

Pentecostal Identity, Conversion, and Deconversion

Geoff Sutton, 23 May 2020

To one degree or another, we are all partially aware of who we are and who we are not at various points in time. We live in an opportune time to better understand spiritual transformation than did previous generations because so many scholars have examined spirituality from various vantage points in the past century. In addition, we live in an era when many nations protect essential freedoms that allow for the sharing of ideas previously considered subversive. These freedoms have permitted many to openly question various aspects of the religions within their culture and to make decisions about their involvement in religious life. My purpose in this exploratory document is to consider how young adults transition from the religious or spiritual (RS) status of their family culture into spiritual career paths. The scientific research focuses on RS transformations in general. I am attempting to apply that research to Christianity in general and Pentecostal spirituality in particular. This is my first draft. I am open to suggestions for modification and elaboration.

I will need to define a few terms before exploring Pentecostal spiritual transformation.

Identity- a person's sense of **self** including their thoughts and memories, feelings, personality, physiology, and social relationships. This is also called personal identity.

Spiritual Identity-those aspects of identity related to spirituality. In Christians whose identity in Christ is strong, their spiritual identity and personal identity may overlap considerably and dominate other aspects of the self. Pentecostal identity depends on how a person understands what it means to be Pentecostal within their subculture. Some may identify as evangelical, progressive, charismatic Episcopalian, neo-Pentecostal, or even blended terms like "Baptocostal" and "Menocostal."

Pentecostal Spirituality- the intrapersonal way in which a Pentecostal Christian understands God, what they believe about God and the Bible, a worldview, beliefs about morality and how they ought to live out the Christian life, and spiritual practices such as personal prayer and Bible study.

Pentecostal religiosity- the extent to which a Pentecostal Christian participates in the rituals of an organized Pentecostal congregation. Examples include singing in choirs, teaching others, receiving communion, attending church services and sponsored events, donating time and money, praying for healing, experiencing spiritual gifts, understanding the end times, evangelizing, and so forth.

Spiritual Transformation- a change in spiritual identity recognized (a) instantly as in a dramatic born-again experience or (b) at some point in time when a person looks back and perceives that their identity has changed in some significant way. Spiritual transformation includes concepts of growth, conversion, and deconversion.

Conversion and Deconversion- the acts of moving toward one spiritual identity and moving toward another identity. On the one hand, the transformation may be dramatic as in the quintessential case of St. Paul who sees the light whilst on the road to destruction of religious others and rejects his

former religious identity by “putting on a new man.” On the other hand, the transformation may be more gradual as in the case of Pentecostal college students who attend a Pentecostal college, then realize at some point that they no longer identify with the spirituality of their parents.

Rambo’s Five Types of Conversion Careers

Conversion Careers are like spiritual resumes, which document a person’s religious or spiritual (RS) affiliations and activities over a lifespan. Lewis Rambo describes five kinds of conversion careers, which apply to religious experiences in any faith tradition (See Fazzino, 2014 & Gooren, 2005). I will apply these concepts to Pentecostals. I won’t dwell upon his particular categories. It is the idea of a spiritual career that interests me. Personal narratives occur within the context of a host culture. Pentecostal pastors may become denominational leaders within a Pentecostal culture. If their inner spiritual journey causes significant doubt, they may experience much more distress than nonclergy who may more easily switch career paths to a broader evangelical congregation or a more compatible Christian tradition. Some Pentecostal leaders do exit to secular or other religious cultures, but this can severely disrupt personal relationships. Finding a “good fit” between oneself and one’s spiritual family group can be challenging. Some Pentecostal young adults discover that they cannot have a Pentecostal career—that is, they are rejected by their Pentecostal culture because of a secular professional career (e.g., acting, artist, psychologist, a biology teacher who embraces evolution) or because of their gender nonconforming identity. I have learned that even a three-year-old recognizes “my people” and “not my people.” In recent years, the blending of religious and political or religious and national identities can further shape the trajectory of a spiritual career.

1. Parental religion- continuing within the Pentecostal faith of one’s parents
2. Seekers and Shoppers- People without much RS heritage who respond to a stimulus to learn more about faith.
3. Committed converts- People who embrace the Pentecostal identity and worldview of a particular Pentecostal culture.
4. Confessing leaders
5. Disillusioned Disaffiliates. Rambo refers to three types as Apostates, Secular, and Religious “Nones.”

Four Characteristics of Conversion and Deconversion

Psychological scientists since William James first focused on understanding conversion experiences using surveys and interviews. This focus was followed by more recent studies of deconversion and resulted in the realization that every conversion involves a deconversion. It seems natural to assume that the processes of conversion and deconversion ought to be the same; however, as Lori Fazzino (2014) observes, deconversion narratives are different. She cites John Barbour’s work and creates a meta-model of conversion and deconversion. In my view, conversion and deconversion experiences are not just about cognitive changes. For many, the entry and exit experiences can be powerful emotional experiences—especially when one’s core identity is deeply affected. Following are Barbour’s four characteristics of deconversion narratives.

1. Intellectual doubt about the RS beliefs
2. Moral criticism of the RS code
3. Emotional suffering
4. Disaffiliation from the religious community

What I find most useful is the emotional suffering in the conversion-deconversion narratives. I think religious scholars too often focus on cognitive elements of change such as doubt to the exclusion of the power of emotion as a driving force in the approach to a new RS experience or the rejection and deconversion from the old. Fazzino comments on the positives of conversion yielding a sense of control, assurance, feelings of ecstasy and liberation. Fazzino uses the language of “biographical reconstruction,” which I view as a change in identity.

Biographical reconstruction relies on canonical metaphors (e.g. God is love), begins with forgiveness of the ‘old’ self, and culminates in a strong emphasis on continual affirmations of the ‘new’ self (Mahoney and Pargament). Personal transformation is marked by personality re-orientation, behavioral alterations, and the suspension of analytic reasoning... (Fazzino, 2014, p. 252)

The following quote from Fazzino (p. 252) reveals her summary of the negative and positive emotions in the deconversion process.

Disillusionment and disenchantment preceding deconversion provoke feelings of rejection, alienation, grief, and guilt (Adam; Harrold). Biographical reconstruction draws on “emotionally-charged metaphors” that convey emotional pain and become incorporated into the deconversion crisis rhetoric (Harrold 83; see also Barbour). The emphasis is kept on the loss of the old self and all religious ties while the individual reaffirms a commitment to seeking truth, morality, and community (Barbour; Harrold). The transformation from believer to non-believer is marked by eventual feelings of relief, liberation, and freedom (Barbour; McKnight and Ondrey) despite the stigmatized status of non-believers in the United States (Cragun et al.).

Rambo’s Five Types of Transitions

Rambo also suggests a typology of religious changes or transitions, which has influenced some of my thinking.

1. Apostasy/ defection- rejection of a religious tradition. E.g., A student from a Pentecostal home identifies as an agnostic or atheist
2. Intensification- a strong renewal of commitment e.g., Pentecostal students responding to a call to vocational ministry
3. Affiliation- a movement from limited to full involvement in a congregation e.g., Pentecostals becoming involved in church ministries
4. Institutional transition- (denominational switching) the change from one affiliation to another e.g., Christians leaving Pentecostal congregations to join non-Pentecostal evangelical congregations.

5. Tradition transition- moving from a major religious group to another e.g., a Pentecostal converts to Islam.

Streib's Six Ways People Exit from A Spiritual Identity

Heinz Streib and his colleagues have examined deconversions in some detail and focused on where people go after leaving a previous faith identity. They refer to these as six exits (Paloutzian et al., 2013). I draw on these ideas in thinking about exits from Pentecostalism.

1. Secularizing- ending an affiliation with any religious group. The person has lost faith in God and no longer identifies as either religious or spiritual.
2. Oppositional- taking on a very different belief system
3. Religious switching- as above
4. Integrating- taking on a belief system that is a better fit with one's beliefs and/ or practices
5. Privatizing- ending an official religious affiliation but continuing to identify as a spiritual person. This has been called "invisible religion."
6. Heretical- leaving an affiliation in favor of a new belief system e.g., spiritual but not religious

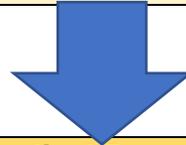
Toward an Integrated Model of Conversion and Deconversion Experiences

I will attempt to illustrate possible entry and exit experiences (conversion, deconversion) for young Pentecostals growing up in a Pentecostal family and congregation who experience changes in their spiritual identities as they transition from adolescence into adulthood in Christian higher education. I am assuming that they are of average or above intelligence with better than average critical thinking skills and were at least moderately involved in their congregation. I will use the elements of a holistic model, which I have described before (e.g., Sutton, 2016). That is, a self (S), with a focus in this document on spiritual identity. The self-identity integrates four dimensions of functioning (Cognition, Overt behavior/personality, Physiology, Emotion—conveniently COPE) and all taking place within a social context (S), hence the acrostic SCOPES.

The emotional distress produced in the deconversion process can drive the young Pentecostal to seek advice, guidance, relief, and support from trusted professors, pastors, peers, authors, and Christian psychotherapists. If they do not re-affirm the Pentecostalism of their youth, they will eventually exit in either a hidden or overt manner. By hidden I mean a mental change that they do not reveal to others except for their most trusted confidants. Hidden exits protect people from loss of employment and the emotional costs of lost relationships but can produce inner tension when forced to make identity-incongruent statements. Some exits are more costly than others. In the chart below, I attempt to integrate salient aspects of recent theories and data about conversion, deconversion, and exit experiences.

Illustration of Conversion-Deconversion and Exit Processes

	Pentecostal Convert	Deconversion Process
C	Accepting given meaning, purpose, certainty, and a near literal Bible reading; Embracing a given worldview & moral code emphasizing authority, loyalty, & purity; Accepting cultural beliefs about illness, politics, etc.	Doubting, coping with uncertainty & criticizing RS beliefs, morality (especially sexuality), politics, careers etc. Challenging views of mental illness & disability. Embracing morality of caring & equality/justice. Developing a new worldview
O	“holiness” behavior, enthusiastic worship rituals (possibly glossolalia), Bible study; praying about calling, marriage, illness; no change in major personality traits; Conscientiousness & low Openness restrict change	exploring new behavior & spiritual rituals; consuming faith challenging books; seeking a better spiritual “fit;” no change in major personality traits; Openness to experience is a catalyst for change
P	Good health may inhibit change; Healing/ deliverance experiences confirm Pentecostalism	possible psychosomatic symptoms due to tension; possible problems with substance abuse; Failed healings may encourage change
E	excitement, love, joy, peace	anger, distress & guilt, fear → grief & loss, sadness, loneliness → relief, happiness
S (social)	Relationship with God, Jesus as close friend, church as family, Christian college community;	rejection, alienation → seeking support network → forming new relationships & finding ways to sustain old connections or live with separation. Positive relationships with people in other cultures support change.



Exits from Classical and Evangelical Pentecostalism	
Hidden or Obvious Exits	Obvious Exits
Progressive Christianity RS blend Spiritual but not religious Agnostic Atheist	Mainline Christian tradition A different Religion

References

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