

## BOOK REVIEW

## Review of *Deconversion: Qualitative and Quantitative Results from Cross-Cultural Research in Germany and the USA*

*Deconversion: Qualitative and Quantitative Results from Cross-Cultural Research in Germany and the USA*, by Heinz Streib, Ralph W. Hood Jr., Barbara Keller, Rosina-Martha Csöff and Christopher F. Silver

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In *Deconversion* Streib and colleagues (2009) set out to examine the overlooked realm of religious deconversion: the active process by which individuals disaffiliate from religion. The *Bielefeld-Based Cross-Cultural Study of Deconversion* consists of a mixed methods and cross-cultural approach to religious change in the USA and Germany. This work is a thoughtful consolidation of theoretical, empirical, and integrated methodological approaches to gaining a more comprehensive understanding of the trajectories and biographical narratives of deconverts.

The research on religious disaffiliation has proven timely given the rise of U.S. religious ‘nones’—those who do not affiliate with any organized religion—and secularism in general. Interestingly, deconversion is often under-probed by scholars in the sociology of religion, with more attention targeted at religious conversion and participation. *Deconversion* highlights that understanding why people leave religion and how religious deconversion impacts individuals, society, and communities is just as important as religious conversion.

Being among the first to foray into this under-documented field, the authors have the flexibility to offer suggestions and preferences for terminological use in the field. It is important, and I suspect many scholars would agree, that the establishment of religious change terminology is necessary in not only helping to legitimate this critical body of research, but to also secure a shared theoretical foreground for researchers to build upon existing work.

The authors provide a cogent explanation as to why they choose ‘deconversion’ over other religious change labels. They claim that this term averts the almost unavoidable negative connotations of leaving religion be it ‘apostasy’ (abandonment of a former religious system) or ‘defection’ (deserting a former religious belief and actively

opposing it). The authors argue that these terms (apostasy and defection) are typically associated with blaming the individual for a break of loyalty to their former religion. In an attempt to be sensitive to future associations, the researchers assert that, “Deconversion allows for less prejudice and suggests that deconversion has similar legitimacy as conversion” (p. 17). While I agree, in part, with their argument for using ‘deconversion’ over the other mentioned terms, the authors needed to clearly specify and operationalize terminological preferences and differences for the purpose of systematization in the research area.

Coupled with promising assertions for terminological use, the authors highlight five characteristics that best describe features of deconversion (p. 22). The list includes denial and disagreement with beliefs, moral criticism, emotional suffering, and a loss of religious experiences and religious community; all features that I would agree provide a foundation for understanding deconverts’ process. Additionally, the researchers examine various deconversion trajectories (pp. 26–28), including secularizing, oppositional, privatizing and heretical exits; and religious switching.

They found that most deconverts chose a secularizing exit ( $n = 29$ )—termination of religious belief and membership in organized religion—with privatizing exit following nearby ( $n = 24$ ). Privatizing exiters terminate membership and continue in a *private* religious life. Although these trajectories are helpful in understanding religious migration, the authors fail to consider that some of these exit strategies may overlap or occur simultaneously in the deconversion process, which may accentuate intricate self-conflicts and contradictions, and a fluidity that may otherwise go unexplored.

Researchers also created a typology to differentiate the religious organizations in their sample (p. 64). Integrated organizations are characterized as having little to no tension with society; oppositional and accommodating are described as being in tension with society, wherein accommodating (more than oppositional) work

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towards integration. Integrated organizations include the Roman Catholic Church, the Lutheran Church, and Reformed Judaism. Oppositional organizations in their sample consisted of the Unification Church, The Family, and Scientology. Lastly, accommodating organizations included Pentecostal churches and Seventh Day Adventists. Unpacking this typology would have been useful; specifically, in fleshing out why these particular organizations are typologized in this way in order to provide clearer direction for future research.

In brief, the study provides a robust analysis of the religious organization the deconverts disaffiliated from; a detailed comparison of faith development levels between deconverts and religious members; and a greater understanding of differences between deconverts and religious members based on data collected on personality, psychological well-being, and fundamentalist/authoritarian attitudes (p. 53). Some interesting findings emerged including, deconverts characterized as having higher scores on *openness to experience* and a higher inclination to identify as “more spiritual than religious” or as “neither religious nor spiritual”. Cross-cultural differences include U.S. deconverts scoring higher on autonomy, transformation and personal growth; whereas, German deconverts scored lower on extraversion, emotional stability, purpose in life, self-acceptance; to name a few.

A cross-cultural difference worth explicating is that German deconverts in general experience an increased loss or crisis compared to U.S. deconverts. The authors

suggest that this contrast is due to differing religious landscapes. I contend that it might have been useful to control for ethnic and cultural differences in the U.S.; that is, it might prove promising to investigate how U.S. deconverts’ ethnic identities impact deconversion, indicating that perhaps in Germany cultural/ethnic identity is closely related to religious identification, wherein deconversion leads to increased instability and loss.

There is also another argument to be made, with regard to the need for intervention. Streib and colleagues (2009) report that 16 out of 99 deconverts sought therapeutic help, primarily those from fundamentalist and new religious groups. I argue that perhaps the reason why the number of deconverts seeking help is not higher starts with the lack of support structures in the respective countries. This, bolstered by a shortage of clinical specialization in religious deconversion counseling, make for serious considerations of deconverts’ well-being and integration into public life.

Overall, this book makes significant contributions not only to scientific knowledge, but to multiple fields, including psychology, sociology and theology. It also lays the groundwork for policymakers to consider supportive programs that improve the social welfare of deconverts. Lastly, it serves as a preeminent launching platform for future research in the burgeoning field of religious migration.

### Competing Interests

The author declares that they have no competing interests.

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