

### Abstract

Participation in a religious community like the church carries a person through many moments of change through their lifetime, and the episodes of change and growth has been referred to as one's "conversion career". What prompts the person to make changes in their conversion career derives from a complex mix of sources. The changes may stem from personal needs or desires or from the promptings or expectations for growth/maturation provided by the theology or practices of Wesleyan communities, but the wider socio-cultural context also powerfully influences the individual in ways beyond the control or even notice of the religious community. An often-overlooked corollary of these episodes of change or conversions is the concomitant (or prior) movement of deconversion or disaffiliation from what was embraced beforehand. From a Christian formation perspective, the conversion to a higher stage of formation may require a deconversion from or letting go of the prior stage. While there may be great enjoyment in the gains in those episodes of one's conversion career, the correlative deconversion can bring a troubling and lingering sense of loss and pain over what or who are left behind.

Deconversion can result in increased commitment and involvement in the present religious community, but it may also result in an exit or disaffiliation from the present religious community towards other spiritual affiliations or even an abandonment of any form of spirituality. This paper seeks to identify the various trajectories and "landing zones" of religious deconversion and those causal factors steering those differing trajectories. It seeks to address how an understanding of varieties and causes of deconversion can help in both focusing the church's renewal and revival efforts towards Christian flourishing and maturity in the Wesleyan context and in minimizing instances of the exiting or disaffiliating forms of deconversion.

## Conversion

For many, the idea of religious conversion brings to mind the story of the Apostle Paul who encounters the risen Jesus on the road to Damascus. This encounter is often seen as a life-changing experience of personal salvation...and it happened in an instant...but was it the kind of conversion we imagine?<sup>1</sup>

Augustin's radical conversion from Manicheism to Christianity is also treated as a model of an instantaneous conversion. His adherence and practice of Manicheism is disrupted as he reads Cicero which prompts a new love for wisdom.<sup>2</sup> Although Augustin shapes his conversion narrative to mirror the instantaneous conversion of Paul, it was anything but instantaneous. Rather it first involved a deconversion from his former life. The decision is prompted by intellectual doubts (of seeming discrepancies between doctrines and astronomical facts) as well as moral criticisms of the Manichean dualism. This dualism had excused him from taking responsibility for his own misdeeds and sin.<sup>3</sup> For Augustin, this amazing story of his re-conversion to Christianity required and was prompted by a *deconversion* from Manicheism.

The great reformers understood conversion in different ways. Martin Luther imaged conversion as a daily struggle to fulfill the promises of one's baptism. The Swiss reformer, John Calvin, stressed instead

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<sup>1</sup> Using Paul's experience as a template for understanding conversion may be a problem. "...Paul was a Pharisaical Jew who was converted to a new apocalyptic, Jewish sect and then lived in a Hellenistic gentile Christian community as a Jew among gentiles."<sup>1</sup> Following Stendahl, Segal contends that Paul is not struggling with a guilty conscience (cf. Ph. 3:4-6). Rather, this incident for Segal is the conversion of his calling. He is being called to preach rather than condemn Christ and to build rather than persecute the church.

<sup>2</sup> J Barbour, "Versions of Deconversion," *Theological Studies*. 57, no. 1 (1996): 11.

<sup>3</sup> Barbour, 12.

“...the absolute sovereignty of God in the order of salvation, as a *subita conversio*: a sudden experience of grace and salvation from sin by God.”<sup>4</sup>

It appears John Wesley preferred to avoid the term, saying,

“...you say, I ‘represent conversion as sudden and instantaneous’. Soft and fair! Do you know what conversion is? (A term, indeed, which I very rarely use, because it rarely occurs in the New Testament.”<sup>5</sup>

Instead, Wesley focused on correlative doctrines such as justification and the new birth. He cautioned in his sermon, “The New Birth,” against expecting a precise understanding of how this conversion happens saying,

“Our Lord sufficiently guards us against any such expectation by the words immediately following the text: wherein he reminds Nicodemus...‘The wind bloweth where it listeth...But thou canst not tell whence it cometh, neither whither it goeth’...Thou mayst be as absolutely assured of the fact...how the Holy Spirit works this in the soul, neither thou nor the wisest of the children of men is able to explain.”<sup>6</sup>

Is conversion an instantaneous experience or a gradual one? Interpreters of Wesley have seen the issue differently often disagreeing how to understand the “Aldersgate Experience” when his heart was “strangely warmed”.<sup>7</sup> Was this moment his instant of conversion, or was it a moment in the overall process of his conversion? Subsequently, Wesleyan scholars have understood Wesley’s conversion and conversion in general in different ways. Those Wesleyans of Holiness and Pentecostal persuasions have tended to see conversion in more instantaneous ways, while others have thought of it more as a durative experience.

### Conversion from social science perspectives

Social scientists come at this experience more descriptively and have had much to say about the religious experience of conversion.

William James’ seminal work on the varieties of religiosity identified two styles of conversion: volitional (gradual) and instantaneous (sudden and dramatic like the Apostle Paul). He saw that conversion was for

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<sup>4</sup> H. Gooren, *Religious Conversion and Disaffiliation : Tracing Patterns of Change in Faith Practices*. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 12.

<sup>5</sup> Albert C. Outler, “The Appeals to Men of Reason and Religion and Certain Related Open Letters, The Works of John Wesley, Vol. 11. Edited by Gerald R. Cragg. Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1975.

<sup>6</sup> John Wesley and Albert Cook Outler, *The Works of John Wesley. 34-70 Volume 2, Volume 2*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1985), 191.

<sup>7</sup> Randy L. Maddox and Jason E. Vickers, *The Cambridge Companion to John Wesley* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010) 305.

sick souls who needed healing from their divided self.<sup>8</sup> This division of the self leads to radical pessimism, melancholy, and depression.<sup>9</sup> He observed, that conversion results in one or more of 4 indicative feelings: a sense of higher control, peace, and harmony; a sense of perceiving truths not know before; a sense of the clean and beautiful newness of life and the world; an ecstasy of happiness. For James, conversion (whether volitional or instantaneous) was the healing process in which a divided self becomes unified.<sup>10</sup>

Henri Gooren describes conversion more generally as “...a comprehensive personal change of religious worldview and identity”.<sup>11</sup> It is seen as a radical experience and involves a complete disruption of an older identity. Richard Travisano noting how it changes us in the way we engage the world adds, it is “...a revision of one’s world view such that one’s self-image and notions as how to deal with others undergo radical change.”<sup>12</sup> This revision is both negative and positive...both destructive and constructive, and it is initiated by a destruction of the clarity about one’s root reality. Snow and Machalek speak more socially and insist that conversion changes the social role of a person and is “...a change in one’s universe of discourse...the broad interpretive framework in terms of which people live and organize experience.”<sup>13</sup>

These are all interesting and instructive descriptions, but there is a problem with many of the older social-scientific descriptions of conversion. They tend to be highly individualistic in perspective.

However, as Snow and Machalek notes, religious conversions occur in a social context of interactions with other religious people or communities. Understanding conversion needs to include both psychological and sociological factors.

Lewis Rambo expands the understanding of any religious choice and points to 5 major factors that influence religious activity<sup>14</sup>:

1. **Social Factors:** Interaction with relatives, friends (social networks) and with religious group members through socialization and role learning
2. **Institutional Factors**
  - a. Dissatisfaction with current group or with religious inactivity
  - b. Presence of different religious groups
  - c. Recruitment methods of other religious groups

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<sup>8</sup> Gooren, *Religious Conversion and Disaffiliation : Tracing Patterns of Change in Faith Practices.*, 21.

<sup>9</sup> It should be noted his interest was in the conversion of adolescents who were typically going through a phase of individuation from their parents.

<sup>10</sup> Gooren, *Religious Conversion and Disaffiliation : Tracing Patterns of Change in Faith Practices.*, 20.

<sup>11</sup> Gooren, 3.

<sup>12</sup> Gooren, 25.

<sup>13</sup> Gooren, 30.

<sup>14</sup> Gooren, 50.

- d. Appeal of their leaders, organization, practices, rituals, rule of conduct, ethics, values, and doctrine
- 3. **Cultural and political factors**
  - a. Appeal of the culture politics or a religious group
  - b. Tension between religious group and society or a specific ethnic group or country
- 4. **Individual factors**
  - a. A religious world view or need to become religiously involved (prior socialization)
  - b. A need to give a concrete expression to feelings of meaning
  - c. A need to seek meaning or spirituality in a religious group
  - d. Certain character traits inducing religious participation (E.g. Insecurity or the convert personality)
- 5. **Contingency factors**
  - a. An acutely felt crisis or turning point
  - b. A religion-based or inspired solution to the crisis (E.g. finding a new job through a church member)
  - c. A chance meeting with representatives of a religious group (E.g. missionaries)

## AFFILIATION

Conversion is influenced by both social as well as personal influences, and in most cases usually part of a process of affiliation with some religious group. The recent emphasis on affiliation focuses on a broader process where a person achieves alignment of purpose and action (conversion) that permits incorporation in a supportive and formative faith community<sup>15</sup>. Engagement with a faith community has (according to Alan Aldridge) a variety of modes that derive from a mixing of 4 basic dimensions: Communal, Ethical, Cultural and Emotional. The mix of these dimensions contribute to the following characterizations of affiliation/identification as well as deconversion/deidentification and speak to the reasons or modes of affiliation or belonging:<sup>16</sup>

Character of identification	Dimensions	Character of deidentification
Emotional	Emotional & communal	Loss
Patrimonial	Cultural & communal	Emigration
Humanitarian	Emotional & ethical	Politicization
Political	Communal & ethical	Secularity
Humanist	Cultural & ethical	Atheism
Aesthetic	Cultural & emotional	Distaste

<sup>15</sup> David G. Bromley, *Falling from the Faith : Causes and Consequences of Religious Apostasy* (Ann Arbor: University Microfilms International, 1999), 34.

<sup>16</sup> Francis Leslie Watson and Yaacov Julian. Katz, eds., *Joining and Leaving Religion : Research Perspectives* (Leominster: Gracewing, 2000), 15–18.

- i. Emotional – deep sense of communal belonging. Characteristic of many minority movements. Is linked to allegations that young followers have been “brainwashed”.
  - a. Deidentification – a profound feeling of loss that can be intensified when it cannot be adequately conveyed to an understanding audience.
- ii. Patrimonial – in France this takes the form of *intègrisme*, linking Catholicism with French identity in an explicit rejection of multiculturalism. This has the potential to express itself as xenophobia and racism.
  - a. Deidentification – takes the form of emigration which may involve liberation or betrayal or both.
- iii. Humanitarian – addressing social problems through social action (E.g. Religious Society of Friends)
  - a. Politicization – religious affiliation comes to be seen as an obstacle to radical social reform. Frustration is a dominant theme in this mode of deidentification.
- iv. Political – espouses a militant conception of the faith as an agent of socio-political change. (E.g. Liberation Theology or various extreme movements pejoratively labeled as fundamentalists)
  - a. Deidentification – secularity with the dominant theme of disillusion. “The faith come to be seen as irredeemably reactionary and is cast aside with little regret as a barrier to progress.”
- v. Humanist – appeals to intellectuals with a high level of cultural capital that allows them to dispense with official doctrines while holding aspects of religious values.
  - a. Deidentification – often indistinguishable.
- vi. Aesthetic – appreciation of religion’s cultural legacy
  - a. Deidentification – distaste...which can be profoundly divisive.

Of note here is, the reasons for affiliation vary for different individuals. Not only the reasons for the affiliation/disaffiliation are different, the process of these affiliations can vary.

It can be quite rapid for some, while being painstakingly slow for others. The process can be very fluid and even non-linear in progression, but there are usually 5 identifiable stages in the process.<sup>17</sup>

#### STAGES OF AFFILIATION

1. *Pre-affiliation* refers to the period when there is contact but no formal link with a religious movement or group. Exploratory contacts are made by the seeker or by visitors and their worldview and social background are assessed.<sup>18</sup>
2. *Affiliation* “...involves equilibration of some combination of organizational and individual involvement sufficient for affiliates to continue and the group accept the affiliate’s participation.”<sup>19</sup>

<sup>17</sup> Mordekhai. Bar-Lev, *Leaving Religion and Religious Life*, vol. 7, Religion and the Social Order (Bingley: Emerald, 2009), 33.

<sup>18</sup> Gooren, *Religious Conversion and Disaffiliation : Tracing Patterns of Change in Faith Practices.*, 3.

<sup>19</sup> Bar-Lev, *Leaving Religion and Religious Life*.

3. *Conversion* is a radical change in the person's religious worldview and identity.<sup>20</sup>
4. *Confession* involves the member's high level of participation inside the group and now having a core member identity involving missionary activity.<sup>21</sup>
5. *Disaffiliation* begins when problematic situations create some measure of organizational or individual disinvolvement and may result in leaving.<sup>22</sup>

Again, the stages are not always followed in linear fashion, and the initial level of affiliation may not lead to the subsequent levels of conversion or confession. Indeed, there may instead be a regression to an earlier stage or an immediate disaffiliation before one reaches the stage of conversion. In a way, each stage of affiliation is a conversion itself.

## CONVERSION CAREER

Given the multiple stages of religious affiliation with many subsequent stages requiring a deconversion from earlier ways and reasons for affiliating, researchers have come to study conversion in terms of *conversion careers*. The study is also prompted by the observation that people may convert more than once in their lives.<sup>23</sup>

Many studies of conversion are derived from disciplined study of biographical narrative interviews of religious converts. These narratives show conversion career as an active process (and not just a moment of decision) involving personal as well as social factors.<sup>24</sup>

What is meant by a conversion career? Gooren describes *conversion career* as that which "...includes all episodes of higher or lower participation in one or more religious organizations during a person's life."<sup>25</sup>

James Richardson views conversion careers from a "religious market" perspective as being multiple-event conversions by people trying out a series of religious alternatives. Streib analyzes that,

"...a growing number of people choose to convert more than once in their lifetime; multiple conversions are unavoidable in cultures in which religion is no longer a single tradition in a mono-religious environment but plural in a pluralistic environment."<sup>26</sup>

<sup>20</sup> Martha Frederiks, "Henri Gooren. Religious Conversion and Disaffiliation: Tracing Patterns of Faith Practices, New York: Palgrave MacMillan 2010, *Exchange* 41, no. 2 (2012): 211–12.

<sup>21</sup> Gooren, *Religious Conversion and Disaffiliation : Tracing Patterns of Change in Faith Practices.*, 49.

<sup>22</sup> Bromley, *Falling from the Faith : Causes and Consequences of Religious Apostasy.*

<sup>23</sup> Heinz. Streib, *Deconversion : Qualitative and Quantitative Results from Cross Cultural Research in Germany and the United States of America : Cross-Cultural Research in Germany and the United States of America* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2009), 20.

<sup>24</sup> Andreaa Nica, "Review of Deconversion: Qualitative and Quantitative Results from Cross-Cultural Research in Germany and the USA," *Secularism and Nonreligion* 5, no. 1 (2016): 251.

<sup>25</sup> Gooren, *Religious Conversion and Disaffiliation : Tracing Patterns of Change in Faith Practices.*, 3.

<sup>26</sup> Streib, Heinz, "Deconversion," in *The Oxford Handbook of Religious Conversion*, ed. Lewis Ray Rambo and Charles E. Farhadian (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 271.

For Lewis Rambo, conversion career is about a "...member's passage, within his or her social and cultural context, through levels, types and phases of religious participation."<sup>27</sup> He identifies 5 kinds of conversion careers:<sup>28</sup>

1. *Parental Religion* for those who remain active with their parental religion
2. *Seekers & Shoppers* for those coming from homes of little religious socialization who have trigger experiences that initiated seeking
3. *Committed Converts* for those who have experienced a change of worldview and identity...a biographical reconstruction using distinct narratives and discourses
4. *Confessing Leaders*
5. *Disillusioned Disaffiliates* (3 varieties)
  - a. Apostates
  - b. Secular "Nones"
  - c. Religious "Nones"<sup>29</sup>

Reviewing the typology, it appears the types are defined by the current landing zones of the conversions. There is a similarity here between these initial landing zones with Westerhoff's analysis of the stages of faith formation<sup>30</sup>. Two observations in the study of conversion careers are: the inclusion of disaffiliation or deconversion; and the relationship between conversion career and growth or faith formation. These two concepts are to be considered as correlates.

## Growth

Fowler's presentation of the stages of faith formation has been seminal in most subsequent perspectives on spiritual growth. His is a most-impressive and inclusive analysis of how we are formed in our faith. Barbara Keller, et.al. summarizes his approach:

"Fowler's...conception of faith includes seven Aspects: cognitive-structural development (drawn from Piaget), perspective taking (Selman), moral judgment (Kohlberg), adding bounds of social awareness, locus of authority, forms of world coherence, and level of symbolic functioning. These seven aspects of faith are assumed to develop in six stages that may be loosely related to age: Intuitive-projective (<6 years), mythic-literal (7 – 12 years), synthetic-conventional (adolescence, adulthood), individuative-reflective (adulthood), conjunctive, and universalizing faith."<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Gooren, 48.

<sup>28</sup> Gooren, 69–110.

<sup>29</sup> It is interesting to note the similarity of Rambo's types of conversion careers and the above-mentioned stages.

<sup>30</sup> Watson and Katz, *Joining and Leaving Religion : Research Perspectives*, 250. "A faith stage has been defined as an 'integrated set of operational structures that constitute the thought processes of a person at a given time'."

<sup>31</sup> Jeff. Astley and Leslie J. Francis, *Exploring Ordinary Theology : Everyday Christian Believing and the Church* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2013), 123.

Movement from one stage to the next is seldom an easy transition. It can be traumatic as one must let go of former dependencies, relationships, and values and reach forward to the next stage. “Thomas Droege writes:

The transitions between stages are critical junctures (crises) at which a person’s life of faith can be severely threatened. A stage transition means a painful ending as well as a new beginning. It means giving up a total way of making sense of things. It frequently entails confusion, doubt, uncertainty, and what may appear to be a loss of faith.”<sup>32</sup>

For each stage of the individual’s conversion career, the conversion to the next stage is often prefaced by a deconversion from the former. The personal struggle to release the past (perhaps comfortable) stages of being in faith is heightened and conditioned by the person’s relationship with his or her faith community that has been formative in the growth to this point.

### Growth and the Faith Community

Putting aside for the moment the various denominations and theological traditions, there are still varieties of how faith communities function. The traditional descriptions of the social functions of the church as being an agent of social cohesion, social integration, etc. could be helpful in this discussion, but instead this paper will consider the 3-fold typology of Strieb, et.al.<sup>33</sup> as it views the relation between the faith community and its social environment.

1. The integrated community: This has no or only marginal *tension* with its surrounding culture or society.
2. The accommodating community: This group is in *tension* with society, but they are on their way to and work for integration with it.
3. The oppositional community: This group is in (great) *tension* with society.<sup>34</sup>

The integrated community is more an open-system and less restrictive in its exchanges with the outside environment. The oppositional community is more a closed-system where the exchange of goods and ideas between the faith community and its surrounding environment is tightly controlled using highly selective input and output filters. The community freely integrates with its surrounding environment. It might be described by oppositional communities as “liberal” in its openness to the outside world. The community that opposes the demands and trajectories of the outside world might be described by integrating communities as “hyper-conservative” or “fundamentalistic” and resisting the changes that

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Strieb, *Deconversion : Qualitative and Quantitative Results from Cross Cultural Research in Germany and the United States of America : Cross-Cultural Research in Germany and the United States of America*, 26.

<sup>34</sup> The temptation to relate these to the socio-theological typology of H. Richard Niebuhr’s Christ and Culture is hard to resist here, but for brevity simply let it be noted here.

happen around it. The accommodating community is somewhere along the continuum between the two more extreme types.

The integrated and accommodating community types seem more ideal for James Fowler's notion of the development of faith or of Kohlberg's ideal development of mature morality. In these kinds of faith communities, the individual would find less obstruction or resistance to the more "mature" stages of formation. The same cannot be said of the oppositional community, where the later stages of maturation as understood in Kohlberg's or Fowler's types would result in friction with the community.

Oppositional communities, though, are not all alike. The more extreme examples would include cults or communes. Less extreme would be the many varieties of fundamentalism.

### Fundamentalism

While fundamentalism is a phenomenon that can attach to various secular social groups, it is largely seen as a religious phenomenon. Examples of non-religious fundamentalisms would be: dogmatic nationalism, scientism, ultra-liberalism, Marxism, etc. We typically only hear news of those radical tragic examples of religious fundamentalisms, and consequently misunderstand it as being synonymous with bigotry, fanaticism or anti-intellectualism<sup>35</sup>. From a psychological perspective, fundamentalism is understood...

"...as a meaning system...the meaning fundamentalists derive from their religious beliefs is what allows them to persevere in an inhospitable culture. It creates a way for them to interpret the world, as well as themselves in relation to the world...[it] encompasses all of life and is strongly felt, for it deals with issues of eternal importance."<sup>36</sup>

What is determinative of religious fundamentalism is its insistence that all of life be understood in relation to a particular (sacred) text. This text is held as being authoritative and the final arbitrator of all other textually based knowledge.<sup>37</sup> Along with the sacred text, there may be a second correlative locus of authoritative interpretation (a book, a collection of doctrines, a governing body or magisterium) that closely guards against heretical interpretations of that sacred text. This results in a restrictive intratextuality of authority that stands in judgement over all disparate interpretations and outside

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<sup>35</sup> Yet, fundamentalist denominations are the founders of many Christian colleges and universities.

<sup>36</sup> Ralph W. Hood, Peter C. Hill, and William Paul. Williamson, *The Psychology of Religious Fundamentalism* (New York: Guilford Press, 2005), 5.

<sup>37</sup> Hood, Hill, and Williamson, 3.

sources of information<sup>38</sup>. The following diagram shows the barrier to giving credence to outside (peripheral) ideas and beliefs:

An Intratextual Search for Meaning

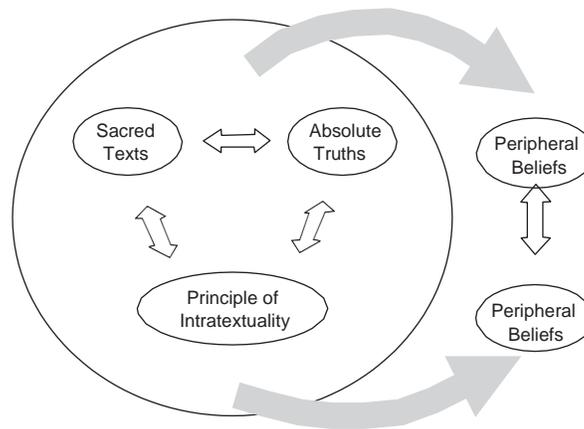


FIGURE 1.1. The structure of fundamentalist thought.<sup>39</sup>

There are benefits to those adherents of fundamentalism: a unifying purpose of life, a sense of coherence, a sense of personal meaning and purpose in living, etc.<sup>40</sup> These are the attractive elements to this belief system. However, this restricted view has its liabilities as well.

“...it appears to be justified to interpret fundamentalism as religious commitment to an absolutist tradition and as a counterpart to *openness to experience*...persons high on this trait [openness to experience] are likely to fully explore the fundamentalist tradition they were socialized into, and to find its limits. They then are likely to be unsatisfied with a tradition that demands the truth of its text and traditions be accepted in absolute terms while simultaneously denying the value of inter-religious dialogue.”<sup>41</sup>

This phenomenon is often seen in the growth (?) experience of university students entering school with their provincial fundamentalistic faiths and being exposed to multiple perspectives about faith and truth. Physically removed from the restrictive guidance or control of their parents or home community,

<sup>38</sup> While modern interpretations have confused evangelicalism with fundamentalism, they are distinguished by how they relate to culture. Fundamentalism is more likely to characterize its relation through images of warfare where non-fundamentalistic evangelicals may use images and analogies that are more conciliatory. However, this is not a defining differentiating characteristic.

<sup>39</sup> Hood, Hill, and Williamson, *The Psychology of Religious Fundamentalism*, 23.

<sup>40</sup> Hood, Hill, and Williamson, *The Psychology of Religious Fundamentalism*, 34ff.

<sup>41</sup> Streib, *Deconversion: Qualitative and Quantitative Results from Cross Cultural Research in Germany and the United States of America : Cross-Cultural Research in Germany and the United States of America*, 79.

they must arbitrate these disparate views and decide whether and how to incorporate these pieces of information. They must either maintain or reject the Intratextuality dynamic of the fundamentalism with which they arrived. To maintain their intertextuality results in rejecting the intertextual experiences of university learning. The religious change adopting an intertextuality which gives credibility and authority to outside voices results in a degree of disaffiliation from the home community. While maintaining religious Intratextuality intensifies the relation with the home religious community but at the expense of the openness to new learning. This dynamic is quite prevalent for freshmen as they enter the university environment. There are other kinds of religious change to be identified.

### Types of Religious Change

As already noted, for every moment of religious change or growth, there are two sides or moments. Lori Fazzino<sup>42</sup> looks at this experience through the eyes of John Barbour saying,

“John Barbour states that “In one sense, every conversion is a deconversion, and every deconversion is a conversion”

In this perspective, deconversion and conversion are alternative perspectives of the same process of personal metamorphosis or religious mobility. There is a “leaving behind” of the former stage as one “moves ahead” towards the next. It includes a multi-stage experience of transformation that involves an emotional response, a biographical reconstruction, and behavioral transformations. There is much that happens in religious change as one converts to the next phase in one’s faith-life, and it is seldom a trivial or simple transition.

Rambo provides a typology of religious changes or transitions:<sup>43</sup>

1. *Apostasy/defection*: the repudiation of a religious tradition by previous members
2. *Intensification*: the revitalized commitment to a faith with which the convert has had previous affiliation, formal or informal...E.g. John Bunyan’s idea of pilgrimage<sup>44</sup>
3. *Affiliation*: the movement of an individual or group from no or minimal religious commitment to full involvement with an institution or community of faith
4. *Institutional transition* (or denominational switching): the change of an individual or group from one community to another within a major tradition [E.g. Baptist to Presbyterian ...or E.g. John Henry Newman<sup>45</sup>]
5. *Tradition transition*: the movement of from one major religious tradition to another [E.g. Roman Catholicism to Islam]

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<sup>42</sup> Lori L. Fazzino, “Leaving the Church Behind: Applying a Deconversion Perspective to Evangelical Exit Narratives,” *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 29, no. 2 (2014): 251.

<sup>43</sup> Gooren, *Religious Conversion and Disaffiliation: Tracing Patterns of Change in Faith Practices.*, 37.

<sup>44</sup> Barbour, “Versions of Deconversion.”

<sup>45</sup> Barbour.

Of particular interest in this paper are transitions of apostasy/disaffiliation, institutional and tradition. These exits from the faith are deconversions with landing zones that separate the person from their faith communities. The questions that arise have to do with the predisposing and precipitating factors for the deconversion. Why do people leave the church, and what dynamics give direction to the trajectories and landing zones that are chosen? Are there any clues to what the church might do to address and redirect these exiting decisions?

## Deconversion and its Trajectories

A more generalized description of deconversion would be:

“Deconversion is the change of a person’s religious orientation in a specific biographical time which involves re-writing one’s religious identity, revising one’s system of beliefs and world views, and re-structuring one’s way of thinking, moral judgment, and dealing with authority – with a special focus on the act of leaving the old and searching for something different...one could say deconversion involves criticism and abandonment of cognitive schemata, exiting from a style of being religious.”<sup>46</sup>

The term deconversion, then, has wide applications. It can refer to the staging of growth as one progresses to the next level of formation. In this case, it is a “letting go” of the former stage in order to move to the next stage in one’s conversion career. Deconversion, then, necessarily precedes conversion. In other cases, deconversion may instead refer to a very different landing zone that leads the person away from the faith community to a disaffiliation. Deconversion and disaffiliation are related but are not the same idea.

Disaffiliation from the faith community may not be a termination of membership or attendance but a gradual withdrawal from participating or a retreat from observances of religious practices.<sup>47</sup>

Disaffiliation might or might not lead to an affiliation with another faith community. In this case, a disaffiliating deconversion would be seen as “...the process that leads an individual to decide to sever ties with a religious tradition, mainline or charismatic.”<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Streib, *Deconversion : Qualitative and Quantitative Results from Cross Cultural Research in Germany and the United States of America : Cross-Cultural Research in Germany and the United States of America*, 23.

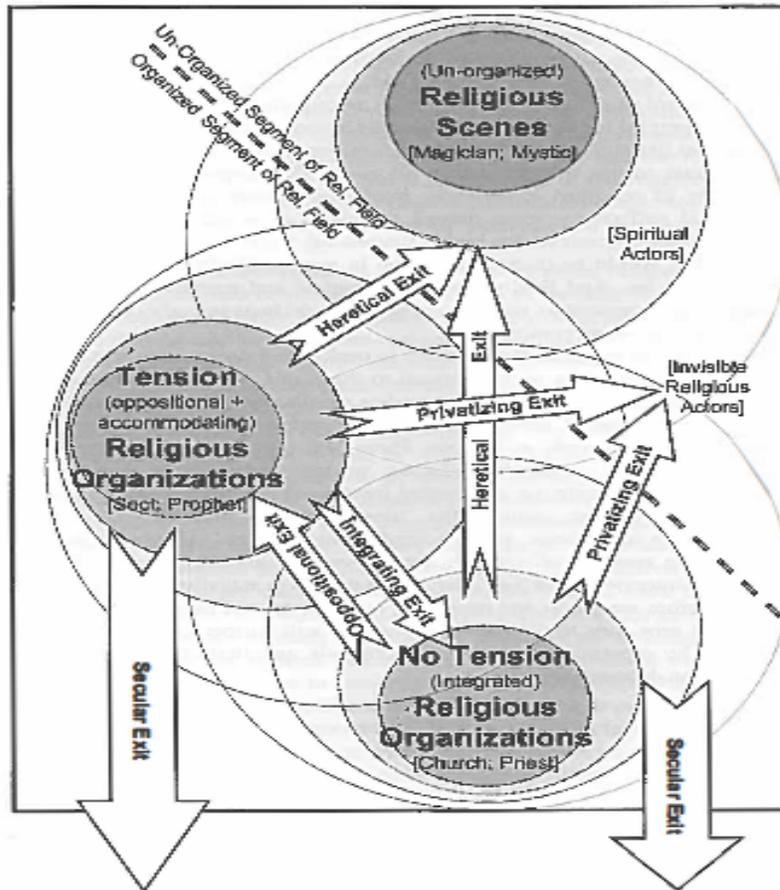
<sup>47</sup> Streib, 22.

<sup>48</sup> J. Patrick Hornbeck, “Deconversion: What, Who, Why, How?,” *Horizons* 40, no. 20 (2013 2012): 266.

Deconversion is a personal migration in the religious field. The migration is into one of two segments:<sup>49</sup>

1. Solid, structured, and well-organized
2. Fluid, unstructured, and unorganized

A graphic that presents the kinds of migrations or trajectories of deconversion is given in Streib, Et.al. :<sup>50</sup>



The result, as seen in the diagram above, of deconversion/disaffiliation is along one of six exit trajectories or landing zones. A brief description of each is given below:<sup>51</sup>

1. Secularizing exit – termination of (concern with) religious belief and praxis, termination of membership in organized religion... sometimes referred to as religious “Religious Nones”<sup>52</sup>

<sup>49</sup> “Review of Deconversion: Qualitative and Quantitative Results from Cross-Cultural Research in Germany and the USA,” *Secularism and Nonreligion* 5 (2016): 251.

<sup>50</sup> Streib, *Deconversion : Qualitative and Quantitative Results from Cross Cultural Research in Germany and the United States of America : Cross-Cultural Research in Germany and the United States of America*, 32.

<sup>51</sup> Streib, Heinz, “Deconversion,” 272.

<sup>52</sup> Other researchers refer to this type as apostasy.

2. Oppositional exit – adopting a different belief system of a different religious praxis a higher-tension more oppositional religious organization (e.g. conversion to fundamentalist religious group)
3. Religious switching – to a religious organization with similar beliefs and rituals and with no difference in terms of integration.
4. Integrating exit – adopting a different belief system of or engaging in different ritual praxis in and affiliation with an integrated or more accommodated religious system.
5. Privatizing exit – termination of membership but continuity of private religious belief and praxis (sometimes called “invisible religion”)
6. Heretical exit – individual heretical appropriation of new belief system(s) or engagement in different religious praxis (syncretistic, invisible religion, spiritual quest) without new organizational affiliation.

Secular, privatized and heretical exiters all disaffiliate from the religious organization without reaffiliating with another. The secular exiter admits a loss of belief in God and self-identifies as being neither religious nor spiritual. Privatizing exiters continue to believe in God and self-identify as a religious person. Heretical exiters continue on a spiritual or religious quest and consider themselves spiritual, but they are without a religious preference<sup>53</sup>.

### Stages of Deconversion

Like conversion, deconversion is not a momentary decision but a process with discernible phases or stages. They may occur either over a lengthy period, or they may all happen quite rapidly. Narrative analysts of those collected stories of deconversion have identified three typical stages of the decision process.<sup>54</sup>

1. “Pre-deconversion, is characterized by stories of experiencing spiritual doubt and emotional distress that evoked the re-evaluation of religious beliefs.
2. Cognitive deconversion, reflects the movement from belief to non-belief.
3. Post-deconversion, is characterized by stories of personal transformation where participants made paradigmatic transitions by engaging in cognitive and social activities or what I call ‘paradigmatic work’.”<sup>55</sup>

<sup>53</sup> Streib, Heinz, “Deconversion,” 279.

<sup>54</sup> Fazzino, “Leaving the Church Behind: Applying a Deconversion Perspective to Evangelical Exit Narratives,” 255.

<sup>55</sup> 3 elements often are part of these narratives of deconversion. They tend to take a *perspective* that emphasizes leaving religion with the difficulties that come with rejecting faith and the emotional disposition of being a religious exile. Second, they usually *narrate* the experience with numerous examples of leaving religion behind. Third, they provide a *cultural repertoire* that makes non-belief plausible by countering religious hegemony and domination using stories about the social and emotional consequences of non-conformity. They take the risks of alienation and persecution to experience authenticity, self-preservation, and liberation to moral order that is not superempirical.

As Fazzino summarizes, “Deconversion is both a dynamic multi-stage experience of transformative change marked by both liberation from and opposition against religion and a repertoire of symbolic meaning that supports a rapidly growing secular culture.”<sup>56</sup> Looking particularly at evangelical exiters, she notes,

“Exiting Evangelical Christianity often resulted in the loss of family and peer groups and was a catalyst for negative emotional experiences. Clearly, the participants were not trying to maximize the benefits or minimize the costs associated with exiting religion, as rational choice theory suggests.”<sup>57</sup>

### Precipitating factors for deconversion

We can look at the changing social climate of growing secularity (with its incrementing negativity towards religion, etc.) as being a predisposing factor for deconversions. When people narrate their decisions to deconvert, it is focused on other more immediate or precipitating factors.

*One factor* often mentioned in narratives is *intellectual doubt or theological concerns*<sup>58</sup>. This factor is especially prevalent in those cases where the individual’s openness to experience is frustrated and resisted by a faith community that is oppositional in its stance towards the secular culture surrounding it.<sup>59</sup> This is a common factor for adolescents who leave home and are confronted with different conceptualizations of knowledge (e.g. science, education, common sense, religion, and the reliability of the Bible) that force them to ask questions about their own values and beliefs. The resulting tension is experienced as the individual tries to reconcile the two while wanting to hold onto both.

A theological concern also prevalent is the church’s teachings about *sexuality*. 3 issues are identified as factors in peoples’ rejection of religion. 1. Sexual desires of adolescents were typically men who receive a flat condemnation of acting on these desires in any overt way, and this led to 3 responses:

1. Sublimation, hypocrisy (secrecy), or disengagement from the church and faith.<sup>60</sup>
2. The use of guilt when linked with sex carries even into marriage. This leads to eventual resentment of the faith community.

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<sup>56</sup> Fazzino, “Leaving the Church Behind: Applying a Deconversion Perspective to Evangelical Exit Narratives,” 250.

<sup>57</sup> Fazzino, 255.

<sup>58</sup> R.E. Bradley Wright et al., “Explaining Deconversion from Christianity,” *Journal of Religion & Society* 13, no. 1522–5668 (2011): 6.

<sup>59</sup> Streib, Heinz, “Deconversion,” 282.

<sup>60</sup> Phil Zuckerman, *Faith No More : Why People Reject Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 159.

3. When homosexuality is unwelcome unacceptable and viewed as unholy, it prompts many to leave and embrace secular values and worldviews.<sup>61</sup>

*A second factor is moral concerns.* This is of two types. One is type has to do with God's shortcomings. The love of God becomes hard to reconcile with the presence of suffering and evil in the world. It also becomes hard to respect God as being good and loving when considering hell<sup>62</sup> as a future punishment or the biblical stories of destruction (E.g. Noah, etc.). Their question they are asking have changed from "Is there a God"? to "What I know about God, I don't like."<sup>63</sup>

A second type has to do with emotional suffering of the individual. From their perspective, God failed them personally. Their experience of pain and loss led them to question God's goodness or existence. God did not help them or answer their prayers for understanding, help, healing, or signs.<sup>64</sup>

*A third precipitating factor* mentioned is those *disappointing interactions with Christians*. "Many come to reject religion because of the actions of religious people who disappointed or offended them."<sup>65</sup> Often, this was focused on church pastors or leaders. Instances included the failure of pastors to deal relevantly with questions of needs or be aware and concerned with how the individual could live faithfully in their everyday life and work in the "real world". Many were offended when leaders gave trite answers to serious questions about the faith. Another disappointment derived from malfeasance of people in the faith community. Instances of hypocrisy, immoral behaviors, and harsh rule enforcement (physical or emotional abuse) were often mentioned and determining factors in the decision to leave.

*A fourth factor* has to do with *interactions with non-Christians*. Few narratives actually mention this as a factor, but research identifies this as a factor. Zuckerman notes,

"For many people, having a close connection or positive relationship with someone who is nonreligious can be a powerfully influential factor in their apostasy...it is often one's social intimates that can spur and direct one's irreligiosity and eventual apostasy."<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

<sup>62</sup> Zuckerman, *Faith No More : Why People Reject Religion*, 162.

<sup>63</sup> Julia. Duin, *Quitting Church : Why the Faithful Are Fleeing and What Do Do about It* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2009), 49.

<sup>64</sup> Wright et al., "Explaining Deconversion from Christianity," 9.

<sup>65</sup> Zuckerman, *Faith No More : Why People Reject Religion*, 161.

<sup>66</sup> Zuckerman, 158.

Of special note is in those cases when at least one parent was either lukewarm or outright a non-believer (usually is the father). It is more likely those children would eventually leave the faith and faith community as they grow older. In fact, 50% of those later-in-life deconverts were from families where one of the parents were not strongly committed to their faith.<sup>67</sup>

The interacting with other cultures and religions can also be a precipitating factor to deconversion. Knowing, watching and learning about other people who do things differently, believe different things, or hold different outlooks can stir up a process of critical self-reflection that can be corrosive to long-held religious convictions.

*A fifth factor is the loss of specific religious experiences.*<sup>68</sup> It is often overlooked in lists, but it is a common part of deconversion/disaffiliation narratives. These experiences once were very validating to the adherent's faith, but either the waning of the truth or power of that experience or the attraction of an alternative religious experience became a factor in the deconversion.

Not all deconverts are exiters. Some even stay and try to reform their faith community. For those who do exit, it often is a very emotional time. It is a change in their faith, but it also affects their social roles and relationships. This change in social role goes through stages.<sup>69</sup>

### Stages of Role Exiting<sup>70</sup>

First stage or role exiting is one of *first doubts*. This is where the previous situation or role is reinterpreted and redefined. This can be prompted by numerous circumstances such as: organizational change, burnout, disappointments in relationships, harsh events or experiences, or the reinterpretation of subsequent events.

The second stage is where the exiter is *seeking alternatives*.<sup>71</sup> During this phase the exiter does a cost/benefit analysis of the possible changes options present to them.

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<sup>67</sup> Zuckerman, 139.

<sup>68</sup> Streib, *Deconversion : Qualitative and Quantitative Results from Cross Cultural Research in Germany and the United States of America : Cross-Cultural Research in Germany and the United States of America*, 22.

<sup>69</sup> Extensive research has shown the more religious you are the more likely you will hold conservative right-wing political views. Affiliation with progressive political groups may result in an experience of a sense of alienation. (pg. 158)

<sup>70</sup> Helen Rose Fuchs. Ebaugh, "Becoming an Ex : The Process of Role Exit.," 2013, 41, <http://www.myilibrary.com?id'550476>.

<sup>71</sup> Ebaugh, 87.

The third stage is the *turning point* which is an event where the decision is accompanied with some kind of external expression or indication such as a public announcement or withdrawing (either financial or participative) support.<sup>72</sup> There are different types or sources of turning points. One is the prompting of a specific event such as a family death, where the person's ambivalence is crystalized and the choice to exit is put in bold relief.

For the majority of exiters, there follows a period of anxiety and being at loose ends that is often described as a vacuum. They feel scared and feel they do not belong anywhere.

The fourth stage is in *creating the ex-role*. What is very helpful and important for the exiter is finding adequate social support that assists in the creation of a new role after exiting the faith community where one has established their relational roles.

### Exiting and Socialization

Bruce Hunsberger reports, that those exiters (college students) who came from strong religious backgrounds reported having paid a heavy emotional and relational price for leaving the faith community.<sup>73</sup> They seldom mention being happier afterward, but felt like they had paid a price and thrown away their former guide to life. Yet, they justified their losses by emphasizing their newfound freedom, independence, and personal identity. The loss of the old self and all religious ties is profoundly felt, but the individuals reaffirm a commitment to seeking truth, morality, and community.<sup>74</sup>

The loss of the supportive religious community left behind is deeply felt, and the elemental passion for relations drive the individual to seek other supportive relationships. There is an "anticipatory socialization" where the person begins to acquire the values and orientations of the group(s) with which one is not currently engaged but which he or she is likely to enter.<sup>75</sup>

These new relationships function to provide the disaffiliated a relational and supportive structure needed to form the new role for their life. The idea of the homogeneous principle emphasized in Church Growth materials is also at work in those homophilic<sup>76</sup> relationships formed after disaffiliating from the faith community. Research on college students shows, that those who disaffiliate from their former

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<sup>72</sup> Ebaugh, 123.

<sup>73</sup> Watson and Katz, *Joining and Leaving Religion : Research Perspectives*, 242.

<sup>74</sup> Fazzino, "Leaving the Church Behind: Applying a Deconversion Perspective to Evangelical Exit Narratives," 252.

<sup>75</sup> Ebaugh, "Becoming an Ex : The Process of Role Exit.," 7.

<sup>76</sup> i.e. the tendency for dyadic relationships to be more likely to form and persist among individuals who share certain traits, attitudes, beliefs, or sociodemographic markers

beliefs and communities are very likely to connect with other disaffiliates like themselves.<sup>77</sup> This is especially true in social locations where the dominant culture is religious in nature (e.g. a denominational college). Those who bond together in this way generate a strong form of homophily.

### Growth and Deconversion

As mentioned, each structural conversion to the next stage of faith formation often requires a deconversion from the former stage. These moments of change might result in a disruption or disaffiliation with one's faith and faith community.

“Richter and Francis (1998:55) write that ‘one of the times at which church leaving will tend to occur is when people are in transition between stages. We may describe this experience as one of ‘losing’ a particular way or form of being in faith, before a new set of ways of thinking, valuing and making meaning take over and one relaxes into a new faith stage’.”<sup>78</sup>

### Outgrowing the community

The level of faith of the individual may progress beyond the faith level of the congregation.

Congregations have what is called a modal faith developmental level. 70% of congregations in Germany and 80% in the United States have a modal developmental level of stage 3.<sup>79</sup> The modal level is like a magnet, in that it pulls the adherent up to that level but restricts growth beyond it. This is especially true with youth in the community. Many leave their faith community because its developmental level lagged behind their own. Half of deconverts from these communities in both countries are at stage 4, i.e. they prefer an individuated-reflective religious style. When the congregation's modal level is at stage 3, those individuals who arrive at stage 4 lose respect for or dependency on that faith community. Disaffiliation, then, is a likely result.

## Focus upon a Particular Group: the Mosaics

Much of the literature on deconversion and disaffiliation focuses on late adolescent age group, or “Mosaics”, as they leave home and head out to either college or the work environment. In this group there is the concomitance of many of the factors of deconversion already discussed in this paper. Why

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<sup>77</sup> Brandon Sepulvado et al., “Social Affiliation from Religious Disaffiliation: Evidence of Selective Mixing Among Youth with No Religious Preference During the Transition to College SOCIAL AFFILIATION FROM RELIGIOUS DISAFFILIATION,” *JOURNAL FOR THE SCIENTIFIC STUDY OF RELIGION* *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 54, no. 4 (2015): 839.

<sup>78</sup> Watson and Katz, *Joining and Leaving Religion : Research Perspectives*, 250.

<sup>79</sup> Streib, Heinz, “Deconversion,” 285.

has this group left their faith communities in such large numbers? Are there any insights to be gained that may help the faith community minister to their needs?

The research of David Kinnaman, et.al, on young adults is quite insightful and touches on many of the factors aforementioned.<sup>80</sup> Many drop away from their faith communities in their twenties.<sup>81</sup>

<b>Perception of Church &amp; Faith</b>	<b>Both</b>	<b>Protestants</b>	<b>Catholics</b>
Dropped out of attending church regularly	59%	61%	56%
Been frustrated about their faith	50%	51%	49%
Less spiritual than at 15	29%	31%	29%
Less active in church than at 15	57%	58%	65%
Have seriously doubted one's faith	38%	41%	33%
Felt like rejecting their parents' faith	32%	35%	25%

### A different reality

“The story – the great struggle – of this emerging generation is learning to live faithfully in a new context, to be in the world but not of the world.”<sup>82</sup> They live in a new reality that can be summed up in 3 words:

- Access – the technological access through screens provide unavoidable sexual opportunities for pornography and real hookups.
- Alienation – Family life is of many different types, and the understanding of how a healthy family should function is difficult to understand. Marriage is delayed into the later 20's or early 30's, and many adult children fail to leave home or gain financial independence, etc.
- Authority – they are part of a culture that is skeptical of authority. This skepticism affects their view of scripture as reliable, their view of the importance of Christianity in society, and the lack of awareness or positive perception of major Christian influencers.<sup>83</sup>

In this new reality, they struggle with blurred lines between right and wrong, truth and error, and Christian influence and cultural accommodation. They have needs and questions, but they

<sup>80</sup> David Kinnaman and Aly. Hawkins, *You Lost Me : Why Young Christians Are Leaving Church ... and Rethinking Faith*, 2016.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid., 22.

<sup>82</sup> Kinnaman and Hawkins, *You Lost Me : Why Young Christians Are Leaving Church ... and Rethinking Faith*, 11.

<sup>83</sup> Kinnaman and Hawkins, 52.

feel the church is not a safe or hospitable place to voice their doubts. Instead they are disappointed with the “...slick or half-baked answers to their thorny, honest questions...”<sup>84</sup>

### The Problem of Nurturance

Their failure to navigate faithfully in this new world is due to the faith community’s failure to nurture them. Part of the nurturing problem is the failure of parents.

Hunsberger finds, “...the evidence indicates that one’s home religious emphasis is a critical factor influencing young people’s tendency to maintain or leave the home religion.”<sup>85</sup> The intergenerational transmission of beliefs and practices from parents to children, and the measured decline in the effective transmission may be due to a societal change in values.<sup>86</sup>

Some researchers suggest, that parents today more than their own parents are thought to be more liberal and value autonomy more than conformity. That trend is expected to increase as younger parents are less religious and therefore less inclined to socialize their children in a religious community.<sup>87</sup>

The second part of the problem of nurturance is about the church. John Wesley’s warning is appropriate here, for indeed evangelism must include nurturing of the newborn else it is like giving still births. In 2007, pastor Bill Hybels of Willow Creek Church confessed,

“We made a mistake...What we should have done when people crossed the line of faith and became Christians, we should have started telling people and teaching people that they have to take responsibility to become ‘self-feeders.’ We should have...taught them how to read their Bible between services, how to do the spiritual practices much more aggressively on their own.”<sup>88</sup>

This is quite a confession from a leading pastor whose philosophy of ministry has been a well-traced-over pattern for many evangelical pastors and churches.

Mosaics have demonstrated a poor knowledge of scripture, doctrine, and church history.<sup>89</sup> Kinnaman and Hawkins observe, “...the cultural pressures faced uniquely by Mosaics make holding on to Christian

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<sup>84</sup> Kinnaman and Hawkins, 11.

<sup>85</sup> Watson and Katz, *Joining and Leaving Religion : Research Perspectives*, 235.

<sup>86</sup> Paul Vermeer and Sanne Groen, “Understanding Religious Disaffiliation: Parental Values and Religious Transmission over Two Generations of Dutch Parents,” *Journal of Empirical Theology* 26, no. 1 (2013): 46.

<sup>87</sup> Vermeer and Groen, 47.

<sup>88</sup> Duin, *Quitting Church : Why the Faithful Are Fleeing and What Do Do about It*, 85.

<sup>89</sup> Kinnaman and Hawkins, *You Lost Me : Why Young Christians Are Leaving Church ... and Rethinking Faith*, 28.

faith a difficult undertaking – if their faith is shallow, how can it survive?” While these youths’ beliefs are Christian on the surface, they are not orthodox beyond that. This engenders a false confidence that is devastated when finding it was totally out of proportion with their actual knowledge.<sup>90</sup> Many Mosaics struggle less with their faith in Christ than with their experience of church.

### Why are they dropping out?

One of the complaints has to do with the overprotective culture of the church.<sup>91</sup> The repressive overbearing helicopter culture is not just a parental issue. It also can affect the church, so that it shapes discipling to avoid risk, adventure, and creative service to God.

Its oppositional rejection of outside experiences gives it a tendency to demonize everything outside the church which then conditions followers to fear the world, but the Mosaics discover the world to be otherwise. This results in a credibility gap with the church, and it fosters a sense of resentment for the restrictions on their experiences.

The Mosaics perceive the western church as having an exclusive insider/outsider mentality ready to bar the door to anyone not measuring up, and this makes no sense to the generation which has been called “the great agreement generation.” The no-compromise stance of the church in a plural cultural environment is unacceptable to a generation for whom negotiation and compromise are facts of life.<sup>92</sup> Instead for them, morality is peer-centered and based on fairness, loyalty (more tribal or peer than institutional), and acceptance.

Most teenagers are not concerned with logical consistency with faith claims. Their struggle is with doubts about their faith, church, being personally rejected, and about handling transitions with poise.<sup>93</sup> They have doubts about the goodness of God, the reliability of the Bible, and the truthfulness of other religions. They have doubts about a church that has not lived up to its potential. They have doubts about whether the faith community will be intolerant of their honest concerns or questions. They have doubts about their own faith as they deal with harsh transitional experiences of the death of a loved one or other life-crises.

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<sup>90</sup> Kinnaman and Hawkins, 115.

<sup>91</sup> Kinnaman and Hawkins, 95.

<sup>92</sup> Kinnaman and Hawkins, 172.

<sup>93</sup> Kinnaman and Hawkins, 187.

When interviewing L'Abri alumni who had eventually left the Roman Catholic Church, the responders articulated an additional reason. "One of the top reasons people give for leaving the church is loneliness: the feeling – especially in large congregations that no one knows or cares whether they are there"<sup>94</sup> Some churches make you feel lonelier going out than you felt going in. "Today's church is not the neighborly, participatory place it once was."<sup>95</sup>

## Where from here?

Youth are the canaries in the mines. They indicate the atmospheric conditions, already present, of the church's coming future. In a different way than usually meant, "Youth are the future of the church" ... and they are leaving in great numbers!

Looking at the Roman Catholic Church's response to losing their youth, Tom Beaudoin states, "There have recently been many calls for more effective evangelization of young people, for more intensive religious literacy, for an all-out effort by bishops and theologians to impress on young people the basics, the essence, of the faith...The intensity suggests a certain desperation and inability to speak an adequate cultural language or to creatively accommodate the coming shape of faith."<sup>96</sup> Since none of these efforts have been effective, he calls for a more experimental approach to theology and practice.

He asks, "What kind of Theology are they looking for?" He suggests the following ideas: one that...

- ...makes sense in and of their lives,
- ...helps them build bridges to and connect better with the "others" in their lives,
- ...opens them spiritually to experiences in the world,
- ...offers realistically hopeful ways of saving the very small corner of the world they feel like they can save,
- ...does not make them too dependent on a religious institution for further growth,
- ...speaks of things that are true across religions and across secularities,
- ...brings on board as many people as possible.<sup>97</sup>

Packard and Hope<sup>98</sup> suggests the following strategies to encourage reengagement:

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<sup>94</sup> Duin, *Quitting Church : Why the Faithful Are Fleeing and What Do Do about It*, 48.

<sup>95</sup> Duin, 51.

<sup>96</sup> Tom Beaudoin, "Deconversion and Disaffiliation in Contemporary U.S. Roman Catholicism," *Horizons* 40, no. 2 (December 2013): 257, <https://doi.org/10.1017/hor.2013.75>.

<sup>97</sup> Beaudoin, 259.

1. Invite Participation
2. Undermine Bureaucracy
  - a. Large or older organizations give more and more resources to maintaining the organization rather than empowering the people.
  - b. Exploding Deadlines
    - i. Put end dates on programs or functions rather than allowing them to go on in perpetuity. Resist the temptation to replicate or extend the project, regardless of how well it went.
    - ii. This keeps the mission of the church front and center in the congregation's consciousness.
3. Be Truly Relational (120)
  - a. "...rather than doing things *for* the poor, we need to do things *with* the poor, because only the poor truly understand their own needs and capabilities."
  - b. The power of relationship is much greater than the power of service.
  - c. Asset-based Community Development
    - i. This approach focuses on identifying and leveraging the strengths in the community rather than focusing on its deficits and problems.
4. Impact Your Community – and Be Impacted

Lewis Rambo suggests ways for the faith community to increase its membership. Some of the suggestions correlate to those agendas suggested by other researchers concerned with reaching the deconverted. He recommends the religious organizations should:

- ...try to influence people's personalities through primary and secondary socialization and religious education.
- ...try to strengthen the development of friendship among their members and the use of members' social networks to bring in as many visitors as possible.
- ...try to contain internal dissent and arguments with a minimum of force and power, always avoiding the risks of parsimony and hypocrisy.
- ...try to find the best possible match between the religious organization and the mentalities and personalities of its members.
- ...try to recruit as many missionary agents as possible and try to accomplish as many contingency meetings with potential converts as is humanly possible; a sophisticated use of mass media is important here.
- ...try to use their own typical music, rituals, and sacraments as powerful experiences that induce and consolidate the conversion process.<sup>99</sup>

Kinnaman concludes by giving 3 insights gained through the research.

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<sup>98</sup> Josh. Packard and Ashleigh Hope, *Church Refugees : Sociologists Reveal Why People Are Done with the Church but Not Their Faith*, 2015, 114.

<sup>99</sup> Gooren, *Religious Conversion and Disaffiliation : Tracing Patterns of Change in Faith Practices*. 134.

## 1. Rethinking Relationships

Current approaches to reach certain generations may be a bit misguided. Kinnaman speaks to a wider range of people, saying,

“The Christian community is one of the few places on earth where those who represent the full scope of human life, literally from the cradle to the grave, come together with a singular motive and mission. The church is (or should be) a place of racial, gender, socioeconomic, and cultural reconciliation...as well as a community where various age demographics genuinely love each other and work together with unity and respect.”<sup>100</sup>

The old assumption was the church existed to prepare the next generation to fulfill God’s purpose. The new thinking is that the church is a partnership of generations fulfilling God’s purposes in their time. What Wesley considered as essential for growth, “Christian conversation”, needs to function across generational lines as the mature saints both pour into and receive from those younger believers a sharing of faith, life, and wisdom.

## 2. Theology of Vocation

A rediscovery of and emphasis on a theology of vocation is greatly needed. A clear mental picture of the role one plays in the world as being a follower of Christ needs to be communicated to believers. It is this missional purpose that makes possible to be part of something of high importance and noble purpose.<sup>101</sup>

This is not just about the missional role of the individual, but it is also the shared role of the faith community living out its faith in the world.<sup>102</sup> This addresses the question of purpose meaning and value in living, and helps the believer make sense with their living. It also bridges the relational barriers between believers and between believers and non-believers.

## 3. Reprioritizing Wisdom

Kinnaman describes wisdom as “...the spiritual, mental, and emotional ability to relate rightly to God, to others, and to our culture.”<sup>103</sup> Living faithfully in the world without being of it is a difficult challenge for the young believer. How can one live out spiritual wholeness and faithfulness in the world? We can read the text of Micah 6:8,

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<sup>100</sup> Kinnaman and Hawkins, *You Lost Me : Why Young Christians Are Leaving Church ... and Rethinking Faith*, 203.

<sup>101</sup> Ron Dalton, *Discovering Christian Ministry : Theology and Practice*, 2015, 127.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid, p. 206

<sup>103</sup> Kinnaman and Hawkins, *You Lost Me : Why Young Christians Are Leaving Church ... and Rethinking Faith*, 210.

“He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God.” (RSV)

How can this be grasped and actualized by the individual? It requires more than an individual's abilities and effort can produce. It requires the nurturing presence of a community of faith. It takes a community of faith to raise a saint! The community must be intentional in its missional efforts to nurture new believers to share life and mission as an ongoing incarnational community as it continues what Jesus began to do and to teach. It requires mentoring structures of Christian conversation (such as Wesley's use of small groups) as a nurturing influence so that young believers actualize the Christian faith...living and growing together to the fullness of the stature of Christ.

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