

# **The Variety of Deconversion Experiences: Contours of a Concept in Respect to Empirical Research<sup>1</sup>**

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## **Abstract**

This article presents an outline of historical and situational arguments which suggest a focus on deconversion, an outline of conversion research and its consequences for deconversion, and a discussion of extant empirical research on deconversion. The discussion then focuses on the conceptualization of deconversion and compiles the features from which a comprehensive concept of deconversion may emerge. The core features of the deconversion concept which is suggested in this article are complemented by dimensions of diversity which also includes a developmental perspective (from the religious styles perspective). This has implications for future research.

## **Zusammenfassung**

In diesem Artikel werden historische und aktuelle Argumente präsentiert, die der Forschung empfehlen, besondere Aufmerksamkeit auf Dekonversion zu legen. Aus dem anschließend kurz skizzierten Stand der Konversionsforschung werden Konsequenzen für die Erforschung der Dekonversion abgeleitet und deren gegenwärtig vorliegende Befunde diskutiert. Die Diskussion wendet sich dann dem Begriff 'Dekonversion' zu und stellt charakteristische Eigenschaften zusammen, die zur Dekonversion gehören. Die zentralen Eigenschaften des hier vorgeschlagenen Dekonversionsbegriffs werden ergänzt durch Dimensionen der Verschiedenheit, die eine Entwicklungsperspektive (das Modell der Religiösen Stile) einbeziehen. Dies ist für künftige Forschung von Bedeutung.

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<sup>1</sup> An earlier version of this article has been presented to the Conference of the Group of European Psychologists of Religion / The International Association for the Psychology of Religion in August 2003 in Glasgow, Scotland.

# 1 Developments in Research on Conversion and Deconversion

Conversion has been a prominent focus of theorizing and research in the psychology of religion from its early days on. Deconversion has not. Searching for 'deconversion' in electronic data bases results in a relatively small number of books, articles or dissertations. Various names which may be regarded as referring to the same core phenomenon, may also point to its complexity: apostasy, defection, disaffiliation, falling from the faith; exit etc.. The name 'deconversion' is rather new, and, because of its potential to structure the discussion in an evolving research field, we work towards a clarification.

We will outline in this text perspectives for a conceptualization of deconversion – in its common features and in its diversity. Conceptual clarification structures empirical research and has to stand the test of empirical research; therefore we strive to show the merit of the concept drawing on our own research on conversion and deconversion. Thereby, we also refer to changes in the religious landscape which need to be taken into account as contexts of the emerging concept of deconversion today. In a century of research in psychology of religion behind us, a significant shift in the religious landscape in favor of deconversion can be observed.

## 1.1 Changes in the Religious Landscape: Implications for Conversion and Deconversion Today

Research in religion brings to our attention some major changes in the religious landscape which have occurred in the last decades. In their study on church leavers in Great Britain which is based on interviews as well as on the quantitative evaluation of a major survey,<sup>2</sup> Philip Richter and Leslie Francis conclude that "people born after 1945 tend to be a 'generation of seekers', with a distinctive set of values; they have an intrinsic tendency to be suspicious of all institutions, including the Church; they are drawn to more mystical beliefs; they prioritize experience above belief; and they tend to 'shop around' widely to satisfy their needs for personal authenticity and spiritual growth" (Richter & Francis, 1998: 52). They turn toward "reflexive spirituality" which means the "capacity to understand the own view as just that – a view." Similarly, Wade Clark Roof (1993; 1999) has identified new attitudes toward religion in the baby boom generation. Roof documents for the population of the U.S.A. cohort shifts in religious styles in the direction of greater institutional abandonment and increased attention to the "experiential" and "spiritual" dimension of religion. He identifies "a generation of seekers" who function well in the "spiritual supermarket". Roof (1999: 178) even draws a new map of religious orientation based on the polarity between spirituality and religion. With an even smaller cohort focus, Tom Beaudoin (1998), in his ethnographic type investigation of Generation X religion, has identified an "*irreverent spiritual quest of Generation X*," as the subtitle of his book says, and which he interprets as a gift.

These are three spotlights on recent changes in the religious landscape. All of them use metaphors such as supermarket, seeker and quest, and this may be taken as indication of the rise of new ways of religious affiliation: Can we still speak of *conversion*? If we find conversion a plausible term, then it must have changed and denote – or at least include – a decision of an actively seeking subject and a possible repetition of conversions. Furthermore, the "suspicion" against religious institutions, of an "irreverence" and of institutional abandonment involves attitudes and acts of *deconversion*, or at least points to deconversion; this could explain an increase of deconversion (as well as conversions) in our times and suggest, for our research on contemporary religion, that we explicitly focus on deconversion, rather than on conversion. Finally, all of our studies talk about the increasing attractiveness of *spirituality* – which many subjects juxtapose against religion. We have evidence from empirical results that between 15% and 20% in the U.S.A. identify themselves as "spiritual, but not religious" (Marler & Hadaway, 2002). Data from our own research (Streib, 2003c) – first results for Germany – present about 20% of young adults who identify themselves as being "more spiritual than religious" and an even higher percentage of self-identified "more spiritual" young adults in the U.S.A. (31.3%). What

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<sup>2</sup> See a more detailed portrait of Richter & Francis' research below on page 4.

does this spiritual quest tell us about conversion and deconversion? At least for part of the segment of subjects who oppose their search for spirituality against affiliation with a specific religion, these data indicate that *deconversion* – involving intellectual doubt, emotional uneasiness or distress, moral criticism and culminating in disaffiliation from a religious organization – is in the foreground for them. Interviewees of this sort will rather tell the story of their religious change as a story of *deconversion* than as a story of conversion.

In qualitative research, we find affirmation that also the subjective theories about conversion and deconversion have changed. New master stories, new patterns of story lines have emerged. A good example for the new type of conversion/deconversion master story is that of Thomas, one of our interviewees in a previous project, who concludes after 20 years of touring through various religious and quasi-religious groups:

"... I did not want to be a prisoner of Christ so to speak ... that uh, I have decided against that [...] I am not a disciple of Jesus ... in that sense [...]"

... but I would say that I have said there I have experienced liberation, but I have said also ... uh can say also, in this se- where I really say a sect, Scientology ... there this has helped me and ... at Bhagwan that ... has helped me, because in each... a good friend she says I have taken a little bit from everywhere, from Anthroposophers this, from Bhagwan that ..."

For Thomas, the rejection of "discipleship" and "imprisonment" has repeatedly been the motivation for deconversions. The search for "liberation" has been the strongest motivation to buy a new product in the spiritual supermarket.

Such changes in the religious landscape justify our specific focus on deconversion; they call for a revision and advancement of the conceptualization of conversion and deconversion to which we now turn.

## 1.2 Turning Points in Research on Conversion: Implications for Conceptualization of Deconversion

### 1.2.1 *The Crisis Model and Its Relativization*

Theory and research on deconversion have emerged from the context of research on conversion. In his review of a century of research on conversion, David Wulff (2002) notes a paradigm change: In the beginning of the psychology of religion, the prototype of conversion was the conversion of Paul on the road to Damascus – a sudden change of beliefs, brought about by divine intervention, leading to a new self and new behavior, a one-time and supposedly permanent event. With some variation, we find this model of conversion in the works of the early psychologists of religion, Stanley Hall (1904), Henry Leuba (1896), Edwin Starbuck (1899) or William James (1902); the type of sudden conversion was at least the prominent model besides a gradual growing type of conversion. The prominence of the crisis paradigm of sudden conversion has been exposed by James Pratt (1920) as submission to evangelical theology. In Pratt's line of thought, Elmer Clark (1929) engaged in empirical investigation and documented the marginal frequency of crisis conversions.

This early moderation of the crisis model and the reservation against a theological superimposition of psychological concepts may be a reminder for the re-conceptualization of conversion, but also for a conceptualization of deconversion: It may be reason to revise interpretations of deconversion as "falling from the faith" or as movement between "belief and unbelief". It may also be a reminder to caution against the exclusivity of crisis deconversion models.<sup>3</sup>

### 1.2.2 *The Passive and the Active Convert – A Model for Conceptualizing Deconversion?*

In the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, a new conversion model emerged. Conversion now is characterized by a meaning making, active subject. It is a gradual and rational process of acquiring and

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<sup>3</sup> A good example of a crisis model may be the one which Janet Jacobs (1989: 128f.) has constructed on the basis of her deconverts from new religions.

testing new behaviors which are followed by the acceptance of beliefs, regard for the social context of conversion, and the possibility of a succession of affiliations or “conversion careers” (Richardson, 1978). Especially in regard to new religious movements, James Richardson (1985) has elaborated the distinction between the active and passive convert and has argued, in agreement with many scholars in the scientific study of new religions, in favor of an interpretation of NRM conversions as active. John Lofland and Norman Skonovd's (1981) compilations of conversion motifs include and attend to the new types of non-crisis induced conversion and display a new effort to come to terms with and systematize the variety of forms of religious changes.

Also these paradigmatic changes in theorizing about conversion have implications for understanding deconversion: We need to reckon with the possibility that the crisis model of a sudden deconversion has declined and that we rather encounter forms of active and gradual deconversions. Recent empirical results – e.g. the studies of Richter & Francis (1998), Altemeyer & Hunsberger (1997), or Roof (1993; 1999) – appear to support this assumption. 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).

### **1.2.3 Faith Development and Conversion – Implications for Deconversion**

Finally, we need to call attention to a perspective which is almost absent in the discussion of conversion so far: the question of whether and to what extent conversion involves developmental transition. The marginalization of the developmental perspective may be attributed in part to the fact that the theories of religious development are relatively young, but now this is no excuse any more. On the contrary, it is time for a correlation.

The question of faith development and conversion has been taken up in the dissertation research of Romney Moseley (1978). Moseley distinguishes, from conversion in the proper sense which, as he supposes, includes a structural-developmental change, the type of conversion which he terms “lateral conversion”, a change of content without structural change. When neither content, nor structure change, but religious experience and commitment are renewed, the person has an “intensification experience”. Fowler (1981) takes up and includes Moseley's perspective in his chapter on conversion in *Stages of Faith*. While Fowler welcomes the idea of distinguishing and relating the two directions of change: *content* change and *structural* change, he wants to reserve the term conversion to *content* changes. This enables him to keep the two directions of change separate and to construct various possibilities in which the two relate to each other: there can be “conversional change without faith stage change”; faith stage change can correlate with content change and go hand in hand with each other; or the two can precipitate each other; but conversional change, according to Fowler, can also block or help avoid the pain of faith stage changes (Fowler, 1981:285f.).

Fowler notes that these various options could be demonstrated finally only in empirical research; but the theoretical model with the two directions of change and the possibilities of their relation are designed in the framework of faith development *theory*. We suppose that what Moseley and Fowler have worked out in regard to conversion could be an important analytical perspective on deconversion, as well, and should be included in the design of empirical research on deconversion – which is rather new, as the following empirical results on deconversion demonstrate.

## **1.3 Empirical Research on Deconversion**

The empirical study of deconversion has emerged as part of the scientific study of new religious movements. The 1980s have been a relatively productive decade, as the studies of Skonovd (1981), Levine (1984), Jacobs (1987; 1989), and Wright (1987) demonstrate. These studies have the merit of bringing to light some of the dynamics of deconversion from new religions which have been viewed in public discussion, in the courts and politics of the time with special concern. We need however, in respect to present-day desiderata for research in deconversion, to point to some shortcomings: Deconversion is studied as a turning point phenomenon involving crisis and conflict; efforts to conceptualize deconversion or linking this concept to the discussion on conversion are rather scarce. We do not see an integrative effort to situate deconversion in theories of faith or religious develop-

ment. Deconversion is predominantly linked to adolescence and young adulthood, while data on the second half of life are restricted to rare cases. Some of these deficits are overcome in more recent research.

Bob Altemeyer & Bruce Hunsberger (1997) have studied religious socialization of more than 4,000 college students and have identified, in this large sample, 24 “amazing believers”, subjects who come from non- or anti-religious backgrounds and find faith, and 46 “amazing apostates” who come from religious backgrounds and “convert”, in the terms of Altemeyer & Hunsberger, to atheism or agnosticism. According to Hunsberger (2000), the process of becoming an amazing apostate is “strongly intellectual and rational, and seems to result from a slow, careful search for meaning and purpose”, resulting in “a dramatic transformation of self in 'becoming one's own person'” (245f). The picture that Hunsberger draws is one of hard-won freedom, independence and personal identity and self-confidence – and of tolerance, since amazing apostates, in sharp contrast to the amazing believers, refrain from proselytizing (Hunsberger, 2000, p. 242-243). The “amazing apostates” have deconverted in a rather gradual process (Altemeyer & Hunsberger 1997: 232). The process of deconversion can be characterized here as individuating-reflective gain over a period of socialization in and before the college years.

Philip Richter and Leslie Francis (1998) have explored the reasons for leaving mainline churches in Great Britain. They started by interviewing 27 church leavers who were mainly recruited by contacting clergy, and followed with a questionnaire survey with more than 400 church leavers located through an extensive telephone screening. They found that many church leavers claim to believe in and experience God without belonging to a church, “their spiritual quest persists” (p. 38). Richter and Francis' discussion of influences leading to the decision to leave church is structured partially along familiar lines: social change, change of values, critical life events, childhood socialization. But they also attempt to account for changes in faith development. The authors also address the question of fit between stage of faith of church goers and the 'modal level' of their churches and, consequently, of their possible common growth and mutual advancement.

Alan Jamieson's (1998; 2002) is the first study to investigate deconversion predominantly in light of faith development. His study includes interviews with 98 church leavers (and 54 interviews with church leaders) of evangelical Pentecostal and charismatic churches in New Zealand. Jamieson has outlined a typology of leavers from Episcopalian pentecostal churches which he aligns to Fowler's model of faith development. These people, while leaving the same type of religious group which Jamieson characterizes as Stage 3 (Fowler's Synthetic-Conventional Faith), move in different directions, which also differ in terms of stages of faith. This illustrates the need to look at the interactions of social context and individual motives and biographical trajectories involved in leaving religious groups. What makes people leave what kind of religious background; where do they turn to; and what are they looking for? These questions also concern mainline traditions.

The Enquete Commission of the 13<sup>th</sup> German Parliament on “So-called sects and psychogroups” has invited the first author of this article to contribute biographical research on members and ex-members of Christian-fundamentalist groups.<sup>4</sup> Of the 22 interviews conducted, 12 were selected for analysis according to the rule of maximal contrast. In our analysis, we did not find (what some in the Enquete Commission had expected us to find) a typical ‘sect biography’, neither of converts, nor of deconverts; what we found is a variety of biographical trajectories. Important in regard to our theme of deconversion is our observation that the attraction toward fundamentalist affiliation is due to ‘themata’ which derive from earlier experiences and belong to a biographically older layer of the person. Not only the affinity towards the group, and thus the stability of membership, appears to be the effect of a ‘fit’ or resonance between the themata of the convert and the mental, ritual and moral setting of the fundamentalist group, but also *deconversion* finds an explanation: If such a ‘fit’ does not emerge or declines for whatever reason, disaffiliation is the most likely consequence. Contrastive comparison of the cases allowed us to locate them in a typology. Three types of fundamentalist biographies or ‘ca-

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<sup>4</sup> Results have been published in the Final Report of the Enquete Commission (Streib, 1998b) and as a separate research report (Streib, 1998a; 2000); a brief summary is included in an article (Streib, 1999), and a summary report is published in the internet (Streib, 2002).

reers' could be identified: (a) a 'type governed by tradition' who, innocent of alternatives, has been born into or grown into a fundamentalist orientation; (b) the 'mono-convert,' who converts as it were once in life-time into a religious orientation which he or she did not have before, and (c) the 'accumulative heretic' whose biography is a tour through different religious orientations and who represents a new type of religious socialization. Finally, a developmental perspective has been applied and we found developmental transformation and progress during membership and precipitating disaffiliation especially in the accumulative heretics, while tradition-guided deconverts and mono-convert type deconverts engage in developmental transformation only after their disaffiliation. We hope to consolidate or advance this observation and this typology in ongoing and future research.

We conclude that empirical research on deconversion has made some progress recently: it has stepped out from the crisis model of deconversion; it has opened the field of research to include a broader spectrum of religious orientations and organizations; and it has made attempts to include a developmental perspective in the analysis. However major deficits remain: research is still focussing on particular groups; cross-cultural comparison is out of sight; the concepts used and the methodological designs across the studies are far from consistent and make comparison of the results difficult; and the application of instruments to measure developmental change do not meet the standard of Fowler's research design, nor its recent advancements (see e.g. Streib, 2003a). A first step to working toward more consistency of empirical work and theoretical discussion in future research is the clarification of the concept of deconversion.

## 2 Contours of a Conceptualization of Deconversion: Interindividual Commonalities and Interindividual Differences

In our effort to clarify the concept of deconversion, we cannot refer to an extensive body of literature. Furthermore, most reflections on 'deconversion' are rather delineations of the steps or stages involved in the disaffiliation process (see e.g. Jacobs, 1989; or Richter et al., 1998: 17; who refer to Skonovd, 1981). For theoretical clarity and also in respect to empirical research, it is necessary systematize the dimensions or elements of deconversion and to account thereby for interindividual commonalities, as well as for interindividual differences.

### 2.1 Common Features – Toward a Definition

As our starting point for our reflection on the interindividual commonalities of deconversion, we refer to a work which is neither part of psychological or sociological empirical research, nor focussing on contemporary religion, but on an analysis of published autobiographical accounts of deconversions of leading theologians, philosophers, and other writers: John Barbour's (1994) *Versions of Deconversion*. Using the term 'deconversion' in a broad meaning of 'loss or deprivation of religious faith,' he has identified criteria of deconversion which, as he attempts to demonstrate, occur in most deconversions. Barbour (1994: 2) distinguishes four characteristics: (1) Intellectual Doubt or Denial in regard to the truth of a system of beliefs, (2) Moral Criticism: Rejection of the entire way of life of a religious group, (3) Emotional suffering: Grief, guilt, loneliness, despair, and (4) Disaffiliation from the community.

Barbour (1994) interprets the interest in deconversion stories as growing out of the increasing individualism and religious pluralism, that developed especially during the 20<sup>th</sup> century, when he says:

"Whereas a story of conversion may not be fully convincing or moving to those who do not hold the author's final beliefs, a story of deconversion can potentially appeal to readers united only by belief in the right and duty of each individual to chose his or her beliefs in a responsible manner." (Barbour, 1994: 51)

It is important to pay attention to the relation between deconversion and individualization, as it is expressed in this quotation. It qualifies the first two elements in Barbour's list, intellectual doubt and moral criticism, as consequences of modern developments and thus provides an explanation for an increased readiness for deconversion in our times. Perhaps deconverts are only more sensitive to, and ready to observe, the "heretical imperative", to refer to Peter Berger's (1979) perspective. Individualization, subjective agency and heresy belong to the necessary elements of deconversion.

Barbour has found his four most significant elements which are involved in deconversion to be sufficient. On closer scrutiny, we may however find other elements which Barbour did not account for in his analysis. When we relate Barbour's list to Glock's five dimensions of religion, we find some correspondence, but also open ends. Barbour's intellectual doubt and denial corresponds to Glock's ideological dimension (and may have some relation with the intellectual dimension); moral criticism can be associated with the ritualistic dimension; emotional suffering has to do with the consequential dimension. What we do not find in Barbour's list, is an equivalent to Glock's experiential dimension.

It may however be important for understanding the process of deconversion to attend to the loss of specific religious experiences which deconverts talk about in their interviews. The loss of religious experiences, or the attraction to a new kind of religious experience, may be an element of deconversion which occur as early in the deconversion process and are as important for this process as intellectual doubt and denial or moral criticism. Thus we may add this to our list of elements in our conceptualization of deconversion.

We conclude the interindividual commonalities of deconversion with an extended list of definition elements. Deconversion consists in:

1. Loss of specific religious experiences (Experiential Dimension); this means the loss of finding meaning and purpose in life; the loss of the experience of God; of trust and of fear;
2. Intellectual doubt, denial or disagreement with specific beliefs (Ideological Dimension); heresy (sensu Berger) is an element of deconversion;
3. Moral criticism (Ritualistic Dimension) which means a rejection of specific prescriptions and/or the application of a new level of moral judgement;
4. Emotional suffering (Consequential Dimension); this can consist in a loss of embeddedness / social support / sense of stability and safety;
5. Disaffiliation from the community which can consist of a retreat from participation in meetings or from observance of religious practices; finally, the termination of membership which eventually follows.

These interindividual commonalities of deconversion can be used to structure empirical research, and as criteria of what characterizes biographical accounts as deconversion stories.

## **2.2 Dimensions of Diversity – Toward a Typology of Deconversion**

Despite common core elements, deconversion trajectories are marked by interindividual differences. There is a variety of possibilities which research should attempt to explain and locate in a typological field. Besides demographic variables such as age, sex, ethnic origin or economic status, it may be also, and perhaps more, significant to account for differences which are closely related to religiosity and its development. In the following, we therefore present a series of possible typological differentiations of deconversion. Only in the process of interpretation and typology construction, will researchers be able to decide which typological polarity explains most of the variety.

### **2.2.1 *The Gravity of Specific Core Elements as Typological Criteria***

We need to reconsider the list of elements belonging to our concept of deconversion, since the gravity of certain elements in a specific deconversion process may lead to a typological differentiation. It makes a difference whether intellectual doubt and denial of beliefs stands in the foreground in a deconversion, or whether a deconvert's decision to leave the religious group is mainly due to moral criticism. Another type of deconversion would result from the loss of religious experience.

### **2.2.2 *The Type of Religious Group or Organization***

Bromley (1998) identifies the roles of people who have left a religious organization and the narratives they tell about their exit as a function of the type and social legitimation of the religious organization. He distinguishes between allegiant, contestant and subversive religious organization. Bromley claims that “allegiant organizations”, e.g. the mainline churches, are left by “defectors” or

“deserters”, “contestant organizations”, e.g. pentecostal and charismatic churches, by “whistleblowers”, and “subversive organizations”, such as new religious movements, by “apostates.”

Bromley, in his strict sociological view, focuses on *institutional* affiliation and disaffiliation, and thus his view has some limitations in regard to our focus on deconversion. His perspective needs to be supplemented by psychological and biographical accounts. But Bromley’s typology is helpful in calling attention to the factor of organizational characteristics and social or societal expectations in the framing of deconversion stories and thus as a cause of potential typological difference. The more research steps out of the field of 'subversive' organizations, and also includes deconverts from better established ("contestant") and well-established ("allegiant") mainline religious organizations, the more we can expect different types of deconverts, a broader spectrum of deconversion trajectories.

### **2.2.3 Position in the Religious Group**

Position in the religious group may be another factor which shapes the role of deconverts. Eileen Barker (1998) calls attention to difference of position in the religious organization. In regard to new religious movements, she distinguishes two types of members who stand at the margins of the groups – and are allowed to do so – from normal members and leaders. These two types of members are peripheral and marginal members. While peripherals – typically well-known public persons or rich people – have resisted full commitment to the groups life style and ritual practice, marginals are characterized by Barker as converts who, after some time of active membership and commitment, find themselves in disagreement with part of the organization's beliefs and practices, while some core beliefs and practices are still central for them. Marginals, Barker (1998: 80f.) says, have come to the point where they have considered leaving the organization or movement altogether; but the pull from the movement and the push from public (e.g. anti-cultist) expectations of what an apostate should be and say makes them decide to stay within a niche of the movement – as marginal members.

From this perspective, we could construct a typology of deconversions which is based upon the position which the deconvert has obtained in the former group. We may distinguish: (1) Ex-members (normal members), (2) Ex-leaders, (3) Ex-peripherals, and (4) Ex-marginals.

Most interesting is Barker's (1998) description of 'marginal members' in NRMs when viewed as contribution to a better understanding of deconversion. We can interpret becoming a marginal member as partial deconversion or as potential preparation for later deconversion. The marginals in a religious organization have probably the highest chance to show up in our deconversion samples.

### **2.2.4 Religious Socialization and Biography**

In the previous research on Christian-fundamentalist members and deconverts already mentioned, we constructed a typology of biographical trajectories which is based upon the subject's religious socialization. We differentiated between the following types: (A) Type governed by tradition, (B) Mono-Convert, and (C) Accumulative Heretic.

The deconversion trajectories may have some correspondence with these three types, in other words: we assume that the type of deconversion is not independent of the type of conversion experience: crisis deconversions, including emotional suffering, may occur rather in “Type A deconverts”, who struggle with traditional ideologies despite having left their religious group. “Type C deconverts” on the other hand may have (repeated) rather unspectacular deconversions. We also suggest this typology for test and application in further research.

### **2.2.5 What do deconverts convert to?**

Our focus on deconversion suggests exploring the starting point of processes of religious change. This does not exclude, but rather implies asking more specifically what deconverts convert to. In terms of the core elements of deconversion, the “crisis deconversion”, especially if precipitated by loss of specific religious experience and accompanied by moral criticism, can be associated with a search for a better place to live one’s faith and thus pre-structure a conversion to a new affiliation; but it may also inspire a churchless faith. A less dramatic loss of religious experience, may, precipitated perhaps by intellectual doubt, lead a person to look for a better product in the “religious marketplace”,

which promises to satisfy new demands and ambitions. It may also lead the deconverts to discard any affiliation to organized religion, thus demonstrating an example of “falling from faith” – notwithstanding perhaps “faithful” affiliation with an exit-group. To describe and understand these processes and the options which they imply, it is necessary to include a developmental dimension:

### **2.2.6 Deconversion in Terms of Religious Styles: Starting-Points and Directions**

We expect developmental transition to occur in a majority of cases of deconversion: Developmental transition is for example involved in deconversion, when deconversion presupposes the acquisition of individual reflection, agency and decision making and this is true for subjects who did not apply individuating and reflective thinking to religion before. In Moseley's (1978) and Fowler's (1981) terms, this would be called 'structural deconversion.' On the other hand however, there may be cases of deconversion involving intellectual doubt and denial or moral criticism, while the deconvert does not change the style of negotiation, since he or she is already performing on the individuating-reflective niveau, or the deconversion is negotiated on the conventional or another niveau. In Moseley's (1978) and Fowler's (1981) terms, this would be called 'lateral deconversion'.

The religious styles perspective, a revision of Fowler's (1981; 1996) faith development theory and research which has been proposed by Streib (2001; 2003a; 2003b), goes further into detail and opens new perspectives, since it conceptualizes religious development in a more complex, domain specific factor field, in which even regression to, or revival of, earlier styles are an option. Further, the religious styles perspective adopts insights from life-span developmental psychology, as Streib (2003d) has argued, which means that religious development is understood also as response of a subject to developmental tasks and challenges in his or her biographical situation – which may also consist in life 'themata', challenges from past experiences that re-emerge and call for attention.

The religious styles thus may serve as a framework for distinguishing various kinds of deconversions. This may be true for the starting point from which the deconvert sets out in the deconversion process; it may be true also for the direction at which the process of deconversion is aiming. It certainly makes a difference whether a person sets out to reflect on and negotiates deconversion in an instrumental-reciprocal style, or in a mutual religious style, or in an individuating-systemic style. The very way in which the ideological conflicts, the doubt and denial of belief systems, the moral contradictions, or the loss of religious experience is phrased and to which authority and reference point the potential deconvert appeals, may be well interpreted in terms of religious styles.

- ◆ Instrumental-reciprocal style deconversion for example may start-out by taking a different quote from the Bible literally and authoritative, referring to a new authority figure, and being under heavy pressure to execute deconversion because of continuing fear of a taskmaster deity who acts according to the do-ut-des principle.
- ◆ Mutual deconversion will rather refer to the religious community – a new religious community, the wider religious tradition, the deconvert's own present community, or, most interesting, to a subgroup, small group or even the family – who may be united by a unique religious experience or by doctrinal and moral conventions which however are different from what the potential deconvert has experienced so far.
- ◆ Individuating-systemic deconverts will rather negotiate the superiority of truth claims and rightness claims and may – or may not – look for the religious affiliation which fits their religious profile that has emerged from individuating-reflective negotiation.

Furthermore, deconversion trajectories are different in respect to the religious style of the direction of the deconvert's development. To name some of the options, ...

- ◆ A deconversion may develop toward the Dialogical Style of correlating various religious truth and rightness claims in the style which Fowler (1981) has identified as Conjunctive Faith. This type of deconvert reconstructs his or her former religious orientation as narrow and particularistic, despite – or because of – the explicit plausibility of its system of beliefs. Akin to this type of deconvert is the denial of being religious and the search for an inclusive embracing spirituality.

- ◆ Another typical version of a deconversion trajectory aims toward an individuative-systemic style in which the deconvert appropriates another religious orientation or an explicitly atheistic world view. Here the individuative-reflective use of arguments is a new emerging competence by which the old religious orientation now can be disproved and the new one justified.
- ◆ Also the mutual style can be a new competence toward which a deconversion trajectory is developing: especially in the cases of deconversion from fundamentalist orientations, we may discern the reference to conventional norms and belief systems as new acquisition. Here, we may observe a consolidation of styles, which e.g. could mean that a style which the deconvert has already performed in other domains is now applied also to the religious domain.
- ◆ Finally, the religious styles perspective allows us to account for the regression and revival of earlier styles. In this framework, we may even understand cases of disaffiliation from more advanced religious orientation to less advanced and rigid orientations *as deconversion*.

Part of the variety of deconversion trajectories may thus be interpreted with the help of the various religious styles as starting point niveau and as direction of the deconversion process.

### 3 Conclusion

To conclude, after an outline of historical and situational arguments which suggest to focus on deconversion and after a presentation of existing empirical research on deconversion, we have discussed and compiled the features from which a more comprehensive conceptualization and definition of deconversion has emerged. The core feature of the deconversion concept which we suggest is complemented by dimensions of diversity. This has implications for future research.

The dimensions of diversity describe theoretically informed options from which the different deconversion narratives can be arranged in a typology. Typological arrangement has one and only one aspiration: to fit the data of the sample, to account for the most significant contrasts between the deconversion narratives. So it is up to the process of interpretation and contrastive comparison, whether age, sex, economic status, and other demographic variables, or type of organization, position in the organization, previous religious socialization, personality traits or religious styles are the starkest contrasting lines and suggest themselves as key polarities for the final typology. This openness for research experience is no deficit, it is just following the lines of Glaser and Strauss (1967; 1998): theory emerges from the data.

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