

Geoff W. Sutton Blog

I blog about psychology, counseling, and culture. Nothing I post should be considered as psychological consultation or services. My website is www.suttong.com

Tuesday, September 19, 2017

A Look at a Deconversion Testimony



On a cold winter's day Sarah sat across from me in the restaurant and declared, "I'm an atheist." We were at a conference and her friends had left to go somewhere—I forget where. Sarah is a brilliant young woman with a bright future. I don't know her well but she made some good points during a conference presentation. She knows I write about the psychology of religion so I've asked her about her opinions. Sarah was raised as an Evangelical Christian—a bit on the fundamentalist spectrum, I guess. She doesn't like the Old Testament—too much murder, too many rules. I ask about the "Sermon on the Mount." She thinks that's ok. She likes Jesus' moral teaching. She's left of center politically and socially. She's about to graduate from a Christian university. Somewhere along the line she lost her faith. She's not come out as an atheist—except to a few people. She's aware of the risks. She can't doubt outloud. Her litany of complaints focus on beliefs that don't make sense and certain views of morality she no longer holds as true.*

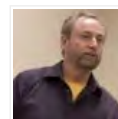
Peter Enns and The Sin of Certainty

My point in telling the "Sarah story" is that I was thinking of people like her when I read the first chapter of Peter Enns', *The Sin of Certainty*. I've been asked to lead off a study of Peter's book. And Enns' first chapter describes his faith crisis. His chapter is instructive because it fits well with a recent uptrend in deconversion and conversion research in my field of interest, the Psychology of Religion. I previously summarized some research on deconversion and conversion. In this post, I provide a look at Enns', story from the perspective of deconversion and conversion. He claims not to have written an autobiography yet the lead story suggests his crisis provides the context for the book.

CRISIS, CHAOS, RENEWAL



About Me



Geoff Sutton

Follow 73

I am a psychologist who studies and writes about Psychology, Religion, and Culture. I also speak at conferences and group events. Topics include Forgiveness & Reconciliation, Morality, Hope, Love, Spirituality, Clergy Abuse & Restoration

[View my complete profile](#)



Blog Archive

- ▼ 2017 (7)
 - ▼ September (1)
 - A Look at a Deconversion Testimony
 - ▶ August (1)
 - ▶ June (3)
 - ▶ May (1)
 - ▶ February (1)
- ▶ 2016 (33)
- ▶ 2015 (48)
- ▶ 2014 (51)
- ▶ 2013 (36)



Subscribe To

Posts

Comments



Popular Posts

Peter Enns recalls a threatening moment listening to faith-challenging questions in a Disney movie, *Bridge to Terabithia*. Leslie and May Belle discuss God and the Bible. After a brief exchange about belief in the Bible and the consequences of disbelief, Leslie says, "I seriously do not think God goes around damming people to hell." Here's the short video clip:



Enns' tells us of his spiritual and emotional discomfort and offers a larger life-context of leaving his teaching job at a Christian school (See Bailey, 2008) and losing some of his friends. He observes, "Watching certainty slide into uncertainty is frightening." Faith provides a sense of meaning and organization. His faith has been seriously tested. After decades of education and teaching in Christian communities, he experienced some life-changing questions like: "Is there a God? What will you do now that God is far off, out of sight? (p. 13)."

In their summary of recent conversion and deconversion research, Raymond Paloutzian and his colleagues (2013) opine that both conversion and deconversion can be seen as part of a larger perspective on spiritual transformation. Here's a quote about the concept of deconversion:

"Overall, deconversion is conceptualized as an intense biographical change that includes individual and social aspects: experiential, emotional, intellectual-ideological, social-environmental, moral, as well as changes or termination of group membership." (p. 409).

As a psychologist, I found myself drawn to Enn's description of his feelings—the emotional experience he felt or reported that others with similar experiences shared. Here's some examples of his language in chapter 1: "threatened, frightening, worried, Feeling judged and banished..." The experience is clearly emotional and specifically, about fear and anxiety.

As a psychology of religion researcher, I noted the social context and its impact on Enns. He reported a change at the school where he taught. The organizational climate became "tense and adversarial" (p. 12). His teaching and writing were examined. Eventually, he says he resigned. His description of the change sounds like a spiritual transformation.

"I recall those first few months of sweet freedom. I hadn't felt that light and joyful in probably a decade. Pick your cliché: I felt alive, born again, as if I had been liberated from a prison camp, released from a dungeon, and had seen the sunshine and felt the cool breeze for the first time in ages." (pp. 11-12)

The positive feelings did not last long. He soon found that "faith went dark" and he lacked the structure of faith provided by the community where "Thinking for myself wasn't necessary..." (p. 12).

Enns concludes the first chapter by suggesting a "sacred journey" is possible for those who give up the quest for right belief and begin trusting God. The sin of

Relationship Betrayal & Barriers to Forgiveness

Relationship Betrayal & Barriers to Forgiveness On 6 November, Sarah Pulliam Bailey of RNS posted a story about ...



HEALTHY MARRIAGES

Healthy Marriages Reconstructing Marriage Part 3 Ellen

sat alone on one side of the two-seater. Head bowed. Tear streaked che...



Marriage Under Reconstruction The 1950s imaginary sentimental love man as protein-carbs winner

(bring home the bacon & breadwinner) marriage has ended for mo...



People with a Purpose

How religious people create meaning God let me live for a purpose. I know God has a plan for my life. But for the grace of Go...



Unprofessional Christian Counseling: Helpful or Harmful?

Christian Counseling-by unlicensed persons

Can people with mental illness find help from counselors without professional train...



The Psychology of Forgiveness

Psychology of Forgiveness and Christian Spirituality

Forgiveness has become faddish in recent years as numerous mental health cl...

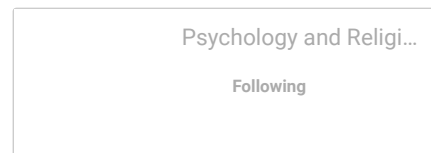


Am I in Love?

Am I in Love? "He loves me. He loves me not." Pulling the petals of love from a flower to

gauge the status of a relationship 🪄

Google+ Badge



Psychology & Religion Links

- [Psychology & Religion](#)
- [Human Nature](#)
- [My Facebook News](#)
- [My Twitter feed](#)
- [Linkedin](#)
- [Academia.edu](#)



Translate

certainty is a preoccupation with right belief to the point of making an idol out of belief and forcing God into our interpretation of the image we created.

I've read the book. Enns ends by telling us of his current congregation on page 192. We see his transformation, played out in Christian media, as an example of that type of deconversion from a fundamentalist-like evangelical Christianity. After what sounds like a wilderness experience, he finds a different sort of Christian community. As I read his words I see evidence of a changed spirituality, a de-emphasis on beliefs, but still a desire for meaning and relationship, "I need to be a part of something bigger than myself..."

REFLECTIONS

Peter Enns' tale is a story for our time. I suspect doubters have been around since the first religious ideas were spoken. But in western cultures, it has become safer to express those doubts and concerns. There's still a risk as Peter indicates—people can't really be honest about their doubts in some faith communities and expect to keep their job or their old friendships.

Like Sarah, more and more young people are questioning the statements of belief promulgated by conservative religious groups. They doubt the truthfulness of certain claims. And when they get answers to difficult questions, they don't find the answers very convincing.

There are different types of deconversions. Some occur gradually but may come to a critical point. These sound a lot like the reverse of conversion experiences. Some exit faith altogether. Some keep quiet and carry on—agnostic. Others exit a faith community (disaffiliation) and find a better fit.

In the research literature, some emerge from their emotional turmoil with a new sense of autonomy and a feeling of personal growth. As Paloutzian and others write of some deconverts who leave a religious community, "...there are also gains in a sense of connectedness for the lucky ones who immediately find a new community and a new identity with a self-identification as 'spiritual person,' also a key characteristic of deconversion." (p. 414)

Peter Enns offers a path forward for those troubled by restrictive interpretations of Christian belief statements—encourage trust in God (in my language, don't sweat the details of belief).

Here's what I'd like to know as I take these ideas to class:

What elements of Enns' story make sense in terms of other stories you have heard or read?

What Christian beliefs, if any, must be held as true and certain to continue a sacred journey as a Christian?

How does your church or Christian organization create a safe place for people with doubts like those questions Enns reported?

How can Christians be helpful to people like Sarah who wish to talk—explore their thoughts about faith?

How do people handle family relationships where some Christians consider others as unsaved, lost, heretics, agnostics, or atheists?

Advertisement

Read more about Christian cultures in *A House Divided* available on AMAZON from the publisher, Pickwick and in the Apple bookstore on Apple devices.

*(Sarah is not a particular person but a composite of bright young people who reject the conservative faith of their youth).

Select Language ▼

Powered by  Google Translate



G+

Labels

- apology
- attachment
- attitudes toward sex
- attribution
- Big 5
- Christian marriage
- clergy abuse
- cohabitation
- contraception
- conversion
- death
- deconversion
- divorce
- emotion
- evangelical
- fairness
- forgiveness
- fundamentalism
- gender discrimination
- gender roles
- Grudge
- Hope
- justice and mercy
- justice mercy
- LGBTQ
- life expectancy
- love
- Marriage
- meaning
- Millennial
- personality
- polygamy
- prayer and meditation
- reconciliation
- religion
- religious coping
- remarriage
- remorse
- reunions
- same-sex relationship
- SCOPES
- sex
- sexual abuse
- sexual orientation
- spirituality
- suicide
- traditional marriage
- trust
- Truth and Reconciliation
- virtue
- women





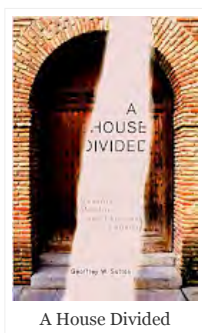
References

Bailey, S. P. (April, 2008). Westminster theological suspension. Christianity Today. Retrieved from <http://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2008/april/114-24.o.html>
This article tells of Enn's suspension and provides links to related stories.

Enns, P. (2016). The Sin of Certainty: Why God Desires Our Trust More Than Our "Correct" Beliefs. San Francisco: Harper One.

Paloutzian, R.F., Murken, S., Streib, H. & Rößler-Namini, S. (2013). Conversion, deconversion, and spiritual transformation: A multidisciplinary view. In R. F. Paloutzian and C. L. Park (Eds.), Handbook of the Psychology of Religion and Spirituality, (2nd Ed., pp. 399-421). New York: Guilford.

Sutton, G. W. (2016). [Review of the book The sin of certainty: Why God desires "our" trust more than "our" correct beliefs by Peter Enns]. Encounter, 13. You can find my academic review of his book online at Academia and ResearchGate.



Posted by Geoff Sutton at 6:33 AM



Labels: agnostics, atheists, Christian spirituality, conversion, deconversion, disaffiliation, sin of certainty, spiritual transformation

No comments:

Post a Comment

Enter your comment...

Comment as: Geoff Sutton (C ▾) Sign out

Publish Preview Notify me

[Home](#)

[Older Post](#)

Subscribe to: [Post Comments \(Atom\)](#)

Popular Posts

Relationship Betrayal & Barriers to Forgiveness

Relationship Betrayal & Barriers to Forgiveness On 6 November, Sarah Pulliam Bailey of RNS posted a story about ...



HEALTHY MARRIAGES

Healthy Marriages Reconstructing Marriage Part 3 Ellen

sat alone on one side of the two-seater. Head bowed. Tear streaked che...



Marriage Under Reconstruction The 1950s imaginary sentimental love man as protein-carbs winner

(bring home the bacon & breadwinner) marriage has ended for mo...



People with a Purpose

How religious people create meaning God let me live for a purpose. I know God has a plan for my life. But for the grace of Go...



Unprofessional Christian Counseling: Helpful or Harmful?

Christian Counseling-by unlicensed persons

Can people with mental illness find help from counselors without professional train...



The Psychology of Forgiveness

Psychology of Forgiveness and Christian Spirituality

Forgiveness has become faddish in recent years as numerous mental health cl...



Am I in Love?

Am I in Love? "He loves me. He loves me not." Pulling the petals of love from a flower to gauge the status of a relationship ...



Hell is for Real? Psychology and Belief in Hell

Psychology of Hell Bronzino, Descent of

Christ into Limbo, 1552 A Christian nurse said she preferred to work with children beca...



Four Tips for Building a Better Relationship

Journey to a Better Relationship Four Things to Pack Couples

often seek counseling to improve thei...

Forgiveness Quotes