others act as online repositories for autobiographical deconversion narratives. The website leavingchristianity.com has links to over 100 deconversion websites, from ones that host general deconversion testimonies to those dedicated to the deconversion stories of former missionaries, nuns, and priests. One such website, known as The Clergy Project, is exclusively for pastors who have undergone or are completing the process of deconversion. Boasting a membership of over 450 pastors who no longer hold supernatural beliefs, The Clergy Project exists to provide a "confidential online community for active and former clergy who do not hold supernatural beliefs. It is a safe house where members can freely discuss the challenges

they face in leaving ministry and establishing a new life" (The Clergy Project, 2014).

Beside websites hosting deconversion narratives, at the time of writing, there exist 23

Internet discussion groups that provide an arena for former Christians to dialogue with

one another (See: Leaving Christianity; Walk Away From Fundamentalism Forum;

Recovering Ex-Christians Facebook Group; Exit Fundyism). The Internet also provides

access to a plethora of websites belonging to former Christians who are invested in

seeking to deconvert Christians. John Loftus (2008) a former pastor and Christian

apologist, writes a blog entitled "Debunking Christianity," expressly to deconvert

Christians by demonstrating Christianity to be untrue. Loftus' website is not unique; there

are multiple websites hosted by former Christians intent on deconverting their former

brethren.

Online deconversion narratives have also been the source for scholarly research.

Chalfant (2011) utilized them as the basis for his master's thesis. As previously

mentioned, Wright, Giovanelli, Dolan and Edwards (2008) analyzed deconversion

narratives online to find explanations for deconversion from evangelical Christianity.

A related study to autobiographical narratives found on the Internet is the work of

Swanson (2009), who sought to identify how apostate organizations use the Internet.

Swanson studied 10 Christian apostate groups and the manner in which they used the

Internet. Swanson, "focused on the extent to which apostate Web sites identified,

expressed, and justified their apostate intent; asked users to respond; and offered or

promised rewards for user response" (p.3). The results showed that while evangelization

and proselytization are aspects of the websites, the primary purpose was to disseminate

information. A noticeable component of a majority of websites was the need to justify

apostasy intellectually:

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

Swanson (2009) leveled several criticisms at the use of the Internet by apostate /

deconvert websites. Perhaps the most significant is that the websites (and those behind

them) did not seem to be truly effective if they were actually seeking to deconvert current

members of the religious organizations they were targeting. One way to become more

effective would be if the websites would focus not only on problems of the religion in

question, but also provide help and advice for those wanting to deconvert. Deconversion

is more than an intellectual change; it is an upheaval to one's entire life. Swanson

maintained that if deconverts wanted to change the hearts and minds of those who read

their websites, they must recognize that fact and provide personal and existential

supports. Otherwise, those who deconvert will not be "pastored" into the new lifestyles

for which they had advocated (p. 18).

Conversion and Deconversion

In order to contextualize the present study, it is important to examine the

relationship between conversion and deconversion and decide if there are sufficient

differences between the two concepts to warrant an entire field of research dedicated to

deconversion. The conceptualization of conversion has received much attention from

scholars and has been investigated from multiple perspectives. In order to properly situate

this study on deconversion, it is important to survey the literature on conversion. The

reason for doing so is two-fold:

1.   First, conversion and deconversion are, in some cases, different sides of the same

coin. Every deconversion from a faith is a conversion to another faith or non-

belief, which is itself a faith commitment (Clouser, 1991).

2.   Second, conversion studies are the soil out of which deconversion studies have

grown.

The major models and theories of conversion over the past 100 years are presented in

chronological order in the following section.

Conversion

The concept of conversion has proven a rich field for research over the past 100

years. William James (2002) in his famous study, *Varieties of Religious Experiences*,

understood conversion to be a kind of healing. The healing, as James understood it, was

that of a sick, divided soul that sought healing and unification of personhood in religion.

James distinguished between two kinds of conversion: volitional conversion, which is

gradual, and instantaneous conversion. The Apostle Paul's conversion on the road to

Damascus is the paradigm of the instantaneous conversion. James also identified four

indicators of conversion that he called the "feelings which immediately fill the

conversion hour:" a) a sense of higher control, peace, and harmony: b) a sense of

perceiving truths unknown before; c) a sense of the newness of life; and d) an ecstasy of

happiness (p. 191). James commented,

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

James' understanding of conversion seems biased and reductionistic to many

contemporary social scientists (Gooren, 2010). Furthermore, modern studies are skeptical

about James' claim that a conversion experience can change a person's personality

(Rambo, 1993). Whether scholars hold James' (2002) theory in high regard today is

beside the point. James' work was a landmark in conversion studies and is recognized as

a classic in the field.

From 1962–1963 in Bay City, Michigan, Stark and Lofland (1965) interviewed

converts to a small cult. They conducted extensive observations and in-depth interviews

with the participants of the study, their families, co-workers, acquaintances, and those

who were interested in the cult but never joined. They identified seven indicators of

whether a person would convert or not:

1.   The experience of enduring unresolved tensions;

2.   Inability to resolve the tensions within a religious, problem-solving perspective;

3.   Describing oneself as a religious seeker;

4.   Encountering a cult at a turning point in life;

5.   Creating an affective bond with one or more members of the cult;

6.   Having extracult attachments neutralized; and

7.   Exposure to rigorous cultic interpersonal interaction, if one is to become a

proselytizer (p. 874).

The most significant indicator determining conversion in the above schema is factor five:

social connections. If the emotional bonds made with cult members were not as strong as

those made with nonmembers, such as family and friends, then conversion was unlikely.

However, if the emotional bonds made with cult members were stronger than those with

nonmembers, conversion was likely to occur. In the years following their research, Starke

and Lofland's process model has been critiqued by other social scientists, yet its impact

on conversion studies has been significant. As Gooren (2010) pointed out, "The

Starke/Lofland process model is quoted in almost all of the conversion literature" (p. 22).

An unpublished but influential dissertation by Mosely (1978) utilized structural

developmental psychology to investigate religious conversion. The study began with an

empirical investigation of religious conversion along with a social and psychological

interpretation of what constituted conversion. William James' (2002) interpretations of

conversion, along with Piaget's (1969) stages of genetic levels, were incorporated to flesh

out Mosley's (1978) model. Mosley unpacked the structural developmental theory and

outlined the implications for the scientific study of religion. Mosley concluded that

conversions that included structural and content changes needed to be distinguished from

conversions that were characterized by a change of content without a change in structure.

If neither change in content nor structure takes place, but instead an individual

experienced a renewed religious commitment, then that person has not had a conversion

but rather an intensification experience. Shortly thereafter, Gillespie (1979) offered

insights to the conversion process that have retained their value for contemporary conversion studies. Gillespie argued that religious conversion deeply alters the fabric of life from which the identity is formed and actions originate. He identified conversion as a way to change identity and showed how a religious identity provided the foundation for wholeness. The majority of his research focused on the relationship between religious conversion and personal identity as it was worked out in the context of life and the social, psychological, emotional, and developmental arenas that constitute it.

Approaching conversion from a biblical perspective, Kasdorf's (1980) began with a look at conversion from a biblical perspective, then moved into conversion in terms of an ethnotheological perspective. Ethnotheology is the field that focuses on the interactions between biblical interpretation and the social sciences. Kasdorf addressed conversion from an exegetical point of view, then examined the empirical, experiential, and anthropological aspects of conversion. He concluded that conversion does not follow a pigeon-holed pattern but may take a variety of forms. Kasdorf concluded the book with an appeal to making the gospel contextually relevant. In a like manner, Conn (1986) approached the subject from a biblical and theological perspective. Conn drew from theology, psychology, and philosophy in order to provide a critical basis from which to assess various conversion claims. He concluded that conversion is the movement toward self-transcendence. Self-transcendence is the psychological stance that is in contrast to both self-denial and self-fulfillment. A person must come to terms with who they are before they can transcend themselves and focus on others. That is when true self-transcendence occurs.

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

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

The context stage involves the entire sociopsychological history of the individual, "the total environment in which the conversion transpires" (Rambo, 1993, p. 20). This includes their family history, education, cultural trends, and previous religious experiences. The crisis stage of the model is marked by the destabilization of the individual's religious identity. The conversion to a new religion is preempted by a deconversion from the present religious stance (p. 44). At this stage, the potential convert is troubled by any number of experiences, which may bring about a sense of

dissatisfaction or disillusionment. Experiences such as discovering one's religious beliefs are false or that a trusted religious leader is guilty of impropriety are typical examples. The third stage, or quest, occurs when the potential convert intentionally seeks out alternative options to his or her present faith (p. 56). Encountering a member of another faith who is devout and active in his or her faith is the fourth stage of the model. If the encounter with the member is positive and the "right" potential convert comes into contact with the "right" advocate at the proper time and under proper circumstances, the potential convert may begin to consider the new path (p. 87). The fifth stage, interaction, transpires as the potential convert chooses to invest time with the new community of faith. This may take the form of attending religious services, partaking in rituals, or learning customs (p. 52). Rambo identified the sixth stage as the commitment stage. The potential convert becomes a convert and identifies with the new religion, perhaps in a formal way such as a ritual. They are now identified as being a member of the religion, and they take on all of the blessings and responsibilities that come with belonging (p. 124). The seventh and final stage, consequences, occurs as the convert begins to grow in the new faith. This may be in a formal discipleship course or informally by learning the ways of the new faith. Various consequences identified by Rambo included sociocultural and historical consequences along with psychological and theological consequences (pp.148–160). Rambo pointed out that there is a risk that the convert may find that the negative consequences of conversion outweighs the positive. In such a case, if the disappointment is great enough, a crisis stage may occur, and the process may begin all over again (p. 170).

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

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

Uniqueness of Deconversion

The phenomenon of religious conversion has proven to be a popular topic of study over the last 100 years. As previously mentioned, numerous authors have investigated the subject and advanced our understanding of the nature and process of conversion. Yet, according to Fazzino (2014), one result of this better understanding is

that, even though the term conversion has garnered a conceptual expansion, it still does not distinguish conversion from other types of significant life change. Therefore, there is still the need for research on radical life change that is not reducible to conversion. In what ways, then, does deconversion distinguish itself from conversion? Are not the processes of deconversion and the factors that lead to it and characterize it largely understood as being the same as that of conversion? Are not all conversions preceded by a deconversion from a previous position? Whether it be adopting a religious faith from a position of non-belief or migrating from one religion to another, is not the subject merely converting from and converting to? Why is there a need for deconversion talk?

The literature on conversion is broad and encompasses psychological, sociological, anthropological, and religiotheological elements. If deconversion is understood merely as a form of conversion, then much of the conceptual territory has been mapped, leaving little room for exploration. Such was the case. A turning point of sorts came with the publication of Richardson's *Conversion Career model* (1978). Richardson's model of conversion made the following clear, that many people in an increasingly multicultural world chose to convert more than once in their lifetimes. Multiple conversions require multiple deconversions from previous faith commitments. This awareness of the conversion careers phenomenon and the aspect of deconversion, which it presupposes, was seen as a paradigm shift in theorizing about conversion that had significant implications for understanding deconversion (Streib, 2004) and opened the door for new research. As Wulff (2002) noted:

> Further, when we take seriously the possibility that conversion is not necessarily a permanent and one-time event and "conversion careers" (Richardson, 1978) are

an option, then deconversion "becomes a new phenomenon to be understood in its own right." (Wulff, 2002, p. 55)

While it is the case that many deconversions are the result of converting to a new faith, that is not always the case. Fazzino (2014) persuasively argued that deconversion from a religious faith to atheism often lacks many of the typical characteristics of conversions that occur as one migrates between religions. Fazzino pointed out that, in the case of conversion experiences from no faith to faith or between religious faiths, migration narratives have an emphasis on turning to something. The turn is a positive one where the new "true" faith replaces the old and erroneous one. Such narratives also represent the first stage in a commitment to the new faith, which, it is assumed, will be followed by a natural progression in the faith. Furthermore, in such cases the convert has a known destination, which includes an ideology, a set of specific beliefs, and, more than likely, a community of practice to belong to. However, this is not the case with deconversion from faith to nonbelief. Migration narratives that emphasize turning from faith and lacking a substitute to fill the vacuum left by the loss characterize such experiences. They are often the culmination of a spiritual struggle that led to an ambiguous destination, thus not offering the deconvert a secure and stable environment in which to establish an identity. Atheism, or any other form of non-belief, does not provide the deconvert with an identifiable set of beliefs to adopt or a community of practice to be a member of in the same way as converting to a new faith does. Moreover, for converts to a faith, the emotional response is often accompanied by positive experiences such as a sense of reliance on a higher power, a sense of assurance, and a feeling of ecstasy. For the deconvert, the emotional response is marked by grief and guilt along with rejection and

alienation. In general, biographical trajectories of conversion narratives are focused on an emphasis on the new self, whereas for deconversion, they center on the loss of the old self. Finally, personal transformations among converts result in the end of doubting and produce liberation, religious conformity, and the suspension of analytic reasoning. For the deconvert from faith, the personal transformation produces eventual relief, an ongoing search for truth, liberation, religious resistance, and a stigmatized status.

Deconversion and Atheist Experiences

Fitzgerald (2003), argued for a three-stage deconversion process that follows two distinct career paths. Those coming from religious homes take longer to complete the process than those reared in homes with little or no religious concern. Fitzgerald developed an interpretive framework that aids in explaining why some adopt the nonnormative identity of atheist. Fitzgerald's framework centered on both social and environmental factors, such as primary and secondary socialization, and individual cognitive factors, such as a commitment to critical thinking. Fitzgerald further explored how atheists manage their ideological nonconformity in light of the social stigma attached to their identities. Fitzgerald presented an argument in which, in contrast to the prevailing literature on deconversion, one should not expect to discover one single factor that explains deconversion. Fitzgerald rightly pointed out, "The process [of deconversion] is often long, difficult and is impacted by several, reinforcing, often equally significant influences" (p. 25). One of those influences is the relationship between parents and children. Fitzgerald, countering the literature, claimed that it is not the quality of having atheist parents that is the most significant socializing factor in becoming an atheist since

the vast majority of participants in the study came from religious backgrounds. What did matter were the parental attitudes towards independent, critical thinking, indicators of future atheism. In focusing on the stigma management strategies of atheists, Fitzgerald argued that such strategies are necessary due to the commonly held view that atheism is a deviant and immoral worldview. Thus, atheists tend to adopt varying strategies in order to maintain social relationships and minimize the risk of negative consequences due to their worldviews.

Stein (2007) maintained that many widely held assumptions about atheists are untrue. Stein maintained that modern society holds many negative stereotypes of atheists such as that they possess significant moral, psychological, and behavioral flaws. Stein argued that atheists have been described as "immoral and deviant, and are commonly thought to be more likely to engage in criminal behaviors" (abstract). Stein admitted that there is some evidence to support the claim that religious adherence was negatively correlated with social problems but challenged the claim that those who do not believe in God were, in some way, less healthy socially and psychologically. Stein argued for this with a two-pronged attack. First, Stein identified problems in studies that provided evidence for a correlation between atheism and negative social problems. Second, Stein tried to show that, among theists, there were significant social and psychological indicators that showed a correlation between theism and social and psychological ills. For the purposes of the present study, Stein's work is important in that it did an excellent job of presenting atheism as a marginalized and stigmatized social subgroup.

Church-Hearl (2008), in a work on atheism in Appalachia, found strong support for the thesis that the effect of adopting a minority position regarding religion and spirituality (e.g. leaving a mainstream religion and becoming an atheist) resulted in participants taking on a minority identity in the sociological sense. Church-Hearl further hypothesized that the atheist minority would feel oppressed by the dominant Christian social group.

A major element of Church-Hearl's (2008) research looked at the negative personal and social consequences of leaving the dominant religious subgroup for a deviant one. Church-Hearl sought to learn how frequently atheists who live in a predominantly Christian region experienced verbal hostility, isolation, job discrimination, or worse. Church-Hearl's research shed considerable light on how atheists faced daily challenges as members of a deviant subgroup; addressed the impacts that deconversion had on their feelings, relationships and opportunities; and managed their minority identities in the midst of a dominant Christian subculture.

Participants in the study claimed that religious believers treated their beliefs with a general lack of respect and often attempted to convert them back to faith. In response, some atheists took the offensive and argued with Christians over the claims of the Bible, while others attempted to find common ground with them, avoiding conflict altogether. Many respondents said that they felt as though multiple social institutions, such as the legal and educational systems, were characterized by anti-atheistic rhetoric, encouraging discrimination against them. Many expressed a lack of social support because they did not have an organized movement providing them with the requisite sociopsychological

resources that they once had as members of faith communities or in another minority community.

Approaching the atheist experience from a legal standpoint, Weiler-Harwell (2008) explored two case studies that involved atheism and civil rights. Weiler-Harwell argued that atheists experience a noticeable level of hostility in the United States in terms of legal rights. In examining Boy Scouts of America v. Dale (2000) and Elk Grove Unified School District v. Newdow (2004), Weiler-Harwell (2008) identified what was believed to be the establishment by the courts of "a new hierarchy of protected and unprotected forms of religious belief," which in turn, "elevated a monotheistic religion over the neutrality standard that had been heralded in prior Supreme Court decisions" (iv). According to Weiler-Harwell, the rulings in favor of the plaintiff in essence established an American civil religion, a religion that discriminated against atheists (iv). As in other studies on the social consequences of atheism, Weiler-Harwell showed that atheists were considered by the general public as a significantly more unpopular and untrustworthy subgroup in America. The combination of their public relations woes and the rulings of the court in the Dale and Newdow cases were earmarked as signs that, in America, atheists cannot expect treatment under the law in the same way that theists can. According to Weiler-Harwell, atheists are a socially and legally marginalized "other", discriminated against because they stand ideologically outside of the majority view.

In 2009, Foust conducted a study that focused on a similar topic to that explored by Church-Hearl (2008), minority identity formation among atheists. Her work, she sought to discover how individual atheists negotiate their minority identities in a

predominantly Christian culture and how atheist groups interact with society and provide important resources for individual atheists.

That Foust (2009) paid attention to atheist groups was of particular importance because it is the only known study that addresses the importance of such groups for atheists. Foust discovered that it is only among these groups that atheists feel comfortable being open about their atheism. It is there they find a sense of inclusion and acceptance that they acutely feel the absence of in mainstream society. Foust discovered that the majority of the respondents overwhelmingly joined atheist groups for social reasons. Forming a sense of community, having positive reinforcement, and getting emotional fulfillment were just some of the perceived benefits to being a member. But, ultimately, "The most important thing an atheist community provides its members is a sense of hope that other Americans will realize that atheists are as normal, as good, and as respectable as any one else, and until that happens, they have a community that will help them through" (p. 81).

The Present Study

The present study contributes to the literature on deconversion. More precisely, it seeks to address a topic within the literature in relation to the process of Christian deconversion, namely its impact on former Christians. A review of the literature has demonstrated that, even though the study of religious disassociation is quite broad, the research into the nature and process of deconversion is in its infancy. That being the case, there are many areas open to study. One aspect of the deconversion process yet to be investigated are the broad impacts that deconversion has on former Christians,

specifically those who join atheist groups. What changes in values, behaviors, motivations, attitudes, identities, and social relationships occur when one leaves the Christian community of practice and adopts an atheist community of practice? This study investigates that aspect of the deconversion process from Christianity to an explicit form of atheism and the resulting impacts.

Summary of the Literature

Since it emerged in the literature in the 1970s, the study of religious disassociation or "leave taking" has continued to attract the attention of social scientists. As one would expect of a new and growing area of research, there has not emerged a unified terminology describing the phenomenon. Terms such as disaffiliation, defecting, apostasy, and disengaging have all been applied to religious disassociation (Bromley, 1980). Much of the early literature on religious disassociation revolved around new religious movements (NRMs) (Skonovd, 1981; Levine, 1984; Wright, 1987; Jacobs, 1989). As NRMs declined, studies on religious disassociation shifted to the loss of faith among more traditional, religious faiths, primarily Christianity. A major step forward appeared in the literature when social scientists, Streib (2009) and Barbour (1994), suggested the term "deconversion" as a more robust and neutral term to describe the process of religious disassociation and provided a conceptualization of exactly what deconversion entailed. This study uses Streib's (2009) conceptualization of deconversion.

Deconversion studies addressing Christian deconversion to some form of non-belief or secularism can be divided into those that address the reasons why deconversion occurs and those that investigate the process of deconversion (Wright, Giovanelli, Dolan

& Edwards, 2008; Downs, 2012; Fazzino, 2010; Brent, 1994; Smith, 2010). It was noted that a rich reservoir of information on deconversion from Christianity exists on the Internet in the form of deconvert autobiographical narratives to nonbelief.

Due to the historical connections with deconversion studies and the similarities in dynamics, major studies on conversion were summarized. A case was made from the literature that deconversion is not synonymous with conversion but exhibits its own unique characteristics. The research on conversion is vast, and only those studies that contribute to the present study were presented. It is clear from the review of the pertinent literature that the impact of deconversion from conservative or evangelical Christianity to atheism on the lives of former Christians is unknown. This study will address that area of ignorance.

CHAPTER 3

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

In this chapter, I propose that qualitative research methodology, specifically grounded theory, is the best approach to study the impact of deconversion from Christianity to atheism. In doing so, I provide a brief historical sketch of qualitative research, identify the nature of qualitative research, and explain my choice of it. I explain why qualitative methodologies, in contrast to quantitative, are the preferred approach and argue that the philosophical underpinnings that lay at the heart of qualitative research are particularly well suited for this study. I then denote specific research approaches for doing qualitative research and present a case for why the nature of my topic is best suited to grounded theory. Finally, I outline how data will be collected and analyzed and describe the measures put into place to ensure validity and address ethical concerns.

Qualitative Research

Qualitative research is one of three approaches for doing research in the social sciences, the other two being quantitative and mixed methods. Historically quantitative research has been social scientists' preferred approach. The reason for the dominance of quantitative research was due to the underlying worldview of post-positivism that, in turn, reflected the empiricist presuppositions of modernity. Even though qualitative

 research methods had been practiced by social scientists as early as the beginning of the 1900s, according to Schwandt (2000) it was not until the later half of the 20th century that "a reformist movement that began in the early 1970s in the academy" began to seriously challenge the hegemony of quantitative methodologies (Starcher, 2012, 2000, p. 189). Since that time, qualitative research has gained wide acceptance within the social science community as a valid research paradigm, despite the fact that it is not open to verification in the same manner as quantitative research. One possible reason for the change of heart toward qualitative research is due to the shift in philosophical presuppositions of many within the social science community from a post-positivist worldview to a social constructivist worldview.

Qualitative Research

Shank (2002) defined qualitative research as "a form of systematic empirical inquiry into meaning" (p. 164). By systematic, Shank meant, "planned, ordered and public" following rules agreed upon by members of the qualitative research community. By empirical, Shank meant that this type of inquiry was grounded in the world of experience, inquiry into meaning points by researchers trying to understand how others make sense of their experiences (Ospina, 2004). A systematic and empirical understanding of the impact of deconversion and how deconverts make sense of their experiences are precisely what this study is about. Denzin and Lincoln (2005) elaborate on Shank's (2002) understanding of qualitative research in this description:

> a situated activity that locates the observer in the world. It consists of a set of interpretive, material practices that make the world visible. These practices

transform the world. They turn the world into a series of representations, including field notes, interviews, conversations, photographs, recordings and memos to the self. At this level qualitative research involves an interpretive, naturalistic, approach to the world. This means that qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them. (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 12)

As Denzin and Lincoln (2005) observed, qualitative research attempts to represent the world of the participant. It is an interpretation of that world based on personal interaction and dialogue with participants in order to uncover how they make sense of phenomena and understand the meanings they bring to them. I maintain that the study of the impact of deconversion falls under the purview of qualitative research because it is best understood as an investigation of how former Christians understand and interpret their deconversion to atheism.

Qualitative v. Quantitative

How deconversion impacts a person is an intensely personal journey; understanding the meanings and the significance of that experience requires the methodology of qualitative research in order to make that impact visible for those who have not personally gone through it. Quantitative research, with its focus on numeric data, lacks the tools to uncover and make visible the meaning and significance of deconversion for those who have experienced it. Furthermore, quantitative research and its emphasis on statistical analysis do not allow for open-ended questions, which are important for uncovering the impact of deconversion.

Qualitative research differs from quantitative research in several ways that are relevant to this study. First, quantitative researchers derive conclusions primarily from

numeric data, whereas qualitative researchers do so by way of personal interaction. Second, quantitative data collection is done by administering surveys and conducting experiments that produce numeric and countable results. Qualitative research, on the other hand, provides its data via observation, interviews, documents, and audio-visual materials. Third, quantitative research is used to test or verify a theory, not develop a new one. Alternatively, qualitative research does not begin with a theory to be tested, though qualitative research can be used to test theories; rather, qualitative researchers construct theories to explain phenomena based on an inductive approach.

The goal of this study is not to test whether a preexisting theory of deconversion is valid, but rather to construct a theory of the impact of deconversion. To do so, it will be essential that the participants be allowed to speak freely about their experiences and the key waypoints along their journeys. It is imperative that participants share their personal deconversion stories in their own words as opposed to quantitative research, which does not allow participants to expand on—and in their own words—their experiences. Unless participants are allowed to do so, the impact of deconversion will remain largely hidden, thus prohibiting the construction of a grounded theory that describes it.

Philosophical Underpinnings

The philosophical underpinnings of this study are that of social constructivism. Social constructivism is a set of presuppositions that are typically associated with qualitative research. According to Creswell (2009), social constructivists believe that individuals desire to understand the world they live in. In doing so, individuals create subjective meanings of their experiences. Meanings are constructed as people engage

with the world they are deciphering (Crotty, 1998). The goal of qualitative research,

according to social constructivism, is to rely as much as possible on the participant's

view of the subject in question (Creswell, 2009). That is the case with the present study.

For those reasons, I will not begin with a theory that I seek to verify, but rather produce a

theory inductively in response to the data that emerges from the research. In adopting

social constructivism, I recognize that all humans find themselves in a world they did not

create. Each human being is born into a particular culture, at a particular place and time,

and speaks a particular language. It is via those entities that we access a world that has

largely been given meaning by others. This is just as true for myself as a researcher as it

for the participants. That being the case, I am sensitive to the fact that what gives an

event, process or experience meaning is the interpretation bestowed on it by humans. As

such, meaning is constructed, not merely discovered. This does not mean to imply that, as

a qualitative researcher, I deny the existence of an objective ontological element to

reality. Qualitative researchers differ in their ontological assumptions about the nature of

reality; some are realists, others are not. However, it is generally accepted by even the

most committed realists, of which I am one, that researchers will never fully capture the

objective reality of the phenomenon, process, or experience they study. That fact should

not be taken as an admission that qualitative research is not concerned with analyzing and

representing the objects of their study accurately. What it does mean is that the

interpretation of reality will always be a human endeavor, and humans construct

interpretations with the tools provided by their cultures. In this study, I will utilize the

tools unique to the paradigm of qualitative research to gain insight into the interpretations

humans construct of their worlds, particularly their deconversion from Christianity to atheism.

Qualitative Research Strategies

Qualitative research strategies are varied. The researcher has several different approaches to choose from, and the choice of one over the rest will ultimately be determined by the approach that best suits the research topic in question. Narrative, phenomenology, grounded theory, ethnography, and case study are the dominant research strategies utilized by qualitative researchers at present (Creswell, 2009). Narrative strategies utilize data to retell the story of a participant's life in narrative form. This approach is too narrow for developing a general theory of deconversion. Phenomenology seeks to identify the essence of a phenomenon, such as the experience of suddenly losing a loved one to a rare disease. However, the essence of deconversion is not what this study seeks to uncover; thus, phenomenology is ruled out as a live option. Grounded theory constructs a theory in order to provide an account for a particular phenomenon, which is grounded in the data collected (Creswell, 2009). Ethnography, the practice of qualitative research that involves the researcher studying a cultural group in a natural setting for a lengthy period of time, would prove to be an ineffective choice for this study (Creswell, 2007). This study is not interested in a general accounting of atheists, but the impact of their deconversions. Unless a researcher could observe a number of participants going through the process of deconversion, ethnography would not be able to aid in the construction of a theory. Finding and observing such a group is virtually impossible.

Adopting case study as the strategy for this study was seriously considered. Case studies investigate in depth a specific phenomena, event, activity, process, individual or group of individuals for a set amount of time in order to discover a particular goal (Stake, 1995). While the impact of deconversion itself does occur over a specific and identifiable period of time in the lives of individuals, the goal of this study is not to compare the experiences of individuals in order to identify reasons why they deconverted or to examine the similarities and differences between their experiences as they matriculated through the deconversion process. The primary purpose of this study is to generate a theory that describes the impact of deconversion. As attractive as case study is for analyzing specific cases of deconversion, its purpose is not to generate a theory, and, for that reason, it is rejected. For the above reasons, the research strategy I have chosen to employ in this study in order to analyze the impact of deconversion is grounded theory.

Research Approach

Grounded theory consists of systematic although flexible guidelines for collecting and analyzing qualitative data in order to construct theories that are "grounded" in the data themselves (Charmaz, 2006). Citing the work of Glaser and Strauss, Charmaz (2006) identified seven characteristics of grounded theory:

1. Simultaneous involvement in data collection and analysis.

2. Constructing analytic codes and categories from data, not from preconceived logically deduced hypotheses.

3. Using constant comparative method, which involves making comparisons during each stage of the analysis.

4.   Advancing theory development during each step of the data collection and analysis.

5.   Memo-writing to elaborate categories, specify their properties, define relationships between categories, and identify gaps.

6.   Sampling aimed toward theory construction, not for population representativeness.

7.   Conducting the research for the literature review after developing an independent analysis (Charmaz, 2006, p. 6).

An advantage of grounded theory is the emphasis it places on the utilization of comparative data analysis in constructing theories. Grounded theory is not a linear process. From a selective sample, data are collected by the grounded theorist and then coded before more data is collected. Coding, concurrent recording of memos and constant comparative analysis, results in the generation of categories. This dialectical process continues until theoretical saturation is reached. At that point, the theorist constructs a theory to account for the categories that emerged from the data (Birks & Mills, 2011). The great strength of grounded theory is that the inductive process grounds the theory in the data. Rather than seeking to determine if a particular process, experience or phenomenon is in accordance with a predetermined theory, grounded theory allows for the emergence of the theory from the data. For that reason, grounded theories possess impressive explanatory power.

The characteristics of grounded theory make it the best choice for achieving the goal of this study. First, the primary distinctive of grounded theory is that it results in a

theory or central understanding of a particular phenomenon. The goal of the study is to provide a substantive theory on the impact of deconversion from Christianity to atheism. That being the case, grounded theory is the natural choice among the various methods. Second, in order to construct a theory describing the impact of deconversion from Christianity to atheism, it is essential that the theory be grounded in the data itself and not in the *a priori* assumptions of myself as researcher. Otherwise, the resultant theory runs the risk of being little more than a validation of my own assumptions. By grounding the theory in the data (the codes and categories that surface from the data), it allows the theory to emerge inductively and not merely reflect my own preconceived notions of what the impact of deconversion looks like. Third, simultaneous analysis and data collection along with the constant comparative analysis typical of grounded theory allows for the development of theories addressing the impact of deconversion at each stage of the analysis. The dialectical process of comparing data with data allows for tentatively extending theories that, as new data is processed, are continually refined, the benefit being that the final theory regarding the impact of deconversion is itself the result of a process that is not only grounded in the data, but also has been deeply shaped by it.

Data Collection

The sources of data collection for this study are semi-structured interviews recorded in Windows Media Audio (WMA) format with those who have deconverted from Christianity to atheism. The interviews consisted of semi-structured questions that sought to uncover the impact of deconversion as it occurred. Questions asked are as follows:

1.   Have your values changed since your deconversion? If so, how?

2.   How were your social relationships impacted as a result of deconverting?

3.   What is your sense of personal identity, and how has it changed?

4.   Have you changed opinions about any ethical/moral convictions?

5.   Has your behavior been impacted as a result of deconverting? If so, how?

The interviews were recorded on a digital recorder and transcribed at a later time. The recordings and the transcripts have been saved on my laptop, as well as an external hard drive and also uploaded to a remote server.

Sampling Strategy

Participants of the study were selected based upon a combination of the following sampling strategies: maximum variation, typical case, and chain. Maximum variation was chosen because it best fits with the goal of the study: to produce a general theory of how deconversion impacts the lives of former Christians who have adopted atheism. The strategy of maximum variation is nonrestrictive and inclusive in nature. Seeking maximum variation among participants and not focusing on a particular subgroup or demographic allows for the possibility of a general theory to emerge from the data that describes the phenomenon in the broadest terms.

Typical case sampling, the practice of highlighting what is normal among the experience of participants, also contributed to the goal of discovering a general theory on the impact of deconversion. Looking at typical cases, those that are neither extreme nor unique, has the advantage of uncovering data that is generally representational of the impact deconversion has in the lives of the majority of former Christians.

With chain sampling, one chooses participants based on the suggestions of knowledgeable contacts. The suggestion of possible participants is based on who can best provide the researcher with rich data. As an outsider, chain sampling allows the researcher to gain access to possible participants through the suggestions of those who are members of the community. This provides the researcher with a measure of credibility that otherwise she may not have.

Participants

In- depth, open-ended interviews were used to construct a theory about how deconverting impacts deconverts. A theoretical model was developed describing the following: a) the contributing conditions that led to deconversion along with a model of the deconversion process, b) strategies that participants used to mitigate the negative consequences of deconversion, c) the contexts within which the deconversions took place, d) intervening conditions that played a role in the selection of strategies, and e) the consequences of deconversion.

Twenty-four (24) individuals were interviewed, 15 men and 9 women, from across the United States. The ages of the participants ranged from early-20s to mid-50s. All had at one time identified as Christians for varying lengths of time. Some were believers for only a few years, others for several decades. Each of the participants held beliefs that placed them within the broad scope of the evangelical movement, which, for the purpose of this study, is constituted as having a conversion experience, a high view of the Bible as God's word, a belief that salvation is mediated only through Jesus, and the need to engage in evangelism. Participants included a former seminary student, former

pastors, a former church counsel member, a former worship leader, a former church intern, and former amateur apologists. The journey to atheism for some was quite quick, almost instantaneous, while for others, it took a number of years. Some experienced emotional difficulties as they let go of their faiths, but most found it quite easy.

The first participants were originally contacted through the Internet. Advertisements seeking participants for this study were posted on numerous ex-Christian and atheist websites and Facebook pages. The advertisement produced a small number of respondents willing to share their deconversion stories. Upon contacting them, it became clear that not all of the respondents were suitable for the study. Some did not fit the definition of Christian assumed by the study. For example, a number of respondents identified as formerly being members of an evangelical Protestant denomination but indicated that they never adopted the belief system for themselves. Still others, at one point in their past, did personally adopt the Christian faith but were members of the Roman Catholic church, a group that is outside of the scope of this study. Deconverts from other religions, such as Mormons and Jehovah's Witnesses, also responded and were eager to share their stories; however, they, too, were outside the scope of this study. Individuals who fit the criteria were contacted and interviewed either in person or via a video conference call. From these original interviews, other individuals were identified. Participants suggested friends and colleagues who might be interested in sharing their stories with me. One participant, Douglas, was particularly helpful in finding participants. Douglas is a well-known atheist advocate, conference speaker and writer. He has the respect of many deconverts and acts as a gatekeeper for the atheist community. Douglas

contacted me and was very interested in my study. He volunteered to be interviewed and provided a very insightful and interesting interview. At the end of the interview, he informed me that he felt this was an important study, and that I, as the researcher, had noble intentions and was not merely seeking to cast atheism in a bad light. As a result, he posted my advertisement on several private atheist and deconvert message boards and vouched for my integrity. He encouraged his readers to participate in the study. He also put me in contact with deconverts that he felt would make good interviewees. One of those was Lauren. Lauren is presently working on her Ph.D. and is researching the ethics of atheism. She, too, is well respected in the atheist community. She volunteered to be interviewed and, like Douglas, put me in direct contact with those she felt could provide helpful interviews for my study.

Prior to Douglas and Lauren vouching for me, the attitude toward both me and my study was generally hostile. A number of individuals posted comments on the atheist websites and Facebook pages that were highly skeptical of my intentions. Many individuals believed that in virtue of being a Christian, I was duplicitous and had an alternative agenda. Some even investigated who I was and the university I attended. Many deconverts were reluctant to share their stories because they did not personally know me and did not trust Christians. Having Douglas and Lauren vouch for me provided access to potential participants that advertisements on Facebook pages never could. As a result of their recommendations, I interviewed 12 participants.

Participants were selected based on the following criteria:

1. They had to have made a personal decision to follow Jesus Christ at one time.

2.	They had to have been a member of an evangelical or fundamentalist church.

3.	They had to have defected both institutionally and ideologically from Christianity.
   By this, I mean they must no longer accept that the fundamental beliefs of
   Christianity are true, and they must no longer attend a church.

4.	They must self-identify as an atheist, which means they must either deny the
   proposition, "God exists," is true, or lack the belief "God exists."

Twenty-six (26) individuals were interviewed; however, it became apparent that only 24 met the criteria.

The 24 participants came from evangelical and fundamentalist church backgrounds across the country and from varying degrees of conservatism, both in doctrine and practice. Three types of church cultures were identified that shaped the views and practices of the participants: conservative evangelical, conservative evangelical with fundamentalist tendencies, and fundamentalist. Nine (9) participants came from conservative evangelical backgrounds. For the purpose of this study, conservative evangelicals are the least conservative in doctrine and practice as compared to the other two. Conservative evangelicals are primarily conservative when it comes to what they believe regarding the essentials of the faith. They are conservative in that they affirm the traditional doctrines of the historic Christian faith. The moniker "conservative" stands in contrast to "liberal", which when applied to Christian denominations indicates an attitude of skepticism toward the historic beliefs of the Christian faith. Conservative evangelicals at their best tend to espouse an attitude of charity to other believers who differ on secondary and tertiary issues but stand firm on what they believe to be the

essential teachings of the Bible. Typically conservative evangelicals would be ideologically to the right of popular culture when it comes to controversial social issues such as gender roles, the definition of marriage, and the legalization of marijuana. Practically speaking conservative evangelicals espouse a mild separation from what is often called "the world", the system of thought and behavior that is out of sync with the teachings of the Bible, and exemplified in the fashions of the current age. Conservative evangelicals are more accepting of consuming alcohol, going to movies, and styles of dress then their fundamentalist cousins. They seek to build bridges with the surrounding culture in order to reach it and are not afraid of incorporating various pragmatic means to do so.

At the opposite end of the spectrum are the fundamentalists. Fundamentalism arose in the early part of the 20th century in response to challenges aimed at both the existence of God and the trustworthiness of the Bible. Characterized as a reactionary movement, theologian Roger Olsen defined fundamentalism as follows:

> The distinctive hallmarks of post-1925 fundamentalism are 1) adding to those essentials of Christianity non-essentials such as premillennial eschatology, 2) "biblical separation" as the duty of every Christian to refuse fellowship with people who call themselves Christians but are considered doctrinally or morally impure, 3) a chronically negative and critical attitude toward culture including non-fundamentalist higher education, 4) emphatic anti-evolution, anti-communist, anti-Catholic and anti-ecumenical attitudes and actions (including elevation of young earth creationism and American exceptionalism as markers of authentic Christianity), 5) emphasis on verbal inspiration and technical inerrancy of the Bible as necessary for real Christianity (including exclusion of all biblical criticism and, often, exclusive use the KJV), and 6) a general tendency to require adherence to traditional lifestyle norms (hair, clothes, entertainment, sex roles, etc.) . (Olsen, 2012)

Six (6) participants came from backgrounds that could be considered as leaning strongly in the direction of fundamentalism. Certainly not all of the 6 participants attended churches that match all of Olsen's descriptions. But in the case of 6 participants, their church experience did exhibit a significant number of Olsen's criteria.

The third typology that emerged from the interviews was a hybrid of the conservative evangelical and the fundamentalist typologies. Nine (9) participants had church experiences that were conservative evangelical with fundamentalist tendencies. This third group was predominantly characterized by the conservative evangelical typology with various strains of fundamentalism detectable in the narratives of the participants. For example, Kristen came from a conservative evangelical church but her parents insisted in a separation from the world that caused a major rift in their relationship. Likewise, Mitch's church experience was typically evangelical conservative in doctrine in practice but was marked by aspects of fundamentalism. Both he and his brother were home schooled to avoid the negative influences of the secular education system and taught that young earth creationism was the only acceptable interpretation of the early chapters of the book of Genesis. Charlene's experience was marked by doctrinal purity, ecclesiastical exclusivity and a demand to remain separate from the world. As all evangelical churches do, hers sought to remain faithful to what they saw as New Testament principles of church practice. However, they approached the New Testament with a rigid literalism characteristic of fundamentalism conveying the message to congregants that only churches within their association were truly Biblical.

Table 1 identifies the age, gender, location and church typology of each

participant.

Table 1

Participant Demographics

Name	Age	Gender	Location	Church
Anne	30-35	Female	Las Vegas, NV	CEF
Charlene	40-45	Female	Richmond, VA	CEF
Christopher	30-35	Male	Fullerton, CA	CEF
Cindy	45-50	Female	Simi Valley, CA	CEF
Dale	30-35	Male	Seattle, WA	CE
Dave	30-35	Male	Garland, TX	F
Derek	30-35	Male	Fort Smith, AK	F
Donald	25-30	Male	Walnut, CA	CE
Douglas	40-45	Male	San Francisco, CA	CE
Frank	40-45	Male	Grove City, PA	CE
Jill	40-45	Female	San Francisco, CA	CE
Kristen	35-40	Female	Seattle, WA	CEF
Kyle	25-30	Male	Irvine, CA	CE
Lauren	35-40	Female	Las Vegas, NV	CE
Marcus	20-25	Male	Los Angeles, CA	CE
Martin	40-45	Male	Las Vegas, NV	CEF
Mitch	20-25	Male	Irvine, CA	CEF
Rachel	50-55	Female	Durango, CO	F
Sam	50-55	Male	Durango, CO	CEF
Steve	25-30	Male	Nashville, TN	F
Shelley	45-50	Female	Seattle, WA	CEF
Tim	50-55	Male	Fargo, ND	F
Trina	40-45	Female	Los Angeles, CA	F
Wayne	35-40	Male	Houston, TX	CE

Note. CEF = conservative evangelical with fundamentalist tendencies, F = fundamentalist, CE = conservative evangelical.

Data Analysis

Qualitative research is concerned with more than simply collecting data in order

to identify significant categories and themes. Rather, it goes beyond merely discovering

categories to making connections among the categories and identifying relationships that produce a coherent and plausible understanding of the topic at hand. In order to do so, a rigorous means by which to analyze the data must be in place.

An important aspect of qualitative research is that it is characterized by simultaneous data analysis and data collection. The researcher does not wait until all of the data have been collected to start analyzing them for themes. Analysis is an ongoing process, a constant dialogue between the researcher and the data; because it is a dialogue, the process is interactive and nonlinear. Ideally, the process of analysis blends the general process of data analysis common to the diverse qualitative strategies and the specific research strategy being utilized (Creswell, 2009).

For this study, an inductive and comparative analytical approach typical of qualitative research methodology and based on the principles of a grounded theory approach was used. Grounded theory rises from the simultaneous tasks of organizing the data, reviewing the data, memoing, coding, and linking of categories. This study followed those general contours. Specifically, this study appropriated the methodology of grounded theory as articulated by Charmaz (2006).

A defining element of data analysis in a grounded theory study is the approach it takes to coding data. Qualitative codes emerge from the data, not preconceived codes applied to data. In grounded theory the creation of analytic codes is a three-step process: a) initial, b) focused, and c) theoretical coding (Charmaz, 2006). Initial coding generates potential categories to pursue as data continues to be analyzed with the researcher remaining open to all theoretical directions the data may lead. An important component

of initial coding is to closely align to the data. The researcher may in fact code line by line, often doing so with codes that denote action (Charmaz, 2006). Further, initial codes are provisional, meaning they serve as guides for future research. Future data collection and analysis, in turn, confirms the utility of the initial codes that are then either retained, refined, or rejected. Finally, initial codes are also comparative in that they are the result of a process by which codes are formed by the dialectical process of comparing various sources of data.

Focused coding, sometimes known as axial coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1998), is more conceptual in nature than initial coding. By constructing broader conceptual codes from frequent or significant earlier initial codes, the researcher can sift through large amounts of data in a methodical manner. This study appropriates two types of focused coding associated with grounded theory, axial and theoretical coding. Charmaz (2006) noted, "Axial coding relates categories to subcategories, specifies the properties and dimensions of a category, and reassembles the data you have fractured during initial coding to give coherence to the emerging data" (p. 66). The fracturing of the data into initial codes is regrouped into major categories. Specifically, the categories of axial coding help answer where, when, why and how questions. A type of axial coding that is relevant to this study, which seeks to identify the process of deconversion, is what Strauss and Corbin (1998) labeled process coding:

> Process coding can be described as a series of evolving sequences of action/interaction that occur over time and space, changing or sometimes remaining the same in response to the situation or context. The action/interaction may be strategic, taken in response to problematic situations, or may be quite routine, carried out without much thought. It may be orderly, interrupted, sequential, or conditioned – or in some cases, a complete mess. What makes

action/interaction process is its evolving nature and its varying forms, rhythms, and pacing all related to some purpose. (p. 165)

Process coding uses gerunds, "-ing" words, to highlight action in the data, and can aid in identifying and underscoring the activity in question (Saldana, 2009). Process coding was an apt approach for this study because it is a search for "ongoing action taken in response to situations or problems, often with the purpose of reaching a goal or handling a problem" (Corbin & Strauss, 2008, p. 96-97). Consequently, by identifying action, process coding could help bring to light the responses of deconverts to situations or problems they perceived with Christianity and how those perceptions contributed to their deconversions and the impacts they have had on them (Saldana, 2009).

The second kind of focused coding used in this study, one that builds upon the results of axial coding, is known as theoretical or selective coding. Theoretical coding identifies possible relations among focused codes and categorizes them under more general terms. The purpose of theoretical coding is the integration of the focused codes into categories that form the constituent elements of the emerging grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). A grounded theory is ultimately constructed by providing a narrative that relates the theoretical categories in a coherent manner and has a sufficient measure of explanatory power.

Theory construction is the product of both the rational insights of a subjective researcher and the data discovered by the collection process. An important aspect of this process is the written records the researcher has chronicled while interacting with the data. Often referred to as memos, these observations play a key role in analyzing the data

and developing a grounded theory. There are at least three reasons why memoing is crucial for qualitative research and grounded theory in particular. First, as Charmaz (2006) noted, memoing is the lynchpin between data collection and writing drafts. Second, Corbin and Strauss (1998) maintained that memoing is an essential technique of qualitative research without which it is impossible for an analyst to reconstruct the details of the research. Third, memoing is important because insight is often generated by constant comparison between the data generated by interviews and the memoing of the researcher. Memos not only allow for the capture of analytic thoughts about the data, but also assist in analytic thinking and producing new insight (Maxwell, 2005). Therefore, as the researchers analyze the data, they continually need to record their own observations and thoughts. Reflecting on these can aid the analyst in discovering emerging themes and impact the direction of the study.

In order to facilitate the data analysis aspect of this study, the computer software program NVivo was used to sort and categorize codes as well as memos. NVivo allows for the creation of multiple codes, along with the ability to incorporate recordings. A noteworthy element of NVivo's relevance for this study is the ability for the researcher to identify relationships in the data because it is from the relationships discovered in data analysis that the final theory emerges.

Validation

Essential to any research study is the ability to ensure confidence in the findings it puts forward. According to Creswell (2009), validity "is one of the strengths of qualitative research, and it is based on determining whether the findings are accurate

from the standpoint of the researcher, the participant, or the readers of an account" (p. 191). To provide confidence in the results of the study, I will address three areas of concern that, unless addressed, may call the validity of the study into question: external threats, the validation of emerging themes, and the role of the researcher.

The primary validity threat to this study is the potential to overgeneralize the results. An important question to ask, therefore, is, given the fact that all of the participants of the study are located in the United States, what degree of confidence could one have that the results of the study are transferable to deconverts elsewhere? The answer is as that, due to the general distrust of and hostility toward atheists throughout the United States, it is unreasonable to believe that the experiences of the participants in this study would be reflected in the lives of deconverts elsewhere in the world, where atheism is not looked upon in askance.

In order to ensure the validity of the themes that emerge from the study, the following strategies will be utilized: triangulation, participant evaluation, reflection on researcher bias, and audit trail.

Triangulation is the practice of comparing themes derived from different sources of data in order to confirm the validity of the emerging themes. If the themes are based on two or more sources of converging data, this adds to the validity of the study (Creswell, 2009). In the case of this study, the data gleaned from the interviews were compared with deconversion testimonies of former Christians posted on these Internet websites: Internet Infidels (2014), Daylight Atheism (2014), and Debunking Christianity (2014). The purpose in doing so was to determine if the findings of this study echo the claims made

by ex-Christians from outside the study. The themes from which the final theory emerged were found in the online testimonies, and they contribute to and validate the findings of the study. The categories that emerged from the interviews were constantly compared with online sources to confirm or disconfirm their validity in contributing to the overall theory.

The second validation strategy employed in the study was that of participant evaluation. Upon constructing the theory, but prior to the final write-up, five participants were invited to read a draft copy and offer feedback. Their feedback was taken into account and reflected in the final write-up.

The third validation strategy was the insight gleaned from reflecting on the role of the researcher. In grounded theory, the role of the researcher is to interview and observe (Rath, 2008), but it is impossible to do so from a position lacking in bias. That was the case in this study. I am a Christian who has served as a pastor at two different churches, an adjunct professor at a seminary, and the head of the Bible department at a Christian high school. Interacting with those who have abandoned the Christian faith is both fascinating and slightly uncomfortable for me. As a person who is both emotionally and intellectually fulfilled by my faith, it is intriguing to me to listen to the stories and reasons of others who felt they could no longer continue to identify as Christians. However, the prospect of dialoging with those who have well-crafted and forceful arguments against the veracity of Christianity's claims was mildly troubling.

This study is not about the truthfulness of Christianity. Nor is this study about identifying the reasons for deconversion from Christianity. It is about the impact of

deconversion experienced by apostates from Christianity who now identify as atheists. As a Christian researcher, it would be tempting to look for poor reasons, unjustified claims, and unwarranted criticisms of Christianity that might demonstrate the irrational nature of deconversion in order to provide an apologetic in response. In order to avoid this, I kept the outlook of Creswell (2009) in mind: "In the entire qualitative research process, the researcher keeps a focus on learning the meaning that the participants hold about the problem or issue, not the meaning that the researchers bring to the research" (p. 175).

The fourth validation strategy used was an audit trail. In order for an outside auditor to be able to review the study, I kept all copies of the transcriptions of the personal interviews. The data analysis including the initial and focused codes were retained, as well as all other pertinent information that contributed to the construction of the theory.

Ethical Considerations

In a qualitative research project, the concern for the wellbeing of the participants is of utmost concern. Due to the personal and interactive nature of qualitative research, it is imperative that the rights and dignity of participants be protected and that their safety never be jeopardized. In the case of the participants of this study, the issues of confidentiality and possible repercussions from participating in the study were minimal. All participants were active members in various atheist organizations in Southern California who are openly anti-religious and often seek confrontation; or they were those who identify on the Internet as former Christians and are not shy about posting both their names and photos in social networking sites dedicated to deconversion. However, in

order to ensure that the highest ethical standards were followed in conducting the study, the following guidelines were put in place.

First, I secured the approval of Biola University's Protection of Human Rights in Research Committee. Second, I provided all participants willing to be interviewed with a consent form. The form indicated that their participation was voluntary, that they were under no contractual obligation to finish the interview, and that they could withdraw from the study for any reason and at any time.

Third, I confirmed with the participants that their names and personal information were strictly confidential and would not be included in any material that would be seen by anyone other than myself.

Fourth, the venues for the interviews were chosen at the discretion of the participants. I allowed participants to pick an interview place in which they felt most comfortable. All interviews were conducted in public venues such as coffee shops and university common spaces.

CHAPTER 4

CENTRAL FINDING

Understandably, participants experienced negative consequences resulting from their deconversions. Radically changing one's worldview has significant impact, and much of it is negative. However, they also experienced positive consequences. In fact, participants reported that despite the negative consequences, the overall impact on their wellbeing was positive. They reported positive consequences both affectively and cognitively. They characterized themselves as feeling liberated, happy, and better off as atheists then as Christians. This raises the question of what kind of experiences they deconverted from that made enduring the negative consequences so worthwhile. The data reveals that there is a strong relationship between the perceived benefit of deconversion and the type of Christian faith participants rejected. The central finding of this study is as follows: Deconversion from forms of Christianity perceived as rigid and oppressive produced a sense of liberation in those who deconverted. Though deconversion to atheism often produces negative consequences, the freedom experienced significantly outweighs them in the minds of participants.

Moving from a dominant, even a privileged, subculture like Christianity to one that is looked upon with a great deal of distrust had negative consequences in the lives of deconverts, some of which one might expect. Many participants spoke of the loss of

community being something that they felt acutely when they stopped going to church. Replacing that community was not always easy to do, and that left a void in the lives of many. The strain on family relationships with parents, siblings, children, spouses, and extended family was significant. For some, it effectively put an end to some relationships. Likewise, in many cases friendships were pushed beyond their limits, never to be mended. A number of participants spoke of suffering strained relations at work, losing out on employment opportunities, and even being fired for being atheistic. There were emotional consequences as well. Concluding that one's worldview is false can be a confusing and devastating experience. Yet, despite the negative consequences, participants found that the sense of liberation that came with abandoning faith was worth all of the negative experiences. The cost of deconverting may be high, but it was worth it.

Interestingly, a number of former Christians took exception with the term deconversion saying that it carried a negative connotation and thus signaled a hidden bias in the study. Several people who responded to my postings on the Internet seeking research participants for a study on deconversion suggested that the term conversion would likely be better received among potential participants since it conveyed a more neutral attitude on my part. One individual wrote, "I'm not sure how I feel about the term, 'deconverting' . . . . I think it's just converting. Deconverting has a negative connotation in my mind." Yet, the term deconversion is commonly used by apostates (Fazzino, 2014; Krueger, 2013; Smith, 2013), and there are good reasons for doing so. As Fazzino (2014) has pointed out, there are meaningful differences between converting to an organized religion and losing one's faith and adopting atheism. In conversion, there is an emphasis

in turning to an organized religious faith, in deconversion the emphasis is in moving away. However, in moving away it remains unclear what the destination is. Not so with conversion, where the destination is clear and includes not just a prescribed ideology but also a community and a historically extended tradition. Furthermore, converts often experience an end to doubt when they identify with a religious tradition, believing they have found the truth, while deconverts continue to search for the truth, knowing only what they do not believe in anymore, not necessarily what they positively affirm. Likewise for the convert, liberation is found in salvation from sin, ignorance or some other hindrance, but for the deconvert, liberation is found by coming to a new realization about the self and reality. Finally, while converts may experience a privileged status depending on the newly adopted religion, deconverts often become part of a marginalized subgroup and experience the stigmatization that comes from standing outside the dominant paradigm. The significant differences between the phenomena of conversion and deconversion warrant the uses of the terms. Thus the use of the term deconversion is justified and should not be understood to connote any negative meaning.

The following chapters present the results upon which the central finding of the study is based. Chapter 5 provides a look at the reasons for and process of deconversion. Participants identified a number of contributing factors that led to their deconversion. The contributing factors clustered around cognitive and emotional reasons and reveal both why and how participants deconverted. The importance of this chapter is that it begins to paint a picture of the backgrounds from which participants deconverted. Chapter 6 continues to unpack the religious background of participants. It identifies several themes

that emerged from the data that combine to reveal important aspects of their Christian experiences. Chapter 7 addresses the negative impacts of deconversion. Specifically, it identifies three broad categories of life that were negatively affected. Chapter 8 looks at the strategies employed by participants to navigate their new identities and Chapter 9 highlights the factors that influenced the choice of strategies. Chapter 10 focuses on the positive aspects of deconverting. Participants consistently witnessed to significant positive affective and epistemic consequences from deconverting. The positive consequences were so meaningful for participants that they made the negative consequences worth enduring. Chapter 11 summarizes the findings of the study and offers suggestions for both Christians and deconverts in light of the findings.

CHAPTER 5

FACTORS CONTRIBUTING TO DECONVERSION AND THE PROCESS OF

DECONVERSION ITSELF

This chapter presents the factors contributing to the deconversions of the

participants and puts forward a model of the process of deconversion. Regarding the

contributing factors, it focuses on the emotional and cognitive reasons why deconversion

occurred. The model of the deconversion process contains the five stages that the

participants passed through on their journeys from Christianity to atheism. Identifying the

reasons for deconverting and the process of deconversion provide a framework for

understanding the impacts of deconversion.

The reasons given by the participants for their deconversions are divided into two

main categories: emotional and intellectual. Eighteen (18) participants pointed to

emotional factors as the catalyst in their deconversions. Being hurt or disappointed by

believers played a major role in the loss of their faiths. All 24 participants raised various

intellectual problems with Christianity. For some, it was the primary contributing factor

to their deconversions; for others, it was a secondary factor. Regardless of the primacy of

the cognitive factors involved, it is clear that each participant came to the same cognitive

conclusion: Christianity is a false belief system.

The model of the deconversion process constructed from the data culled from the interviews included five stages: a) crisis, b) seeking the truth, c) trying to retain faith, d) becoming an agnostic, and e) becoming an atheist. Not every participant passed through each stage of the process; however, a discernable pattern did emerge from the interviews. The model presented in this chapter reflects a composite of the participants' experiences.

Contributing Factors

Emotional Factors

Participants reported that being hurt by other believers played a major role in their deconversions. For some, the hurt came from being let down by the shortcomings and outright failures of church leadership. Others shared disappointments at the hands of other Christians. A third group pointed to the overall negative effects that congregations had on their Christian experiences.

Disappointments with church leadership. Several participants pointed to disappointments with church leadership or those who were in positions of leadership in parachurch ministries as playing significant roles in their deconversions. Instead of finding support in times of personal crisis, it was noted by multiple participants that the leadership they looked to for guidance had let them down. For some, it was the moral failings of leadership. One participant, Derek, commented that what impacted him was "the stealing, fraud, [and] sexual promiscuity running rampant among UPC pastors that [he] trusted." In his case and the cases of others, the blatant hypocrisy of the spiritual leadership in which he trusted played a role in undermining his faith.

For others, it was not so much the moral failings of leadership that negatively impacted their faiths, but more the way the leadership in question exercised its authority. In the case of Charlene, she felt that the heavy-handed approach by the elders of her church actually played a major role in her deconversion. In her situation, the elders refused to endorse her as a cabin leader for a preteen girls' Bible camp because, at the time, she was dating a non-Christian. Instead, they encouraged her to consider serving in another capacity, one that did not entail being an example to young, impressionable girls:

> While the rest of my Christian friends went off to teach at Camp Aush-Bik-Koong that summer, I was required to stay in town. Looking back, I realize that was a real turning point for me. I'd signed up to be a counselor at ABK and, although I had already proven myself to be a capable teen and a good teacher, Bill [the pastor] was sent to talk to me in my home. He explained that the elders just couldn't let me counsel unless I broke up with David. While the elders of our church possibly protected some preteen girls from possibly hearing that their counselor had a possibly (Who were they to judge?) non-Christian boyfriend, they pushed me down a path from which I never returned. Clearly everyone already assumed I was sinning, so I might just as well begin! I hung out with the church crowd less and less and became more and more involved with David and his friends.

Lauren, another participant, felt that the church leadership not only let her down when she most needed their help, but they also rejected her entirely. Lauren worked at a church on the West Coast as a youth pastor and worship leader. She eventually had to leave the church to move back east to care for her ailing mother. While there, she began performing as an exotic dancer, something she did prior to her conversion to Christianity. She met a man at her club and had a child with him. They moved to Texas and lived together until he physically abused her so badly that she ended up in the hospital. After separating from him, she returned to her church community seeking support. Shortly after returning, she met and married a man who lied to her about being a Christian in order to

marry her. Devastated, Lauren subsequently began an affair with a younger man, who turned out to be gay. To make matters worse, her husband refused to provide financially for her and her daughter, and they were on the brink of being thrown out of their house. Her affair and other questionable decisions became known to the pastor, resulting in a strained relationship between her and the church leadership. With the approval of her husband, she returned to exotic dancing in order to pay bills. When the dancing proved to be less lucrative than anticipated, her husband called the pastor to tell him of their dire situation. The church leadership informed her through her husband that she was "nothing but a whore" and that if she came back around the church, they would "have her arrested for child endangerment." Receiving such shocking and harsh treatment from the leadership was the catalyst in her deconversion. First, it deeply hurt her and changed the way she saw her Christian leaders. They were no longer agents of God's grace but, as she described them, "horrible people." Second, she believed that the church's rejection forced her to make drastic choices in order for her and her daughter not to end up homeless. She said the way she was treated by the leadership "actually pushed me into . . . I actually did porn for two years." In response to this experience, she wrote a column for an adult website entitled, "A Family of Church vs. A Family of Porn: Which Family Really Has the Ties That Bind?" She compared her treatment within the Christian world to that of the porn industry. Looking back on her experiences with the church leadership, she said:

> I struggled for a while because I just couldn't believe that these were God's people. You know, I couldn't believe [it]. . . These are not Jesus' works, you know? Jesus walked with the sinners. Jesus said to turn the other cheek. Jesus said, "Go out and make disciples of all nations," not "Stand on a street corner with a freaking sign, telling people they are going to hell"—you know, not judging people.

Hurts by fellow Christians. Participants also identified disappointments with other Christian leaders and fellow Christians who not only failed to provide the desired assurance but actually reinforced doubt. Steve approached his professor, looking for answers concerning passages in the Bible that seemed to contradict each other and was told, "If you want to keep your faith, [you'd] be better off not asking these questions." To him, the response implied that, for those in the know, there was something to hide. In his words, it was that "one statement from him that was kind of like . . . somebody saying, 'Don't go in that room; there's nothing in there. See, we keep that locked. Just walk past it.'"

It was not only the failings of respected Christian leaders that played a contributing role in deconversion, but also the perceived negative treatment by the rank-and-file congregants. Criticism from other believers that he perceived as unjust or petty caused Sam to question just what Christianity was all about. Because he liked to listen to pop music and watch television, he was told, "You are obviously not a good Christian or obviously a bad one because, if you're a Christian, you wouldn't be doing all those kinds of things." Instead of challenging him to a deeper Christian commitment, it made him say, "Wait a minute! What does pop music has to do with Christianity?" The answer, in his mind, was that it has very little to do with being a Christian. This hurt was further compounded by comments that he received upon sharing with the church that he had been diagnosed with cancer. Instead of rallying around him, they said, "The reason you have cancer is because you are getting a divorce." Understandably, he was offended by such reasoning and responded by pointing out that, if the accusation is valid, then, "Why

doesn't everybody else have cancer because there's a lot [of] bigger problems than divorce?" Moreover, he raised telling indictments of certain members of the church by pointing out, "There's a lot of people's lives around me that, if that is the case, everyone should be walking around with cancer." Eventually, he perceived that through both his divorce and battle with cancer, "the church abandoned" him.

Rachel also was going through a divorce when she was a Christian. She commented, "When people heard that there was going to be a divorce, all of a sudden I started losing connection with people." Although she recognized that getting a divorce while being a member of the church counsel created an awkward situation between her and other members of the church, the treatment by church members during that period led her to ask herself hard questions about her faith. She wondered, "What am I doing, and what is this group that I'm involved with? Do I still want to be part of it?" She concluded that, because of the negative treatment she experienced at the hands of her fellow believers, she did not "want to be part of [the church]." In the end, she felt like she "was abandoned" by fellow Christians. Subsequently, she left the church and, ultimately, her faith.

Congregational reactions. Participants also had negative experiences at the hands of fellow believers when they challenged deeply held beliefs in their churches. When Martin, while serving as a pastor, questioned traditional positions on various social issues, his own congregation attacked him personally and with hostility. Martin described his church upbringing as a place where, "Questioning was looked upon really negatively . . . and doubt was something you just push aside." Nevertheless, he chose to teach an adult

Sunday school class in order to "talk about stigmatized topics," such as, "the death

penalty, gay rights, and stuff like that," he said. Consequently, he found himself on the

wrong end of some pointed criticism:

> We had this class, and it turned out [that] a lot of people are [sic] in it. I mean, we just got hammered by the churchgoers. . . . After that, everything changed. Everybody looked at my wife and myself [sic] completely different[ly]. We were Christians, and we happen[ed] to be anti-death penalty and pro-gay rights.

The response from the angry congregants was a strategic "Get personal and attack!" he

said. The apparent desire was to get Martin and his wife fired from the church. The

church no longer wanted him "to teach their kids" because they thought "I was wrong."

He described the hurt and disappointment from his congregants' reactions as "a pretty

horrible experience." Shortly thereafter, he left the church. It was not long after that he

left the faith altogether.

Disappointment with God. While many deconverts traced their journeys to

atheism to injury by other Christians, only one participant mentioned being hurt and

disappointed by God. Lauren, actively involved in her church as a youth pastor intern and

part-time worship leader, deeply desired a Christian husband. She was attracted to Kurt,

the internship director. Also in the internship program was a petite, attractive, blonde girl

named Mary. Mary garnered attention from many of the young men at the church. This

troubled Lauren, who had diligently prayed that God would bring her a Christian

husband. Mary eventually married Kurt, which caused tension in her relationship with

Lauren and Lauren's relationship with God. When Mary and Kurt wed and Lauren

remained unattached, Lauren felt hurt when she perceived that God had ignored her

earnest petitions:

> Things [were] cracking with my relationship with Mary, and . . . when she
> married Kurt, I felt so let down. I prayed for my husband. I had prayed for that
> man, . . . a godly man, for so long. I ended dating someone in the internship that
> year who is gay, who was trying to be straight that year. But, God wasn't bringing
> me my godly man.

Cognitive Factors

The second major contributing factor in deconversion is cognitive challenges to

the truth of Christianity and the existence of God. All participants claimed that the

cognitive dissonance they experienced by trying to maintain their Christian faith, in light

of conflicting data, was simply too much. After wrestling with a number of different

challenges to the truthfulness of Christianity and the existence of God, they no longer felt

they could retain their faith with any sense of intellectual integrity. The three most

significant cognitive challenges that resulted in deconversion were the following:

perceived problems with the Bible, Darwinian evolution, and the influence of atheists

themselves.

Problems with the Bible. For Christians, the Bible is a book without peer. It is

the inspired word of God and the final authority for life and Christian practice. Many

conservative Christians affirm not only the divine inspiration of the Bible, but also its

inerrancy. The doctrine of inerrancy holds that the Bible is wholly without error

regarding any topic that it addresses. Therefore, contradictions within the Scriptures are

only apparent and, when all the data are in, will vanish. Furthermore, God has preserved

the transmission of the Scriptures, keeping them free from corruption. The Bible reveals who God is, who we are, the reason for our brokenness, and God's solution for it. This section focuses on the consequences for faith when confidence in the Bible as God's word is lost.

Doubt about the claims of the Bible was the most specific objection leveled, being cited by 14 participants. The most common problem raised did not come from external sources that criticized the Bible; rather, they arose from reading the Bible itself. Christopher lamented, "The turning point was when I finished reading the Bible. I think it was the third time reading through it that I realized that I couldn't believe in a lot of things in it." He went on to add, "I read the Bible, and that really made me question it. The more that I read it, the more I questioned it." Wrestling with some of the content of the Bible is understandable for 21st century readers. The Bible calls upon its readers to affirm a world that is often very different from their own experiences; talking snakes, angelic visitations, chariots of fire, and resurrections from the dead are conspicuously absent from their day-to-day lives. Additionally, scientists have provided explanations for many of the phenomena that the ancients would have attributed to the gods. As a participant pointed out regarding the veracity of the creation account, when "you have an education and you understand evolution, it is really tough to believe in a literal translation." Reflecting on his attempt to maintain a robust faith in the Bible as an educated person, Douglas quipped, "Boy, the mental acrobatics that we'd go through was something else!"

Inerrancy. The doctrine of inerrancy is perhaps the cornerstone of fundamentalism and the evangelical movement. In response to the capitulation of some sectors of Christendom to the scalpel of higher criticism, fundamentalists and evangelicals strongly affirmed the supernatural accounts contained in the Bible and its factual accuracy in all that it teaches. Unfortunately, the doctrine itself has not been derived from biblical text but is an *a priori* deduction from the convictions that God is perfect and that he inspired the Bible. Given those two beliefs, it logically follows that God cannot inspire a text that contains errors. As one participant put it, "When you come up fundamentalist, there are no contradictions in the Bible. It's the perfect word of God. And if you see a contradiction, it's because you read it wrong." The problem this creates is that, if one believes they have discerned a historical error or contradiction in the Bible, they must reject it as the word of God because the *sine qua non* of God's word is that it is errorless. A great deal of apologetic effort is spent in defending inerrancy by refuting biblical difficulties. Encyclopedias, books, and journal articles have been dedicated to reconciling apparent contradictions, such as the Creation accounts in Genesis 1 and 2 and the resurrection narratives in the gospels. For many deconverts, the explanations, rationalizations, and harmonizations ring hollow, and they begin to doubt that the Bible is God's word. Interestingly, however, they do not seem to question the presupposition they have inherited from their evangelical upbringings: the belief that inspiration demands inerrancy. Like their estranged evangelical cousins, they still unquestioningly assume that inspiration demands inerrancy. This assumption was confirmed by Douglas, a former Southern Baptist and now a prominent atheist activist, speaker, and author. He was asked,

"Do you think it is generally true of deconverts that they assume inerrancy to be the case and that they have been told if there is even one error in the Bible, then it is not the word of God?" He responded by agreeing and provided the following commentary:

> I think so. I mean, I hesitate to generalize because I've ran [sic] into a lot of people, and they all have different stories of what did it for them. But, I think that's definitely a big, major part for a lot of people. It seems like the people who read the Bible the most are mostly likely to reach that conclusion. It's like, wait a second. They [the deconversions] all hinged on a different part, but, sooner or later, they reach their tipping point. "A prophet of God can't be wrong?!"—that kind of thing. Definitely for me, that was definitely a factor. I was taught to guard the truth and defend the truth. Then [you find out] these [Christian beliefs] are all lies and this is the truth. When you find out that this thing they call the truth may not be *the* [italics, mine] truth—Boom!—that did a number on me.

He was not the only one for whom discovering a perceived contradiction in the Bible undermined his beliefs. Steve, the son of a prominent evangelical leader, also was powerfully impacted by his discovery of what he "knew to be a contradiction" in the Bible. He estimated that, growing up, he had "read the Bible 20 times cover to cover," but while at a Christian liberal arts college, he came across the "contradiction." As he read through the Bible, he encountered what he was convinced was an irresolvable problem, and he was "floored." He decided to turn a critical eye back to the Bible and began to reread. He "took 3 months and went through it again," and by the time he had finished, he estimated that he "had 40 pages of notebook filled" with contradictions and difficulties.

Moral problems. The Bible is a record of many events that seem morally suspicious, if not offensive, to contemporary readers. The problem for some deconverts is not the record of morally offensive events, like the slaughter of the Canaanites, but that

God ordered the atrocities. If one has inherited a particular view of God, one that focuses only on his kindness and love, then when one encounters such troubling stories, this can cause a sense of disequilibrium. How could the good and loving God of the Bible command such heinous acts like slaughtering all of the inhabitants of the Promised Land?

Martin had such an experience when he encountered the stories of "genocide" in the Old Testament. The dissonance was so great between his view of God and what the Old Testament recorded that he expressed he "felt lied to about the Bible." He elaborated by pointing out, "There are things that aren't so nice in the Bible," specifically "the stories of genocide." It was difficult for him "to reconcile the God of the Old [Testament] and the God of the New Testament," whom he saw as warlike on the one hand, and loving and gracious on the other.

Biblical criticism. For Ann, the problem related less to the moral problems with the God of the Bible and more with the historicity of the text. While attending a Christian college, she was required to take courses covering the Old and New Testaments. The first course looked at the New Testament and exposed her to issues that she had apparently never considered, such as the process of canonization and textual criticism. The course caused her to question the trustworthiness of the New Testament:

> I had to take Old Testament [and] New Testament, so the first semester I was there, I took New Testament. . . .When he was teaching us, you know, he talked about the Apocrypha, which is . . . the books that were never canonized. He talked . . . historically how the Bible was canonized, where the manuscripts came from, [and] how old they were. That's when I started to go, "Wait a minute! That makes no sense. Why would somebody write these manuscripts 40 years after the death of [Jesus] . . . Was it really written by an apostle?" . . . I started questioning the validity of the manuscript, so I struggled with that in the first semester.

The second semester course on the Old Testament added to her doubts; however, this

time it was not issues of canonization and textual criticism that were the problems. What

caused her to question the trustworthiness of the Old Testament was the combination of

apparent contradictions in the exodus account and the absence of extrabiblical evidence

for the exodus itself:

> The second semester, I took Old Testament. It was actually the story of the exodus; we were reading it. The accounts, they seemed completely contradictory. There were things about it . . . just things that were not logical that really bugged me. I couldn't understand the Egyptians not recording the exodus in their history, especially if two thirds of their labor force just up and left. That would have a huge economic impact on their society, and for it to never be noted, I thought that was strange.

The result was a series of confrontations with her professor and pastor in which she

expressed her anger at never having been taught that information before. The cumulative

effect on her faith was substantial. The classes had planted seeds of doubt that would

grow into unbelief:

> I remember marching into my professor's office and becoming really belligerent and crazy, angry that nobody had ever taught me about the Apocrypha or the history of the Bible. I had a lot of heated conversations with my pastor back home about it. It was really tough because it was, like, my first exposure to, "Maybe this isn't valid?"

Darwinian evolution. A commonly mentioned factor in deconversion was the

acceptance of Darwinian evolution as the explanation for the origin of all species.

Thirteen (13) participants mentioned that accepting the theory of evolution played a role

in their deconversion. For deconverts, the belief that the entire edifice of organic life

could have evolved through random, beneficial mutations over time struck a major blow

to their theistic worldviews. While many believers, when presented with the evidence for

Darwinian evolution, manage to retain their faith by becoming theistic evolutionists, the deconverts in this study appear to have presupposed that, for various reasons, if evolution was true, then God could not exist. Convinced of the truthfulness of evolution, they believed they were forced to reject belief in God's existence.

In response to the question, "Can you point to anything specific that you would identify as a catalyst for your loss of faith?" a quarter of the participants responded with comments such as, "Learning about evolution is a powerful thing for me;" "Understanding the theory of evolution is like the biggest thing for me;" and "Evidence on [sic] evolution was one of the biggest things." Many deconverts raised in Christian homes were only taught the creationist account of origins. Evolution was not a legitimate theory of origins in the experience of many participants since holding to both the theory of evolution and Christianity would produce "cognitive dissonance." As one participant commented, "I grew up being taught creationism most of my life." Such was the case with the majority of participants of the study.

The fact that most deconverts were raised with the traditional creationist account of origins meant that often their first exposures to the theory of evolution was in high school or, for some, even as late as college. Marcus noted:

> I don't think I'd ever really explored . . . a secular worldview before I was 15.
> Once I started taking biology and opening myself up to those ideas a bit more,
> that was kind of like my first exposure to that. It turns out I agree with that more.

The timing of the exposure is not insignificant as it relates to deconversion. During late adolescence and early adulthood, people begin to think critically about their worldviews. The influence that teachers and professors have on students at this point in

life can be significant. The combination of assuming science to be the final authority for

truth claims and meeting evangelistic Darwinians can be a potent source for doubt, as the

experience of Marcus demonstrates:

> I was taking this biology class at my high school, where the talks were about boring things about like evolution, like Darwin, and stuff like that. We had a pretty vocal teacher who subscribes to Darwin's view of evolution. . . . We all had an even more vocal teaching assistant, who was straight out of UC Berkeley; like biological studies, like evolution, majored in all that stuff. He brought up atheism a lot, especially when we're talking about evolution. He always brought up . . . the contrast between creationism . . . evolution and stuff like that. Yeah, he was very vocal about his views. He made sure everyone knew that he was an atheist, I guess, so I think that kind of helped me to explore the atheist's worldview a bit more because, I mean, for my whole life, I think I had identified as a Christian, for the most part.

For Douglas, "The striving to keep belief in creationism (even though it was so

obvious, in hindsight) when in my heart of hearts, I knew evolution was the real deal"

was difficult. Likewise, Mitch wrestled with how to process the evidence for evolution

and what it meant for his faith. After being convinced that the evidence for evolution was

persuasive, he realized that his new position on origins would impact the contour of his

faith. His comment, "I'm not really sure what that means from my Christian perspective,"

may indicate hope that one could be an evolutionist and a Christian. Unlike other

participants in this study, he did explore the possibility of adopting theistic evolution but

found it created more problems than it solved:

> When I read through the evidence on evolution, I think a big part of me . . . [was] looking way back at our ancestors . . . [and asking] some of the famous questions people ask, . . . "Was it Australopithecus? Was it homoerectus? At what point was the soul imparted? Did God come down and touch you with a soul? Was it australopithecus? Do they have a soul?" So that was one of the—[changed thought midsentence]—I think, as I started struggling with that, that was a big impact on me.

Accepting Darwinian evolution proved to be a cognitive challenge to participants' faiths. Most claimed that belief in God and belief in evolution were incompatible. When they became convinced that the evidence pointed toward evolution, they were left with two choices: follow the evidence and accept evolution as their theory of origins or ignore the evidence and sacrifice their intellectual integrity. For the participants, following the evolutionary evidence entailed denying the existence of God. One participant attempted to reconcile evolution and theism but believed that it could not be done without doing producing significant "cognitive dissonance."

Losing belief in God entails no longer being a Christian; one cannot reasonably identify as a Christian without a belief in God. However, one can deny the Christian faith and still remain a theist. Islam or Judaism is still an option for those who lose faith in the God of Christianity.

The influence of atheists. A quarter of the participants mentioned the works of the New Atheists as being meaningful in their journeys to atheism. The New Atheists are a cadre of authors from different backgrounds who are united in their disbeliefs in the existence of God and in their convictions that religion is a force for evil that should be abandoned for the good of all. Their scathing critiques of arguments for the existence of God and withering criticisms of religion have earned them a wide hearing in a post-September 11th world. The most influential of the New Atheists are sometimes known as the Four Horsemen: Richard Dawkins, Daniel Dennett, Christopher Hitchens, and Sam Harris.

Dale, a lawyer, read Richard Dawkin's book, *The god Delusion*, and encountered

an unfamiliar argument for why God probably does not exist. He found it persuasive and

realized that, if true, he could no longer be a believer:

> When I was 25, I picked up the book called *The God Illusion* [sic], by Richard
> Dawkins. I picked that book because I've been involved in does-God-exist
> debates for quite a while, on the side of yes-he-does-and-yes-there's-a-good-
> reason-to-believe. I wanted to get the other side's arguments, so I picked it up,
> and I was reading through it, and, very abruptly, I realized that I accepted one of
> the logical arguments that was made in that book. . . . The only conclusion that the
> argument lead to was [that] it is much less likely that a God exists than a God
> doesn't [exist]. I didn't know what to make of that! Even [with] all the
> liberalization I had gone through, that was an unexpected thing. It wasn't . . . a
> decision that I made because of [the] unhappiness of my belief or conflict that I
> had [seen] in the church or my beliefs system. It wasn't because of any social and
> personal conflict. It was just [that] there's this logical argument that I accept.

Mitch said he "started reading all of those books, while a full-time employee at

the summer camp." He did so with some Christian friends in a small group by "slowly

kind of exploring, from a very guarded perspective." He was wary because, as he put it,

"It's a pretty brutal attack straight on your faith, bringing a lot of questions." Despite the

brutality of the attacks, he continued to devour their books:

> Sam Harris, Christopher Hitchens, Richard Dawkins (who has been writing for a
> really long time), Dan Dennett—all those writers—Steve Pinker, Michael
> Shermer, I've read all of their books, every one of them that's written a book
> (well, besides Dan Dennett. He's a little bit thick for me; I haven't read all of his
> books). But, I read anything by Sam Harris. So, I started reading all of these
> books while I was still a full-time employee at the summer camp.

How the internet influenced deconversion. For Christians, apologetic material

is ubiquitous. For decades, Christian publishing houses have been churning out

apologetic books, and Christian radio stations have aired apologetic preaching, defending

and arguing for the faith. Entire ministries are dedicated to the task of apologetics, and

some of evangelicalism's most prominent representatives are apologists. Atheism,

however, lacks the infrastructure that is inherent in a religion like Christianity. For

instance, there are few atheist bookstores and publishing houses and even fewer atheist

radio stations in the United States. Seekers cannot drive across town to the local atheist

bookstore to pick a book on atheist apologetics. In fact, it was nearly impossible for the

average person to access atheist apologetics until recently. Consequently, millions of

Christians have been exposed to only one side of the argument for Christianity, and that

may create an unchallenged sense of confidence that reason and evidence demonstrate the

truth of Christianity. With the advent of the Internet, all that has changed. In many ways,

the Internet is the great equalizer in the world of ideas, and, for atheism, it has proven to

be the ideal platform for challenging the claims of Christianity. A quarter of participants

credited the Internet for providing them with information that contributed to their

deconversions.

Mitch offered the following observations about the importance and influence of

the Internet on deconversion:

> I think Dan Dennett is the one [who] thinks the Internet will completely change the future. I feel . . . that the Internet has opened and raised my consciousness to a point that I have very different priorities on what's important, as opposed to what I did before I had this information. The Internet started opening my eyes that the atheist movement had been out there.

Initially, he was just curious:

> I think it was about a year—[changed thought midsentence]—I can remember looking on websites at stories about people and saying, like, "Oh, that is very interesting. That's not going to be me though. Like, I'm might take these perspectives and change my worldview and give [myself] a greater degree of sympathy, what not, [but] I don't think I'm going to change my mind." Reddit [a website that hosts various threads on different topics] was a big influence on me

at this time. . . . They have, you know, a section about atheism. They have a lot of quotes from authors. . . . So, I explored more on that.

Douglas has seen the influence of the Internet in spreading his work on behalf of atheism. Thanks to the Internet, his message has reached a vast audience around the world. He testified:

> We get emails from people in places like Egypt, in the Middle East, where there are women who . . . can't get a job, they can't drive a car. They can't do anything but stay at home and go on the Internet. There are no anti-Islamic websites but there are plenty of anti-Christian websites.

Wayne, a participant from Texas, who once was an amateur apologist, identified the Internet as a major influence in his deconversion:

> I would say, probably, the next big thing in my back story is that, when the Internet came around, I was in college, and just from being on the Internet and meeting people in college, I started to realize that I knew more people that were not Christians. I would say the straw that broke the camel's back—you know, I'm hesitant to tell this story to other people because some people would look at this one moment and say, "Oh, I could refute that one thing"—Leading up to this, mainly I worked at a job as a web developer, and I was contracted to do about six hours of work a day that was billable, so, I mean I had like an hour and a half a day that I could just do whatever. So, I watched debat[ors] like William Lane Craig, and that sort of thing on YouTube. [I was] doing my best to be aware of confirmation bias [the temptation to interpret all evidence in such a way that it confirms one's belief]. I was trying to believe and think through both sides of the arguments, thinking that if I can consider the arguments that the atheists have and refute them to my satisfaction, then I'm good. I don't have anything to worry about. At that point, I noticed the more and more I did this, the more and more I softened my position; I started becoming, I guess, maybe moving in more toward atheism.

Martin also mentioned the Internet as playing a role in his deconversion. Already struggling with belief in the existence of God, he was moved towards atheism in part by having conversations with people online and listening to their stories of deconversion. He accessed atheism videos and learned of books about atheism:

Up until five years ago, I worked in a church until 2009 or 2010. At that point, I considered myself agnostic. I remember having a conversation on the Internet [where] people are questioning, people [are] telling about their stories, you know, watching videos, reading textbooks about atheism—sort of good without God.

The Process of Deconversion

The model presented below is based on the data collected from the participants' interviews. As such, the model may be particular to these participants and not accurately represent the deconversion process in general. However, there is considerable overlap between this model and that of Krueger (2013). The model that emerged from the experiences of the participants consisted of five stages: a) a crisis of faith, b) seeking to know the truth, c) trying to retain the faith, d) moving to agnosticism, and e) becoming an atheist.

Like the present study, Krueger also identified five stages to the deconversion process. Three of those stages correspond with three stages of the model presented here. In both studies, deconverts experienced a stage of doubt, migration away from the faith, and apostasy. Where the studies differ is that, in Krueger's study, the process did not begin with a crisis but with weak social attachment. Weak social attachment led to doubt about the truthfulness of Christianity. From that point, deconverts disassociated from their faith communities and transitioned away from their Christian identities. In the final stage, they declared their identities as atheists. The deconversion model presented here is slightly different. Participants in this study did not begin their deconversion processes as a result of weak social attachment to their faith communities. Instead, it was an intellectual or emotional crisis that began the process. Like the participants in Krueger's

study, participants in this study transitioned to unbelief, then declared their atheism. A significant difference is that, in this study, participants sought to retain their faiths before transitioning to agnosticism, then atheism. That does not seem to be the case in Kruger's model.

Stage 1: Crisis

The deconversion process began with a crisis of faith. A significant event occured that caused the believer to question his or her faith. Each crisis was unique to the individual, but every participant reported a crisis moment. Three broad classifications of crises emerged from the stories of the participants: bad experiences with other Christians, exposure to virtuous non-Christians, and confronting intellectual challenges to the faith.

Bad experiences with other Christians. Steve recounted an experience with his mother when he revealed to her that he had decided to make contact with his estranged father and his father's new wife. She told him, "Well, you only have one mother in God's eyes, so you choose me or you choose her." Steve said, "Well, I'm not going to choose. I'm not going to play the game." Tragically, she had not spoken to Steve or his sister in eight years. The rationale Steve's mother used to justify her extreme choice to cut her two children out of her life is based on her understanding of what the Bible teaches about marriage. Steve saw this action as one in a long list of tragedies engendered by religious irrationality. He credited experiences like the one with his mother for making him "more receptive" to what he would read from the New Atheists:

> Christopher Hitchens, in his *God Is Not Great*, he's just going through the alphabetical list of different kinds of atrocities in core morals [sic] and showing

good and bad getting flipped. I was [thinking], "I can really attest to that firsthand."

For Sam, a middle-aged man from Southern California, his crisis came through the treatment he received from other Christians in his church. He saw the church as more of "a social club," and said, "If you did not follow the rules of the social club, you will not fit in at the social club." By questioning what he perceived as the legalism in the church, "the less popular with my own group, within my own church, and within my own congregation" he became. The crisis reached a peak when he started divorce proceedings. He "could see just how much outside of the social club" he was, at that point, so he decided "to step back," "re-evaluate, and think." "For the last three years, I've gotten really serious about thinking," he affirmed.

Exposure to virtuous non-Christians. Interacting with others who were not Christians but were good, moral people challenged the particularist presuppositions of some participants. Their uncritical acceptances of the exclusive claims of Christianity were difficult to retain in the faces of their experiences. Martin provided an excellent example. As a member of the military, he struggled with the thought that a Muslim he had come to know and admire was consigned to hell because he was of a different faith:

> I remember having very, very specific and meaningful conversations with a guy that had been assigned to our platoon there. He was an Iraqi guy, born and raised in Iraq, and he had gone through all the horrible experiences. He was a regiment translator, and he was trying to help the Americans to rebuild the country and everything. He used to go with us and try to interact with the population. I got to know him really well. We were together 365 days [a year], 24 hours a day. I was really curious about the Muslim faith and asking why he believed what he believed. He was asking me the same questions, and I started thinking, "You know, where I came from, my upbringing with my parents, the church that I was raised in, they would probably tell me that this guy is going to hell." I had the

hardest time reconciling that. Here was this guy, he was married and had children, [and] he was trying to do what he thinks is best for his family. For me, he was a good, moral, decent person, and just because he has a different faith, he is going to hell. That, I just couldn't [accept]. That sort of started making me question about Christianity.

Intellectual problems. The third crisis point was general intellectual doubts

about the truth of Christianity. Although problems with the Bible were the most specific

objections raised by participants, all participants, at some point, raised general intellectual

problems with Christianity. For some, it proved to initiate the deconversion process. In

the case of Sam, his doubts occurred when he "read an atheist book in order to disprove

it." It dawned on him that he had "no honest argument in response to it." He concluded

that "everything that was said [about Christianity] for the last 30 years" was under

scrutiny. More problematic was the thought that he did not "have a single comeback" to

the arguments in the book.

Dave, a self-identified humanist activist, raised the perennial intellectual

challenge to the existence of God, the problem of evil: How can it be reasonably said that

God is loving, in light of the gross amount of evil in the world? His statement powerfully

captured the problem and is worth quoting in full:

> When we look at the problems in the world, when we look at starvation, tornadoes, hurricanes, leukemia striking children, earthquakes crumbling [structures] down and trapping people under these giant blocks (obviously, they can't move), these terrific events in our lives are terrifying, and when we insert a God into the equation, that adds thousands more questions. Why would it say in Psalms 21:7, "God is going to keep us from harm," when clearly that's not the case? Atheists and Christians experience harm at the exact the same statistical rate. Why, if people are in fact biologically born gay, would they also be immediately condemned to a life of never experiencing love, or in Leviticus 20:13, be killed because of their actions in simply acting out of love? Why would a God of love condemn someone for feeling love when he's the one that made it

that way, when, in fact, he made them that way? Why doesn't God lift the rocks in Haiti? Why doesn't God cure the children from leukemia? It creates this cognitive dissonance that God is love, and yet, he watches as these horrific things happen, and he does nothing to stop it. I would stop it if I could, and I'm just an atheist.

Charlene, too, was plagued by questions. For her, they focused on why her non-Christian friends "gossiped less" and were more "genuinely generous" than her "so-called Christian friends." When she raised the issue, she "was reminded that everyone is human, and it's not up to us to judge." To make matters worse, she was told: "I think too much and am too smart for my own good." Far from satisfying her curiosity, that response lead only to more questions, specifically about the relationship between God's sovereignty and human responsibility. She asked, "Didn't God make me this way? Wasn't He the one who gave me my intelligence and the ability to ask questions?" If so, why was she to blame for her inquisitiveness?

Stage 2: Seeking the Truth

The second stage of the deconversion process occurred as participants began to seek ways to resolve their crises. Not content to merely ignore the challenges and continue with the status quo, they choose to seek the truth. As Christopher put it, "I really want to know what the real truth is." Some, like Wayne, first looked to God for help:

> I went for about a year. . . . I was too afraid to really take steps. I kind of got apathetic about researching or looking at things. I prayed often, on and off, asking God, like, "Hey, I'm having all these doubts, you know. Can you reassure me somehow? Can you lead to some information or something?"

Eventually, he branched out in the opposite direction and started looking at top "atheist resources" on the Internet, in order to "learn about how [atheists] think and what they

think." He began his search "by walking into [the] office, pulled up [his] computer and went up to Google and typed in 'Atheist.'"

Dave, upon experiencing a crisis moment during his baptism, realized that he had never really investigated whether what he believed was true:

> And it's silly! I was like, "I don't, I don't know [if] it [is true]. I have so much research to do [about Christianity]. I, this is weighing over my head, I do not deserve this team [the church he was joining]. I better go figure this stuff out." And, I ran home, I grabbed a bottle of water, I flipped [open] the Bible, and I read and read and read. I was probably the only 15-year-old on the planet, you know, reading through from Genesis to Exodus. . . . Questions just flooded in, and I did my own research as a teenager, all the way to my early 20s, talking with theology professors, asking all these questions. To me, this is the single most important question of my life. It's my eternity we are talking about.

His acute onset of doubt generated in Dave a passion for finding the truth. His study raised even more questions for him about what he believed. He continued researching and, as he did, the more difficult it became to hold on to his faith. It is here, in the face of counterarguments and objections, that the participants made the move to the third stage.

Stage 3: Trying to Retain Faith

The third stage of the deconversion process involved participants attempting to retain their faiths in the face of growing doubts. It was at this stage that several participants in this study turned the corner in their journeys to atheism. In fact, a majority skipped this step altogether, capitulating quickly when challenged either emotionally or intellectually. Those who resisted reported that despite their desires, they could not maintain belief in God.

Charlene spoke about her "path from Christian to atheist as a conversion experience." For her, "It took years of painful, sometimes excruciating, struggle" as she

"slowly awakened into reason." Wayne, likewise, went through a lengthy period of wrestling with what he believed. Shortly after having a child, he "started having some pretty serious doubts." Until then, "There wasn't a point where [he] didn't believe." When doubt came, his strategy for dealing with it was that he "ignored it for a while." He managed to avoid doubt for quite some time, but it eventually caught up with him. "It was actually in my 30s, the first time I actually seriously thought that I maybe I don't believe this anymore," he said. Dale also wrestled with holding onto his faith in the face of increasing doubts:

> I wouldn't describe it as ever having chosen atheism. I tried very hard in the two months following to convince myself back. You know, I've read a lot of Francis Collins. I've read a lot of [Lee] Strobel, reread a lot of stuff, previous arguments in favor of God, trying to convince myself that, you know, God really exists because I thought, a) it's a big deal. I should not make this move lightly. And, b) it was a way I could save my marriage, so I tried very hard for social and personal reasons to hold on to Christianity.

The impact of attending a Christian college and being exposed to ideas that challenged a rigid interpretation of the Bible forced Mitch to find a way to hold on to the core of his faith and accept the new ideas he was learning. His strategy was to "liberalize a little bit" in his positions. He believed that he "started to question things, trying to reconcile the existence of an eternal hell with the existence of an all-loving, all-powerful God." He found himself also "trying to reconcile issues about science" and the Bible "in order to maintain a belief in God" in light of the new data he was encountering.

Stage 4: Going from Believer to Agnostic

At the point in the process where retaining belief in God was no longer feasible, some participants chose to identify as agnostics before they became atheists. Slightly over half of participants, at one time, were agnostics; the other half transitioned from being believers to atheists without an intervening step, or they did not use the term agnostic. Martin, who worked in a pastoral role at church as an agnostic, said: "By the time I was at church . . . you know, working at an office in the church, I came to terms with the fact that I was actually agnostic. I didn't believe anymore. I think it was more about working in the church and having the paycheck."

Steve abandoned his belief in the Christian God but did not immediately become an atheist. He still believed there was a supernatural essence to reality. He speculated, "Maybe something bigger is out there, but maybe it's like energy, or the cosmic consciousness, whatever the buzz word of the year is." The uncertainty of what ultimate reality was caused him to linger in epistemic limbo for over "two years" before he moved from agnosticism to atheism. Shelley also spent "two years" as a "full-blown agnostic," as she sought the truth. In the end, Martin, Steve, and Shelley, like all the others in the study, matriculated to stage five and identified as atheists.

Stage 5: Going from Agnostic to Atheist

Moving from agnosticism to atheism marked the final stage of the deconversion process. All participants who had, at one time, identified as agnostics migrated to atheism, although it must be noted that the definition of atheism adopted by the vast majority of participants in the study is functionally no different from agnosticism.

Traditionally, atheism has been understood to affirm the nonexistence of God. However, recently many atheists choose to define their position in the negative as, "lacking a belief in God." Christopher is a good example of the conflation in terms:

> So, I became agnostic first, and it's only because I started having doubts. It was one thing [to figure out] how do you clear up those doubts. It wasn't until later on, [that] I consider myself [an] atheist. Like now, I consider myself an agnostic atheist, which [means] I don't make an assertion that there is no God—that is the agnostic part—but I'm also unconvinced, so that's the atheist part.

What all of the participants seem not to realize, however, is that it is difficult to distinguish the property, lacking a belief in God, from agnosticism. Moreover, it does not rise to the level of being a genuine philosophical position because it makes no claim about reality. Instead, it merely reports an individual's subjective, inner mental states.

Summary

This chapter surveyed the factors contributing to deconversion along with the process of deconversion. The reasons identified by participants leading to their deconversion were the emotional and cognitive challenges that they could not withstand. The model of the deconversion process presented in this chapter was constituted by five stages: a) crisis, b) truth seeking, c) trying to retain the faith, d) agnosticism, and finally e) atheism.

CHAPTER 6

CONTEXTS

The previous chapter addressed the contributing factors surrounding the impact of

deconversion and a model of the process of deconversion was also put forward. Two

main factors contributing to deconversion were identified: cognitive and emotional

reasons for deconversion. Each of the factors was subdivided into further sections and

expanded upon. This chapter focuses on the contexts out of which deconversion emerges.

The background conditions in which deconversion occurs have a significant bearing on

the impacts. For example, the participants' report of overwhelmingly positive results

from deconversion speaks to the nature of how they perceived their Christian

experiences. The interviews revealed that, for the deconverts, the factors surrounding

their deconversions made abandoning their faiths feel like liberation from an oppressive

system. Four contextual themes emerged from the data that contributed to the negative

perceptions of Christianity and, thus, the positive nature of the deconversion: a) aspects

of fundamentalism, b) high Christian commitment, c) a high confidence in apologetics,

and d) problems with Christianity while a Christian. Not every participant in the survey

cited the above factors, nor did any one participant report all of them. However, the four

themes were prominent in the participants' narratives of deconversion and provided a

glimpse into the contexts within which deconversion occurs.

Themes

Aspects of Fundamentalism

A dominant theme appearing in the data was that a participant's religious experiences were tainted with aspects of fundamentalism. While fundamentalism is difficult to define, there are certain attitudes and behaviors that typically characterize it. Fundamentalism is often associated with narrow-minded, strict adherence to certain tenets of the faith, religious exclusivism, and extreme literalism. Other attributes that are identified with fundamentalism, such as legalism, anti-intellectualism, denigrating those outside the faith, and an overly strict commitment to a particular church, were present in the narratives of participants.

Legalism. It is not surprising that many deconverts reported being reared in environments that they perceived as being strict, legalistic, or fundamentalist. The focus on what not to do and who not to associate with left bad tastes in the participants' mouths and acted as precursors for their deconversions. Few spoke fondly of their religious upbringings. Mitch referred to his home life as a "very mild, fundamentalist upbringing." His parents were intentional about raising him and his brother in a Christian home where his "family was together" all the time. That included being home-schooled. The one mitigating factor that kept his family mildly fundamentalist, as opposed to radically fundamentalist, is that he "was raised in California where there is a culture of academia."

A hallmark of fundamentalism is an emphasis on taboos: prohibited actions, items, and beliefs. Often, as participants broke away from the influence of parents and

church leaders, they became skeptical toward the taboos they once accepted. Martin no longer abstains from drinking alcohol despite being raised in what he described as "a pretty strict household." In his home, "Vices like alcohol were not only frowned upon . . . [but were] viewed as a horrible thing to do." As an adult atheist, he no longer believed that drinking was evil. When he dined out with his parents, he would, to their chagrin, often order a beer. Even as an adult nonbeliever, his parents still attempt to get him to submit to the taboos of their worldview: "They say, "You shouldn't do that. Drinking is sinful,'" he said.

Growing up as a member of a minority sect, Tim described his home life as "very strict" and "very, very staunchly religious." He attributed much of that to his father who, perhaps unwittingly, was lured by the power and control that the "fundamentalist" church gave him over his family. Tim alleged, "He was the one who's the most gung-ho about it because it was fundamentalist religion, and fundamentalist religions give fathers all of the power." From Tim's point of view, "Everything strongly revolved around the church," in his formative years at home.

Derek also described his religious upbringing as "strict" and, like Mitch, described it as "fundamentalist." In his experience, it was not so much the taboos and restrictions that negatively impacted his view of Christianity, but more the rigid and wooden literalism that was demanded in reading the Bible. Regarding how one should interpret the Bible, Derek was told: "There is really not much allegory. Take it literally, or not at all." Being presented with a "Take it, or leave it" approach to the Bible was

instrumental in his deconversion. As Derek explained, "When I found things I couldn't take literally, I just pulled on the string, and it kind of unraveled."

Like Derek, the word that Martin chose to describe the religious environment in which he was nurtured was "strict." He shared, "[My] parents are pretty strict, I mean, we were a pretty strict religious family. By that, I mean we never missed a church service; there was Wednesday night and Sunday morning up to evening." He went on to elaborate just how strict his parent were. Not only did they never miss a church service, they also had very narrow beliefs about who was and was not Christian. While it is unclear if others outside of his denomination were considered believers, it is clear that those who were Roman Catholic were not:

> You know, I was raised . . . that I shouldn't associate with Catholics—that's how strict the household that I grow up in [was]. And, Catholics really weren't Christian you know; they prayed to Mary and other stuff.

Steve chose to use a stronger term to describe his home. When asked to depict his religious rearing, he responded by saying, "I think legalism is probably the singular most applicable word you can use here." He defined legalism as, "rules that apply to everyone else, but you." By "you," he meant his parents who proscribed the rules. Perhaps the most revealing comment about the strict nature of religious home life came from Shelley. She not only believed her upbringing was strict, but actually abusive:

> Well, I do look at what I went through as a child as abuse. What they did to me was abuse, and it did affect my life in negative way[s] and is, of course, carried over. I didn't feel that my parents were abusive because they followed what they [thought was] good. I would never say they were abusive parents, but what I did experience was abuse mentally, for me anyway. And, it did have a negative impact for me throughout my childhood and my high school years. And, my college years—[they were] very, very difficult for me. I wished I didn't have to go through that.

Anti-intellectualism. Participants spoke of being reared in environments that discouraged the asking of questions and critical thinking. Since participants did not explain why questioning was discouraged, the reason for this is unclear. Perhaps it was due to the inability of parents and church leaders to answer questions, so they discouraged the asking of them? Maybe it was out of fear that the questions could not be answered and that too much thinking would lead to doubt and unbelief? Regardless, whatever the reasoning behind the suppression of critical inquiry, such suppression is an important contextual factor in the deconversion process. Charlene testified that, for her, Christianity was characterized by unquestioned devotion to a way of life, the effects of which lingered long after her deconversion. She maintained, "My childhood was so ingrained in Christianity, in faith in a supernatural being, in unquestioning devotion, and in the acceptance of God's will, that there was much I have had to unlearn."

At the beginning of Charlene's deconversion, doubts and questions began to rise in her mind, so expressed them to those in leadership. Their responses were to rebuke her for her inquisitiveness: "I was told that it's not up to us to judge and that I think too much and am too smart for my own good," she said. Shelley was also discouraged from asking questions. She perceived the leadership as requiring blind obedience:

> When I was a Christian, it had to be a certain way because I was told it had to be, or that's what my church told me, my pastor or the deacons . . . I had to be a specific way. I was taught not to question my elders, especially not to question the people who were part of my spiritual life.

Cindy, too, was not allowed to ask questions concerning her faith. She believed that, as a result, it negatively affected her ability to be assertive and think for herself. Furthermore,

it caused her to place her trust in people in an unwise fashion, resulting in undesirable

consequences:

> I think it was the way they think. I was taught to never question anything, so that's why I was so naïve and passive growing up because I didn't question anything and [that] made me trust people [whom] I shouldn't have trusted.

Non-Christians were evil. A third but less prominent contextual factor was that

the mental pictures participants had of non-Christians and the unbelieving world were

characterized by deep distortions and mischaracterizations.

Steve admitted that, growing up, "We just assumed that every non-Christian was a

drug-addicted pedophile and probably sacrificing virgins to goats or vice versa or

whatever." Because of his upbringing, Martin believed that atheists were the epitome of

evil. He opined, "I remember, just because it was so pounded into me as a kid growing

up, you know, [that] atheists are so bad and equated with evil."

Remarking on how she now enjoys the freedom to dialogue with people who are

not Christians, Rachel looked back on her former life as a believer and explained why she

lacked that freedom. The main reason she did not engage with non-Christians was

because of the "evil influence" she saw in the unbelieving world. She had been taught to

see things in such stark terms that having relationships with non-Christians was out of the

question. In her words, "You were a believer; everything else was of the devil."

Church attendance. During their times as believers, church attendance was a

regular occurrence for participants. All but two participants reported that the church

played a significant role in their lives. Some attended because they were still under the

authority of their parents, but others went willingly of their own accord. Not all

deconverts were raised in church, but those who were tended to be raised in families who

placed a very high priority on going to church and had a commitment to being there

whenever there was a service. For some participants, the commitments of their families to

church caused them to suffer in various ways.

Despite the fact that there were a number of Christian churches in their

hometown, Martin's family chose to drive an hour and a half, round trip, twice on

Sundays, to their particular church:

> [My] parents are pretty strict, I mean, we were a pretty strict, religious family. By
> that, I mean we never missed a church service; there was Wednesday night [and]
> Sunday morning up to evening. We actually drove almost 40 minutes to the
> church one way. We go to Live in God Church, [and] we attended [it] as a kid . . .
> . I grew up south of Dallas in a really small town. The town had Baptist and a lot
> of [kinds] of Protestant [churches], you know, Methodist, things like that. We
> have one, little . . . country . . . Pentecostal church, but [my] parents chose to drive
> almost 40 minutes away to Dallas. That's how my parents were. Only when we
> got older, my sister and I started complaining about sitting in the car for almost
> two hours, round trip, twice a day on Sunday.

Douglas also reported that his family was deeply committed to church attendance. Their

commitments extended beyond church to a home group that met at his house and also

extended to participation in the youth group. Nearly everyday of the week had a church-

related activity:

> Our family, if the doors were unlocked, we were there [at church], so Sunday
> morning, Sunday evening, Wednesday night. Thursday night was a home group at
> our house. Tuesday night was the home group at someone else's house. Friday
> night was youth group as I got older.

As previously mentioned, Tim's family's belonged to an exclusivist sect that

severely restricted what he was permitted to do. He observed:

> We went to church every Saturday, even though we were Christian—the fun Jewish-Christian, hybrid religion. It involved all the of Old Testament instruction as well as the New Testament judgment stuff. It was very, very staunchly religious. One of the doctrines of [my church], which makes it a minority denomination within Protestant Christianity, is the belief that the Sabbath must be kept holy.

Keeping the Sabbath holy, according to his church, meant that Tim had to rest on the Sabbath. Resting precluded any type of strenuous activity. Unfortunately for Tim, that ruled out nearly all extracurricular school activities or sports programs that took place on the weekend. He lamented:

> I couldn't do anything from sundown Friday to sundown Saturday. Therefore, the majority of school events and things like that were out of question. [I] couldn't be in a debate, couldn't be in band. I couldn't be involved in any sports or that sort because it's usually on weekends.

Committed Christians

Prior to their deconversions, participants exhibited behaviors characteristic of serious, committed Christians. Twenty (20) of the 24 participants demonstrated high levels of commitment to their faiths. Whether participants were truly born again was a theological question beyond the scope of this study. Nonetheless, it is clear from the data that all of the participants considered themselves Christians and were quite serious about their faith. For some, that meant teaching Sunday school; for others, that meant going to seminary. The interviews revealed a willingness to serve, worship, pray, study the Bible, engage in dialogue with others, give money, and deny certain proscribed pleasures. The amount of biblical knowledge varied from participant to participant, and their understandings of what it meant to be a Christian was by no means uniform. However,

each participant deconverted from, what was in his or her mind, a context of meaningful

Christian commitment.

Anne described an extended period of time, beginning with her preteen years and

continuing through high school, where she was living a committed Christian life:

> When we were younger, my grandmother would read us the Bible every night,
> and we would pray. It was when I became a teenager when we really got involved
> in studying the Bible, doing this weekly Bible studies [sic] and we [had] this
> youth council that I was on. I was really involved in, like, Bible quiz team. It was
> more like during my teenage years when I really got into really studying about the
> church.

It was after her exposure to biblical criticism at college that Anne began to have serious

doubts that proved to be the beginning of her deconversion.

Steve recounted that, during his time as a Christian, he was as sold out to Christ as

he could possibly be. Desiring to serve, share the gospel, and worship God, he showed a

zeal not often seen among Christian youth:

> I was in any church opportunities that were available. I did summer stuff like
> King's Kids, where you go to a camp and you learn god-awful choreography in
> pastel shirts and go and perform it on the street and stuff. I went with a group
> called Teen Mania; it does international missions. I went over to Russia with them
> and [to] Ireland and Jamaica with my church youth group. I would say that I was
> about as into it as you could be. You know "Acquire the Fire," Ron Luce's big
> thing? I would go and rededicate myself, and I was, yeah, I was on fire. I was on
> the worship team at the private school when I went to a Christian college. I was
> on their Thursday night band kind of thing and [did] mission trips with them. I
> was in it about as hard core as you can be into it.

Charlene also spoke of deep commitment and a passionate desire to follow Jesus.

Her life produced what many would consider genuine, spiritual fruit:

> I eventually rededicated my life to the Lord at a weekend retreat . . . . I threw
> myself whole-heartedly into Bible study, Young Peoples, and mission trips. I
> believed that, if I just trusted enough and walked the walk, it would eventually
> feel real to me. I know there were definitely times it did—I even won a friend or
> two over to Christ.

Jill regularly attended Sunday school as a child and later taught Sunday school as well as a high school church class. She even spent time at a Bible camp where she worked for a number of summers:

> I don't remember that we went [to church] every week, but it was a regular thing. My sister and I, we were always along. I don't remember if I ever asked not to go. . . . At least until junior high, we were always along for the ride. . . . I was in Sunday school, and I taught Sunday school and, I guess, high school, and I taught summer Bible camp for few summers in junior high.

Mitch, while a student at a Christian university, worked and lived at a Christian summer camp in the Sierra Nevada Mountains of California. The employment opportunity presented itself after he spent time in a specialized course offered by the university for students who were seeking a deeper spiritual and educational experience. Although he was without a church home while at the camp, he was embedded in a Christian community that was committed to their own wellbeing and to serving the homeless:

> Still, religion was part of my life. I don't think I had a home church because the summer camp that I worked at, that was really a tight community. We did homeless ministry at the church program there , and I really enjoyed it.

Lauren was converted at a youth retreat. She became part of a church and began to grow in her faith. She helped plant a church, did an internship at the church, and then accepted a pastoral position. When not at the church, she served at a charity center. She testified that, during those years, she believed she really was walking with God:

> Halfway through that year, on New Year's Eve, which was my big event, our pastor . . . said that he felt the call from God to start a church, that we were leaving Christian Faith Center. . . . We started Real Life Church, and that was in Naperville in Washington. I finished up my internship there, and I assumed a position at church, at an outreach center, at Charity Christian Center, where I was the intern director and praise and worship leader. I was there for few months, and

I went with the children's pastor from Christian Faith Center [to the Charity Christian Center]. I was 21 and never felt closer to God.

Rachel is another example of a former believer who, at one point, was enthusiastically involved in the church and intentionally living out her faith. She helped lead the church, actively studied the Bible, and even opened her home for Bible studies. She recalled, "I was on the church counsel. We [she and her husband] were really involved, and we would go to our weekly Bible study, too. We had it in our house for a while."

Negative and Critical

When they were Christians, the participants generally viewed themselves as critical, negative, and judgmental people. Although they were meaningfully committed to their faith and seeking to become like Jesus, they spoke regretfully about the attitudes they had toward those outside the faith. Rather than loving their neighbors, they admit that they looked down on them. This will become evident in Chapter 11, but for now, only one example is necessary.

A particularly good example is Rachel. She spoke passionately about her attitude as a believer. She stated, "Now that I am out . . . I can look at myself from a different perspective, I think I was very disrespectful of people who didn't believe the same way I did." She added that one of the most significant beliefs she disdained was evolution. She acknowledged that her belief in creationism was directly tied to her "judgmental" attitude:

> If anybody would say they [sic] are an evolutionist, and regardless of what they said, even if they had a Ph.D. in biology or whatever, [if] they believe in

evolution, I discounted pretty much everything they have done or said, you know? I wouldn't even listen to them or wouldn't read books on that because I wouldn't want to be swayed into something other than what God wanted from me. I think I was probably rude, not rude . . . toward individuals, but just in a way of not respecting the people and work they [had] done and the hard work and the knowledge they [had] gained . . . not being respectful [with] people with what they [had] learned because I would discount it right away. And, I think now the fact that I didn't have any degree for one thing, I didn't have any knowledge in that way [is now a humbling thought to her]. [I would think,] "Because I have the Bible, I have this righteousness that I'm right, and you're wrong, and I don't care how much study you have done. Clearly, you don't believe in God, so you kind of don't know what you were talking about."

Apologetics

The sixth contextual factor was the role played by apologetics in the deconversion process. Apologetics is the theological discipline that seeks to provide a rational defense of the Christian faith. Apologetics is primarily a cognitive endeavor, trading in philosophical arguments and empirical evidences. Therefore, it is somewhat surprising that over a quarter of the participants either considered themselves amateur apologists or had studied apologetics in order to defend and argue on behalf of the faith. Two stated that it actually was the study of apologetics that eventually led to the unraveling of their faiths. Encountering atheist apologetics designed to counter Christian apologetics was devastating. The intellectual arguments that had been the foundations of their faiths were found wanting, and once the foundation gave way, the house of faith collapsed.

Steve remarked, "I had all of Josh McDowell's talking points memorized, but I had never reasoned myself to these points. I just memorized them." When objections were raised that Steve had never thought of, it presented a challenge to him. He offered a shockingly apropos comment that finds support from the results of this study: "You

know, I was an apologist for a while, and it seems really a common story that an atheist

went through some phase of [apologetic] research."

Frank, a Ph.D. philosophy professor, spoke about the influence his youth pastor

had on him as young man. The apologetic answers that were offered Frank were

satisfying to a 14-year-old, but only because he had not heard any counterarguments to

them:

> I was very into theology, and I was also into . . . apologetics and defending the faith. And so, by the time I was 14, I was running those questions by my youth minister and he, of course being 22 and I'm only 14, had all the answers and blew my mind every week.

When he arrived at his Christian college, he was both theologically and apologetically

advanced when compared to the other students. It was when he began to study

philosophy that the foundation upon which his apologetic arguments were built began to

crack:

> [I] started [studying apologetics and theology] at a younger age than most, very intricate responses, very intricate apologetics. . . . By the time I showed up in college, I was very advanced over my peers, actually. Now this college professor—he affirmed it with my peers—I was advanced. I had advanced understanding of . . . theology and apologetics [because] I'd already been working on this stuff. But, then I studied philosophy.

Ultimately, his love for theology and apologetics led to the study of philosophy that, in

turn, where he came across arguments that made both his theology and apologetics

untenable.

Wayne was introduced to apologetics by a friend, and he pursued it in order to

defend his faith better. He read widely and benefitted from the wide array of resources on

the Internet:

>One of my friends introduced to one of the apologetics. Probably, I was 25. I just kind of began reading a lot of apologetics books, looking around the Internet, watching debates, reading YouTube comments, different comments, some different posts, listening to Christians and atheists argue back and forth. Just trying to get more familiar with . . . both sides of the arguments and be prepared to defend my faith to the people I knew who were not Christians.

He was so into apologetics that he confessed, "At certain points, I considered myself an amateur apologist." But over time, he began to entertain doubts. He recalled, "At the beginning I thought apologists' arguments were very compelling, but all of the information I was getting was one sided." Unnerved by that thought, he attempted to look at the issues more objectively:

>There was a point where, in watching debates and reading through the comments, I started reading criticisms, and I started noticing . . . [that these] apologetic answers that I'm getting satisfy me, but I already believed. Good enough for me as a believer, but they are unconvincing to my friends who are not believers. And, I get to this point when I started thinking, "Why is it that these arguments are good enough for me but so easily dismissible by people?" [I thought] I could tell [that] if they would just believe, then they could see how this is a good argument.

These thoughts unsettled Wayne:

>I questioned a lot at that point, "Is it that I'm not doing a good job communicating it, or is this really not a convincing argument?" I guess, at that point, I started asking myself the question, "Why is this argument good enough for me, and it's not good enough for them? Am I being, you know, actually honest?" . . . "Are they being hypocritical or just trying to figure out where to draw the lines, I guess?"

Theological, Social, and Lifestyle Issues

Prior to their deconversions, 15 of the 24 participants identified with a theological position, social issue, or lifestyle choice considered aberrant by their conservative, Christian communities. In some ways, participants did not fit in ideologically before they deconverted. What is interesting about this contextual category is that it raises the

obvious question of whether some deconversions were more a matter of not liking

Christianity and wanting it to be untrue more than finding it untrue and deconverting? Of

course there is no way to know, and a charitable interpretation of the participants' stories

required that they be taken at their word.

Problems arising from Christian experiences. Four (4) participants said their

Christian experiences were sources of great disappointment. Expecting, but not

experiencing, an intimate relationship with God led to doubts. In the case of Charlene,

her experience did not align with what she was taught and what she expected from being

in a relationship with Jesus. She struggled with the assurance of her own salvation. Set

against the backdrop of her sinfulness, she could find no peace in the one place her faith

told her it should be found:

> I can't actually recall accepting Jesus into my heart, but I always knew it was
> something I'd done around the age of three or four. While this should have
> brought me peace, it caused great angst because I never felt certain of my
> salvation. I was all too aware of the fact that I was born sinful and that I was
> worthless without Jesus, but if I couldn't remember the act, how could I really be
> saved? Still, I was able to talk more about my uncertainty over my salvation, and
> it really troubled me that I didn't have a proper testimony. I'd always been a good
> kid, raised in a Christian home, who did everything to please. Of course, I knew it
> didn't matter what I'd done or hadn't done, that I was sinful by nature and needed
> Jesus, but the good testimonies were always the ones that involved serious
> struggle. At least if you'd lived a wild life and were washed in the blood of the
> Lamb, there'd be a real change and you could be sure of your salvation.

Although she tried to achieve a sense of assurance by inviting Jesus into her heart, her

attempts always fell short. In fact, she felt nothing: "I remember many nights, as a young

child, lying awake in the dark and crying out to God. I regularly begged Jesus to forgive

me of my sins and come into my heart, but I never felt anything happen." Additionally,

her attempts only seemed to exacerbate the problem:

> I also spent a great deal of time contemplating eternity. The thought of living forever, whether in heaven or hell, terrified me. I'd eventually fall asleep, exhausted, only to awake the next morning, still unsure of my salvation and dreading everlasting life.

Problems arising over theology. Five (5) participants raised theological issues

that bothered them when they were believers. What they were told about God as opposed

to their own moral intuitions acted as precursors to their deconversions. The primary

theological issue involved was the supposed goodness of God, specifically the doctrines

of God's sovereignty in salvation and eternal punishment. Frank, while a theology

student at a college in Pennsylvania, struggled with this issue of God's sovereignty from

the beginning of his college career until he deconverted: "I had struggled from day one in

Grove City with the problem of God's sovereignty. Calvinist interpretations of that

[troubled me], "How can God create people just to condemn them? That made God evil."

He tried to reconcile this inconsistency in his beliefs by adopting a fideistic approach to

his faith that allowed him to avoid seeking a rational answer to the question:

> Presuppositionalism [and] Kierkegaard…said God is infinitely beyond our understanding. There's an infinite, qualitative distinction between God and man, according to Kierkegaard. That led me to think that "Okay, well, we can excuse all this stuff from God, in a sense, because God's just so far beyond our minds."

That strategy was ultimately unsuccessful because it did not override his moral

sensibilities. He had already come to the conclusion that the God of the Bible was an

immoral character, and, despite his attempt to retreat into fideism as a means of

reconciling moral tensions, he could not manage to do so:

> But, what's key in that is that it already came to the point where Christianity was morally untenable, and I was accepting it on the presupposition . . . that God is just so far beyond us that I can accept that untenability more, right? So, there was already that dimension. I was already on a fideistic, that is, faith-based commitment of presupposition because were I to be internally consistent with my own values, I would have to believe that this God that sends people to hell deliberately, wantingly, is a moral nightmare.

The doctrine of hell was problematic for other participants as well. Martin, as noted earlier, spoke about the injustice of God condemning a good man to hell just because he believed the wrong things:

> I was really curious about the Muslim faith, and being a Christian, I started asking why he believed what he believed. He was asking me the same questions, and [I started to think], "You know, where I came from, my upbringing with my parents, the church that I was raised in, am identified with and connected with, they would probably tell me that this guy is going to hell." I had the hardest time reconciling that. Here was this guy, he was married and had children, he was trying to do what he thinks is best for his family. For me, he was a good, moral, decent person, and just because he has different faith, he is going to hell.

The apparent unfairness of being consigned to eternal punishment because of holding the wrong beliefs caused Martin to question his entire belief system for the first time. He recalled, "That sort of started making me ask questions about things like Christianity. Why would God punish a guy like this?" Tim also struggled to understand the rationale behind the doctrine of hell. For him, it seemed ridiculous that any God worthy of the title would send people to hell over insignificant matters like the ones that were important to his church:

> There were things like . . . "This is abomination, men . . . [with] long hair or women with short hair." Those are the things that the church was completely hung up on. I was like, "What has that to do with anything? Okay, he has long hair, she's got a pixie haircut, does that affect other people? Are we going to hell because of a haircut? That would be really stupid. What kind of petty, petty deity would believe like that?"

Lifestyle choices. A smaller, but meaningful number of participants reported that

certain aspects of their behavior were considered outside what was deemed appropriate

by their churches or Christian communities. In Charlene's case, the manner in which the

church leadership handled an indiscretion of hers was a catalyst in her deconversion. At

the time, she was dating a non-Christian named David. The church elders frowned on this

relationship. They not only reprimanded her, but also would not endorse her application

to be a counselor at a Bible camp. She could not understand what was so wrong in dating

a non-Christian:

> As with any of my non-Christian friends, I tried to minister to David. I brought
> him to Young Peoples and explained the Bible to him as best I could. Despite the
> verse about being unequally yoked, I really couldn't see that I was doing anything
> wrong—it's not like we were getting married!—so why would I hide it? And, isn't
> lying also a sin?

Charlene and the church were in disagreement, as she felt that she was not violating any

biblical principals by dating David. The church did. She continued to date him and

became estranged from the church. Hurt and angry, she ultimately left the faith.

Steve, who in high school was passionately committed to Christ, recounted a

period in his life when his lifestyle changed from walking out his faith to walking on the

wild side, even though he still thought of himself as a committed Christian:

> My worst days were in my Christian heyday. I was the prototypical [pastor's son].
> You hear about the pastor's daughter but I was like the pastor, preacher and
> missionary's kid. I was wild in ways that . . . Dennis Rodman would envy. But I
> actually have [spent] nights with Dennis Rodman himself in South Beach.

He attributed the change in his behavior to his rigid and legalistic upbringing. When he

found himself at college and without parental supervision, he felt free to experiment:

It started when I went off to college. I was about as straight laced as you could be in high school, like when I went off to college a virgin and never tasted alcohol. Got to college, and it was kind of like when get your first taste, the flood gates burst open and you can make up for lost time.

Social issues. Within evangelical Christian circles, there has traditionally been broad agreement on social issues that the Bible regards as sinful. Included in that list would be the practice of homosexuality. A third of participants testified that, while a Christian, they did not share the majority view that homosexuality was in fact wrong. For them, the moral position regarding homosexuality was that the church was wrong in condemning it.

Sam had been involved in the performing arts for years and, subsequently, had come to accept homosexuality as a legitimate expression of sexuality:

Those hadn't change for me for the fact that I always had gay friends. This was always the issue that was very difficult for me to reconcile with church . . . for the fact that I've always been a proponent for gay marriage.

Tim shared the same perspective as Sam. He, too, had come to the conclusion that homosexuality was not a sin before he had deconverted:

Before . . . I said I was liberalizing, so before I became an atheist, I thought that homosexuality was not a sin, but, at least, it probably wasn't. I wasn't a 100% sure where I was on that, but at least it probably wasn't.

Martin, while a member of the Methodist church, actively tried to change the minds of people in his congregation about homosexuality. He said, "I was a part of groups, when I was working at the Methodist church, that were trying to get the church to change their bylaws to be accepting of gay people." He also worked for change within the

denomination by advocating for the rights of homosexual congregants at the church's general conference:

> I remember being selected as a church member to attend the conference to vote on things upcoming in the next couple years. . . . They would get together every four years as a church, as a whole to vote on things. [I was] selected as a delegate and [was] a part of the delegation that spoke up to change the book of discipline to allow gay people to be accepted in the church.

It is impossible to know if the theological problems, lifestyle choices, or contrarian positions on social issues were convenient excuses to reject a faith they no longer wanted to follow. That certainly was one option. Another was that participants found Christianity in such tension with their own reason, moral sensibilities, and desires that they were motivated to look into the truth claims of Christianity and found it lacking. Whatever the case may be, the problems that these participants had with Christianity were important background conditions that related to the impacts of their deconversions.

Summary

This chapter focused on the various contextual factors from which the deconversion of participants emerged. Five contextual factors influencing and shaping the experiences of participants were identified:

1. Participants' Christian experiences were characterized by aspects of fundamentalism;

2. Participants were committed believers;

3. Participants viewed their former selves as negative and critical;

4. Participants were attracted to Christian apologetics; and

5.   Participants held theological and social views at odds with their Christian

communities.

CHAPTER 7

NEGATIVE IMPACTS

As one might imagine, there are numerous negative consequences to deconverting. Renouncing one's worldview can come at a high premium. Christianity acted as the lens through which each of the participants interpreted the world. It answered such questions as the following: What is the nature of ultimate reality? What is a human being? How do we determine right and wrong? What happens after we die? and Where is history going? It also was the context within which nearly all of the participants had been raised and the social world in which they turned. Thus, it provided both the foundation upon which their worldviews were built and the social contexts in which they developed. Upon renouncing the Christian faith, participants experienced significant negative social, emotional, occupational, and existential consequences.

Negative Social Impacts

The single greatest negative impact of deconversion was felt most acutely in social relationships. In reply to the question, "How has deconversion negatively impacted your life?" participants overwhelmingly responded by citing the negative social consequences of turning from their faiths. All participants reported negative social

 consequences. Three specific areas where that impact was felt were the following: a) family, b) friends, and c) community.

Family

Participants readily shared that the deepest negative social impact was felt in their family relationships. In nearly every instance, participants experienced a range of negative consequences from mild approbation to the extreme of being disowned. Only in two instances did relationships improve; in those instances, the family had no religious beliefs, and one family was mildly atheistic.

General Social Consequences

Several participants told stories of a general nature that highlighted the negative social consequences of deconverting. For instance, Dave was invited to a family Christmas gathering at the home of one of his relatives. As an atheist, Dave personally rejected the religious nature of Christmas but wanted to participate in the family celebration. He attended and brought with him greeting cards to hand out to his relatives. The cards were not Christmas cards but winter solstice cards. It was not appreciated:

> I show up one year, and I have these winter solstice cards. Then I passed them out to everyone at the house. They were actually printed up by the American Atheist Press. It was a peaceful and loving description of the winter solstice to show how it all got started. It was really a holiday history lesson, if you will. Everyone was so offended. I was told I was not welcome back for Christmas, simply for giving the history of the winter solstice fest on a card.

Things were no better at Easter for Dave:

> Easter was automatically, of course, banned, when I tried to explain to them the history of Easter. They wouldn't even listen to me [about] the pagan traditions, the god as Aster. I'm sure you know the histories of these terms. There was

another pagan tradition . . . with Halloween . . . that Christianity adapted to and allowed people to celebrate multiple things that really made it something Christian. And it was brilliant! I don't mean this to be offensive, like I always say, [but] Christianity is sort of like the Walmart of religions. It's been adapted, and its growth has been phenomenal because it didn't draw a line in the sand that says, "Do this, or you die!" Sure, yeah, you can have your bunny rabbits and chocolate eggs all because of Jesus. And, people are going, "Why did we have eggs and talk about rabbits because Jesus came back to life?" [It] just makes no sense because I've been trying to explain the pagan traditions to these holidays, and my Christian family members were not happy about it.

In Christopher's experience, being a former believer "does cause problems" with family members. For him, the trouble resided in the fact that, in his extended family, there are people who, despite his not wanting to talk about his lack of faith, "push [him] to talk about it," he said. He provided an example of such an experience when his extended family was together for dinner, and his stepmother had just viewed a report of a school shooting on the news:

We had a family dinner up in downtown San Diego, and my stepmom was watching the news and said, "You know what this is? It's because people don't have Jesus in their heart [sic]." And, I was, like, "I'm holding my tongue," and she's, like, "No, you can't say anything, that's all I want to say." [Then I said], "Why is it okay for you to say that?" . . . I can't say, "No, it's probably because people have mental disorders." I have learned [to] just give up. I'm not going to convince them; it's not going to be worth the hassle.

Douglas described his experience with family after his deconversion as "tough" because he no longer felt that he "was on the same team with them." Shelley observed that her family does not "really talk to [her] that much anymore." When they do, they think she is "stupid." Kristen and her husband have also experienced pushback from her family members. When they quit going to church, not only did they receive "a lot of criticism from certain family members, [but also] there were some fights." Dave identified all of his family members as "very conservative or religious" and explained

how that, combined with social media, has caused tension in his family. A family member circulated an email that contained false information about a proposal to remove "In God We Trust" from American currency. Dave replied to all the family members who received the original email by saying, "That's actually not true," and pointing out the erroneous information. His family member that sent the email did not appreciate his correction and said, "If you don't like my email, just delete it." Dave responded by saying, "Well, if you're going to be able to lie to 15 people in our family, I'm allowed to tell the truth."

Parents

Of all the family relationships that experienced negative consequences resulting from a participant's deconversion, perhaps the relationship where the impact was felt deepest was with parents. Parents, as a unit, were referred to by participants as expressing a range of emotions from disappointment to denial. For some parents, it was harder than others to hear the news. What differentiated each case was how deeply committed to Christianity they were. Those who were more committed were more upset than those who demonstrated less commitment to the faith.

Martin's parents knew of his loss of faith for a significant period of time. His beliefs had changed, but his lifestyle largely remained the same. One area where it changed was in his consumption of alcohol. Growing up in a strict home, Martin was taught that imbibing alcohol was sinful. As an atheist, he no longer was shackled by that belief. When he and his parents dined out together, Martin occasionally chose to order an

alcoholic beverage, which caused his parents great consternation. As was previously

mentioned, Martin said:

> I would say I'm not an alcoholic, but I do have a beer or something. Even to this
> day, as an adult, if me and my parents [sic] . . . go out to dinner and I order, like, a
> beer, they would still give me crap about it, even if it's just one and I'm not
> driving. They still say, "You shouldn't do that. Drinking is sinful."

Despite his best efforts, Martin's parents would not talk with him about his lack of belief:

> I talk to my parents, but they just don't want to talk about it and don't
> acknowledge it, no matter how I try to talk about it, bring it up, or discuss about it
> with them, to sort of get [it] out in the open.

Although they know he no longer identified as a Christian, they refused to acknowledge

that fact, preferring to remain in denial:

> My parents still won't acknowledge my atheism. Even after telling them the
> reasons why, they still won't acknowledge it at all. They won't acknowledge it!
> My mom acts as if it doesn't even exist. It's the elephant in the room but will not
> be talked about.

> Douglas' parents accepted his atheism, but coming out to them was not easy.

They were not pleased with his decision. He recounted how he "sat them down" and said,

"Hey, I just want to clear the air. Just so you know, I'm not a Christian anymore." Both

of them were shocked, and, as Douglas described it, "It just blew their minds." His

mother "freaked out," he fondly recalled. His father did not respond in the way Douglas

thought he would but was nonetheless "not happy" with his son's decision. His

relationships with his parents continued to be strained as Douglas' lifestyle and activities

moved him further out into orbit from his parent's worldview:

> What was probably the toughest thing was coming home for Christmas and being
> asked, "Well, what've you been up to this year?" and I'm going, "Well, I have
> been writing erotica, and leading an atheist biblical ministry [Bible study with
> other atheists, looking for problems with it] and I'm a major speaker in talking

about how I don't think Jesus existed at all." It was like I just had nothing to say to them. That was awkward and weird. . . . We've gotten over that, but that was probably the toughest thing.

Mitch also mentioned that going home and being around his parents for lengthy periods of time was difficult since they no longer share the same faith. Like Douglas, finding things to talk about with his parents is difficult:

It would be harder, like, [at] Christmas time, when I'd go home for longer, those times are not as comfortable. You know, you have those lulls. The phone call conversations, I am way more in control of a phone call, things like that.

For Kristen and her husband's parents, the problem was not that they do not have enough in common to talk about anymore since their deconversions. The problem was that his parents insisted on talking about it so much that Kristen and her husband have had to erect boundaries to curtail the discussions:

My husband's parents are the ones who will have the biggest problem, but we have had issues there for years and eventually came to a point where we set up boundaries [that] limit how much we discuss religion. If they continue to respect those boundaries (which took years to make happen, as it was), then things will be okay. If not, we will have less contact with them.

Mothers

It is clear that the parent who suffers the most from a child's deconversion is the mother. For whatever reason, the participants' relationships with their mothers have suffered more than any other family member's relationship. Thirteen (13) participants referred to the relationships with their mothers being negatively impacted by their deconversions. Mothers of participants have been deeply hurt by their children's deconversions. The relationship between faithful mothers and unbelieving children was

often greatly strained, and a mother was more likely to attempt to reconvert the deconvert than any other family member.

Hurt. A significant consequence of deconverting was that mothers were often intensely hurt. Charlene and her mother often argued over Christianity as Charlene was losing her faith. She described the experience for her mother as "heartbreaking." As a result, she "used to hide" her "convictions from her." Now she "lives her life as openly and honestly" as she can "without pushing" her beliefs on her mother. They no longer fight because they no longer "talk about it anymore."

The most moving story of the hurt experienced by both a participant and that participant's mother came from Jill. In recounting one of her last visits to see her mother in the hospital, she was moved to tears as she said:

> I was here at the hospice her last few days, and she wouldn't acknowledge me. She told my sister that she thought I was going to hell, so she turned her face away from me, and she didn't ever speak to me. She talked to others, but she never spoke to me.

Strained relationships. When Dave revealed to his mother that he was no longer a Christian, she assumed that he was just going through a phase. She refused to believe that he no longer believed in the existence of God:

> When I first told my mom, she didn't believe me and, of course, believed that it was just a phase that I was going through. It was, you know, it was a, "You're just angry with God, what you did or what God did to you, but you're working it out." Pretty much in complete denial, but, over time, it got worse.

One of the reasons it got worse was that she perceived him as trying to deconvert her to

atheism. Once Dave became aware of that and changed his approach, their relationship

improved:

> I realized that my approach was probably the biggest problem. I began to, sort of, reframe and restructure the way I was talking to my mom about these things because we ended up in fights a lot. . . . So, I found a way to actually talk to my mom about her beliefs and why I didn't believe them. . . . I realize that so many different religions are constantly trying to talk each other out of their own beliefs, and when she heard me talk about it, she thought I was trying to drag her into atheism, kicking and screaming, like the Mormon knocking on the door or like the Jehovah's Witnesses knocking and wanting to drag you into their church[es]. . . . I realized it and said, "No, Mom, I want you to understand [that] I'm fine with you believing; I just want you to understand why I don't. I'm not angry with any particular God. I'm not mad, I just don't believe it. Here is why I don't believe it." As soon as I told her I was fine in her keeping her beliefs [and] I just want[ed] her to understand me, all the walls came down. It broke down the barriers; we were able to have an open conversation.

In spite of the fact that Dave and his mother were able to have open conversations with

each other about their beliefs, she was not supportive of his activism. Dave's work on

behalf of secular humanist causes and evangelistic atheism was not something of which

she was proud. David commented that, although he saw himself as doing something

noble in working to relieve religious oppression and bigotry, his mother saw it

differently. He grieved, "My mom is not proud of what I do. She's quite ashamed of what

I do." He recounted a particularly hurtful moment where, instead of receiving praise from

his mother, she deeply wounded him:

> It was my first time ever debating on a live FM radio station in the fifth largest market in the country. So, I'm proud, and I tell my mom about it. She listens, and she doesn't talk to me, like call me or anything. Second week goes by, and she doesn't say anything. Third week goes by, and I finally called her up (I expected her to say anything, at some point) . . . and was like, "Mom, have you heard any of the interviews?" She's like, "Yeah, I listened to all of them." I said, "What do you think?" because all my messages were about equality, respect, love for

humanity—"It's not a practice run. Leave a positive legacy. Treat everybody with respect and equality"—those are my messages. . . . Her response probably is the single, most hurtful response anyone has ever said to me in my entire life. I said, "What do you think?" She said, "Well, I just wish they would stop using your last name."

Bewildered, David opined that he could not understand why, even though they disagree on the existence of God, she would be so ashamed of him, given many of the worse things he could be involved with:

I remember just thinking, "I didn't start a crack house, you know, I didn't start a child pornography ring. I'm doing something noble. You disagree with the worldview, but it has a noble purpose." . . . She wouldn't wrap her head around that, so I quit talking about it with her and went on. It makes it especially hard to be an activist, to find something that has a noble cause and yet to have the people that you love very much think that what you are doing is sending the society backwards and hurting people. You don't have the support of people around you. You don't have that face of people going, "I'm so proud of what you're doing."

He found some consolation in the support he received from other deconverts who discovered his radio show or podcast on the Internet. He commented, "It means the world to me because my mother is ashamed of my last name being public." His mother has "been so ashamed" of his work that:

a lot of people she works with, a small company [with] like 45 employees, they don't know that her son has a radio show, or has been in multiple television shows, or a has a book out, or has a movie out; she doesn't want anybody to know anything about what I'm doing.

Reconverting attempts. Some mothers attempted to win their children back to the faith. Charlene's mother debated with her over the merits of the arguments for God's existence. Frank's mother subtly tried to encourage him to find a Christian girlfriend, hoping that would solve the problem. He recounted how she responded when he told her of his loss of faith: "She kept saying I needed to find a good, Christian girl." Even though

she never tried to "drag" him to church, she "wants to make it clear she [doesn't] like it and wonders what she did wrong."

Like Frank's mother, Douglas' mother chose a subtle approach in trying to influence her son back to the faith. Her approach was trying to convince him that he really was not an atheist by repeatedly denying it. Perhaps she felt that if she acknowledged his profession of disbelief, it would serve to legitimize and strengthen it?

> My mom would do strange things, like, I was in a conversation with her about something else, and I said something, at one point, "Well, Mom, is this because I'm an atheist you're saying that?" . . . She said, "Oh, you're not an atheist." I said, "Well, yeah, Mom, I am," and she "No, you're not." "What is about that word do you think I'm not?" "You're just not," and [I said] "Oh, okay." Okay, so that was awhile back. I think that was the closest she'd ever come to try and to talk me out of it.

Marcus' mother did not seem to be overly upset at his deconversion, partly due to the fact that he was not raised in a home where Christianity was emphasized. Nevertheless, she, too, made nominal attempts to get him to reconsider his position: "My mom still tries to challenge me all the time though. It's playful. It's not really like she's mad at me or anything like that," he said.

Martin mentioned that his mother let it be known in subtle ways that she hoped her son would return to his faith. Recently, Martin discovered that his sister had also left the faith of their family. She opened up to him because he had already confessed his loss of faith to his family. Both found in each other a sense of camaraderie in dealing with their mother's attempts to influence them spiritually:

> My sister actually admitted to me that she considered herself as nonreligious. I didn't know about that until about two years ago. I told my parents, I told my family, so she admitted to me as well, so we sort of found solidarity with each other, knowing that and venting about mom sending us religious stuff.

Fathers

Study participants did not mention their fathers as often as their mothers. When they did speak of the impact that deconverting had on their relationships with their fathers, participants reported that it was milder than in their relationships with their mothers. Fathers were portrayed as being unaware of what was happening in the spiritual lives of their children. When they became aware that their children were wrestling with faith or actually deconverting, their responses ranged from mild disappointment to moderate support. Only in one case was there a serious attempt to reconvert his son.

"My dad, I don't even know if he knows or not," said Wayne, when asked how his father responded to his deconversion. One reason Wayne gave for his father's ignorance is that they rarely seemed to ever talk about spiritual matters. Their "conversations seem to be limited to business and house maintenance, and stuff like that," admitted Wayne.

Unlike Wayne, Steve's father did take an interest in his son's spiritual life. However, since he divorced Steve's mother and remarried, he and Steve had had little interaction. Steve has not ever come out and said, "Dad, I'm an Atheist", but he wonders if his father knows that something has changed, due to how he responds to his father's requests to pray for Steve.

> I was talking to him last night about a rather serious, pressing matter, and he goes, "Would you mind if I pray for you?," and I said, "You can do whatever you feel you need to." I don't know how he takes my ambivalence. It doesn't hurt me one bit [for him] to pray for me.

Steve speculated what would happen if his father did find out about his loss of faith:

> I think if I just came out and told him that, I mean, you would have to strain really hard to hear the disapproval in his voice. He just keeps it in and would just be convinced that it's a phase that kids go through. I'm 37—a kid in his eyes still. He would just be convinced that he could pray me through it, eventually.

Marcus also has never came out and told his father that he is an atheist. When referring to how his father responded to his loss of faith, Marcus said, "We really have never brought it up." Despite that, Marcus speculated, "He probably really, really, really didn't want me to be, like, an atheist." His father did send him a message when he found out that Marcus was associating with secular groups at his university. "He just wanted to remind me what my upbringing was," Marcus said. Yet, it seems that his father was more concerned with Marcus suffering socially as a consequence of identifying with atheist groups than that he had lost his faith:

> Yeah, I think he was more upset about me being so vocal about, like, a minority view. I don't actually know what his concern was, but I think he was probably concerned about me like, being marginalized for that.

> Douglas' father had come to terms with his son's deconversion. He was not happy or supportive of Douglas' work in advancing the cause of atheism, but he did support Douglas. An example of his support was seen when Douglas invited him to attend a lecture Douglas was giving on the myth of the historical Jesus. In his talk, Douglas systematically attacked the idea that Jesus was a historical person while his father sat in the audience and listened. After the talk, Douglas invited feedback from his father:

> After the talk, I said, "Well, Dad, what do you think?" He said, "Well, you know, son, I didn't agree with any of it, but I thought you really did a good job." That was just the world to me. It was really great.

> Only one participant, Tim, reported that his father actively tried to reconvert him. He affectionately described his father as the type of person who "would found his own

church, if he was actually motivated." He went on to joke, "He's the kind of person who, given half a reason, will turn any conversation into a sermon!" When Tim revealed to him that he no longer was a Christian, he was surprised how well his father received the news. He ventured to guess that it was because of his age at the time. He recounted, "I was also about 32 when I told him, so it's like it was a not-as-long-as-you're-living-under-my-roof situation." But, his father's relaxed attitude to Tim's deconversion had not stopped him from trying to reconvert his son, a fact that Tim found endearing:

> He still tries to reconvert me every chance he gets. I just laugh. I think he realizes that he's not going to influence my decision on this, but he tells me he's obligated to try. You gotta love that.

Siblings

The impacts from deconversion on sibling relationships resulted, in most cases, in a sense of distance and/or tension in the relationships. In some cases, the tensions increased to the point where they caused deep fissures in the relationships that have not yet been healed. As one would expect, the impact was felt most acutely in relationships where one of the siblings remained a committed Christian.

Derek and his brother were very close growing up. His brother was a committed believer, holding to the veracity of Bible. As an atheist, Derek no longer believed that the Bible is the word of God and had shared his feelings with his brother. Derek voiced, "He believes in the great flood. I told him it was ridiculous." The consequences of their ideological differences were that they "are not close at all anymore," despite at one time being "best friends." Derek still has affection for his brother and would "love for him to

deconvert" but realized that "it would probably split his family apart," which Derek

would not want to see happen.

A more extreme situation that resulted from the clash of worldviews among

siblings was that of Frank and his brother, Rich. Growing up, Rich was Frank's role

model. It was Rich's conversion and Christian experience that influenced Frank to also

become a believer. Years later, as grown adults, Frank and Rich would clash violently

over their ideological differences. After deconverting while at a Christian college, Frank

began to break the news to his family. The final person he told was Rich. He described

the experience as "very difficult." His revelation to Rich produced three notable

confrontations:

> [In] the first conversation, I tried to explain. I said, "Okay, Rich, I'm going to explain," and I would really want to go through the whole logical process with him. I waited a year to tell him, and finally, he was going to sit down. He knew, but he was waiting for me to talk to him, so we sat down. . . . I got to maybe 5 minutes, maybe 10 in, trying to lay out the ideas. He said, "Oh, here is your problem," and he starts giving me the gospel.

Frank felt "really betrayed" by Rich's response. Rich had no interest in hearing him, even

though what Frank was telling him was meaningful to him. It resulted in Frank feeling

frustrated and estranged from his brother. "All these years I tried to model myself on him,

and here I was, trying to share what I had discovered and learned, and he had no interest

in hearing me. That was extremely upsetting and alienating," he stated. The discussion

degenerated into an argument. Frank explained, "Our voices got loud quickly, the baby

start to cry, then I'm the troublemaker because I'm the atheist." As unsettling as that

confrontation was, it would not be the last. Several years later, Frank published an article

in a book and was showing it to his family at a family pool party. He and Rich engaged in

a discussion that quickly got heated and ended in physical violence:

> My brother and I were talking. So, now we're on the subject of religion. I
> remember this long, long argument. At one point, I got up, and I kind of yelled at
> him, and then . . . he said, "Don't come in my space!" Well, I came back, and we
> started arguing again. Then he said, "Well, I don't think it's very ethical for an
> ethics professor to download movies off the Internet," (he knew I'd been doing
> that). And then I said, "Oh, yeah?" I got up and I said, "You know, a lot of people
> say it's not ethical to hide your children away. [You] lock them up, so that they're
> shielded from all external influences, even schools." He got up, and he kind of
> like charged at me, and I back pedaled, and I fell to the ground. He put his hands
> on my neck, but he didn't squeeze; he just put his hands on my neck. I was just
> like kind of stunned, and I just cursed him down. I'm like, "What the fuck are you
> doing?" And he kind of got up, grabbed his stuff, and, like, bolted out the door.
> His wife came in to collect all the kids' things, and they left. He's never talked
> about it again.

For Steve, his deconversion caused tension with his sister. According to him, she

was very "nonconfrontational," and he did not like small talk. He preferred to have deep

conversations about meaningful things. The combination of her desire to avoid

confrontation and his desire to talk about meaningful things resulted in them not talking

much at all:

> She has really a hard time listening to anything that I have to say because it is
> challenging, and she'd rather just hang up. She'd rather talk about the weather or
> hockey. Those are 5-minute conversations for me. We have always been close. I
> mean, we don't see her much because she's been overseas for several years, so we
> see her a couple of weeks out of the year. But, we don't have the deep,
> meaningful conversations that we used to.

Cindy's story was similar. She and her sister used to talk frequently; now, they

talk only once every two to three months. Her sister no longer calls her, even though they

"used to talk all the time." She bemoaned that, prior to her deconversion, she and her

sister spoke on the phone "several times a week, sometimes even several times a day."

Now, when they do speak, Cindy's sister "[doesn't] really talk about her religion on the phone." Their relationship has continued to deteriorate to the point where Cindy felt that her sister began to treat her "like an idiot even though [her sister] doesn't have a degree or a high school diploma." Cindy tried to educate her, but she refused to look at the literature that Cindy had given her. According to Cindy, "She won't read anything but the Bible."

Spouses

The relationships between participants and spouses experienced significant negative impacts as a result of one of the spouses deconverting. In all cases, it produced worry at what the believing spouse would think. A few marriages have successfully managed to live with the tension that inherently exists in a marriage between a committed believer and an atheist. In two cases, the marriages could not endure the tension, and they were dissolved.

The impact of Dale's deconversion was disastrous on his marriage. He and his wife grew up in the same small town and attended the same Baptist church. At the time of his deconversion, both had been moving toward a more theologically liberal viewpoint but were still committed to the core tenets of Christianity. Dale was exposed to the writings of Richard Dawkins and found his argument for why it was highly probable that God does not exist convincing. He wrestled with the argument for several days, thinking it through on his own and becoming convinced about the conclusion. In his words, "Two days into that, I still have no idea what it meant and but knew enough to know that this wasn't something that I was going to change my mind about." He had deconverted. His

loss of faith was something that he briefly kept from his wife, but he did not feel

comfortable doing so. After he revealed to his devout wife that he no longer identified as

a Christian and considered himself an atheist, the marriage deteriorated. He confessed,

"For several months, I tried to regain my Christianity, trying to go to marriage

counseling, trying to keep it together ,but I just couldn't put it back together." Dale

reminisced, "It became clear to me that I wasn't going to find my way back to

Christianity. It became clear to me that my wife was not going to continue to try to make

it work." After "about two to three months," he moved to Las Vegas "and kind of gave

up on that process. . . . It was the low point of my life in terms of how I have felt about

my life and work," he said.

Christopher and his wife were able to manage the differences in their worldviews,

but it was not without tensions. Christopher had already deconverted before he and his

wife met. His wife understood what he believed, and she herself was having questions

and doubts about her faith. She was the daughter of a pastor and attended church every

Sunday before they met. Although he would like to see her deconvert, he surmised, "She

will never go away from it because if she does, she kind of feels [that] . . . she walks

away from her family." A possible reason for the lack of significant tension in the

marriage is due to the fact that Christopher was already an atheist when they married.

There was no sense of betrayal or buyer's remorse due to one of the parties renouncing

faith after the wedding.

A sense of betrayal was exactly what Martin was afraid his wife would feel as he

began questioning his faith. Both he and his wife were involved in pastoral positions at

church and he was moving towards agnosticism. As he did, and he thought about how his wife would respond, he wondered whether his wife would leave him. He commented that he, "was trying to figure out . . . will she leave me?" In the end, she did not leave him and became an agnostic herself. Her deconversion relieved the worry and concern Martin had had, and he reported that his marriage was "a lot better" today post deconversion.

Perhaps the most unique experience in terms of how deconversion impacted marriage was that of Dave. Unlike the other participants in the study whose marriages were negatively impacted, Dave's marriage was salvaged by his deconversion. Dave and his wife dated for five years, were married for about six years, then divorced. His wife already had a son from a previous relationship that Dave "met when he was 8 months old, and raised him until he was 11 or 12." He and his wife have one daughter together. They stayed in constant contact and shared equal time with their daughter, and he spent meaningful time with her son as well. Even though his wife was not a Christian, she was also not a secular humanist activist like Dave. His wife used his activism against him during the divorce and custody proceedings. He maintained, "Her attorney saw an opportunity to capitalize on this and made me seem like a bad parent." Despite that, Dave and his wife remained close and "never really stopped loving one another." As they worked through their differences, she began working for Dave's radio program. Through the exposure provided by Dave's activism, she began to move from being an "aptheist," his term for an apathetic atheist, to an atheist activist. She is now the bookkeeper as well as the outreach director for the radio program. They are also reunited. Dave summed it up this way:

It's phenomenal! We are back living together, and our daughter is here, and our son is here. In a way, the extreme worldview sort of participated [sic] in the split. Because of how busy I was, she didn't get the whole reason why I was an activist. But, ultimately, it's also been what helped to repair the relationship because we found so much [common] ground in helping others, in reaching out to others, in raising money for charity through my organization, and [in] helping a local senior center. [We] [help] kids go to science camp [and do] fund raising through our listeners.

We found common ground there and she started to see why I do what I do. Now we share this passion, and we both do it full time. So we are not only back together and happier than we've ever been, but we are working towards a common goal as full-time activists, so it's been great.

Extended Family

Deconversion not only negatively impacted relationships with immediate family, but also with extended relatives. In the case of two participants, the consequences of their losses of faith and subsequent atheism were particularly striking. Dave shared that, as a result of his deconversion and activism, his relationship with his grandmother has been virtually severed. After his grandmother found out that Dave identified as both an atheist and a political liberal, she wrote him out of her will. She informed Dave, "I no longer have a grandson." According to Dave, she had "completely written me off as a grandson. I'm no longer even part of the family or part of her estate in any way."

Kristen's in-laws refused to attend their grandson's birthday party because they were uncomfortable with where it was being hosted. Kristen explained:

Here is an example of a problem related to religion, in case this helps. We celebrated one of our son's first birthdays at a wonderful family museum during the day. We had a big family dinner planned at night. My in-laws refused to attend the day celebration simply because they found out there was a Harry Potter exhibit going on that day, even though they would not have no reason or obligation to attend that particular exhibit. But, according to their church, Harry Potter is evil, and they thought because of that, "We should not go to the

museum," even though it meant missing most of our son's first birthday celebration.

They did not stop at merely refusing to come to the party but felt it was important to inform other family members that they should not attend as well. They called other family members and told them "not to attend the celebration because they should boycott Harry Potter." As one would expect, Kristen and her husband were irate:

> This caused a huge fight in the family. We were floored! . . . Because we were focused on creating a nice experience for our family and friends but not including a church-based concern for Harry Potter, it put a big rift in the family.

Friends

For deconverts, friendships with those who remain committed Christians were difficult to maintain. When participants left the faith, many reported the severing of friendships with Christians. In all cases, it was the Christians who ended the relationships. Clearly, some Christian friends felt that their participant friends had betrayed either them or the faith. With others, the believing friends seemed to feel threatened by the participants' views. Some relationships ended gradually, due to participants withdrawing from their Christian communities. Others ended abruptly, as Christians lashed out at participants. Regardless of how friendships with Christians ended, the losses of friendships and the experiences themselves were acknowledged as negative impacts of deconverting.

Mitch described the relationships with some of his Christian friends as "particularly negative," due to the fact that they choose to bring up his deconversion. Martin described the experience as "hard" because people he thought were friends "all of

a sudden sort of turned on [me]." Kristen spoke of a "distance" between her and her

Christian friends but speculated that some of that may have something to do with her

geographical move away from them. Sam complained, "Virtually immediately,

everybody from the church ostracized [him]." Rachel also felt like she was "abandoned"

by the church. She speculated it might be due to her divorce and her deconversion, which

were simultaneous. She did not hold it against her former friends because she compared it

to how people often respond to the death of a spouse:

> When a spouse dies or someone in the family dies, people don't know what to
> say. Then they don't say anything at all. So, I kind of feel it was part of that, too,
> so I don't want to necessarily say they all left me and stopped being my friends.
> It's probably a mixture of a lot of reasons.

The way in which friendships with Christians ended for participants tended to be

very impersonal. Few encountered direct, personal confrontations. When friendships did

end, they more often than not did so because of natural causes, such as no longer sharing

the same social space with Christians anymore. An interesting phenomenon that emerged

from the data was an approach used by Christians to end friendships with deconverts

without having to personally confront them about their losses of faith: unfriending on

Facebook. The social media website, Facebook, provided Christians with a platform to

passively end friendships with participants without personally confronting them.

Charlene experienced this approach from one of her longtime friends, Carolyn. Charlene

had actually led Carolyn to Christ when they were in high school. They attended church

and youth groups together. Charlene surmised, "I think my deconversion was quite

upsetting for her and she defriended [sic] me on Facebook for awhile." They have since

reconnected and restored their relationship. Dave experienced being unfriended as well.

He also identified those with whom he went to high school as the primary offenders. He

shared one example of a Christian friend who unfriended him, not because he lost his

faith, but due to his activism, which she interpreted as negative:

> It's people . . . that I went to high school with. And I'm like, "Oh, Robin! I'd love
> to connect with her! She's awesome! I remember her friends and her little brother.
> I remember her—she was 'little Robin'—and now she's grown up, and she's in
> college." . . . I click "Add friend," and, 10 minutes later, she would respond with,
> "David, I hope you're doing well. You know I appreciate the request, but I prefer
> to have positive messages come through my news feed, so I'm going to decline
> your request at this time."

Christopher had a similar experience to Dave. His best friend unfriended him on

Facebook because Christopher was posting too much disturbing material about science:

> My best friend defriended [sic] me a little while ago on Facebook, because I'm
> exposing too much science stuff, which I know . . . [is] the science stuff that most
> . . . religious people don't like though, about anthropology, illusion, astronomy.

Likewise, Douglas' friendship with his best friend from high school ended with a

Facebook post. Douglas often posts antireligious, pro-atheist material on Facebook, and

he speculated that his old friend from high school unfriended "him because he couldn't

deal with it."

One of the worst experiences among participants was that of Martin. After being

deeply involved in ministry at his church for a number of years, he lost his faith. The

responses from "a lot of friends" were negative. One woman from his church was very

hurt and shared with him how she felt. She posted a mean-spirited letter on his Facebook

wall, expressing her thoughts. Martin recounted it as follows:

> I had one lady . . . on Facebook, one time, out of the blue, [post] on my wall that
> she wished I never came to work at the church and that I never existed. [She said]
> I was a horrible person, [that I] should have never come around and . . . [should]
> just leave everybody alone, kind of thing. It just took me by surprise that

somebody is trying to say something like that. I had known [her] for so long and had a close relationship, then, just out of the blue, to say . . . "You're a terrible person because you're an atheist! [It] doesn't matter that you're an upstanding citizen with the same wife all your life, and you're married for 10 years [with] a son, you know. You're still a horrible person. I wish [I] didn't know you and wished my kids didn't know you, and I wished you never existed!" was her sentiment.

Frank had a similar experience. The mother of young woman in his church confronted him about his deconversion by expressing her disappointment with him. She felt that he had let down her 18-year-old daughter who looked up to him as a Christian mentor. They accused Frank of abandoning them, when, in the past, he had encouraged them to endure through spiritual struggles:

A family from my church, they turned on me. The mother kind of ambushed me to have the kids talk about how disappointed they were in me. That was very upsetting! I was extremely close with that family. . . . It turned out the 14-year-old, or . . . I guess she was probably 18, she was like, "How could you do this?" When she had gone through high school, I was one of her role models to kind of endure throughout her high school years. Back then, I was like, "Hang in there." And then, for me to come back and say, "No, I'm sorry, folks. I was wrong about all that," she felt like, "What? How could you abandon us?"

The participant who spoke most passionately about the losses of friendships and how they negatively impacted him was Dale. His experience was punctuated by the fact that the losses he experienced were often the result, not of his friends feeling abandoned or betrayed, but of how they viewed atheism and atheists. He said, "The people in my life, my family and my wife's family and my friends that I had from all the way back into middle school, had similar reactions." He went on to clarify their reactions by sharing an experience he had with old friends who reacted negatively to his coming out as an atheist:

I had two friends that I had in middle school, one that I am still reasonably close with and one that was kind of an acquaintance. They pretty much found out and told me that they don't want anything to do with atheism. Yeah, I had a number of

people that I would describe as acquaintances that said some equivalent of the line, "If you don't believe in God, I don't know how I can trust you."

It turned out that it was not just his old Christian acquaintances that no longer felt they could trust him. He began detecting a pattern among even some of his closet and dearest friends, as they responded in similar fashions:

People would say "I don't know how I can trust you," and they were honest words. . . . . People were treating me different[ly], people were trusting me differently, you know, even where I had long years and years—my entire adult life I have known these people and had an honest, intimate relationships with them. It was different after that change.

The confessions that his friends felt they could no longer trust him was shocking. Dale offered a guess at why it is that his friends did not find him trustworthy just because he no longer believed in God:

Just knowing that you believe in a God means you still think of consequences for lying, cheating and all of these things, and they could intellectually identify that as a motivation. . . . So, they said, you know, "But, without a God, what motivation have you got to ever be honest or selfless?" And so, they projected those beliefs upon me and those views upon me and said, "[We] don't think you are trustworthy anymore."

While it was troubling, Dale did not find the loss of trust "particularly hurtful," in most cases, because, as he said, "I wasn't particularly close with them." However, in the case of his father-in-law, his mentor when he was in high school and a Christian, the loss of trust "cut deeply":

I kept in touch with him when I was in college much more than he did with his daughter, who I ended up eventually marrying. When he said that to me, that was particularly hurtful. We had been through a lot together. He had been a mentor to me. We had a long history of intimate trust in our actions, so when he said to me, "I can't trust you the way that I did because I don't know that you would be honest anymore," that was particularly hurtful.

Dale managed to move on from the negative experiences and reestablish new friendships with those of like mind. He did not speak of retaining any of his previous friendships with Christians, although he may have retained some. Lauren, on the other hand, did keep a few of her Christian friends. Her deconversion was so emotionally devastating that it made it all but impossible for her to even want relationships with her Christian friends. As it turned out, not many wanted to have a relationship with her. Because of her lifestyle choices, she was "kicked out" of her church. She only maintained friendships with two couples and one individual. The first couple she described as "open and welcoming and genuine." The second couple adopted her daughter, and she described them also as "genuine" and willing to accept her as she was without engaging in debates about the existence of God. She did not comment on her one, remaining friend from her Christian period. Other than those five people, "Everybody else is gone," she said.

Communities of Faith

Study participants not only lost their faiths, they also lost the communities of faith they were once a part of. All participants had, at one time, been involved in church and other Christian groups, such as college Christian clubs and youth groups. For many, it was their primary source of social interaction. After their deconversions, all participants eventually migrated out of their faith communities. In doing so, they became aware of how important being a part of a community was for them. Losing the camaraderie and solidarity that their faith communities provided was difficult and something that numerous participants identified as a negative experience.

Douglas identified "the loss of connection between fellow Christians . . . as definitely a feeling that really struck [him]." It apparently struck Lauren as well. She described her time within the Christian community as "one of the best" times in her life. She shared that, as a Christian, she and her Christian community "used to do white water rafting, birthday parties and holidays. . . . We had, like, a core group of friends, and it was amazing." Her deconversion naturally occasioned a rupture with her community. The fallout was that she "lost" all of that, "and [she] never quite got that back." Martin testified that, for him, the loss of community was poignant. As he reflected on his time embedded in a Christian community, he acknowledged that losing those relationships was socially difficult. "Everything in my entire life [was] structured on this," he said. It took him and his wife "a little while to figure out a social life," post deconversion. They soon realized that finding a "community outside the church" was something they "really didn't know how to sort of navigate." They attributed the challenge to the fact that, when one becomes a Christian, the "church has such a built in community, like an automatic friend, you know, kind of thing." He continued by saying, "You already have, I guess, obvious things you have in common, so it's easier to try make those friendships or connections." Such is not the case for atheists. Shelley made that exact point when she addressed the issue of community. Although her deconversion was not without difficulty, she began to feel a sense of loss only "much later on," when she "realized there is really no such thing as atheist community." She went on to share, "It breaks my heart because we don't have anything like that, you know, like a religious community."

Negative Emotional Impacts

Religious faith plays a major role in constructing the world of our lived experience. It acts as one of several lenses through which the world is interpreted. The religious lens shapes the understanding of every aspect of reality and is the foundation upon which a life is built. Thus, losing one's faith can be emotionally difficult and disorientating. Participants in the study spoke about the negative impacts of losing faith and becoming atheists. First, they identified an emotional vertigo that accompanied their losses of faith. Second, they identified a variety of negative emotions and feelings that resulted from their deconversions. Third, participants commonly referred to two particular negative emotions: depression and loss.

Derek recalled that his faith had been "the most important thing in [his] life," but his deconversion made him "feel like the whole belief system was pulled out of" him and left him without a foundation to stand on. Douglas shared a similar experience:

> There was about a year where I knew that I was an atheist, I just couldn't accept it. I couldn't believe it. I felt like I [had] been flying on a plane, and the bottom had dropped out, and I was still flying. I couldn't believe what was holding me up**.** I just felt naked and out of my shell for about a year or so.

He continued by adding:

> There was a year of unsettled feeling. That was weird. I felt like a snail out of its shell. It was a weird feeling of vulnerability, I guess, is the best way to say it. Wherein in one sense, I felt this whole new universe was just growing bigger and expanding.

Dale's experience was similar to Douglas' in that he, too, felt the disequilibrium that Douglas spoke of, but, also like Douglas, he did not despair but looked forward to his expanding horizons:

> I didn't ever feel like, "Oh my goodness! Life is pointless," but I had several months where I had no idea. . . . There were very large, open, unanswered questions on what this meant in my life. Throughout that time period, I actually, you know, one of the things that made me feel better about myself was exploring my new world.

Shelley summed up the difficult and disorientating experiences of many participants well when she described the impact of losing one's religion as "a roller coaster."

Negative Emotions

Participants made numerous references to a variety of negative emotions that accompanied their deconversion. Anne's deconversion was instigated by a discovery she made in an Old Testament class. Even though she described her deconversion as "logical" and "rational," it still caused her to feel "upset" and "angry" and produced "a lot of heated conversations with her pastor." It was "tough" for her because, for the first time in her life, she wondered, "Maybe this isn't valid?" When she finally concluded that the Bible was not the word of God, she said it was "traumatic" and "horrible." She cried because she felt like she had been "lied to." Even though she felt "angry" about being deceived, she confessed, "It was really hard to let go of it. . . . It was really hard." Indeed, she qualified what she meant by "hard" by labeling it as "terrifying and lonely." Others, like Charlene, also spoke of the difficulties of losing their faiths and the emotional pain it produced. When asked about her deconversion experience, she shared, "The process, though, leading up to it was very difficult. There was definitely negative emotions [sic]." She elaborated by saying:

> I can't really say when my doubts first began. It certainly wasn't a simple matter of, one day, no longer believing. And yet, my path from Christian to atheist can, in some ways, best be described as a conversion experience. In reality, it took

years of painful, sometimes excruciating, struggle as I slowly awakened into reason.

For Lauren, one dominant emotion accompanied her journey: "intense anger." She was upset at how she was treated after all that she had invested in her Christian community, only to be rejected by that very community. She also mentioned that alongside the anger was a deep sadness resulting from the thought of trying to replace the community she lost. She felt dejected over trying to find another group with which she fit in.

Marcus' deconversion was marked by a "reclusiveness" at school because he did not talk to people in order to avoid letting them know about the inner struggle he was experiencing. Perhaps a reason for his reclusiveness can be found in the observation made by Tim, who commented that, for him, what caused his negative feelings was "the realization of just how much religious activity takes place all around you, all the time, until you walk away from it." When you do, said Tim, "Then the world does get a little colder." Trina felt the coldness, too; however, she described it as "feeling like an alien from another planet."

One participant spoke passionately about how Christianity had negatively impacted his sex life and the feelings that produced. Upon deconverting, he felt deep anger and frustration towards Christianity because he perceived that it was the reason he felt ill prepared for sexual relationships with women. Speaking candidly, he said:

> At 23, you're dealing with people who've been going through this emotional learning curve and the sexual learning curve for 8 to 10 years. People your age have a good 8 to 10, or maybe 5, 8 to 10, years on you. . . . No one is waiting to have sex 'til 20. Even the people who wait, they don't really wait 'til 20. So you have this issue [of] how do you fit with these people? And what happens is, every

time you have sex, they know. They know you're new, and it kills you because they ridicule you, or you fear they are going to. You can't deal with beginner issues because now you're behind them, and that's very crippling. And the fear of that is more crippling than anything. The bitterness—this is the deepest source of bitterness. And it's really, really been the most devastating impact on my life was [sic] my sex and the romantic relation [sic] – love life. I just never had normal relationships.

Loss and Depression

The two dominant negative emotions mentioned by participants were loss and depression or sadness over losing their faiths. Nine (9) participants remarked that, when they deconverted, an important part of their lives was lost or missing, and it caused them to experience feelings of sadness or depression. For Lauren, it was remembering the Christian community she had been a member of that produced "sadness at everything I lost." For Anne, Charlene, Douglas, and Wayne, it was the missing emotional security that believing in God provided that caused the emotions. Anne explained, "I think that has really scared me, the idea that there's not someone who is actually watching over me, and that really, really, frightened me." Charlene observed, "Although I no longer believed what I'd been taught as a child, I still felt like I was missing something." Douglas echoed Anne's comments about losing a feeling of security that came with belief in God. He lamented, "My worldview of having this divine God who would watch over me all the time; that was gone." Wayne also felt the absence of security and protection that resulted from his deconversion:

> I remember the first time I got on an airplane after I acknowledged to myself that I am an atheist. I remember that, at that moment, I normally had prayed. I prayed for the safety of the flight, [but] I remember I don't have that now. Like, I have to trust engineers and maintenance people and weather—that's it. If any of those

things let me down there's nobody who will change the outcome of this. So yeah, I missed that.

A momentous loss, such as one's religious faith, can be the catalyst for deep sadness and, in some cases, depression. Donald described his emotional state after his deconversion as "depressed:"

> I became depressed for about a month afterwards. . . . I made the announcement just after Thanksgiving, and for the next three weeks, I realized I was completely uninterested in stuff that I usually like to do. . . . My appetite wasn't really much. I didn't really feel like talking to people, even though I was meeting up with people regularly because everybody wanted to talk.

> Dale attempted to retain his faith for the sake of his marriage but was unable to.

He, then, moved out of state and started his life over in Nevada. It had become clear to him that his wife was not going to continue to try and make the marriage work. For her, the assumption was that they had two radically different religious beliefs and that a marriage could not be built on two different foundations. Dale described that period "was the low point of my life in terms of how I have felt about my life and work." As previously mentioned, Lauren had feelings of what she described as "intense anger and sadness" over how she was treated and at the relationships she had lost since her deconversion.

All participants who said they felt sorrow or loss from their deconversions cited immediate and personal reasons for feeling the way they did. For some, it was the loss of friends and community; for others, the loss of the security provided by the existence of the Christian God; and, for one, how Christianity negatively affected his sexual development. Only one participant identified feeling depressed as a result of the logical consequences of atheism. Marcus astutely observed that one of the consequences of

atheism was that humans do not have any ultimate significance. The realization that he and the rest of humanity were not the creations of a loving God but the result of Darwinian evolution initially was hard for him. "Since I don't believe that each human being is, like, inherently special or anything like that, I guess that is depressing sometimes, but it's not really something that keeps me awake at night or anything like that," he said.

It is not surprising that deconverting from Christianity to atheism produced a variety of negative emotions. However, what is most striking is that only one participant identified losing his relationship with God as a source of negative emotions. When asked if they missed being in a relationship with God and whether losing that relationship caused any sense of loss or sadness, only Wayne responded in the affirmative: "Yeah, I mean, I regard it as like a loss of friend," he said.

Negative Existential Impacts

Psychiatrist and Holocaust survivor, Viktor Frankl (2006) once said, "He who has a why to live for can bear almost any how" (p. 9). Frankl's point was that, if a person can discern meaning in the midst of suffering, they are much more likely to be able to endure it. One of the benefits often reported by religious devotees was that their faiths provided an ultimate meaning to human existence. Moreover, it provided a why in the midst of the ubiquitous suffering of human existence. A belief in God not only infused life with ultimate meaning, it also ensured that suffering was not in vain and that, despite all appearances, it had a purpose in the good, wise plan of God. When one deconverts, they not only give up on the existence of God but, consequently, any ultimate meaning to

human existence or the hope that evil and suffering have any redeeming values. Such losses are not small consequences. Each deconvert had to deal with the effect atheism had on the meaning and purpose of life. Fourteen participants recognized the loss of ultimate meaning as a negative consequence. It was not, however, a debilitating one; most participants were able to come to terms with life not having a grand meaning.

Anne admitted, "There's no deeper meaning to anything—or value. There is really nothing." Her belief is connected closely with her view of origins; that is, she "just believes we are a species, kind of created to keep ourselves alive." Tim offered a similar response to the question of meaning in an atheistic universe. He suggested, "We're lucky to be here. That makes sense of it. There is no bigger reason, there is no bigger meaning, there is no higher power. The reason why we're here is because we're here."

Marcus echoed the views of both Anne and Tim and traced his view on the meaninglessness of life to his view on human nature. As an atheist, he no longer believed that humans have the inherent dignity and value that he once believed they did, in virtue of being made in the image of God. He acknowledged that, when one gave up on the belief in God, they also must give up their belief in inherent human value and, thus, in an ultimate meaning in life. The consequences of the loss of those two things were mildly depressing for him. As previously mentioned, he pointed out, "Since I don't believe that each human being is, like, inherently special or anything like that, I guess that is depressing sometimes. But it's not really something that keeps me awake at night or anything like that."

Like Marcus, Donald felt what he referred to as a "big void" for the first couple of months after he deconverted. He attributed that to "stepping away from his purpose in life for the past 10, 13 years." When asked by friends how he can make it in life now that he no longer believes in God, he honestly replies that he does not have a "clean answer." He elaborated by adding, "Christians say, you know, 'I live for Jesus, I want to serve Jesus, I want to bring people to Christ.' I don't have a simple answer to that. . . . I'd be lying if I gave you a clean, clear answer."

Mitch repeated similar thoughts. He confessed that, in his work with palliative-care patients, he has observed "how atheists really struggle" with "the lack of having a purpose in life." He went on to affirm, "If you don't have a purpose in your life, it's just a huge determent to your psyche." He, like Marcus, realized the connection between the image of God and human value and meaning. Explaining his views on human origins, he said, "Until proven otherwise, basically we all come from stardust. When you look way back at it, it was basically stardust. That's a big blow to human narcissism." However, Mitch realized that, even though there is no ultimate meaning to life, atheists must create their own meaning, "Basically, if you don't have a purpose in life as an atheist, you have to create a purpose. I am perfectly okay with that." Although he accepted that, as an atheist, he must create meaning in life, he admits that it is no easy task, "You have to make purpose in life, and that's definitely a struggle."

While most study participants admitted struggling, to varying degrees, with the loss of ultimate meaning for human existence, Dave saw it as liberating and exciting. He,

too, believed that life had no ultimate meaning, so one must create it in order to stave off existential anxiety, but he expressed no sense of remorse over that fact:

> When you realize that you are equal and you are all growing together, you realize that that's the beauty of life and that you're meaning of life . . . is to discover your meaning. Your meaning of life is to find your purpose. The purpose of your life is what you make it to be. You are truly in charge of your own destiny, and that is not only extremely exciting but incredibly liberating. I have no predetermined set of laws, and I don't follow ABCD that I could go to this place and I can't go to this place. It's not a test; it's not a quiz. I'm in charge, and I could leave a positive legacy and do something phenomenal in my life, or I can sit in front of the television and not make an impact—that's okay. [If] that's what I choose to do, that's okay.

Negative Occupational Impacts

The final sphere of life impacted negatively from deconverting is employment. Some participants lost their jobs when it was discovered that they were atheists; others had friends who had lost jobs because of they, too, were atheists. Others were concerned that, if it was known that they were atheists, it would negatively impact their employment, so they kept their religious views to themselves. One participant could not contain himself and spoke openly about his lack of religious faith and found himself censured by his employer.

Losses of Jobs

Five (5) participants reported that they had lost their jobs as direct results of their atheism. Tim was a member of a band that played at a bar. He lost his position with the band because the owner of the bar, a "good Christian," as Tim put it, discovered that he was an atheist. Tim said, "He decided to fire me because, according to another guy in the

band, he didn't want an atheist in the band." Jill, likewise, believed she lost her job as a

planning commissioner because of her atheist activism:

> We had a billboard campaign here in San Jose. Just a group of atheists coming out with billboards saying, "Hey! We are people. We're real people like you, we're your neighbors, your friends, your co-workers—we just happen to not believe in God."

She described the billboard campaign as "very positive." Unfortunately for her, the

campaign was featured "in the newspaper and word got around" her small town that she

was behind the billboard campaign. She also "stopped the Christmas tree-lighting

ceremony on public property last year." Once again, word spread about that as well. It

was perceived by those in her town that she "was trying to take Christ out of Christmas."

Subsequently, she was removed from the planning commission, and she surmised that,

perhaps, "Those two things helped me to be removed from the planning commission."

Shelley had a similar experience. A graduation requirement for her bachelor's

degree stipulated that she must perform 30 hours of volunteer work in a vulnerable

community. She chose a transitional home for women and children. Evangelical

Christians operated the home, and Shelley felt that she could volunteer there without

compromising her beliefs. She believed that the cause was noble, and, because she was

doing data entry on a computer, it did not require her to hold or affirm the beliefs of the

ministry. She was wrong. Shortly after completing her first day on the job, she received a

phone call from the executive director, telling her, "I don't think this is going to work

out." When Shelley asked why, she was told, "Well, you can't park your car in the

parking lot." Shelley's license plate spells "ATHEIST," and the ministry did not want

that to be seen in their parking lot. Shelley was more than willing to leave her car at home

and have her husband drop her off and pick her up; she even offered to walk. Shelley's

offer was met with resistance from the director: "That's not good enough," she said. The

director added, "You didn't sign the statement of faith. We have not had a volunteer who

didn't sign the statement of faith." She pressed Shelley as to her religious affiliation and

asked, "Are you an atheist?" to which Shelley answered, "Yes, I am." The director

informed her that because of her atheism, the ministry "can't have you around the

residents." Shelley "tried to appeal to reason" and said:

> You know, I'm a pretty decent human being. I've never been in trouble with law.
> I don't cheat on my taxes. My children have never been in trouble with the law.
> You know, we take in broken animals all the time. . . . How can you judge me like
> that?

Her argument was met with resistance. The director informed her, "We are evangelical,

and if you can't preach what we want you to preach, then we don't need you." In the end,

Shelley was let go from the ministry. She accounted for her experience by saying, "I got

fired from my volunteer position because I am an atheist."

Dave lost his job working for a major airline because he, like Shelley, had a

license plate that spelled "ATHEIST." He bemoaned this fact, "Literally, 48 hours after I

pulled into my job with my [new] license plate, I was let go." He had worked for the

company for two and a half years only to be unceremoniously let go after he displayed

his newly customized license plate. Dave shared another incident where he believed his

atheism cost him a job. He was given an offer of employment from a company in the IT

industry, subsequent to passing a background check. Dave asserted that he should have

passed the background check because he has "never been arrested [or] never gone to jail

for any reason," nor has he ever "had a drug or alcohol"-related problem. He passed both

the drug test and the background screening. He expected to hear back from the company concerning when he was to start, but instead, "They went silent for two weeks." Then he received a letter in the mail saying they that they were withdrawing their offer. Dave wondered if "in their public research had they found out who I was and what I was doing?" It would not have been hard for them to find out about his activism on behalf of humanist causes. As Dave put it, "All you literally have to do is type David _____ and then Google. The first thing that comes up is _____.com." Even though he could not prove his activism was the reason the company withdrew the offer, he certainly believed it was: "They're not going to say, 'Oh sorry, we're not going to hire you because you're an atheist.'"

Mitch did not lose his job because he was an atheist, but his loss of faith did affect his decision to leave his job. While working at a Christian retreat center and conference ground in the Sierra Nevada Mountains, he lost his faith, which influenced his decision to quit. Although he was eventually planning on leaving the camp and returning home, he admitted, "I think losing my faith had a fair amount to do with that." Despite the fact he was not in a position of spiritual leadership, he no longer believed what the camp taught and decided it was best to stop working there.

Remaining Quiet

Participants who did not lose their jobs because of atheism expressed concerns at the possibility of it. To preserve their employment, they have chosen to remain quiet about their lacks of belief. Cindy said:

> I have never told anybody that I've worked with that I am an atheist. Some people I know, they were Christians, so I just kind of pretended that I was a Christian. I never went to anybody and told them I'm an atheist.

Her primary reason for keeping quiet was that she feared for her job. She relayed a story about a fellow atheist who lost his job because it was discovered he was a nonbeliever:

> I have a friend who came out, at one point, and he mentioned that he didn't-believe-in-the-Bible type thing, and they started treating him differently. He actually ended up getting fired, so I don't personally think that it's a good idea to come out as an atheist at workplaces. . . . I don't tell anybody at work that I'm an atheist. If I get a new job, I wouldn't tell anybody that I'm an atheist.

When asked if she thought that her friend's atheism that actually caused him to lose his job, she replied, "He was very professional about it. They wanted him to go to a Bible study. He said he didn't believe in that stuff, then they started treating him differently after that." She admitted that she was not sure "that's why he got fired" but believed they looked at him "as not like them, and so maybe that has something to do with it." Cindy is not the only one who chose to keep quiet out of fear of the consequences. Wayne expressed to his wife that they needed to be very careful about whom they revealed their atheistic beliefs to because, if the wrong people found out, they could be negatively impacted financially:

> So, you know, I was very paranoid that it may have financial impact on us. For us to get out there, yeah, we have to be careful. . . . If this gets out, I might not be able to get a job, I might get fired, I might have to look for another job.

The fear of losing employment is not only common among rank-and-file deconverts, but also can be acute for those who are in the ministry. For pastors, ministers, full-time preachers, and other church leaders, the loss of faith can be very problematic. Although

not a pastor himself, Dave, because of his humanist activism, was quite familiar with the

struggle unbelieving pastors face. He described it as follows:

> Think about the life of a preacher. After high school, like 18 years old, you go to a preaching school for six months to two years. You get an associate's degree or a preaching certificate at some preaching school, and you're an assistant preacher somewhere. You're a deacon doing messages on Wednesday afternoons, and you work yourself up in being a preacher. Twenty-five [25], 30 years later, you are the pastor of the church. It's the only thing that you've done, it's the only trade you ever had, it's the only job you ever had. . . . Then suddenly you realize you don't believe this stuff anymore—what do you do? You've got a wife and four kids, you have been on a mission to Africa—what do you do? Come out and lose everything you worked for, including your family? What do you do?

Speaking Up

In the case of Christopher, he chose to identify as an atheist at his place of work,

and he did suffer negative consequences. Working in a public school, he engaged in a

conversation with another teacher who did not appreciate his atheistic perspective. The

conversation became animated and was overheard by other teachers. The principal called

Christopher into the office and asked him to account for the conversation. He attempted

to diffuse the situation by telling the principal, "We had a scholarly discussion, and it

might have seemed to be heated up a little bit, to the observers, but we are fine, me and

her [sic]. We talked about it; we are fine with each other."

Participants chose to handle identifying in the work place differently. Some, like

Tim, Mitch, and Shelley, told others what they believed, and it caused them to lose their

jobs. Others, such as Dave, Jill, and Cindy's friend, were open about their atheism, and

they, too, subsequently, lost their jobs, yet it was not clear that it was due to their atheism.

However, there is good reason to believe it was. A few participants, like Christopher,

spoke up and were called to task for being divisive, but most were like Cindy, who chose to keep quiet about her worldview and avoid conflict:

> [If] you [say to] anyone who is gay, "As long as you stay in the closet, you have people who will leave you alone about it." Of course, if you're not honest about who you are absolutely, you can avoid criticism. . . . But, when you're at your company meeting and you're a nonbeliever—you're not only a nonbeliever, but you happen to think that religion is poisonous or oppressive—and your boss of a secular company says to all 15 people in the conference room, "Alright, folks, before we start this meeting, you bow your heads and pray. Dear Jesus, . . ." Oh, stop right there—you have a decision to make, be honest or pretend? And, if you bow your head and you close your eyes, maybe you're doing it to keep your job. Maybe you're doing it to support your family, but you're not being honest with yourself. You're not being honest with people around you. Chances are, statistically speaking, there are at least three or more people in that room that feel the same way you do, but their heads [are] down and [their] eyes [are] closed. . . . As long as we don't identify as a people and as a population, it's easy to discriminate.

Summary

This chapter highlighted the significant negative impacts deconversion had in the lives of participants. Many suffered socially, testifying about the loss of relationships with family, friends and their Christian communities. This was a difficult and stressful aspect of their experiences. Some paid a high cost socially, having close relationships completely severed. Others managed to maintain most of their close relationships, but rarely without strain or tension. Emotionally, participants spoke of experiencing strong negative emotions as they deconverted. Feelings of anger, confusion, depression, sadness, and loss were associated with losing their faith. Participants also said a negative impact of their deconversions was the loss of an ultimate meaning in life. Some still wrestle with the loss. However, the majority have come to terms with it and believe that the loss of ultimate meaning in life has imbued this one life they have with more value since it is the

only one they will ever have, and they are determined to make the most of it. The chapter

closed with a look at the impacts deconversion can have on employment; participants

also spoke about the fear of losing their employment over their loss of faith and, in fact,

several did.

CHAPTER 8

STRATEGIES

Leaving one's faith can have major consequences across a broad spectrum. The impacts from external sources, such as friends and family, are generally negative. This chapter highlights the three strategies participants utilized for dealing with the impacts from those sources of their deconversions: a) how they chose to reveal they were now atheists, b) how they chose to live their lives as atheists, and c) how they engaged with Christians post deconversion.

Strategy 1: How They Revealed Their Identities

Participants realized that how they revealed their identities to others had the potential to negatively impact themselves. Participants used two opposite strategies. First, they sought to avoid negative pushback and cautiously revealed their atheist identities to trusted friends and family. Second, they were not as concerned with the negative consequences as with taking an open stand for atheism.

Cautious Approach

Knowing that identifying as atheists could have negative consequences caused a number of deconverts to mitigate the impacts by coming out slowly and cautiously. Mitch

observed, "It's been a slow process of deciding what I want to tell people. Some of my

summer camp friends know that I don't have my faith anymore." On the whole, he has

not chosen to reveal the change in his worldview to many of his friends. Martin confessed

that, although he has been an atheist for some time:

> It wasn't even until, gosh, maybe, like, two months ago, I started posting articles or things like that. It wasn't like I started posting atheist things out of nowhere, you know; for the longest time, I didn't. I wasn't overtly being atheist or agnostic other that just changing the status on Facebook, and there's something, you know. I probably told a whole 20 people where I was now.

Recounting the journey to publically declaring her identity as an atheist, Kristen spoke

about the fear that can be generated by identifying as an atheist. Due to her upbringing,

embracing the label atheist produced fear, resulting in her identifying first as an agnostic

until she was ready to come out as an atheist:

> I would probably say at some point I, I called myself agnostic because I think I'm too scared to call myself an atheist just because of the upbringing, just because of what was stigmatized of an atheist [sic] for me as a child. I'm being taught [that] an atheist is the worst that it could be in my household. You could be a lot of things, but that would be pretty bad. But, I think it's sort of a deep-seated thing in my own mind of, you know, I can handle the term agnostic but not atheist right now.

Likewise, Christopher also refrained from calling himself an atheist out of fear:

> When I say "calling myself an atheist," [that] was only in the last few years. I think a lot of it is because of my fear from when I was a Christian. I know how we treated atheists. And, I think another reason why it took me a long time was of the fear of hell. Even at the start of being unsure with that, I was still scared because when people stopped in believing in God, you [sic] are going to Hell.

Sam explained why, in his opinion, it is easier for apostates to self-identify as agnostics

than as atheists. On one side, it is motivated out of epistemic humility. On the other side,

it is motivated out of fear of how they will be perceived if they claim the label "atheist."

> I think the majority of people are more comfortable with [using the agnostic rather than the atheist label] because they don't want to say, "I'm an atheist." I guess people, in their mind [sic], when they say that, it always implies, "I'm a Satan worshipper" or "I'm a pagan" or "I'm something else."

Wayne's fears were of a more practical nature. The combination of his loss of faith, adoption of atheism, and where he lived made him concerned about what might happen if word got out that he was now an atheist:

> Being from Tyler Texas, I don't know if you know anything about it, [but] it's like the Bible Belt. I mean, there's [a] church [on] every corner. It's assumed, like, when you meet somebody, asking them where you go to church. It's a valid question; you don't have to start with, "Do you go to church?"

The practical consequences he feared if it became known he was no longer a Christian revolved around issues of employment and whether or not his change in worldview would impact him financially:

> I was very paranoid that it may have a financial impact on us. For us to get out there, yeah we have to be careful. . . . If this gets out, I might not be able to get a job, I might get fired, I might have to look for another job. It was about my biggest concern of mine at that time.

Open Approach

While many participants took their time and were deliberate in whom they confided their losses of faith, others were more open. They chose to deal with the impacts of their deconversions by facing them head on, come what may. In general, they wanted people to know about the changes in their lives and were more than happy to declare them openly in different forums.

Martin was motivated to post on Facebook in order to help others who might be going through difficult times as they matriculate through the deconversion process. Initially he was cautious but soon decided that the benefit of assisting others was worth it:

> You know, it wasn't even until a couple of months ago that I overtly posted something on Facebook, and I decided, "I'm an atheist, and I'm going to speak out about it." Not necessarily attacking religion, but speaking forth, "Here I am, and it's okay to say that you are." And, that was from a perspective of I found it really comforting to have other people to have solidarity with, people like Lori and friends I've made from other places. And, I just wanted to sort of replicate that with anybody else that I might know who [is] living in places [sic] that are not so open to being an atheist.

After his deconversion, Marcus quickly identified as an atheist on Facebook by updating his profile. "You know, I was at that stage where I want[ed] everyone to know, like, I updated my Facebook profile, like, my religious views and stuff like that so everyone would know," he said.

Shortly, thereafter he removed the label from his profile because he "didn't want to limit the people" who might want to talk to him "based on that." "You know," he said, "I don't feel like that should be something that limits people from talking to each other, but it has potential to have that effect."

Shelley was not shy about revealing her transition from Christianity to atheism online. For a period of time, she actively engaged in attacking religious ideas as a means of identifying as an atheist:

> There was a time I was going through a militant atheist phase, where it was just bashing everything religious. My whole thing is ideas are fair game. Not so much [attacking] people [because] people do stupid things; that's acceptable. But, the ideas don't get their feelings hurt, and if it's a bad idea, then it deserves to be called out. So, that said, I put up stuff that needed to be addressed, and I still do, on my wall. People see it and they challenge me, or they accept it, or they'll say, "Oh, that's Shelley, doing her thing again."

In the same manner, Wayne pursued a strategy of revealing his deconversion by going

public and actively seeking out Christians in order to engage in dialogue:

> Right after my deconversion, I was just hungry to debate and just get the toughest opponent that I could, people that I knew. I emailed a couple of people, and I said, "Hey! Recently I've realized I'm an atheist, and I know you're a Christian. You're pretty well studied in the Bible. I know you're pretty solid in your faith. Would you feel like having a discussion with me or talk to me a little bit about this?

Strategy 2: How They Lived

A second strategy utilized by deconverts to deal with the impacts of deconversion

emerged from the interviews. Once they had let it be known to friends and family that

they were no longer Christians but rather atheists, participants were faced with the

question of how they would live as atheists. Given the stigma attached to being an atheist

in the United States, how each answered that question revealed a particular strategy for

dealing with the potential impacts. How participants chose to live out their commitments

to atheism differed according to each individual; however, as in the previous section, two

distinct approaches were discernable.

Diplomats

The first approach former Christians adopted in living as atheists was a diplomatic

one. They were concerned about avoiding needless tension and causing unnecessary

offense in the way they lived out their atheism. For these folks, although atheism is an

important part of who they are, it is not something they feel should cause strife, if it can

be avoided. To be clear, being a diplomat should not be understood as being embarrassed

or shy about their beliefs. All of the participants were quite forthcoming about what they

believed and more than happy to talk about it. Nor should being a diplomat be understood

as a reflection of their commitments to atheism. All the participants were committed to

their denials of the existence of God, and some of the most diplomatic in the public

presentation of that denial were the staunchest nonbelievers. Diplomats seek to avoid

potential problems by not raising the issue of atheism. This does not mean that they never

talk about it or get in heated discussions; it simply means they let the battles come to

them and do not seek them.

      Charlene, while living in Virginia, interacted regularly with Christians who

assumed that she, too, was a believer. Given a choice between engaging them in

conversation, which potentially would risk damaging the relationship, and remaining

quiet, she chose to remain quiet and let them continue on in their assumptions. She

explained:

> In Virginia, people would talk about their Bible study and morning prayer, etc.
> assuming those around them agreed or did the same (on the school playground for
> example), and I just listened. Growing up with that, it's not unfamiliar, and I
> understand that it's important to them and don't feel I need to attack them.

Charlene was able to navigate successfully in both worlds, that of her personal worldview

and the dominant socio-religious worldview in the area in which she lived. By choosing

to listen only and not share her views, she retained her friendships, which, for her, was

more important than changing their minds about the existence of God.

      Charlene related to her mother in the same way she interacted with friends in

Virginia. A devout believer, Charlene's mother has endured watching all of six of her

children turn from the faith in which she raised them. As she was going through her

deconversion, Charlene "used to debate quite a bit" with her mother. They "have come to some sort of agreement in which" they "no longer discuss religion or faith at all" because it was too upsetting for both of them. While she used to hide her convictions from her mother, she no longer does. "I try to live my life as openly and honestly as I can, without pushing my beliefs on her, and we just don't talk about it anymore," she said. Charlene was content for her mother to believe in God and no longer desires to challenge her faith; "God works for her, and that's great," she stated. As a diplomatic atheist, Charlene was more than willing to share her views but saw no need to disabuse others of their beliefs as long as they held them graciously. Commenting on a particular religious belief that she did not accept, she expressed her attitude of tolerance:

> I just can't believe that God is real because if he were, I couldn't be where I am today without him. People wouldn't be able to find peace any other way, but they do. And, it's not the same for everyone—some people truly believe in reincarnation. If that helps them deal with life, I say, "Go for it," as long as they don't push their beliefs on everyone else.

Douglas identified himself as a diplomat. He acknowledged that there are different approaches that deconverts utilize as they live out their atheism. He did not believe that there was any "right" way to do so and felt no compulsion to tell others what was the best way. Douglas pointed out that, in any movement or ideology, there were in-your-face adherents and, while that may be okay for some, it was not the way he had chosen to live out his commitment:

> There's, like, a certain type of people, and it's [sic] not just [those] committed to atheism. . . . They want to wear the t-shirts and want to be in your face about whatever it is—fill in the blank. And yeah, I stopped trying to tell the people the right way of being atheist because I think there's a place for what they call firebrands and diplomats. I prefer to be a diplomat. But, I'm a kind of a diplomat that, if you tell me something, I will let you know how I feel about it.

What made Douglas' observation interesting was that he was a very well-known atheist activist. He was an author, conference speaker, and national organizer of numerous atheist and humanist events. He was a leader within deconverted circles and widely known and respected for both his winsome character and ability to articulate his position. Douglas is an excellent example of the fact that atheists can be both diplomatic in their approaches to atheism and also be advocates. He was quite clear in his beliefs but did not seek confrontation for its own sake.

Kristen, a former believer in her early 30s, located on the West Coast, felt concerned over what people might think of her deconversion. Primarily because she did not want to offend or hurt Christians, knowing that it had the possibility of doing so, she said:

> I do worry about what some people will think, mainly because I am not sure if there is a good way to explain our choice, and I genuinely do not want to offend Christians. But, any attempt to explain why we are no longer interested in church inherently has the potential to offend somebody.

Not wanting to offend others created a difficult decision for her and her husband. When friends and acquaintances discovered they had deconverted, she and her husband were faced with a dilemma:

> So, we are left with a hard choice: say nothing, and let people assume the worst; or explain our reasoning and worry that our friends will feel expressing our thoughts are an attack on their faith, if that makes any sense.

Realizing that she cannot control how others will respond to their losses of faith, she took consolation in the fact that other atheists and agnostics have faced similar experiences and drew peace from having a sense of solidarity with them:

> I do expect some people will make very wrong assumptions about the choice to leave Christianity, but, once again, that is something we just have to accept and move on and take peace in the fact that other atheists and agnostics get it.

Another example of a diplomatic deconvert was Mitch. Committed to the nonexistence of God and happy to dialogue with anyone about it, he felt no compulsion to evangelize. In contrast to the authors who so impacted his own deconversion, he took a more supportive role toward those who were in the midst of their journeys, as opposed to attempting to actively deconvert Christians:

> So, that's a big thing I think about atheist. I would be of the perspective where I want to support someone's journey, if they were come to me. But it's not a, it would not be of a very proselytory perspective in my life.

Marcus sought to identify with others of like mind when he attended college. He attended gatherings of prominent secular and atheist campus clubs for social purposes. What he found was that the tenor of the clubs was such that it did not fit with his way of living out his unbelief. As a diplomatic atheist, the strident tone of the campus clubs was not appealing to him:

> Yeah, I've been to a couple of meetings. I don't know, I just didn't really enjoy it being there. I just didn't enjoy doing that, talking about that topic, because a lot of it was kind of like bashing Christians and groups that we didn't agree with. So, I stopped going there probably after going there twice. That didn't last.

Firebrands

Firebrands typically seek change and are willing to engage in activities to that end even if it angers others. A noticeable number of participants in the study met that description. Steve shared a common sentiment with firebrands. What inspired him and

others to live out their atheism "is a motivation to wake people up. It's not to antagonize people, but it's kind of like, I mean, unplugging them from the Matrix."

What became clear from the data was that many deconverts shared the further motivation to change the views of other atheists. Firebrands believe, and according to studies they have good reason for doing so, that atheists are viewed by the general public as submoral and untrustworthy individuals. Their activism is directly tied to changing that point of view.

Dave was an excellent example of choosing activism as a strategy for dealing with the impacts of deconversion. He was a full-time "humanist activist." He deconverted after a crisis of faith led him to investigate the truth of what he believed. He quickly came to the conclusion that it was not true. Shortly thereafter, he was mentored by a prominent atheist who gave him guidance and opportunities to advocate for atheism and humanist causes. Today, Dave is the host of a popular radio program broadcasting daily for three hours and attracting 160,000 listeners per month. The show is dedicated to secular causes, advocating for atheism and challenging the truth claims of religion. Renouncing belief in God also led him to reject belief in the afterlife. This caused him to turn his focus to this life and to actively making it better for himself and others. He has chosen to do so by becoming a secular humanist activist. Losing belief in God, for many, produces a sense of personal vertigo regarding who they are and why they are here. Dave eagerly desires to spread the word that it does not have to be the case:

> When I realized I didn't have that option, I did have this goal of creating heaven on earth, right? Creating my paradise here. Breaking the mold. So what if most people don't put their trash can [sic] the same place that I put my trash can in the house? It's convenient, and it makes more sense, and it's better aesthetically. I'm

going to do it because I want to create a comfortable living environment for myself . . . so it really is about breaking the conformity. It's about non-infringing upon other people. It's about loving one another and realizing that you are part of something bigger than yourself. This desire to believe in a God because you always felt like there's got to be something bigger, got to believe in something bigger than yourself, starts to go away when you start to embrace atheism. But, once you embrace humanism and secular humanism as part of your atheism, that firmly comes back.

One way Dave sought to change people's views of atheism was to change their views of atheists themselves. He did so by publically identifying as an atheist, then by living a life he believed would challenge people's presuppositions of atheists. One way he chose to do that was by having the word "ATHEIST" on his license plate:

People are constantly taking pictures of the license plate. I see it all the time, starting conversations behind me in the car. People kind of nod their head [sic] [from] side to side [sic], like "I don't necessarily disagree to that thing," and they start talking back and forth. Sometimes they laugh and take pictures. But, then again, it's identifying that atheism is not a black hole with black fingernails with long black hair that you can push off into the closet and that you cannot be afraid of. It's not equal to gothic; it's not equal to Satanism or anything negative. It's a short, chubby, bald guy in a Ford F-150 that has taken his daughter to school. You know, it's regular people, and they were not out to hurt you. I will let you in on traffic, I'll waive you over. I will let you walk across the street without running you down. And, people see this on a day-to-day basis, me acting humanly and civilly in the society, just like everyone else, with this branding of atheism on me. And, that's what I do. I don't do it to start a fight; I don't do it to push anyone else's face. I do it to let them know we are everywhere, and it doesn't effect the way we respect one another in a negative way.

Jill was a deconvert in her mid-50s living in San Jose who, like Dave, chose to adopt an aggressive strategy in expressing her atheism. For her, an important principle that needed to be retained was the separation of church and state. Feeling that Christianity often was given a pass on violating that principle, she chose to take a stand against religious expressions that cross the line:

>In the last year and a half, I guess, I've become more active; in fact, I put a stop to the town sponsorship of the Christian tree lighting. They were going to have a nativity play and a live nativity scene on town property with town sponsorship. I mean, I'm all for you can worship whatever you want; you can have as many nativity scenes on all the private properties that you want. Go for it! I couldn't care less [sic]. But, I mean, when you're violating the constitution, doing it on public property with public sponsorship, then I have a big problem with it. So, I stopped it, and because of that, a local woman here who is on a local atheist meet-up group, she contacted me, and she came to support me, and it inspired her to contact the Freedom from Religion Foundation to set up a local chapter. So, we, she got inspired to start a chapter because of what I did here.

Jill's work was not only centered on stopping the encroachment of religion in the public sector, it was also concerned with changing the views others have of atheism. One way she went about doing that was by partnering with the Freedom from Religion Foundation in organizing a billboard campaign in her hometown. The purpose of the campaign was, like Dave, to change people's perceptions of atheists:

>We had a billboard campaign here in San Jose. Just a group of atheists coming out with billboards saying, "Hey, we are people, we're real people like you. We're your neighbors, your friends, your co-workers. We just happen to not believe in God." So, we did this billboard campaign; very positive, and I was on two of them, and it was in newspaper.

Referring to the story of a young Muslim woman who had suffered greatly for her deconversion, Mitch commented, "I am going to start sharing that I am a deconvert myself." His primary reason for doing so was to add to the projects of other atheists who were "trying to reduce the idea that we eat babies."

Firebrands not only seek to change how people view them and atheists in general, they also actively seek to aid each other as they live in a predominantly religious society. That means organizing atheist social groups, in order to facilitate the need for community, and atheist political groups directed at bringing about changes in the law that

benefit atheists. Tim, formerly a committed believer, was actively involved in creating

social spaces for atheists and political-action groups. Regarding his work of creating

social opportunities for atheists, he said:

> I've become very active in creating places where nonbelievers can gather with other like-minded people, so they can come out of the closet, if you will. I worked on rebuilding a local freethinkers group for a few years, from 2009 to 2012. I created a couple of atheist conventions, tried to expand things out, but they were a little too set in their ways, so I moved on. Earlier this year, I cofounded a secular community that meets up every week that is more of a social gathering than anything else. We have 20 to 30 people who come out every week. Not bad, considering the uptight community we're in and the fact that it's a challenge to reach closeted nonbelievers.

Concurrent with his work in creating events and communities for atheists, Tim also had

goals of being politically active. His focus was on social activism, and he was willing to

work with religious groups in order to bring about positive changes in the community:

> And, I'm in the process of starting an atheist group that will have more of a social activism direction. That goes live on Monday. The secular community is just a place where people can get together, eat, drink, and discuss whatever they want in a taboo-free environment. If you want to talk about God stuffs, that's great. If you want to talk about movies or shoes or politics, that's cool, too. Primarily, we just want nonbelievers to know that they're not alone. The atheist group will be more active in terms of being active in the community, raising money for local causes, promoting dialog and cooperation with religious organizations in the area, and basically trying to get the community to see that we're not baby eaters.

It is interesting to note that what motivated him in doing good was not exclusively the

benefit he can provide others, but also that it will reflect positively on atheists. Like other

firebrands, he was very concerned about the misguided views people have of atheists.

Strategy 3: How They Engaged Other Christians

Deconverts once identified themselves among the faithful; they were embedded in

churches, Bible studies, parachurch organizations, and Christian clubs. For many

deconverts, the greatest pushback they received was from those they left behind as they detached from various Christian communities. One approach that several deconverts used when criticized was to go on the offensive and turn the tables on the believers. Tim's method was to challenge faith in the Bible:

> When people started with the Bible, I'm like, "Where did that come from? Who wrote that, do you know? No, it wasn't Matthew, Mark, Luke, or John; those are just titles. So, did you know that the Bible, that particular thing that you're quoting, wasn't actually in the Bible—it was added later?" Or, "Did you know that particular morality tale was actually stolen from the Egyptian book that was written before the Bible?" You know, that kind of thing, so I'm all, "Prove it, then I'll agree with you."

Mitch tried reasoning with believers by appealing to the fact that both he and they do not believe in many of the same gods. Neither he nor the Christians with whom he was dialoging believe in the gods of Greek or Roman mythology or even the god of Islam, for that matter. So, he argued, all are atheists to one degree or another. However, he had chosen to deny one more god than they did:

> One thing that I've tried to do is—([by the way], if I try to explain my perspective to someone who doesn't question their [sic] faith, [I use] this . . . stuff I've read in books and learned through trial and error)—[what] Sam Harris quotes . . . a lot of times in his talks, "You do know what it's like to be an atheist. Every single person in this room, you know, you all, if you're in a Christian room, you all know exactly how to be an atheist towards Islam, or toward the great God of the oceans, or whatever. You all know what exactly it feels like. That is exactly what it feels like to be an atheist; we've just gone one god further."

Shelley shared an encounter she had with a believing friend concerning faith healing. According to Shelley, they were talking about religion and sharing their perspectives. Her friend challenged Shelley with what she assumed to be a proof of God's existence. The friend said:

> The elders of the church gathered together and formed a circle and prayed over this man who is in the middle. He emerged. He was holding this black mess of goop in his hands, and the guy no longer had cancer.

Shelley was quick to point out to her that what was being offered as evidence for God's existence was, from Shelley's perspective, not very impressive at all. Instead of merely accepting the story and avoiding conflict, Shelley offered her own challenges to her friend:

> I said, "Did you see their hands while they were in the middle of the circle?" and she said, "No," and I said, "Did any of them have pockets?" She said, "Well, yeah," and I said, "Don't you think it's within the realm of possibility that they had something that they, you know, premixed before this, and then used it for the situation?"

That was the last time her friend talked with Shelley. Although she was disappointed, she added that, even though she lost a friend, she accomplished her goal of challenging believers to think:

> If I can just plant a seed and not to change any body's mind, [that would be good]. "To each his own, Live and let live"—that sort of thing. But, you know, any type of critical thinking, as far as I'm concerned, is good. Whatever path that leads you on.

Summary

In order to mitigate the impact of deconverting, participants revealed that they knowingly or unknowingly engaged in certain strategies. This chapter identified three strategies that featured prominently in the data:

1. Participants were careful how and to whom they revealed their deconversions and their new identities as atheists;

2. Participants were inclined to adopt one of two stances in relation to how they lived their atheism publically. Some chose to be diplomats, while others, firebrands; and

3. Participants utilized various methods to engage Christians in dialogue post deconversion

CHAPTER 9

INTERVENING CONDITIONS

The previous chapter highlighted the strategies used by participants in dealing

with the impact of their deconversion. What also emerged form the data was that there

were intervening conditions that influenced the choice of strategies for coping with the

negative impact of deconversion. This chapter will touch on those conditions. The two

intervening conditions were family relationships and anger towards Christianity. A third

possible intervening condition, geographic location, emerged in the data, and it seemed to

influence the choice of coping strategy. However, due to the small sample size, it is

inconclusive if that is, in fact, the case. Therefore, it is offered as a suggestion for why

certain participants chose the strategies they did. More research is required in order to

identify geographic location as an intervening condition.

Family and Strategy Selection

The first intervening condition that influenced the strategies participants used in

handing their deconversions was that of family. Nearly all of the participants of the study

came from highly religious backgrounds. For their parents and many of their siblings,

Christianity remained the foundation upon which they built their lives. Even though the

participants no longer shared the same worldviews as their family members, they testified

to still caring for them deeply. This resulted in participants attempting to prevent their loved ones from experiencing unnecessary distresses due to their apostasies. Their concerns lead them to either avoiding telling their loved ones they had deconverted or, if that fact had already come to light, to avoid getting into upsetting discussions about it for the sake of the family.

Rachel commented that she had "a very close relationship" with her mother. But she explained, "I haven't come and specifically told her that I don't believe anymore. I think it would kind of hurt her. So, honestly we haven't talked about it." In order to avoid hurting her mother's feelings, she had chosen to keep her identity as an atheist secret. However, she went on to say "I think she knows." Rachel speculated that perhaps it is because "I've kind of pulled away." She went on to say that, even though her mother will occasionally talk about faith-related issues with Rachel or pray for her, she does not see the harm in, out of love, not speaking up. "I guess for me, since I don't necessarily believe, I don't think it's a big deal if she doesn't know, and she can just continue to believe how she thinks I am."

Cindy and Charlene also expressed similar sentiments in relating to their mothers, but, in their situations, both mothers knew. Cindy noted, "My mom, I don't talk to my mom anymore. She can't handle my atheism really, so I think it's better if I never bring it up, but she does, and then she gets kind of upset a little bit." Charlene, echoing Cindy's concern for sparing her mother, said, "I used to hide my convictions from her, but now I don't. I try to live my life as openly and honestly as I can, without pushing my beliefs on

her, and we just don't talk about it anymore." Both women have chosen to avoid talking

about their identities for the sake of their mothers' wellbeing.

In Kristen's situation, both sides of the family knew that both her and her husband

were no longer believers. Their deconversions had caused problems between them as a

couple and with her husband's parents. She shared that:

> My mother-in-law recently tried to talk to my husband, saying that "We must
> return to church sometime" and wanting to confirm he "still believes in Jesus,"
> etc. My husband's response was that he did not want to discuss it because it would
> cause a fight. We have come to some sort of agreement in which we no longer
> discuss religion or faith at all. It was too upsetting for both of us.

Avoiding engaging in conversation about matters of faith and religion was a prominent

strategy that emerged among participants. In some situations, more extreme avoidance

maneuvers were deployed. Kristen and her husband felt that his parents' attitudes were so

problematic that, for the sake of familial harmony, they could not live near them;

otherwise, conflict would erupt over their beliefs:

> I have to be honest and say the extremist position taken by my in-laws has
> probably had a huge impact on why we do not live near them, and probably never
> will. When we did live by them, there was too much Christianity-connected
> judgment and fighting, and we do not want our kids around that kind of drama.
> My husband's sisters still attend church. We know there will be a lot of favoritism
> towards them and their kids (this has already happened, actually) because they
> attend church and we do not. Again, we would not want to live closer to that and
> have it more obvious to our young kids. So, that is hurtful too, and it is sad that
> we think the best way to manage the situation is to maintain some distance, but
> that is how it will be. So, this is probably the biggest impact on our family
> relationship, the fact the difference in beliefs makes it difficult to even live near
> each other.

Anger and Strategy Selection

The second intervening condition that influenced the strategies employed by

participants to manage their deconversions was a negative feeling toward Christianity.

For some, deconversion was an act of rebellion and anger that was directed at a way of life, institution, or group of people. How they chose to deal with the impact of their decisions to leave the faith was to charge headlong into it. Instead of avoiding conflict, they sought it. They were intent on drawing clear lines of demarcation between their former faith and where they now stood. They planted their flag in the ground and proudly identified as atheists.

A striking example of this is Lauren's admission that what "drives" her doctoral research on atheism is "hate and rage." She used the perceived negative experiences at the hands of Christians to inspire her as an advocate for secularism on college campuses and as an activist for secular causes. In her words, she "was able to take some lemons and make some lemonade." She has not only dedicated her academic career to the study of atheism and atheists, she has turned it into a "wonderful career." Although she admitted to not having "a wonderful sense of self worth" and was still dealing "with the emotional ramifications of betrayal, of not being enough, of you know, everything that happened," her chosen strategy of being an outspoken secular advocate allowed her to mitigate the impact in her life.

A second participant who exemplified a strategy influenced by having negative feelings toward Christianity was Trina. Trina lived in Los Angeles and lost her faith in her teens. She was a member of several local atheist groups and online communities. Her previous experiences with the church, believers, and God caused her to adopt a strategy similar to that of Lauren's but more caustic. She lamented that she often was on the receiving end of criticism due to her atheism. "I definitely feel discrimination. Even my

landlord tells me I shouldn't be an atheist. He's a Christian 'Repugnician.' He hates it

because his brother is also an atheist," she said. Rather than shying away from

controversy or seeking to avoid it altogether, Trina seemed to court it:

> I wear atheist buttons, t-shirts, bumper stickers. Believers have come up to me and yelled at me that I'm going to hell. I reply, "It's your hell, you believe in it, go burn in it!" If they're nasty, sometimes I say, "Another fine example of that good ole Christian love!"

She recounted a story of an experience she had a fitness facility. While running on a

treadmill, she sought to change the channel on the overhead television. She requested

assistance in using the remote. According to her, "Two female employees got nasty with

me. They always look disapprovingly at my shirt, so I gave it right back to them."

Despite the fact that she found such interactions with Christians offensive, she

maintained, "Even though I continue to be treated nasty [sic] by believers, I will keep

wearing atheist related items when out and about."

A third participant whose choice of strategy was motivated by anger towards

Christianity was Frank. He, like Lauren and Trina, had chosen to openly identify as an

atheist and engage with believers on behalf of atheism. It appeared that what motivated

him in adopting this strategy was his anger toward Christianity for the overwhelmingly

negative impact it had on his sex and romantic life, as mentioned in Chapter 7.

Subsequent to losing his faith, he began to reflect upon what being a Christian had

cost him in terms of his personal development. He concluded that being a Christian:

> didn't let me just organically develop. I didn't get any advantage of figuring out as a high school kid and grow at that rate [sic]. I didn't go to a secular college where I could meet women who were at campus and have organic relationships that weren't aimed at marriage as the only reason to have a relationship. Those things that help you to get a segue [sic] and practice and get experience and

network, all of that wasn't there when you're at a college where the first date is for marriage consideration.

Commenting on the church's views on sexuality and abstinence, he said, "That really hurt me. It's arbitrary." He mused that, had he left the faith earlier, he:

> could have gone the other way. I could have found someone. I know it's not a direct line. It doesn't destroy everyone's sex life or love life, but it did mine. I'm bitter about it because it's a false belief . . . . It was dogmatic. Because I put so much moral and psychological commitment into doing things that way, to have it backfire so painfully has been a source of bitterness. It's been the most devastating impact on my life.

Geography and Its Possible Effect on Strategy Selection

Where participants live may have influenced the strategies they utilized in dealing with the impact they experienced resulting from deconversion. Those in more liberal blue states appeared to experience less impact on their lives than those in more conservative red states. Those in the conservative Southeast and Midwest seem to adopt more cautious strategies in identifying as atheists, while those in the Northeast and Pacific Northwest were less cautious in the strategies they adopted. However, due to the limited sample size, this finding is only tentative, contingent on further data.

Martin, who was raised in Texas and now lives in Las Vegas, expressed that while he did not choose to publicize his atheism at work, it eventually became known. Yet because he lived in Las Vegas, he felt that he did not need to adopt any particular strategy to lessen the impact:

> Actually, in the four years that I've been working in this company, I didn't come out and tell everybody the first day I started or something like that. But coworkers are very aware that I am atheist. Actually, I had few coworkers that are not so religious. We have coworkers that are like that, and so there hasn't been any

hindrances [sic] at all to me at this particular company. I do believe that it [sic] would have been in Texas, not but not here.

In contrast, he pointed out that had he been back in his home state of Texas, he would have had to adopt a different strategy to mitigate the negative impact of deconverting:

Las Vegas is definitely a place where it's a lot easier to live. If you are in Texas, Texas is not very friendly, at least the parts we came from, toward atheists. We would have a hard time if we would try to be open in Texas about religion or work or other things like that. Here, it's not. It's not so bad, the hostility here.

Wayne, also from Texas, noted that, because of where he lived, he was cautious and worried that news of his deconversion would negatively impact him and his wife. In order to avoid as much negative impact as possible, he cautioned his wife about posting their beliefs publically on the Internet. As noted earlier, he said:

I was like, "No, no." Oh yeah, she's a little bit of a hot head, you know. She gets fired up to do drastic things like that. And, I was like, "No, no, no. I'll just change jobs, and what if these things got on the Internet? It's going to be a there forever." And you know being from Tyler, Texas, I don't know if you know anything about it, it's like the Bible Belt. I mean there's a church on every corner. It's assumed like, when you meet somebody, asking them where you go to church. It's a valid question; you don't have to start with, "Do you go to church?"

Wayne eventually did change jobs. What motivated him to do so was the realization that his hometown was a fundamentalist stronghold. To avoid the repercussions he would experience in his hometown if it were known that he was an atheist, they moved to a much larger metropolitan city where they could live with a greater sense of freedom:

But the reason that we even looked is because, you know, coming home from a road trip one time, listening to an atheist podcast, they were making fun of something some fundamentalists were doing. I was listening and, man, it makes me mad that, you know, we're going to go home, we're going to be back in a place that is just like that.

Not all participants living in the Bible Belt chose to cautiously avoid identifying as

former Christians. Steve, who was living in Nashville at the time, chose a different, more

aggressive strategy. During a business meeting, he was confronted with the awkward

situation of having the other members of the meeting assume he was a Christian:

> Something had come up last spring. I was out with four guys, and we were discussing something. And, they're like, "Well, what do you feel the Lord is leading you to do?" and "We should pray about this." And I was like, "Before you guys assume too much about me, I got to let you know that I have been retired for about a decade. I've got the gold watch. I did my time. I'm on my pension plan right now. So, you guys continue with this conversation, but I'm not going that route." And, they were just floored. They couldn't wrap their mind [sic] around it.

When his companions began to push back, Steve politely responded by telling them, "If

you want to have a conversation like this, off the side, I'm more than happy. This isn't a

good way to approach me with it, though." In the end, identifying as a former-Christian-

now-atheist did not negatively impact his business. "We still do our weekly meetings," he

said. "I haven't seen it effect business yet because they still use me. But the lack of

church and religion definitely puts it on business people's radar here in the South."

Douglas had a contrasting experience to Wayne and Steve. Living in San

Francisco counteracted any negative pushback. When asked if he had experienced what

he perceived as discrimination due to his beliefs, he said that he had not. "I know about a

lot of people in places like Oklahoma and Utah [and] in the South where they ran into all

kinds of pushback and trouble." Douglas pointed out, "Most of the negative things come

from external things where people treat you differently because you're an atheist." He

added, "That doesn't happen up here in San Francisco." The major reason he attributed to

not having negative experiences was that he lived in San Francisco, "one of the most

liberal parts of the planet." According to him, "Most of the people I know are secular anyway, even if they don't consider themselves atheist." Besides the fact that San Francisco, is "a much less church-oriented town," Douglas pointed out that the size of the city has a bearing on the level of tolerance toward differing perspectives:

> I meet a lot more Jews, a lot of Muslims, a lot of Buddhists, a lot of you name it. I mean, it's such a world-class city that there's not any one thing that really has a lock on the town.

As a result of where he lived, Douglas had been able to openly express his beliefs without the fear of significant negative consequences. The political climate, ethnic and religious diversity, and the size of the city combined to provide a measure of anonymity and freedom from some of the negative consequences experienced by deconverts in more conservative parts of the country.

The benefit of deconverting in a metropolitan city like San Francisco becomes even clearer when contrasted with deconverting in a small town. Dale could not avoid the negative attention that often accompanied deconversion, precisely because he was in a small town. After his deconversion became public, he noticed that "people were treating [him] different [sic], people were trusting [him] differently." People told him, "I don't know how I can trust you," even though, as he put it, "I had long years and . . . my entire adult life, I [had] known these people, and [I] had honest, intimate relationships with them." Still, those relationships were "different after the deconversion." Reflecting back on that time in his life, he commented:

> I think it's a process for everyone. I think I am the first in many of these people in their lives who had gone through this, so they don't know how to interact with somebody who says "I don't believe in God anymore."

In his small town, he was the only atheist. "I was in a small town, where everybody knows everybody else in an instant, so they didn't really know how to deal with an atheist," he said. Even though he could understand that "It was new for them," he added that it "didn't necessarily make it less hurtful when it happened."

Summary

This chapter presented the intervening conditions that influenced how participants chose the coping strategies presented in the previous chapter. From the data, it became obvious that family relationships impinged upon the choice of strategy. A number of participants reported that, in an attempt to avoid hurting family members, they either had not told them about their deconversion, or if they had tried not to make it an issue, knowing that it would only bring family members sorrow. A second strategy adopted by some participants resulted from their anger and hostility to Christianity. For these individuals, Christianity was seen in such a negative light that it needed to be actively fought against. Where a participant lived may have impacted the way they handled their deconversion, but this will require more research to establish. Those in more conservative parts of the country employed somewhat different strategies than those in more liberal parts of the country. Likewise, those from small towns where they were well known by many chose a different approach to identifying as atheists than those in large cities, which provided more anonymity. Thus, it is offered as a suggestion that where participants lived impacted their choice of strategy.

CHAPTER 10

POSITIVE IMPACTS

This chapter focuses on the positive impacts of deconverting from Christianity to atheism. Despite the many negative consequences associated with deconversion, participants strongly affirmed that ultimately the impacts of deconverting have been positive. Leaving Christianity and adopting atheism was fraught with difficulties, but participants spoke consistently that it was worth the cost. Being in the truth and free from the falsity of Christianity and the lifestyle it required has provided cognitive and emotional benefits that outweigh the negative consequences. Dave was very clear about how deconverting impacted his life,

> I really want to bring this point home . . . . It is an overwhelmingly positive impact to go from Christianity to atheism. Overwhelmingly positive. As an atheist, I don't feel like there's a limit. I mean, I can live my life in any direction I want to.

Other participants confirmed and even expanded upon Dave's perspective and reflected on how deconverting had caused them to have different views of themselves. They used such phrases as "I've grown healthier as a nonbeliever," "I'm more pleased with myself," "I'm more comfortable with myself," "I relished the challenge it presented," "I'm calmer," "I have higher self esteem," "I'm more honest with myself," "It was really exciting," "It was a growing time," and "It was a very blossoming time."

As participants shared their stories, two themes emerged regarding their perceptions of the positive impacts of deconversion. Participants felt that deconverting produced positive consequences both affectively and cognitively. In the way they felt and thought about the world, deconverts believed they were better off after their deconversions than before.

This chapter is divided into two main sections, the positive affective and positive cognitive impacts. The dominant theme in each section was that participants perceived themselves as "being free" since deconverting. While participants' comments on the affective and cognitive domains overlap considerably, I treat them separately in this chapter to articulate better the function of each.

Positive Affective Impacts

Affective freedom is understood in terms of happiness that takes the form of lacking particular negative emotions and possessing certain positive ones. In this section, I first discuss freedom before turning my attention to happiness.

Freedom

When asked what positive impacts deconversion had on their lives, participants largely responded that they were now free; altogether, the 24 participants expressly referred to being set free or liberated 35 times in the interviews. Twenty-one (21) participants used the words "free," "freedom," "liberated," or "liberation" to define their experiences, or they described being set free or liberated from Christianity. There was a strong sense among the participants that Christianity once bound them, and deconversion

liberated them and provided opportunities to flourish as people. Although the negative

impacts were substantial and difficult, participants perceived the positive impacts as

invaluable. Freedom from the "oppressive" and "arcane" Christian religion came at a cost

for all participants, but all testified that it was a price worth paying. The affective and

cognitive positives outweighed the negative impacts. The cost of freedom was high but

ultimately worth it.

Participants explained their liberations differently. Frank's liberation began when

he picked up a book by Sam Harris, a prominent atheist. In Harris, he found someone

who, like himself, felt that Christianity and religion in general were wrong and hurtful. In

regard to religion, Frank said it was as if someone was finally willing to say, "'No, fuck,

no! It's wrong!' That was really liberating. It was really an awkward kind of 'Yes!' There

are other people who get this." Furthermore, he felt that his deconversion freed him

cognitively for previously prohibited academic pursuits. He commented, "Liberation

came when I could now read freely and not have any preconception about what the

conclusion would be." One author that particularly impacted his thinking was Michel

Foucault:

> He was just sort of imagining thinking outside the box of our gender and
> sexuality. And, the freedom, the openness of possibilities where he was like,
> "We're so impoverished relationally. We have family. We have friends where
> there's a whole spectrum of relationships we could imagine and develop." And, I
> just remember having the sense of the possibility there. Or, he's talking about
> how we talk about pleasure, but we don't experience it. My heart was just aflame
> for this openness to new ideas, wherever they went. I think that was
> extraordinarily liberating.

Wayne echoed Frank's sentiments. He, too, gained intellectual freedom from his

deconversion. He described himself "as being more free to question things." He added, "I

personally feel, as an atheist, I don't think there is anything that is so sacred that it can't

be questioned." Similarly, Mitch identified intellectual freedom as a benefit from

deconverting. For him it stemmed from finding more congruency to his beliefs as an

atheist than when he was a Christian:

> I found a lot answers. I think I have. There is like a freeing piece now that I don't have as many intellectual problems with my values system. Like I was saying, my values system I don't think has drastically changed. I think it has gotten easier in terms of congruency. It's more congruent.

Rachel complained that Christians often told her that "I need to believe this or not

believe this." But, as an atheist, she happily commented, "I can choose on my own if I

want to believe it or not, and I love that freedom." She went on to say:

> I feel more free, definitely more open, less judgmental, more open to people and ideals. Free to think things, or not think things, based on what I choose to do, not based on what Christians friends say I should do or not do.

Whereas Frank, Wayne, Mitch, and Rachel's liberations came in the form of

intellectual pursuits, more often than not participants' liberations came in the form of

being set free from what they perceived as the oppressive nature of their faith. Charlene

reminisced about her time living in the Bible Belt of Virginia, "Where it is not

uncommon to be asked what church you attend upon first meeting." It was while living

there that she allowed herself to ask the question, "What if there is no God?" Prior to that

time, she was, "afraid to even think such a thing." But, when she did, she discovered that

"the world didn't change." In fact, that simple question allowed her to see things in a new

way. It was "eye opening," she said; it was "freeing" and "a very liberating experience."

Tim's experience was similar to that of Charlene's. When he finally "gave up religion

and accepted" that it was behind him, he reported, "There was an incredible burden that

just vanished from my fundamentalist shoulders. And, the constant condemning that goes along with fundamentalism, until you get away from it, then you're like, 'Oh, this is great!'" He described his life as a Christian as "burdensome" because for him the Bible was a book that taught, "These are the people who you can love, and these are the people you should hate, and there's a lot of people you should hate." Deconverting meant that he did not have to comply any longer, which he described as "a huge plus" because he no longer had to live under that "intolerance" anymore.

Christopher no longer felt that he had to "live up to some type of expectation" anymore, nor did he "care what other people [thought]" of him. He found freedom in knowing that "Some people are going to like [him], and some people are going to hate [him]." Regardless, he no longer felt like he had to "live up to anybody's standards any more."

The feeling of always having to live up to standards can be burdensome. Steve found that being relieved of this burden was a very positive aspect of his deconversion. "I think, yeah, it was a very freeing sensation," he said, primarily "because there's so much guilt and condemnation that comes with the Christian religion in particular." Shelley, likewise, shared that, for her, deconverting brought a sense of freedom from the scrutiny of an omniscient God. When asked how deconversion positively impacted her life, she replied by saying, "Initially, there wasn't, except for relief. I kind of felt like I felt free. I felt like there's nobody watching me. I felt like, I don't know, all I can think of is free."

Sam went further in describing his former faith as one that he now sees as oppressive and is grateful to be free from:

So, at this point, the only benefit I got from Christianity is the ability to pose guilt to others, the ability to control others and manipulate others, and, for a lot of ways, suppress others. Without that element of my life anymore, I'm a much more free individual.

Jill raised the issue of freedom from the fear of eternity. In the past, it was something that had caused her concern, but, because of atheism, she does not "feel any loss at all." She confided, "I feel liberated that I don't have the fear to worry about life, about heaven and hell, about judgment." Deconverting "emotionally liberated" her from those fears and she was now "free of all that stigma and all the expectation."

Beside the intellectual and emotional relief discussed, a third sense of freedom mentioned by the participants was the freedom to live as they chose. Rachel found joy in the freedom to be friends with two young men who were not believers:

I was able to say, "You know, I'm going to be friends with them and whatever they needed me to be, if they needed an adult to talk to, or kind of a mom, or kind of a person to just to listen, or want to come over, or have lunch, or whatever." I really like people, I like hearing about people's lives, and I like hearing stories and talking to people. And, yeah, there's that freedom, being able to talk with anyone.

She can now enjoy unbelievers for who they are and no longer feels the need to evangelize them. She asserted that she was "free to be able to [enjoy them], not just for the purpose of evangelizing them or making sure they turn away from their sin and to be saved . . . . I was just able to see them for who they were." No longer was she concerned about having to decide if people were responsible for their sexual orientations or about holding that against them like she did when she was a Christian. She does not:

think about "Were they born that way, or did they made that choice?" . . . . When I'm at church, what I was taught was that it was the choice they made, not that they were born that way. So, I am able to see people and appreciate people without any thoughts of "What will God think?," or "God needs me to evangelize

them," or "God needs me to win them, so we see them in heaven." And, I just get to appreciate people, so that has been very freeing.

Her spectrum of relationships broadened, and she noted that she was now "able to have relationships with them, talk with them, hang out with them, no matter who they are, no matter what they believe." Not only did she feel free to associate with those who were not Christians, she felt the freedom to make choices and act in ways that before were forbidden, such as drinking at a bar:

> If I choose not to drink, you know, (I don't think I really do very much), but if I choose to have a drink with a friend after work, I can do that, and I can have the freedom to do that and not feel guilty and not I feel like I shouldn't be here.

Sam also spoke of being "freer to accept an individual with all their [sic] shortcomings, with all their beliefs, with all their likes and dislikes, accept them for who they really are. I'm not trying to change anybody anymore." He no longer looked at the world through the lens of us vs. them or as an in-group vs. out-group mentality. As a result, he said, "The relationship with the majority of my friends has gotten better."

Happiness

Freedom was not the only positive impact that resulted from deconversion. Thirteen participants stated that they were happier as atheists then they were as believers. Those who did not specifically use the word "happier" did, nonetheless, portray themselves that way post deconversion. Repeatedly, participants communicated that leaving the strictures of the Christian faith produced in them an emotional state of joy and contentment. Even though the process of deconversion was difficult, perhaps the reason so many deconverts testified to being happier was because, as Charlene said, "In the end,

things were better." Regardless of how difficult the journey was, the end result was worth it in the eyes of participants.

Dave gave powerful testimony as to how one could be happier as an atheist than as a believer. He no longer viewed himself and fellow Christians as a special group, loved by God in a unique way. He had come to see himself and everyone else as part of "something bigger than us; it's humanity as a whole. We are a part of the gigantic family [to] which we are all related in some degree." Dave saw all of life as an interconnected whole, each part related to the other through the natural process of evolution and chemical composition. Therefore, he felt a deep connection to nature. He said, "I can stand out in a forest and be moved to tears knowing the relationship my body has with the earth, that someday I will return to that." Furthermore, the knowledge that he has a "limited amount of time" combined with the fact that "the odds of [him] actually being here are astronomically small" cause him to marvel:

> The fact that I'm literally made of stardust, of things from space—it is phenomenal. It's moving, it's emotional, it's sexy. It's all of these things that I can only verbalize as genuine happiness. I hate to take that long way around, but the sure answer is happiness.

Additionally, Dave went on to say, "I have to say there is an overwhelming improvement in my emotions, period." As a consequence of accepting his place in the universe, he felt "genuine happiness." He continued:

> When I do something for someone, it is not because I think that God is watching. It's not because I'm trying to rack up points for heaven, [or] not because it's a Christian, or Muslim, or Jewish thing to do. I simply understand that all humans are connected and not only in evolutionary and biological way, which is cool in itself, but also in an bigger part of humanity way. So, it feels really amazing that we are part of this giant moving body of humanity, that I get to play a role in that. So, I am extremely happy.

In recounting his deconversion, Dale was clear that his transition from Christianity to atheism was precipitated by an intellectual problem. It was decidedly not because he was unhappy, which is why, for him, it made it all the more surprising that his deconversion produced greater happiness:

> I didn't choose atheism. I became an atheist because I agreed with an argument, and I didn't know what else to do with that. But, I went from there to [being] more happy and satisfied in life than I had been before, and then eventually come to the point now where I believed that, with very few exceptions, I think religion is a bad influence on people.

He continued:

> So, that was positive for me to find that—and surprising—I didn't choose atheism because of atheist consequences. I didn't really know what the consequences would be when I made that transition. I was surprised to find how happy that was, how I was feeling about it. I was excited about my new sense of wonder in unanswered questions, you know.

Other participants who testified that they were happier now as atheists were Sam, Cindy, and Martin. Sam said he was "a lot happier now" that he is no longer in church, "a lot happier" since he left Christianity, "a lot happier" not having to answer to other Christians, and "happier" that he no longer feels the need to try and convert people to Christianity. Cindy also was "happier" being an atheist and away from all the "negativity, the judgment, the anti-education" she associated with the church:

> The last time I was in church, I was 22, and I felt, like, angry [at] what the priest was preaching. I was very convinced that they were very hateful and ignorant. I left the church, and I left all that. I felt I was leaving something very bad because they were just teaching ignorance. I was so angry with her preaching.

She stated, "I'm happy because I'm away from all that. I just felt really happy that I don't have to dealt with it anymore."

Reflecting on his journey and how difficult it was, Martin shared that despite it all, "You know, I consider myself now . . . . I'm a lot happier than five or six years ago." Martin is representative of nearly all the participants in this study for whom deconversion was the means by which they were able to reconcile many of the loose ends of faith they wrestled with as believers. Deconversion was the path to a unified self, a self no longer at war with itself. Looking back over their journeys, participants identified the result of finding that unity of self as happiness. When asked what constituted happiness, participants spoke in terms of binary opposites and how they now identified with the positive binary concept, whereas when they think of themselves as believers, they identified with the negative concept. Participants were inclined to see themselves as compassionate verses judgmental and peaceful as opposed to anxious.

Compassionate v. Judgmental. It was clear that participants drew sharp distinctions between their attitudes toward others when they were Christians and their present attitudes as atheists. They uniformly testified that, prior to their deconversions, they were judgmental and intolerant of others who believed differently than they. As atheists they saw themselves as much more compassionate and open to others. No longer did they discriminate along lines of religion and behavior. When they did discriminate, it was based on what they believed to be secular reasoning, not religious faith.

Because of his difficult experiences, Frank was more open to the experiences of others, even if they were not in line with his preferences. "I felt like I stopped having the kind of myopic concerns of a fundamentalist. And, I stopped putting everything in this black-and-white world," he said. Douglas described himself as "being opened up" and

how that "kind of rushed in and expanded" his consciousness. It changed the way he

"interacted with people." He spoke at length about how it changed the way he interacted

with people:

> Well, I felt very special as a Christian in that sense that we have the right answers and we were going to heaven and everybody else is going to hell. Now, I feel that same kind of specialness but not in a bullshit way. It's not an ego-driven way. I feel like I'm special, and everybody else on the planet is special, too. And, that's really cool. What surprised me the most is when I stopped becoming a—I won't say [stopped] being a Christian—but when I stopped becoming that kind of Southern Baptist that's very judgmental, I was able to look at people in a whole new way and be connected to them, feel connected to them in a whole way I've never had before. Because when I was a Christian, I was the type that would look at somebody, "Oh, they're Baptist, they're saved. Oh, they're Lutheran, they're saved. They're Catholic, they're going to hell. They're Mormon, they're going to hell." And just this Arnold Schwarzenegger terminator-type of thing where I would just kind of categorize everybody and it would shade everything, all my interactions with them from that point on. Once I got rid of that, all of a sudden having a Christ-like concern for all people was effortless. I felt more connected to humans. I felt more connected to my place in the universe and everything in a way I never had before. And I love that. I really loved that a lot.

> Likewise, Dave spoke eloquently about how his views about others have changed.

His atheism cast life in stark, urgent terms that he felt demanded he treat each and every

person with dignity and respect regardless of who they are or what they believe:

> I can tell you the greatest impact has been my love and respect for humanity. When you no longer believe that there is an afterlife, this life becomes extremely important; the legacy you leave, the memory you leave, the lessons that you teach to your children, the way you interact day in and day out with people. When you see this person and you say "Hi" to them and you have smile on your face, that literally maybe the last time you will ever see them. And, the biggest thing that changed for me is that, as a Christian, I always went back to, "All questions will be answered at the end," or "When I'm in heaven, it will all make sense" . . . . That sort of made me treat this life as a practice run.

In the midst of sharing what motivated his work on behalf of secular humanism, he

reiterated for the second time that his love for humanity was the biggest change in his life

since his deconversion:

> All the financial stuff, all the activism, and other things, just equality and all the things that come in secular humanism are also important, and I'm very thankful for those opportunities. More than anything, my absolute love for humanity is the biggest thing that has changed.

Dave summed up his views about how deconverting changed his attitudes toward others

by contrasting the worst manifestations of Christianity with his understanding of atheism:

> Not that all Christians are negative, but once they look at the positive aspects and use that positively in their lives, they are wonderful people. But, the ones who want to oppress, the ones who want to control and maintain power, they definitely use that book [meaning the Bible] against humanity. When you become an atheist, you shed that; you shed the negativity, the desire to oppress. You see equality without God-goggles on; you don't feel [that] you are specially chosen by a powerful being. You feel free, you feel free to treat each other with respect. You don't have to hate anybody, and it's an all-positive viewpoint of humanity.

Participants, describing the attitudes of Christians, raised themes of judgment and

intolerance often. Anne believed that she was more "tolerant" as an atheist than as a

Christian. She also indicated that she was more "empathetic now than when [she] was a

Christian." Not only was she more empathetic, but she also believed she was "less

judgmental" as an atheist than as a Christian.

Drew affirmed that, for him, losing his faith made him more open to accept

people for who they were and "where they were." He had become more concerned about

asking others, "What can I do to make your life better?" His concern was no longer for

their eternal destinies and whether they were in the Christian community, but how he

"could increase happiness and reduce suffering." He claimed:

I think I am less judgmental than I was. I remember coming down pretty hard on people in high school. "All the Bible," I thought, "they should follow the Bible." I was pretty dogmatic when I taught Sunday school, so I think I was one of those pretty ugly Christians, unfortunately. So, I think I'm less judgmental than I was back then, less black and white.

Rachel felt very strongly that, since her deconversion, she had been liberated from judgmentalism and intolerance. She spoke of "that constant turmoil" she experienced as a Christian of trying to hate the sin and love the sinner. As an atheist she was:

able to appreciate them as what they were and love them as who they were without having to judge, without having to think, "Well, this is wrong," that I need to change them because God doesn't like this or that.

She grieved that, in hindsight, she felt as a Christian she was disrespectful to those who believed differently. Deconverting has provided her with a greater sense of self awareness. "Now, that I'm out . . . I can look at myself from a different perspective," she said. When she was a Christian, she believed that she was "neglectful of respect for people," particularly those "who didn't believe the same way [she] did." She claimed, as an atheist, that she "doesn't do that any longer." As an atheist she is, "interested in what people believe, and how they feel, [and] why they feel that way." She added:

There is no disrespect here at all. There's no judging of, "Oh, I'm sorry you feel that way. So, you don't believe in Jesus? You don't believe He died for yours sins?" So, even though you believed in all that stuff, well, you know, you still question. I don't feel that way anymore. I just feel more open and respectful of other people now.

She was now:

able to embrace people as they are right now, no matter who they are, no matter what choices they have made. I was able to do that . . . . I have more friends who are homosexual. Sometimes, I don't care anymore. I appreciate them as people and what they have to offer in life and not necessarily worried about what sexual background [sic] they have. You know, I don't care. I do I feel I'm just going

back to people and my relationships, and I think I'm more open in accepting more people, and I like that.

That was not always the case, she was quick to repeat:

I know as a Christian, when I was one, what we are called to do is to love everyone. And now that I am out of that, I don't think a lot of people really did that. I think as Christians, if we really were supposed to do that, like in the Bible how Jesus had said, "Love everyone," I think things would be different because I honestly feel that I am more loving and accepting [of] people now than I was as a Christian.

Sam, like Rachel, thought that he, too, was "less judgmental" as an atheist than as a Christian. He also believed he was more "compassionate," "caring," and "freer to accept an individual with all of their [sic] shortcomings, with all their beliefs, with all their likes and dislikes." Cindy, too, confessed that a positive impact of her deconversion was that she could now "accept people for who they are" without having to "judge" them. She saw herself as "more warm" now than before and focused on the collective welfare of others rather than merely "focusing on [herself]." Shelley bluntly said that her deconversion caused her to "hate less people" and become "more compassionate." She was "more supportive" and "more forgiving" then when she was a Christian because, as she put it, "You don't have to funnel everything through how wrong some of these other people are."

Peaceful v. Anxious. The second way participants explained what happiness meant was in terms of gaining peace and losing anxiety, worry, and guilt. Although losing their faiths brought negative emotions, it also brought awareness of the substantial negative emotions that were the result of their faiths. Participants shared that they often felt they were not good enough for God, that they worried about their eternal destinies,

and felt guilt over sin and shortcomings. While it is true they suffered some negative

emotions when they deconverted, eventually those subsided and were replaced with a

sense of freedom. When participants deconverted, they left behind the belief system,

lifestyles, and communities that they believed produced those negative feelings. In the

place once occupied by those negative emotions, participants found peace. Donald

affirmed, "Yeah, actually, like I definitely do feel more at peace." "But see, that's not

completely the answer because before, as a Christian, I also had a very profound sense of

peace . . . . I had a way to find peace," he was quick to point out. The peace he has

acquired is different:

> I think now it's a different sort of peace where it's a more day-to-day peace, so
> less "Oh! There's tons of stress in life." I found a profound peace…I go to the bed
> at the end of the day and I feel that, "Hey, it's good." I'm not [lying] on my bed,
> like, repenting of all the things that I did not do good enough today or right or
> things that I did wrong.

> When Charlene allowed herself to ask the question, "What if there is no God?,"

she noticed, "That simple question allowed [her] to see things in a completely new way."

She noted, "It was eye opening, freeing, and it brought a peace I had never before

known." Steve, like Charlene, found that, though asking that same question was

"sobering" and "terrifying," the "intellectual honesty" it provided him brought the "most

peace."

> Others, like Wayne and Martin, found in their deconversions a relief from guilt.

Wayne said, "As far as positive things, I would say I feel much less guilt. I can go to bed

every night and think, 'Okay, I was honest to everybody today, did my best to help

people around me, I have nothing to be ashamed of.'" Likewise, Martin actually felt

scared to even entertain the question of God's existence because of the image of atheists

that, in his words, "was so pounded into him as a child." When he began to have growing

doubts, he was faced with the inevitable question of whether he even considered himself

a Christian. He "remembered experiencing a lot of guilt over that," he said. Becoming an

atheist relieved him of that fear and guilt:

> I remember just because it was so pounded into me as a kid growing up, you know atheists are so bad and equated with evil. I'm really scared at first, thinking, "Should I even be questioning these things? Do I even consider myself a Christian?" I remember experiencing a lot of guilt over that. I'm like, "You know, I don't even know how I could be, like, thinking these things. Obviously, if I am thinking these things, God knows that. Is he mad at me?" You know, I felt a lot of that for a few years, when I started to become an atheist. I don't have that anymore. I don't have all the unnecessary guilt over my head anymore.

Reflecting on his darker times as a Christian, Frank confessed, "I had extra burdens that

were not based on actual things, that weren't hurting anyone." He felt bad about actions

and thoughts that, although the Bible said they were sinful, were not hurting anyone. This

produced "guilt over the kinds of things that made no tangible difference" to the people

in his life. As an atheist, he sees the guilt as misplaced. It was guilt over things that, in his

mind, were of little consequence and did not hurt anyone, while ignoring more important

issues:

> So instead of being worried about how I'm affecting the people in my life, I was worried about whether or not I was masturbating. That sort of anxiety has completely fallen away. No longer being a Christian has allowed Frank to be more concerned about how his behavior is affecting other people and also freed him from the guilt that came with an overly religious conscience.

Donald and Rachel addressed the issue of guilt by referring to the sense of

obligation they felt to share the Christian message with others. Both commented that in

the past they felt guilty that they did not do it more or do it better. Donald said, "I feel

less of a guilt that I don't preach to my coworkers." Rachel admitted that, in regards to meeting new people, she was able to engage with them "not just for the purpose of evangelizing them or making sure they turn away from their sin and to be saved." She added, "I was able to see people and appreciate them without any thoughts of what will God think, or God needs me to evangelize them, to win them so we see them in heaven."

Jill, on the other hand, no longer felt a sense of worry or fear over her own salvation. Becoming an atheist removed any concern for where she would spend eternity since she no longer believed in a conscious existence after death. She identified a liberation of worry as a positive impact of deconversion. She maintained, "Because of atheism, I don't feel any loss at all. I feel liberated that I don't have the fear to worry about after life, about heaven and hell, about the judgment."

The participant who spoke most about guilt and the freedom that atheism brought was Sam. In commenting on how he now lives his life as a nonbeliever, Sam noted that he tries "to do the best I can do for other people." One of the ways he does that is by being "respectful to other people." As a result of living by those maxims, he maintains, "There's a lot less guilt that I . . . have to deal with." One specific example he gave was in regards to his friendships with homosexuals. As a Christian, he was always quite concerned that, if he were seen with his gay friends, he would be rebuked. He no longer needed to care. "Guess what? Now that I am a professing atheist, I don't have that guilt, and I don't care what my group will think because I'm going out with my friends." In fact, he has "a lot of friends who don't think the same as me." He continued, "A lot of guilt or hang ups for those things are gone for me." In summarizing his deconversion,

Sam said that he was much happier now and free from "a lot of guilt," but it was not easy. "I really experienced a lot of improvements, but there was a very big window to a lot of guilt to leave the church and say 'You know what? I don't agree with this anymore.'" Yet, for Sam and the other participants, it has been worth it.

Positive Cognitive Impacts

Ideologically, deconverts tended to view their deconversions as positively impacting their noetic structures. Specifically, they pointed to the impacts deconverting had on their ethical beliefs and their epistemic criteria for truth claims. Like the positive affective impacts of deconversion that produced a sense of freedom from the confines and strictures of Christianity, participants spoke of a freedom both explicitly and implicitly in relation to the cognitive impacts of deconversion. Cognitive freedom is understood to be a new approach to ethics and epistemology. This section presents findings that make it clear that deconverting effected participants' morality and shifted the criteria to which they appeal to determine the veracity of propositional truth claims.

Ethical Improvement

It is often argued or even assumed that, unless a person believes in God, they either cannot be moral or have no foundation for morality. All of the participants of this study challenged both of those assertions. In fact, most believed they were more ethical as atheists. That self-perception was due, in part, to their changes of mind over what is in fact a morally prohibited action. As this chapter will demonstrate, deconverts not only

changed their minds on the nature of the relationship between God and morality, they have changed their minds on moral issues.

Ethically better. When asked about his morality, Dave asserted that, while it only changed "a little," he felt it had changed for the "better." Although it has not changed much in the day-to-day interaction with others, it has changed dramatically in relation to his overall worldview. He observed that he finds within him:

> this overwhelming desire now to give back and leave a legacy and to reach out and help those in need. It's a little human that is struggling. It's a member of my species that is struggling to survive, or trying to raise money for a wheelchair, or is trying to raise money for a surgical procedure he or she can't afford, being able to help people like that or reaching out to my listeners to help in funding for someone else. Being able to do that is something I don't know if I would have accepted with urgency had I remained a Christian . . . . It would be easy for me to sit back and say, "Let God's will be done. Yes, maybe I can help, but whatever happens to him or her is ultimately up to God. And, God, if you want me to do something, then give me a sign." The absence of a sign would be then my justification to be apathetic to this person's suffering, so I don't have anyone to pawn my issues off on. I don't have reasons to say . . . "God's watching! Therefore . . ." I do it because I'm a part of humanity. So it has actually helped to become a better human, and it helped me really understand the definition of secular humanist, which I don't think I would have done as a believer.

Frank found that he "became more compassionate" because he "wasn't following everything through the faith. [He] was now open to everyone on their own terms rather than other values." He maintained, "Honesty is still central" for him, and "Philosophical values still mattered." Despite still being "a pushy person who wants to argue," he believed he approached issues with an ethical "openness as opposed to closeness" since his deconversion.

Dale likened the change in his ethical perspective to that of a child growing up. Children need instruction until they are mature enough to make wise choices on their

own. Dale compared his former life as a Christian to that of the child who needed ethical

instruction from a parent figure, in his case, God. As he matured, he came to believe that

God was no longer needed to tell him how to act ethically. Nor was he acting ethically

merely because he was told to, but because he was choosing to, because of informed

reasons:

> It felt like growing up. It felt like, when I was a kid and a mom said, "Don't hit,
> don't lie, share your toys," those kinds of things. I didn't really feel like I had all
> the answers, but early on . . . I had [the] feeling of "I'm now no longer doing these
> things because somebody tells me they are good. I am now doing things that have
> a more fundamental meaning of good to me."

He freely admits that not having God or the Bible to appeal to did make ethical decision-

making more opaque. There were fewer clear answers to moral dilemmas than before, but

all of that does not seem to bother Dale. He found that feeling he was growing up morally

is a step in the right direction, whether he ever gets clarity on many moral matters or not.

One thing he was sure of was that when he does get clarity, it would come from thinking

carefully, not by special supernatural revelation:

> We just do the best that we can, and so a lot of the answers to moral questions felt
> to me like I was forced to say, "I don't know, and I'm not sure if I'll ever know."
> But the reasons that will compel me will not be a dogmatic, [such as] "The answer
> was given to me, and whether I understand it or agree with it or feels right and
> makes sense intellectually or anything else, it's just given to me." It went from
> that to, "I get to live my life honestly seeking out what I think is the best, most
> healthy, [what] contributes most to [my] and others' happiness as I can. And I get
> to answer those complex questions to the best of my ability. And it was, you
> know—that felt like growing up to me. It felt like I stepped in a positive direction.
> I don't know if I have fewer answers now than before. Maybe I'll struggle for a
> while, and I'll do worse than I did? Maybe I'll have instances of making bigger
> mistakes than I otherwise would have? But, at the time, it felt like that was a good
> thing. It felt like good progress, even if making more mistakes [was] part of the
> task of becoming a more moral person.

Lauren and Mitch both suggested that their approaches to morality had changed for the better since their deconversions. Lauren shared that she wrote a scathing indictment of church ethics when compared to adult film industry ethics, in the levels of acceptance exhibited by both. She maintained that the truly loving community was not the church but the adult film community. There she perceived more acceptance for who she was than within the church community. Since leaving the faith, she believes that, "if anything," her morals "had gotten stronger." She suspects, "If there is a heaven, I would probably end up there. All I ever wanted to do is help people," she said.

Mitch tended to believe that, though his ethical stance had changed since his deconversion, it had not changed much. He said, "I was raised with such a Christian perspective, you know, it's not like I got up and started going to brothels or anything like that, although my reasoning for not doing this is totally different now." Even though he is not going to brothels, he would no longer have a problem with someone else patronizing them:

> So, I just have such an open mind now, but it's not like you take action [meaning not engaging in behaviors simply because he no longer thinks they are immoral]. Someone would tell me, like, "I'm thinking of having an open relationship, where I'm married to a woman, but I'm also having sex with other people." I was like, "Okay, that's your journey." Maybe I'll be convinced that that's a better way of life later on. I mean, that's not what I think right now, but who knows for sure?

One thing he was quite certain about was that his moral system made more sense than it did when he was a believer:

> I don't have as many intellectual problems with my values system. Like I was saying, my values system I don't think has drastically changed. I think it has gotten easier in terms of congruency. It's more congruent.

Biblical morality. One of the main reasons that deconverts tended to see themselves as more moral since their deconversions was due to the shift in how they viewed the Bible. Participants raised questions with the morality found in the Bible and found it difficult to understand how Christians could base their approaches to ethics on such a troubling text. From the dark stories of how God dealt with the inhabitants of Canaan to potential inconsistencies, deconverts did not find much of moral worth in the pages of the Bible.

Charlene opined, "That actually was part of my problem with the Bible and the whole idea of God—it gives people a sense of moral superiority." She then stipulated that ultimately appealing to the Bible did not really solve anything, since, like all documents, it must be interpreted, and interpretation was always based on a host of presuppositions that impact the received meaning. That being the case, saying that something was wrong by appealing to the Bible, according to Charlene, was similar to looking down a well and seeing one's own reflection:

> The Bible is full of inconsistencies and is open to interpretation, which is why there are so many different religious groups, even within Christianity. People have to pick and choose what they believe and still have to come to terms with their own moral values. Christians can say that their beliefs are based on God's teachings and feel comfort in knowing that they are right for that reason, but it really just gives a person a way out of tackling the tough issues for themselves.

Sam supported Charlene's observation about the Bible being a poor source for deriving one's ethical system. He, however, was even stronger in his condemnation. Sam believed that the Bible advocated and even prescribed many moral atrocities:

> The Bible says slavery is good. Bible says incest is okay. Yet, they try to be Christian today, and, you know, there's not a single Christian today that will say that slavery is good. Not a single Christian today would say that pedophilia is

good. Not a single Christian today would tell you that murder is okay. All these things are okay in the Bible.

God and morality. Many of the deconverts came to disagree with the concept that, without belief in God, it was impossible to be moral. They all considered themselves fairly moral people, and they did not believe in God. Furthermore, many came to the conclusion that God was not required to provide an account for ethics at all. Ethics, rather than being some kind of transcendent law weighing down on us, authored by a moral Law-giver, was much more mundane. Participants regularly pointed in one of two directions to account for the existence of moral obligation: common sense or evolution. Jill argued that one does not need God in order to have morality; all one needs is to think rationally about it:

> I'm a good person, and I know that I'm a good person, because I think it's good to be a good person, and I believe in morality and ethics in doing the right thing. And, I never felt that I had to do it because God is telling me to. I find that very, very tragic.

In the same manner, Charlene asserted, "I slowly learned that you don't have to believe in God to be a good person, to know it's not right to kill, that you shouldn't take anything from your neighbors, that it's healthy to rest, etc."

For Sam, the whole idea that morality required God was foolish. He argued that one does not need the Bible to tell us how to treat each other; one does so because it is obviously the right thing to do:

> For me, it's another reinforcement for me that you don't need Christianity to be a good person. I don't need Christianity to tell me that it's a good idea to take care, you know, to be a good Samaritan or to help others in need. I think the difference is that now I realize that Christianity doesn't have the exclusive "Love thy neighbor". They really like to think so, and they presented it as though it's

impossible for you to love your neighbors as yourself. That it's impossible to do good things without the Church. I think that, you know, I can be a good person, I can be a wonderful person without the Church.

Tim had a similar point to Sam. Although he appealed to animals as an example of sentient beings that do not believe in God and still exhibit social empathy, he did not explain the moral sense by way of evolution. He simply asserted that such moral knowledge was hardwired into both animals and humans:

> Too many people think that, without the Bible, we don't know how to behave; we will be just like animals. Well, that's a good example. Animals have incredible social empathy. They take care of their own. They defend from outsiders, but, for the most part, it's not like monkeys eat their young; they take care of their young. Morality doesn't come from a verse; it comes from "This is how you treat people." So, yeah, I don't see any legitimate arguments for morality coming from a 10,000-year-old book.

Evolution and morality. Twelve (12) participants did attempt to account for a moral sense that humans posses without simply asserting that we are, in fact, moral animals. When they did so, they exclusively appealed to the process of evolution to account for human moral awareness. According to natural selection, mutations within species that provide a survival or reproductive advantage will be selected naturally. Selection, in this case, implies that creatures with the positive mutations will survive and pass on their genetic material. All aspects of biology can be accounted for in terms of natural selection acting on beneficial mutations over time. In the atheist account of reality, there is no room for nonmaterial substances such as God or the soul. Therefore, morality is a not a transcendent law existing outside of humans but merely a sense that aided our ancestors in surviving. Martin explained:

People have evolutionarily evolved to be moral . . . . It's good for us as the human race to not kill each other, do good to each other, and live, like, in peace and harmony together, and that comes first before religion. My idea of where they [moral values] come from now is different. I think it's sort of an evolutionary trait; we just know we are better off not trying to be selfish and going out and hurting and harming other people. That's not a good thing. You're gonna be outcast from a community if you do something like that.

Cindy also appealed to evolution to explain why it is that we have empathy. She argued:

We evolve with empathy. There are consequences to actions; we learned from the consequences of actions. I mean, if I kill somebody, obviously I'm not going to feel very good; I could go to jail. If I rape somebody and I do drugs, I'm destroying my health. There are consequences to everything we do, and I want to be happy. That's what I want, so the good thing is to be happy.

Also Shelley maintained that morality is fully accounted for due to its being

evolutionarily advantageous:

I think a lot of my morals are inherent and societal and an evolutionary advantage. You know, I don't kill people, because I'm a human being, and human beings are supposed to propagate, you know, the [lives] of other human beings. It's societal and inherent, and it's an evolutionary advantage for me to be moral without a code of supernaturally inspired laws.

Two Main Issues

Participants expressed they changed their minds on numerous moral issues. However, two issues were prominent: abortion and sexual ethics, specifically homosexuality. In terms of abortion and homosexuality, participants reported that they no longer believe the same as they did when they were Christians. Also, they were clear that their changed positions on the issues were indicators of moral progress.

Abortion. Dave admitted that, if he were a Christian still, he would have to be against abortion based on the principle that the baby is "God's child." However, since he

no longer believed in God, he was no longer bound to view the child through the lens of

faith. His shifted view now looked through the secular lenses of the principle of

individual autonomy in combination with the property-thing view of human persons. The

property-thing view of personhood is a metaphysical doctrine that holds that a human

being becomes a person only after it accumulates certain properties. The property-thing

view stands in contrast to the substance view that holds that a person is not determined by

the successive addition of properties, but by its essential nature. Christians tend to hold to

a substance view of identity and maintain that a baby is a person from conception based

on its essential nature, not that it becomes a person only after it acquires a property like

sentience:

> If I was a fundamentalist Christian still, if I was a leader, I would have to be against abortion. I would have to because I would have to believe that life is God-ordained, and if that life is more important than any law that man creates . . . . I would have to say that law allowing abortion is legalized murder of God's child. I would have to say that, and that's why I can't be a believer because we can look at cases like rape and say, are we sinning if someone has become pregnant during a rape that that was God's will for this woman to be raped to create this child? Did God will one of the horrific things that a woman can go through? And so a woman being able to make decisions about her body is one of the most important things that we can offer. It's bodily autonomy, period. If I crashed into you, and it was completely my fault, and we were the same blood type, and we are a match for a kidney donation, and you were going to die, and you needed a kidney to live, and I caused your pain and suffering, and I was a perfect match for you, there would still, never, be any law that would require me to give you one of my kidneys because we still respect bodily autonomy. Even if I have put your life at risk and you have children and a business and all these other things that you are working on . . . . I would still never be required to medically go under a knife and be forced by law to go under medical procedure to save your life, ever. But, if a woman gets pregnant and decides eight weeks in, nine weeks in, ten weeks in, twenty weeks in, she doesn't want to share her uterus any longer, we have laws on the book that prevent her from making decisions about her body. And I disagree with that; it's a sad situation. Even if you call it a life, it's a sad situation. You can't grant the same body autonomy to two joined humans, and that fetus is not

yet a fully developed human, so I feel like the woman should have more rights than the fetus.

Though no other participants were as articulate as Dave, the majority shared the same sentiment. Dale noted, "I slowly got to the point where I think there are a lot of circumstances where allowing abortion is a more compassionate choice than not." Marcus clearly stated, "I support women to have the right to choose to have an abortion." Steve explained that he is no longer pro-life because, "From a biological standpoint, I don't buy the life-begins-at-conception. I think you have to have sentient life." Furthermore, he did not think "pro-life arguments hold up" "from a philosophical point."

One participant, Shelley, had an abortion when she was younger. She wondered aloud, "Now, would I do it again? Probably. I just wouldn't feel as horrible or as guilty about it because, now, I have more information and new information and more reliable information." Tim echoed Dave's view that persons are property-things when he said:

> When you stop believing it was, like, it's a fetus, it's a cluster of cells. It can't think, it can't function independently, it's just a bunch of cells. Left alone, it will probably turn into something, although spontaneous abortion happens, well, quite frequently. But they're cells; it's not a human being.

Sexual ethics. The issue of homosexuality and same-sex marriage was one that participants felt passionately about. They all accepted homosexuality as an alternative lifestyle and also supported same-sex marriage. Both of these positions are contrary to the traditional Christian understanding on marriage and sexuality. Interestingly, not all participants originally accepted the traditional Christian interpretations. Mitch, for instance, said, "On the hot-button issues, my perspective on homosexuality has always been liberal." Anne also shared the same perspective when she was a Christian, "Gay

marriage, not being allowed, I think is crazy, I would never agree with that, as a

Christian." For those unlike Mitch and Anne who did adopt the traditional Christian

interpretation on homosexuality, they jettisoned it when they deconverted.

Douglas admitted that, prior to his deconversion, he was "so much more

conservative." He cited, "Embracing gay rights is one of the first things that would have

really caused a rift when I was a Christian." "Homosexuality is something I am a lot

more in favor of now," he said.

Donald realized that, once he no longer looked to special revelation as a guide on

moral issues, homosexuality was something that he could no longer label as wrong. He

freely admitted that he personally finds homosexuality unappealing, but that was

insufficient grounds to condemn it:

> I don't think I have any grounds to call it wrong, like really wrong anymore, but I
> would be lying if I said that I am perfectly comfortable with that. It's not my
> thing, you know, but it is also something that I need to remind myself that I have
> really no grounds to think that it's wrong.

Frank's change of perspective was immediate, "Gays. Immediately pro-gay,

immediately defensive." The main reason he had such a visceral reaction was that the

church, in his opinion, had not gotten as upset over divorce, and yet, "Jesus is clear on

divorce. He is silent on gays."

Rachel acknowledged that, even though she still did not know whether

homosexuals "were born that way" or if "they make choices or a combination," she was

inclined to believe, "Whatever point people are at in their lives, that's where they are at

that moment, and I feel they have the right be happy and the right to be whom they

choose to be." For those reasons, she is now in favor of gay marriage. Likewise, Cindy

was clear, "No, I'm very—I'm not against homosexuals. I think they should be able to get married. I'm not against anybody that does anything like that . . . . Even if they're doing it, it doesn't really matter to me," she said.

Wayne pointed to sexuality as the area that, for him, changed the most as a result of his deconversion. He not only changed his views on homosexuality, he also changed his views on every area of sexuality; he believed that virtually every kind of previously prohibited sexual behavior was actually acceptable:

> I would say the biggest area it has affected me has been sexuality . . . certain things like pornography or sex before marriage or like homosexuality. All these things I used to think . . . are wrong. I don't have to think they are wrong anymore. I had to completely reanalyze what [it is], what [it is] that makes a thing like that right or wrong.

Epistemological Improvements

Participants not only felt ethically freer after their deconversions, but also epistemologically freer. In some cases, deconversion resulted from their beliefs changing, and, in others, the criteria for belief changed as a result of the deconversion. For example, participants who deconverted because of intellectual problems shifted their criteria for truth, at some point, from the Bible to something else, typically empiricism. In other cases, the criteria for belief changed only after deconversion had taken place, and the Bible was no longer a viable option. In either case, participants described the epistemic impacts of deconversion in positive terms. First, they felt freer in the sense that they were more open minded. Second, they now based their beliefs on evidence and not faith. Third, science, not the Bible, had become their criterion of truth.

Openness. Charlene expressed her freedom to search for answers outside the Bible by arguing, "There is so much we don't know and so much we will never know, but rather than confining things into a small box [the Bible], I want to explore and search and learn more." Marcus reported a similar attitude concerning the search for truth: "I feel like whatever the truth maybe in all of this, I guess, I'm happy that I'm doing my best to discover what the truth is like about existence and stuff like that. I guess that's a positive." Steve was very careful that, upon his deconversion, he did not immediately "give up one belief system for another one." Instead, he took his time and investigated the issues. He "realized how easy it is to get into group think." He stated, "I wanted my thoughts to be my thoughts, and I didn't want the group mentality to kind of dictate what I thought or believed."

Basing beliefs on evidence. Faith in God is considered a virtue for Christians. Without trusting in the existence of God, one cannot meet the most basic criterion for being a Christian. Participants had, at one time in their lives, faith in God, but then lost it for various reasons. The loss of faith in God also resulted in a loss of faith in faith itself as a means of knowledge. Whereas before participants looked to their faith tradition to discern true from false beliefs, they no longer did so after their deconversions. However, because it is difficult to live without an ultimate criterion for truth, they turned to empirical evidence.

Christopher maintained that he based his beliefs only on strong evidence. As an example, he shared an anecdote about when he was presented with a claim for a particular medical treatment that he thought to be questionable. He argued with the young

woman about the legitimacy of the treatment but admitted that, despite how ridiculous it sounded to him, he said, "If she turned around and showed me research, I would look at it—or a journal—and say that it is a reliable source. Then, okay, I was really wrong, and I apologize." She did not provide him with the evidence he required, so he withheld belief in the treatment.

Charlene also was no longer happy with merely believing propositional truths because the Bible told her so. She said, "I think, for me, it was hard to just accept things as wrong or right because God said so in the Bible. I need a better reason than that." Mitch shared a similar sentiment to that of Charlene. Like her, he no longer is willing to take the claims of the Bible as self-attesting. He now looks to evidence proportional to the claim being made before he will accept it. Mitch quoted Christopher Hitchens when Mitch said, "Extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence." He, too, had adopted that motto and "changed to a more scientific mindset." He stated, "My priorities, what I thought was important, really shifted to being much more evidence based." He speculated that that was not only the case for him but for other atheists as well:

> So, I think you'll find that, when you talk to a lot of atheists, they tend to value things based on evidence, that evidence is the best way to explain things for now. I think that's a good way to live your life.

Tim concurred with Mitch's assessment of the importance evidence should play in forming beliefs. For Tim, the bottom line was, "Can you prove it?" He recounted a discussion with an individual over the truthfulness of the Bible that highlighted the role that evidence played for him in belief formation:

> I say, "Can you back this up with evidence that doesn't come from the Bible?" Before long, he says "Verse . . ." [and] I was like, "No, no, no, I want evidence,"

and that's how I approach everything. So, that's how I approach it. Everything is evidence based. If you can prove it, if it can be confirmed, if multiple people, multiple sources can confirm this, then, alright, I'm on board . . . . That's just how I approach everything; I'm very evidence based.

Science. The evidence that participants were looking for was empirical, scientific evidence. They were not so much interested in philosophical arguments or personal experience, but scientific facts. Anne cited science as her ultimate criterion for truth because it started giving her "answers" to her questions of ultimate concern. In fact, she was more passionate about science than she was about atheism. She claimed, "I wouldn't say I became more atheist. I became more science oriented. I'm more into science than in the idea of atheism." She added, "I'm huge on you should only believe in what you actually test." After deconverting, Dale poured himself into various scientific disciplines in search of answers as well. "I read a lot of science books", he said.

I read a lot of books about physics . . . [and] biology. I read a lot of books about neuroscience, too—but a lot of books—and just started asking the questions of how and what and why. [They] became much more meaningful and intriguing to me than [they] had before.

Jill identified her ultimate criterion for weighing evidence as the "scientific method." She acknowledged, "Science is my only authority, and my heart." Mitch, too, looked to science because when it comes to "scientific facts, you're playing with completely different criteria than what philosophers might call that a fact." For him, scientific facts trumped philosophical facts.

When asked what she believed were the best means of testing knowledge claims, Rachel also pointed to science, "I'm probably more scientific about things, and I see

things more scientifically, more than spiritually." What attracted her to science over other

approaches was that science is constantly changing and is based on empirical evidence:

> What I like about science is that [scientists] are constantly learning; they are
> constantly studying, you know. And, I really like the fact of science being able to,
> I guess, guide me a little bit. Not because it's a 100% true, but I think I like the
> discovery; I like the learning. I like the discovery, I guess, the reason and, you
> know, evidenced based, for sure.

After deconverting, Wayne returned to one of the early loves in his life. He

claimed, "I definitely fell in love with science again." As a child, he grew up watching

space-related television shows and recalled how he "was really into space exploration and

all that." He is optimistic "that we're becoming pretty good skeptics" and is pleased that

he and others are becoming "better at not just taking somebody's claims on faith." Rather

than looking to faith, Wayne said he was looking to "the scientific method." After a long

hiatus from science, Wayne was, once again, "a fan of science," especially when it comes

to judging evidential claims.

Summary

Participants were not only impacted negatively as a result of their deconversions.

To the contrary, they consistently reported that they were better off both affectively and

cognitively. Participants attributed their positive, post-deconversion statuses to the sense

of freedom and liberation. Affectively, this meant they were happier than when they were

Christians, due to losing negative characteristics and gaining positive ones. Cognitively,

they were now free to think for themselves, which translated into the belief that they were

more moral as atheists than as Christians and were on more secure, epistemic footing

concerning the rationality of their beliefs. Participants perceived the positive impacts

resulting from their deconversions as outweighing the negative impacts, and their

liberations were worth the cost.

CHAPTER 11

CONCLUSIONS

This study sought to investigate the impact that deconverting from Christianity to atheism had on the lives of former believers. It offered a number of contributing factors that played a role in the participants' loss of faith and adoption of atheism. Participants cited both cognitive and emotional reasons for their moves from faith. Cognitive issues largely focused on problems with the Bible, the influence of the New Atheists and the assumption that evolution and the existence of God were incompatible. Emotional reasons centered on the treatment that participants received from other believers. The chapter on contributing factors also discussed the process of deconversion as reported by participants. A model of the process of deconversion was constructed that consisted of five stages. Stage one of the process is occasioned by a crisis of some sort. Often, it was an emotional crisis as discussed previously in reference to the reasons for deconversion. Less often, it was an intellectual issue. The second stage is focused on seeking the truth. Participants reported that the troubling crises led them to find answers in order to faithfully resolve the problems. The third stage represented a tipping point. Here participants displayed a desire to retain their faiths in the face of mounting difficulties. However, in each case, efforts were in vain, leading directly to stage four. By stage four, participants had moved away from clearly identifying as believers, due to insurmountable

 difficulties, but were not, at this point, atheists. Rather, many went through an agnostic phase. Stage four represented a metaphorical halfway house that ultimately gave way to stage five, when participants moved from agnosticism to atheism.

The contexts from which the deconversions emerged—family backgrounds and religious proclivities—played a role in understanding the impact deconversion had in their lives. What the contexts revealed are that many participants came from strongly conservative church backgrounds that tended to be legalistic, authoritarian, and closed to intellectual inquiry. Participants were highly committed and involved in various ministries in their churches, and all but a few were raised in homes that placed a very high priority on being involved in church. Yet, despite that, a significant percentage of participants were turned off by what they perceived as un-Christian behavior in the home. Several participants stated that, prior to their deconversions, they were involved in apologetics and enjoyed defending and commending their faith through arguments and evidence. When they came across counterarguments, they became convinced that they were wrong and Christianity was untrue.

Negative Consequences

As expected, participants identified a number of negative consequences resulting from their deconversions. Participants revealed that the negative impacts were felt most acutely in these three areas: a) socially, b) existentially, in connection with the meaning of life, and c) emotionally.

Social Consequences

The primary negative impact from deconverting was experienced in social relationships, particularly with Christian family members where relationships were often strained or broken. One participant lost his marriage, another was disowned and written out of a will, a dying mother rejected a third, and a fourth engaged in a physical confrontation with his brother. Though such experiences are the most extreme examples, this impact of deconversion on families was not uncommon. Those from Christian backgrounds who did not experience such drastic consequences, nevertheless, did testify that deconverting had an adverse impact on their family relationships.

Participants also noted a negative impact on relationships with their Christian friends. It was hard to maintain close relationships with friends from the Christian community for several reasons. They no longer shared the same social space. Participants no longer attended the churches, youth groups, or Christian clubs that provided a convenient meeting place. Further, Christian friends expressed they felt betrayed to one degree or another by the apostasies of the participants. In such cases, it was the Christian friends who appeared to create distances in the relationships. Sometimes they lashed out; other times they simply drifted away.

A third social area where the impact of deconverting was negatively felt was in the loss of community. Leaving the church and the social network it provided was difficult for atheists, primarily because there was nothing to take its place. Becoming a Christian immediately immerses a convert into a large community comprised of a church, Bible studies, youth groups, etc. The church is a body of believers who mutually support

and care for one another. There are regular meetings, social gatherings, and formal ceremonies that induct members into the group, all of which are lacking for atheists. Until recently, there have been very few organized groupings that atheist deconverts could join. Those that did exist prior to the advent of the Internet were virtually unknown to all but those in the large cities where they existed. Today that is changing. Atheist meet-up groups are being established around the country, along with virtual atheist communities and even what some have called "atheist churches." Thanks to the Internet, replacing the loss of the Christian community is not the problem it once was, but it is by no means as easy as finding a church.

The fourth area of negative social impact was in the workplace. Being an atheist in the workplace was difficult for a number of participants. Being an atheist directly led to several being fired from their jobs. Others feared being fired if their nonbelief was discovered. To prevent that from happening, participants remained quiet at work and did not share their views for fear of possible recriminations.

Existential Consequences

The second major area negatively impacted by deconverting related to whether life had any ultimate meaning in light of the death of God. Participants recognized early that, if God did not exist, then life has no ultimate meaning. For many, that realization was troubling. However, most quickly recovered and did not "lose any sleep" over it. There was a resolve among participants to face reality as they found it to be, not as they wanted it to be. In place of ultimate meaning, they chose to create their own limited, subjective meanings. The thought that this one life was all they had, and, therefore, it was

up to them to make the most of it was motivation enough for many participants to move

forward, despite not having any ultimate purpose.

Emotional Consequences

The third major area of negative impact was felt at the emotional level.

Obviously, it is difficult to have a wholesale change of worldview. Such a paradigm shift

produces a sense of cognitive disequilibrium. Naturally with such a seismic shift comes a

raft of emotions, many of which are negative. Participants described the following

feelings: "anger," loss," "depression" and "confusion." They spoke of the process as

"excruciating," "a struggle," and "like the bottom being dropped out." Over time, the

negative feelings subsided and were eventually replaced by more positive emotions.

However, in recalling their experiences, participants revealed that though they no longer

focused on the negative emotions produced by their deconversions, they were,

nevertheless, not far from the surface.

Strategies

Participants utilized several strategies in order to mitigate the negative

consequences of deconverting. Chapter 7 provided insights into what those strategies

were. Three strategies for dealing with the impact of deconverting were used by

participants of the study.

How They Revealed Their New Identities

The first was how they chose to reveal their new identities to others. Most chose

to do so carefully and quietly, knowing that it could cause both hurt and problems for

them and others. Close friends and family were often the first to know, but, in some

cases, participants avoided telling family altogether in order to avoid hurting them.

Participants generally adopted a conservative strategy, but a few believed that coming

straight out and announcing on social media would be the best policy.

How They Lived Out Their New Identities

Participants also sought to control the impact by how they chose to live.

Participants chose between two types of atheist lifestyles: diplomat and firebrand.

Diplomatic atheists sought to mitigate the negative impacts by not emphasizing their

atheism or raising it to the level of their primary identities. In doing so, they attempted to

avoid conflict. On the contrary, firebrand atheists intentionally made an issue of their

atheism, often elevating it to the level of their primary identities. Firebrand atheists

typically viewed religion as not only false but also dangerous and bad and sought to

persuade others to adopt that mindset. The idea behind this confrontational strategy

appeared not to be motivated by reducing negative consequences in the short term but in

future reduction long term. If firebrand atheists could weather the storm of negative

consequences as they advocated and campaigned on behalf of other atheists, perhaps they

could change the climate of distrust and dislike of atheists in the future, thus reducing the

negative impact for others.

How They Engaged With Christians

The third strategy participants exhibited for dealing with negative consequences

was how they chose to engage with Christians. Several participants chose to challenge

Christians to think about what they believe. Instead of opting to respond defensively and answer the questions posed to them by Christians, participants took an offensive strategy and raised questions of their own about the Christian faith. In doing so, they sought to cause Christians to reconsider their positions.

Pertinent Conditions for Strategy Selection

Chapter 8 addressed the two pertinent conditions that affected how participants selected strategies for handling the impact of deconversion, which were the relationships of the participants and anger towards Christianity. A third condition was identified, but, due to the small sample size, no conclusions could be drawn; therefore, geographical location was offered as a suggested condition. It appears that where one lived played a role in how one chose to reveal his or her deconversion. Those who lived in small cities and towns where they were well known and where there existed less ideological diversity tended to be less vocal about their deconversions, due to the immediate threat of negative consequences. Conversely, those who deconverted in larger cities where there was a greater sense of anonymity and greater diversity of views tended to be more open about their deconversions. The size of the city or town was not the only geographical issue that impacted the choice of strategy employed by participants. Where participants lived also played a role. Participants in places like the Pacific Northwest, which is known for being more socially and politically liberal, found it easier to come out as atheists. Participants in the Bible Belt and traditionally conservative states like Texas and Virginia maintained that it was more difficult to be open about their lack of religious beliefs. In order to avoid negative consequences, participants living in those places chose to remain quiet. Again,

as mentioned above, while theses findings are strongly indicative that location impacts how one chooses to reveal their atheism, there needs to be more research with a larger sample size in order to confirm it.

Positive Consequences

The impact of deconverting from Christianity to atheism was not all bad; it was quite the contrary in some aspects. Although they did experience significant negative consequences, participants consistently affirmed that the positive impacts of deconverting outweighed the negative impacts. The positive consequences were felt in two distinct areas: the affective aspect of their experiences and the cognitive aspect. In both cases, the dominant expression that best describes how participants viewed themselves was "free." Participants believed that they were liberated both emotionally and cognitively when they deconverted.

Positive Emotional Consequences

Affectively, this resulted in them being happier people. Happiness was expressed in binary opposites that compared how they perceived themselves both prior to and after their deconversions. Participants spoke of being less judgmental and more compassionate and tolerant, less worried and more peaceful. Cognitively, participants felt freer to question and investigate all areas of life post deconversion. They were no longer bound by the Bible's precepts and church teachings. No longer did deconverts determine morality by appealing to the Bible but were free to think for themselves, the result being that they changed their minds on a number of issues. The two main moral issues that they

changed their beliefs on were abortion and homosexuality. Whereas prior to their deconversion, participants were pro-life and anti-homosexual lifestyles, after their deconversion, in most cases, they were firmly supportive of both.

Positive Cognitive Consequences

Deconverts reported that they had migrated from faith to reason as the primary approach when evaluating truth claims. Subsequently, participants either intentionally or unknowingly adopted a different ultimate criterion by which to measure truth claims. Prior to their deconversions, they looked to the Bible in order to evaluate truth claims. Participants now appealed to evidence, not to supernatural revelation. It became clear that evidence for participants meant scientific, empirical data. Science was the ultimate criterion of truth for many of the participants because it was based on what was provable, but faith in the opinion of many was based on blind trust.

According to the data, the result of this study suggests that the positive impacts of deconverting from Christianity to atheism outweighed the negative impacts for participants, due to the perceived oppressive nature of their Christian experiences. The positive impacts did not erase the hurt and loss many participants mentioned, but the sense of freedom experienced was so profound that it did significantly compensate for the losses. No longer bound by what they perceived to be the chains of a false ideology, participants reported that they were improved affectively and cognitively. Ironically, despite the fact that they no longer believed in God, participants would tend to agree with Jesus when he stated, "You shall know the truth, and the truth shall set you free."

Significance

This study investigated the impact of deconversion on the lives of former

Christians. Although the body of literature on deconversion is small, it is growing. In

recent years, several studies have been conducted on the reasons leading to and the

process of deconversion. Until now, none have specifically looked into the broad impact

of deconversion. This study not only adds to the body of literature on deconversion by

depicting the impact of deconverting, but also supports a number of findings in previous

studies on the reasons for and process of deconversion. Likewise, the findings of this

study also support the work of researchers who have investigated minority identity

development, a topic closely related to the impact of deconversion. This study differs

from the findings of Streib (2009) and Krueger (2013), both of whom reached similar

conclusions about one aspect of the process of deconversion, specifically religious

commitment prior to deconversion.

Factors Contributing to Deconversion

The few studies focusing on deconversion have primarily looked into the

contributing conditions leading to an individual's deconversion. The conditions consist of

two factors: the reasons leading to deconversion and the process of deconversion.

Although both factors are addressed in the literature, at present they are both

underrepresented. The most extensive research on the reasons leading to deconversion is

that of Wright et al. (2007). Their research focused solely on the reasons given by

apostates for their deconversions. They restricted their data to online narratives posted by

deconverts on websites dedicated to deconversion. Four reasons were identified as the

primary contributing factors leading to deconversion: a) intellectual or theological concerns, b) problems with God, c) interactions with Christians, and d) interactions with non-Christians. There is considerable agreement between the findings of the present study and those of Wright et al. Both studies agree that intellectual and theological concerns were a catalyst in deconversion. Furthermore, there is overlap regarding the identification of specific intellectual and theological concerns. For example, Wright et al. reported that online narratives cite problems with the Bible as a major reason for deconversion. The problems noted by the authors of the online narratives were that the Bible was inaccurate, offensive, and akin to superstition. Similar themes emerged in this study. Participants claimed that the Bible caused them significant turmoil as they became better acquainted with its contents. For some, it was the process of canonization that troubled them, while others mentioned moral problems they had with the Old Testament. Still others could not bring themselves to believe the miraculous claims of the Bible. Both studies also highlight the role that interacting with other Christians played in the loss of faith. Both studies found that deconverts were pushed towards apostasy by mistreatment from other believers. The hurt or betrayal experienced by deconverts from those who claimed to be Jesus' followers had a profoundly negative impact. Hypocrisy was also a significant theme raised in both the online narratives and by the participants of this study as a catalyst in deconversion. Deconverts found moral hypocrisy by those who identified as Christians deeply troubling prior to deconverting. A third similarity reflected in both studies is the role non-Christians played, but here there is an important difference between the findings of Wright et. al and the present study. In the study of online

narratives, deconverts did not cite non-Christians as playing a significant role leading up to their deconversion. After the deconversion had occurred, non-Christians played a supportive role by coming alongside their fellow deconverts. While it is also the case in the present study that non-Christians played a meaningful role post deconversion, they also were credited with helping to bring about deconversion. Several participants in this study questioned their faith and its exclusivity because of interactions with non-Christians. Meeting virtuous, non-Christians caused participants to wonder, "How could a religion that consigned so many good non-Christians to Hell be true?" Authors of online narratives began to question God's existence because of the perception that God did not meet their expectations. However, that was not the case with this study. Disappointment with God was reported by only one participant in this study as a precursor to deconversion.

The second factor contributing to deconversion highlighted in this study was the process of deconversion. The process or the journey to atheism presented in this study consisted of a five-stage model that began with a crisis, and then moved to seeking the truth, trying to retain the faith, becoming agnostic and, finally, identifying as an atheist. The relationship between this model and those extant in the literature is a mixture of similarity and notable differences. On the one hand, there is important overlap between a number of models in the literature that depict the deconversion process and this study. For instance, Barbour (1994) identified four basic characteristics that deconverts recognized in their deconversion experiences. The first characteristic identified by Barbour corresponds with the first stage of the model presented here; namely a crisis that

causes one to question the truth of their beliefs. Like this study, Barbour argues that

deconversion begins with an intellectual component of doubt or denial of a truth system.

The intellectual doubt about the truth of the system may result from a particular doubt

within the system or from an emotional wound that produces an intellectual doubt about

the system. Second, for Barbour deconversion is characterized as moral criticism,

directed, not simply, at an aspect of the former faith but the entire system and way of life.

This stage was noticeably absent from the process of participants in this study. No doubt,

participants raised such criticisms, but they often came after they had left the faith and

had time to reflect on their experiences. During the process itself, the dominant theme

was not moral outrage but rather hurt at how they were treated by fellow Christians. The

third stage in Barbour's model is that the process produced feelings of loss, guilt and

emotional upheaval. Here, once again, there is agreement with the findings of the present

study. Participants in the third stage of the model attempted to hang on to their faith in the

face of mounting difficulties. Participants reported feelings of cognitive dissonance,

emotional upheaval, and sadness as they matriculated through the third stage. Barbour's

fourth stage of the process is that deconversion is characterized by rejection and

disaffiliation from the former religious community. This corresponds directly to the fifth

stage in this model where participants identified as atheists and broke ties with their faith

communities. Heinz Streib (2004) has adopted Barbour's model and adapted it by adding

a fifth aspect arising out of his own research on deconversion. Streib found that, among

deconverts in his study, the role that religious experience played was an overlooked

aspect of their deconversion. For many in Streib's study, the loss of meaning in religious

experience contributed or was the precursor to the intellectual problems. Streib hypothesized that the loss of specific religious experiences may occur early in the deconversion process and may be as important to the process as intellectual doubts. This was not the case for the majority of the participants in this study. There is clear testimony to the fact that participants were highly involved in their church communities prior to their crisis experiences and that their religious life was meaningful to them. As their doubts increased, their religious experiences became less meaningful due to the nagging suspicion that their beliefs were false.

Krueger (2013) also proposed that the deconversion process starts with a loss of meaning in religious experience. Her model begins with a detachment phase where deconverts move away from their religious communities. Characteristic of the detachment phase is that participants in the study reported never being closely connected to their previous religious communities and did not feel strong allegiances to maintaining their beliefs in the face of encroaching doubt. That was not the case with the participants in this study. As previously mentioned, participants in this study were closely connected to their faith communities. In many cases, they served in leadership roles and found their religious experiences meaningful prior to their crisis moment.

Strategies

A number of studies relevant to this research were conducted on how individuals negotiate the adoption of a minority identity. The types of strategies utilized by individuals to diminish negative consequences are especially noteworthy. Participants in this study engaged in several strategies to mitigate the pushback they feared would

accompany deconversion. One strategy was the various ways that participants chose to interact with Christians post deconversion. Those in this study either sought to challenge believers or to avoid confrontation. These same substrategies were reported by Church-Hearl (2008). Like the participants in this study, those in Church-Hearl's study were either eager to challenge Christians about the veracity of their faith or to avoid the conversation altogether for the sake of harmony.

A second strategy that emerged was how they chose to reveal their new atheist identities to those with whom they had significant interpersonal relationships. What was discovered in this study accords with Foust (2009), who reported that deconverts selectively choose to whom they revealed their new atheist identities. In her study, she found that deconverts often hid their losses of faith from people when they believed it may result in negative consequences. The two areas where the danger of negative consequences was the greatest were among family members and at work. Participants in this study, likewise, feared the negative consequences that could arise if family, coworkers, or employers discovered their new identities. Participants in both studies often chose to keep quiet in order to avoid problems. Fitzgerald (2003) identified similar strategies used by participants in her study that focused on the negotiation of a non-normative identity. Like Church-Hearl, Foust, and this study, Fitzgerald identified strategies for navigating the disclosure of an atheist identity. These are the three strategies found in her work: a) selective concealment, b) selective disclosure, and c) open complete disclosure. Selective concealment consists of hiding one's identity in order to escape negative consequences. Here, the individual uses avoidance techniques, such as

not bringing up the concept or using the term atheist to circumvent any possible discussions about atheism. Selective disclosure occurs when deconverts choose to whom they reveal their new identities. As with the participants in this study, participants in Fitzgerald's research selectively revealed their identities to a small number of people. In her study, Fitzgerald discovered that only when participants were directly asked about being an atheist did they chose to reveal their identities. Participants in this study were a mixture of those who chose to reveal their identities when asked and those who felt it important to inform close family and friends. Fitzgerald's third category, open disclosure, described the strategies of those who were entirely open about their identities regardless of the consequences. These individuals not only disclosed their identities as atheists, but were actively involved in atheist causes. A number of participants in this study also chose the open and complete disclosure strategy. Some did so, as firebrands, others as diplomats, but both typologies are at home in Fitzgerald's open and complete disclosure category.

Impacts

The conclusion of this study is that, though the costs were high, deconverting was worth it because it resulted in a sense of liberation and increased wellbeing. The sense of wellbeing is closely related to the perception of the participant's Christian experience. The more oppressive and rigid they felt the expression of their Christian faith was, the more liberated they felt as atheists. This is supported by a number of other studies. Smith (2010) found that the participants in his research on constructing an atheist identity often mentioned that, upon adopting the atheist label, they experienced a feeling of liberation.

Ross (2009) identified two types of deconversion experiences. The first type is associated

primarily with relief and the easing of cognitive tensions that resulted from deconverting.

Characteristic of this type of deconvert is that their deconversion experience is

characterized by embracing new possibilities in philosophy and morality, negative views

of religion, and the strengthening of the identity of unbelief. Similar themes emerged in

this study. Participants reported feelings of relief and freedom as a result of deconversion.

They, like the individuals in the Ross study, often expressed beliefs that atheism opened

up new possibilities, particularly in epistemology and ethics. Participants in this study

also communicated a sense of anger and resentment towards Christianity, similar to those

expressed in Ross' research. A difference between the findings of Ross and this study is

that there were no participants in this study who would be representative of Ross' second

type of deconversion experience, which was defined by loss and struggle over the loss of

faith. To the contrary, while participants in this study did speak of the negative emotional

impact that leaving their faith caused, none of the individual experiences would be

defined as predominantly negative. Downs (2012) also concurred with the findings of this

study concerning the overall impact of deconversion being perceived positively. In her

research on the experience of leaving Christianity, she concluded that individuals

experienced negative feelings in the process of deconversion, but those feelings

significantly improved after deconversion. Like the findings of this study, Downs

reported that deconverts in her study also felt free and happy to no longer be Christian.

For Various Groups

The results of this study are relevant for two groups. First, conservative Christians will find the results meaningful because it provides them with insights as to how they are viewed by those who once identified with them. Conservative Christians can benefit from understanding why participants found their Christian experiences so negative that they chose to define their deconversions as liberating and an overall benefit to their wellbeing. Second, those who have deconverted from Christianity should also benefit from this study. It reveals not only the general contours of the impact of deconversion, but also brings to light important presuppositions of which many participants might not have been aware. Deconverts should profit from having these hidden beliefs brought to their attention since the beliefs played a momentous role in their decisions to relinquish faith.

Christians. The conservative Christian community would do well to consider the results of this study. The fact that the participants of both this study and others report that they feel liberated and happier as a result of leaving the Christian faith should be deeply troubling. There are at least two topics uncovered here that should be of the utmost importance for Christians to consider. First, conservative Christians of all stripes must reflect on a number of assumptions that characterize conservative Christianity and ask whether or not they are essential to the historic Christian faith. An overly strict home or church life that imposes unbiblical rules upon believers acts only to push individuals toward apostasy, rather than keep them from it. The irony is that the very means by which ultraconservative and fundamentalist churches have used to keep their people within the fold significantly contributed to their deconversions. There is clearly something wrong

with an interpretation of Christianity that places heavy burdens on believers when Jesus says that his burden is light and his truth is freeing. This raises the question of just what deconverts are rejecting. It certainly is not the religion of Jesus of Nazareth.

Second, drawing hard lines on issues such as the inerrancy of Scripture or the incompatibility of evolution with the existence of God have proven to be catalysts in the deconversion process. Clear thinking on these issues should result in a reevaluation of both positions. Logically, there is no contradiction with holding that God exists and that evolution is the means by which he created humans. Admittedly this will demand reading certain texts of Scripture from a different perspective. It can, and should, be argued that certain texts of Scripture need to be approached from a different perspective, and, more so, the assumptions about the nature and purpose of Scripture itself need to be reexamined. The uninformed picture that many Christians have of Scripture is woefully inadequate to withstand even the weakest of challenges. Pastors and Christian leaders must do a better job of communicating the very human elements of the Bible to those over whom they have charge. Christians, especially those of high school and college ages, need to be exposed to the troubling elements of the text of Scripture from a Christian perspective before they encounter those problems from critical, skeptical sources. Issues such as historical discrepancies, authorship of the texts, errors in transmission, inclusion of inauthentic passages such as the long ending of Mark, and the process of canonization need to be raised by Christian leaders. Additionally, conservatives must stop making inerrancy the *sine qua non* of being a true believer. Regardless of whether the Bible is inerrant in the original autographs, the fact is we do

not have the originals. That, combined with the myriad of caveats made by the International Council on Biblical Inerrancy (1978) concerning what inerrancy actually means, causes one to wonder if the term has not succumbed to death from a thousand qualifications. Perhaps even more problematic is the claim often made by Christians that, if there is one error in the Bible, it cannot be the word of God. What is tragic about this claim is that it forces reflective believers who have encountered serious challenges to the doctrine of inerrancy to depend entirely on the discipline of apologetics to retain their faith. The fact that volumes have been written demonstrating the inerrancy of the Bible is evidence, in and of itself, that the claim, "If the Bible has even one error, it is not the word of God," sets believers up for apostasy. With so many alleged errors to choose from, is it really reasonable to think that apologists can refute all of them to such a degree that all reasonable people will find the answers acceptable?

Deconverts. The findings of this study are relevant to a second group, namely atheist deconverts. It is apparent that deconverts are thoroughgoing empiricists. It is unlikely that many are aware of their epistemological assumptions, but they, like everyone else, are certainly guided by them. Empiricism is characterized by the dictum that it is only rational to believe that for which there is adequate evidence. Evidence in this case is understood to be either arguments that are grounded in self-evident truths or empirical, scientific data. Before their deconversions, a quarter of the participants looked to apologetics in order to undergird their faith. The apologetics in question were typically evidentialist in nature and placed a great deal of weight on being able to use both philosophical arguments and empirical data to demonstrate the truthfulness of

Christianity. When deconverts encountered objections they could not refute, their evidentialist presuppositions forced them to relinquish their faith. It appears that it never occurred to participants to doubt their evidentialist presuppositions as the criteria of rationality, yet there is good reason to do so.

Evidentialism as the sole criterion for the rationality of belief has been critiqued as far back as 1896. William James (2002) in his seminal lecture entitled "The Will to Believe," attacked the strident empiricism that held many epistemically captive in his day. More recently, Alvin Plantinga (1967), Nicholas Wolterstorff (1988), George Mavrodes (1988) and William Alston (1991) have offered powerful critiques of evidentialism in relation to the rationality of belief in the existence of God. They have all argued that evidentialism is irrelevant when it comes to determining if belief in the existence of God is rational. They do so by persuasively demonstrating that evidentialism is impotent to justify the belief in the existence of other minds. Yet, we are surely rational in believing in the existence of minds other than our own. If that is true, they argue, then we should also be rational in believing in the existence of God without meeting the strict requirements of evidentialism because God essentially is a mind, soul, or center of consciousness. Those who agree with the above group of philosophers point out that, not only is evidentialism irrelevant to whether our belief in other minds is rational, it is slightly obstinate. Does it not seem perverse to demand the kind of evidence that evidentialism requires before we are willing to allow that our family and friends are conscious agents and not automatons?

Consistent with their evidentialist epistemology, deconverts demonstrated a great appreciation for science as the primary source for acquiring knowledge. This appreciation bordered on scientism. Scientism is the belief that science and science alone can provide objective knowledge about reality. This is a naïve view of science and betrays a lack of understanding about the foundation upon which all knowledge claims are built. Deconverts would benefit from investigating the philosophical underpinnings of science. While science has proven to be a remarkably successful discipline, it is not the paradigm of objectivity that many believe it is. First, all scientific observations are theory laden, which means they are not unadulterated, presuppositionless apprehensions of brute facts of reality. All facts are interpreted through a host of assumptions that often operate at the subconscious level and never achieve complete epistemic objectivity. Second, scientific theories that attempt to provide explanations for states of affairs are always underdetermined by the data and, thus, are never certain. In order for a theory to be considered successful in explaining a state of affairs, it must fall within the limits of what is considered an acceptable range of deviation. However, different fields of science allow for differing ranges. What is within an acceptable range of deviation for spectroscopy is not within the acceptable range for stellar magnitude. So, whether a theory successfully accounts for a particular state of affairs depends on what field it is. There is no uniform agreement across the various scientific disciplines on what constitutes an acceptable range of deviation. Third, it is a common misunderstanding that what makes science an objective discipline, as opposed to philosophy or theology, is that science has a particular method that is at the heart of scientific investigation. It is true that many scientific

experiments do utilize an inductive method, but there is no such thing as the one and only scientific method. There are, in fact, a number of ways in which scientists approach their disciplines. For example, abduction, more commonly known as inference to the best explanation, seeks to discover which hypothesis best explains the total amount of data given a certain set of facts. It requires a great deal of subjective judgment on the part of scientists, but it is, nonetheless, a common and acceptable scientific method. More could be said about the limitations and assumptions of science, but suffice it to say that science is not the objective, unbiased means to knowledge that many take it to be. This is no criticism against science, it is merely intended to point out that deconverts have perhaps given too much credit where it is not due.

Further Research

Two areas that call for further research relating to deconversion are the effects that religious upbringing and church practice have on deconversion and the impact that deconversion has on family and friends. First, what kind of Christianity is being presented to deconverts that they find so unappealing? Is it possible that the Christianity so many deconverts reject is closer to the religion of the Pharisees than that of Jesus? If so, then what participants are rejecting is not Christianity at all but a mischaracterization of it. This is not to imply that if they were presented with an understanding of Christianity that is more in line with Jesus' teachings (less legalism, irrationality, and hypocrisy), they would choose to believe it. It simply raises the question of the relationship between how an individual perceives Christian experience and deconversion. That being said, there is little doubt that if individuals are socialized into a bad version of

Christianity, it will be more difficult to remain faithful to it. Obviously, for those who find Christianity to be intellectually problematic, even a better version of it will not be attractive. However, since many intellectual problems are the result of nonintellectual issues, like hypocrisy, emotional abuse and control, perhaps a better version of Christianity would preclude the intellectual struggle?

The second area for further investigation is the effects and impacts that deconversion has on loved ones and friends of apostates. How does the departure of a loved one impact the lives of those around them who remain faithful to Christianity? What is the impact on the parents of a deconvert? How do they navigate the emotional turbulence that accompanies the apostasy of a child? What are the experiences of spouses of deconverts, and how deconversion impact marriage? Parents and spouses not only have to deal with the social ramifications of a loved one or close friend deconverting, they must also face the prospect of eternity without their loved ones. What coping strategies are employed to handle such a daunting possibility? Presently these questions remain unanswered.

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