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Toward Faith

A Qualitative Study of How Atheists Convert to Christianity

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Abstract

The study of religious conversion has historically neglected how nonbelievers (i.e. atheists) come to adopt a belief in a god or gods, and thus cannot address whether findings and theories from previous research apply to atheists. In order to assess how atheists converted to Christianity, we performed a thematic analysis of 111 biographical narratives obtained from the open Internet. Our analysis yielded 10 recurring thematic elements, which we termed: hardship; authentic example; unfamiliarity/pseudo-familiarity (with Christianity or Christians); contra atheism; religious study; intellectualism; numinous experiences; openness to experience; ritual behaviors; and social ties. We draw logical connections between these themes and connect them to previous research. Our results impress the need for a more flexible, and therefore less sequential or stage-based, theoretical approach to conversion.

Keywords: religious change, atheism, Christianity, conversion, qualitative

Introduction

Few studies exist that explore the transition from nonbelief to belief in the Christian God (Larsen; Altemeyer and Hunsberger; Wong; Wang and Yang; Yang 1999). This is intriguing for a number of reasons. The General Social Survey (Smith 2014) shows that the number of U.S. respondents who said they “believe in God now, but didn’t used to,” outnumbers those who said they “don’t believe in God now, but used to.” Furthermore, while having no religious

preference is not equal to atheism, Stark and Finke suggest that “converts are overwhelmingly recruited from the ranks of those lacking a prior religious commitment or having only a nominal connection to a religious group” (121), implying that the majority of individuals raised with no religion join a religion in adulthood. While some scholars have argued that this will probably become less and less the case (Thiessen and Wilkins-LaFlamme), the phenomenon of *return* to religious identification or belief is still largely unaddressed (see also Gray; Lugo et al).¹ Consequently, we saw an opportunity to fill this gap with a novel study of how atheists convert to Christianity.

Atheist Conversions to Christianity

The few previous studies on the conversion of atheists (or nonreligious individuals) allow for a concise review of this topic. Looking at Western, English-speaking populations, Altemeyer and Hunsberger interviewed 24 “Amazing Believers” (those who acquired a Christian faith after being raised in a relatively nonreligious household) and determined that *fear* was a primary reason for their respondents’ transition to faith, with loneliness as a secondary but influential factor, itself often coinciding with a feeling of emptiness. They also noted that when these individuals embraced religion as part of coping with personal problems or fear of death, religious peers were almost always involved in such efforts. This peer connection itself often led the Amazing Believer to spend time in a religiously sponsored recreational context, which facilitated acceptance, support, and resolution of problems. Lastly, these interviewees sometimes reported becoming more religious after praying and perceiving an answer from God to their prayer. While not dealing with atheism per se, this study can be seen as a pioneering effort in that direction.

Other work on atheists becoming Christians consists in the study of Chinese Americans and Chinese immigrants to America (Yang 1998). In a special journal issue devoted to mass conversions to Christianity (see Yang and Tamney), a number of papers report insights into the factors that influence Chinese atheists to become Christians, and a brief summary of their content would serve well.

First, a combination of “coerced modernization” and decline of traditional culture in China created an unprecedented openness toward Christianity as a meaning system that wards off alienation arising from perceived increased materialism and cynicism about selfishness among the larger population. Whereas Buddhism is perceived to be out of step with the modern world, Christianity is often perceived as both modern and consistent with extant Confucian values in Chinese culture. Second, the Christian churches make effective use of outreach programs that pragmatically assist Chinese immigrants with their transition to a new country, as well as with general problems of daily life. The fact that the help provided by the churches is *altruistic* in nature (i.e., rather than predicated upon an expectation of a reward or return help) also makes these organizations particularly appealing, by way of contrast with more traditional Chinese culture. Such helping programs also establish social bonds, and thus emotional support in addition to material support. Third, Chinese and American Christians

¹ Using publicly released datasets from the Pew Research Center’s 2008 Religious Landscape Survey, Gray found that the “faith” retention rate from childhood upbringing to adulthood of the Nones was 38%, while the lowest retention rate, that of atheists, was 30%. The highest retention rate was for Hindus (84%).

have devoted a great deal of resources to proselytizing Chinese nationals, and, in light of the above contexts, such efforts have paid off in some cases.

Relatedly, Wong's doctoral dissertation on how Chinese atheist intellectuals became Christians when immigrating to the United States resonates with the above insights. He determined six key influences: (1) positive interaction with Christians; (2) extensive contact with evangelical communities; (3) self-adaptation in a new culture; (4) experiencing distress/crisis; (5) new freedom to search for life's meaning and a cognitively satisfying worldview; and (6) personal religious experiences with the divine.

Lastly, a recent study by Hui and colleagues examined non-Christian Chinese conversions to Christianity over a three-year period, using a matched control group. They found that neither personality, social axioms, psychological symptoms, nor personal values were predictive of such a change. Rather, only whether or not a person thought that there was one and only one true religion proved to be consequential. Their overall conclusion was that "any person can become a Christian without any predispositions or triggering events" (227).

Though informative, this number of studies hardly forms a body of research, and, insofar as we are aware, no other research has sought to directly examine general factors influencing atheist conversions to Christianity (although see the reference to the work of Harmon, below). For these reasons, our study made use of personal narratives and thematic analysis to investigate how a person changed from being an atheist to being a Christian. Our primary goal was to uncover and relate the central and recurring patterns of elements characterizing these narratives and the religious changes related therein.

Method

After receiving IRB approval, we sought to find appropriate narrative content in online forums, and primarily derived our material from the popular social media websites *Reddit* and *Quora*. Both websites include global audiences, although neither is an explicitly atheistic or religious platform. In these digital public spaces, members answer, discuss, and debate questions; share personal stories and media; and in general carry on a great variety of different conversations. Here, we discovered narrated personal journeys of individuals who, in response to specific question prompts, identified themselves as having once been atheists who subsequently became Christians. Examples of some of these prompts are: "What was it that convinced you to become an atheist and what convinced you to convert to Christianity?"; "Ex-Atheist Christians, why did you convert to Christianity?"; and "Any former Atheists here? What made you convert to Christianity?"

Across the first half of 2016, we acquired 132 narratives, but ultimately retained 111 narrative cases, eliminating others that implied the narrator was agnostic, not an atheist, or generically had been "nonreligious." We also eliminated cases where a person said or implied that they grew up in a weak or nominally religious household, and if the narrative did not specify clearly enough how or why they became a Christian. The majority of retained cases were, on average, one to three paragraphs long, although some spanned several pages, and a few were only three or four sentences long.

The narratives reflected the personal stories of those who self-identified as having changed from identifying as an atheist to identifying as a Christian, without the use of the

word “conversion” as a frame of reference. Due to the plurality of definitions of conversion, there is no standard or widely used operational definition of the term in any discipline that studies religion (Savage; Rambo 1993, 1999). As a result, we understood these narratives to reflect conversions on the understanding that a person had identified themselves as having undergone such a change in self-identification by virtue of their act of answering the specific questions prompts. Additionally, the narratives themselves gave us confidence that few narrators, if any at all, were confused about what an atheist is/was, or that any of them conceived of atheism as still believing in god or gods but only entertaining religious doubts. Although atheism might have different definitions, the definitions advanced in both academic and lay discourse largely regard it as either a lack of belief in god or gods, or, a positive belief that god or gods do not exist (Bullivant; Cliteur). While we cannot know which of these the narrators had in mind, we offer that it was unlikely to be something wholly other or radically different from these two options.

Moreover, while claiming to be an atheist does not make one an atheist, a heavy reliance on self-reports of introspective belief states leaves few means to affirm or deny their accuracy. In general, behaviors and outward signs lend some evidence for self-reported beliefs, but, crucially, atheists tend to lack such institutional and behavioral identifiers, leading us to highlight the importance of self-identification for them specifically. As a result, we found it feasible to accept the previous atheist status of those who answered these questions prompts.

Because no prior theoretical frameworks have included atheism in the equation of religious conversions, we did not wish to assume that previous studies on religious conversion would necessarily be applicable regarding atheist conversions. Having only the personal narratives of atheists-turned-Christians to guide us suggested an exploratory study using conventional *content analysis* (Hsieh and Shannon), as such an approach is useful precisely when few theoretical assumptions are available. However, it would be more appropriate to refer to our approach as a conventional *thematic analysis*, as opposed to a content analysis. This is because content analyses and thematic analyses are similar in a number of ways, yet distinct approaches (Vaismoradi, Turunen, and Bondas), with content analysis focused on how often narrative elements occur, and thus more quantitative in nature. Our approach mirrored LeDrew’s study of identity formation among active atheists: we likewise made use of inductive, as opposed to theoretical/deductive, thematic analysis, and not content analysis, although we attended to the number of cases in which each theme appeared. As another safeguard, in order to prevent our review of the literature from biasing or leading our analysis and analytical insights, we used a delayed literature review (Glaser), meaning that we began our collection and analysis of cases prior to engaging the relevant research literature on religious conversion (Strauss and Corbin).

Our analytical strategy was specific. One author collected all open-source narrative material and, after elimination of cases, read the material three times: once to gain an initial familiarity with the material, where no coding was done and only analytic memos were written to capture observations; a second time, to begin to define themes and specific instances of them; and a third time in order to refine and sharpen these themes and their instances. Once this task was complete, another author performed a second, independent round of coding, in order to compare and contrast it to the first author’s scheme. The remaining author peer reviewed both coding schemes and made recommendations for change, correction, and

additions/subtractions. In this manner, our team disputed, refined, and clarified the themes that emerged (Lofland and Skonovd; Wright, Giovanelli, Dolan, and Edwards).

By this process, the two coding schemes were reconciled into one coding scheme which consisted of 10 themes. We present these themes below in the order in which they appeared most frequently. Because we discuss thematic interconnections throughout each theme description in a combined Results and Discussion section, a brief description of each theme beforehand will serve to provide some context. These themes were:

- Ritual Behaviors: prayer, reading the Bible, and attending a Christian church.
- Intellectualism: use of rationalism, debate, arguments, and critical thinking.
- Numinous Experiences: often inexplicable and mystical experiences of the divine, i.e. religious experiences.
- Social Ties: social relationships and networks.
- Hardship: negative life circumstances.
- Unfamiliarity/Pseudofamiliarity (with Christianity/Christians): self-acknowledged misconceptions or preconceptions based on lack of or low experience, or negative experiences, with Christians and Christianity.
- Openness to Experience: an attitudinal disposition of willingness to examine different ideas; to be open to another view possibly being true.
- Authentic Example: finding Christians or Christianity to be inspiring or impressive; axiological or aesthetic influence.
- Religious Study: extra-biblical study of Christianity, and of non-Christian religions.
- Contra Atheism: experiencing a sense of “worldviewlessness,” or of being ungrounded in the larger scheme of existence, e.g. existential despair.

In the combined Results and Discussion section below, we describe each theme to include the use of illustrative quotes from the narratives; highlight logical interconnections between themes; and, where possible, link each theme to the broader empirical and theoretical literature. We then follow this with a General Discussion section to examine a viable theoretical approach for understanding our results taken together.

Results and Discussion

Ritual Behaviors (59 of 111 cases; 53%)

Encompassing interpersonal, affective, and intellectual dimensions, the ritual behaviors of prayer, church attendance, and reading the Bible appeared in more than half of all cases. However, they appeared in the narrative content primarily as independent activities, even to the point where they could be classified as their own, albeit minor, sub-themes.² Overall, 30

² Because these are primary ritual aspects of Christianity, we chose to combine them into one thematic category. Even so, they are unlikely to be interchangeable in terms of their effects and thus the roles they play in a

narratives pertained to attending church, 22 referenced reading the Bible, and 21 mentioned engaging in prayer. For this reason, we briefly address each of these in turn.

When self-identified atheists reported engaging in prayer, some of this was what we would call “experimental,” in the sense of “trying out” communication with a deity that one did not even believe in, and could be seen as consonant with an attitude of willingness and volition characterized by our theme of Openness to Experience (below). This experimental attitude especially occurred in conjunction with engaging in the other two ritual behaviors. Otherwise, such behavior seemed to be connected to Hardship situations or events (i.e. stressful or anxiety-inducing events), as well as Numinous Experiences.

Overwhelmingly, attending a Christian church service was a matter of a (sometimes spontaneous) invitation from a friend, or because of the desire of one’s romantic partner or spouse to attend. In only three cases did a person attend church due to other than social influence, and all other stated reasons occurred in even fewer cases than this (e.g. attendance at private religious schools). This links church attendance to our theme of Social Ties (see Gebauer and Maio; Rauff; Schaller). Furthermore, social ties, social networks, and affective bonding are central components of one influential theory of religious conversion (Stark and Bainbridge 1980, 1985; Stark; Snow and Phillips). As such, church attendance reflects the influence of personal relationships and communities on the construction and sustainment of religious identities (Stroope).

Motivations for reading the Bible included seeking solace or inspiration in its pages; genuine curiosity about its contents; or exploring the Christian worldview, which invokes the themes of Religious Study. Some came to the opinion that the Bible did not contain the falsehoods, absurdities, and contradictions that they had previously been led to believe it did, which is a tie-in to the Unfamiliarity or Pseudofamiliarity theme. Others reported being impressed and inspired by what they described as the Bible’s spiritual, moral, and aesthetic insights, which is a reflection of the theme of Authentic Example.

Intellectualism (56 of 111 cases; 50%)

The study of philosophy, evolution, science, and, in a few cases, formal Christian apologetics (to include biblical history and criticism), was mentioned in precisely half of all narratives. Here, arguments pertaining to cosmology, intelligent design, naturalistic or divine morality, and the validity of evolution featured prominently. A typical outcome was the conclusion that the intellectual case against Christianity was not as strong as had once been thought, whether such a view was previously learned from friends or family, or simply “received” through conventional wisdom. Intellectualism is thus linked to our theme of Unfamiliarity or Pseudofamiliarity. Reconciling science with religious ideology was a recurring problem for some, and these individuals reported coming to an understanding of science as not foreclosing Christian belief on intellectual grounds. That is, a strict adherence to a scientific epistemology was seen as unjustified and as illegitimately setting limits on what can be known. As we also show with Religious Study later below, Intellectualism facilitates the construction

conversion journey/event. We would certainly expect them to be interrelated, yet we do not suggest that their impact could be measured as one factor; as such, future research should pay due individual attention to each.

of a different and new interpretive framework, where a person gradually comes to inhabit a perspective that was previously unconvincing or otherwise unknown to them (Lofland and Skonovd; Wuthnow 2008).

I longed for the Bible to be true, but the intellectual evidence was still insufficient. So I plunged headlong into apologetics, devouring debates and books from many perspectives. I read the Qur'an and Richard Dawkins' *The God Delusion*. I went through *The Skeptic's Annotated Bible* and looked up Christian rebuttals to apparent contradictions. But nothing compared to the rich tradition of Christian intellect. I'd argued with my peers, but I'd never investigated the works of the masters: Augustine, Anselm, Aquinas, Descartes, Kant, Pascal, and Lewis. When I finally did, the only reasonable course of action was to believe in the death and resurrection of Jesus.

Although some scholars have considered the investigation of alternative worldviews to largely be a private matter (Lofland and Skonovd; Wulff: 56), Intellectualism can be seen as linked to Social Ties due to the fact that reading, study, and reflection were often accompanied by having one's doubts, skepticism, and hard questions discussed and answered in formal and informal debates, and in conversations with clergy, friends, or fellow students. That is, such figures and social experiences were at times instrumental in the development of reasoning and perspective.

Numinous Experiences (50 of 111 cases; 45%)

This theme refers to experiencing mysterious supernatural events, extremely coincidental and thus inexplicable events (providing divine interpretations of them, such as answered prayers), and seeing "signs" from God, or being directly "touched" or "contacted" by God. Typically, such events occurred at a very specific instance in time. However, some, more gradual, occurrences were described as a "creeping inkling," where individuals experienced a strange or vague feeling or sensation of the presence of another person or being that lasted for a duration. On the whole, narrators often acknowledged that they were not (entirely) responsible for this new change in themselves, but rather, they interpreted such a change as the result of having been acted upon by something divine, other-worldly, or external to themselves. At times, these occurrences were highly emotional; at others, they were described as epiphanies, sudden realizations, or very rapid shifts in understanding and perspective. Regardless, all such experiences were explicitly labeled or interpreted as critical turning points for the person.

I had an amazing friend who would pray with me everyday when I was a freshman in high school. At first it was a little cringe-y and I would just go along with it out of respect. But as it went on, I really just had an opening of the heart that I can't explain. It suddenly became obvious how wrong I had been the whole time and my faith began to grow not by own will. She never even talked about a lot of theology or apologetics or any kind of argument, but would just pray for me. I seriously went from being completely convinced of atheism to Christian.

Numinous Experiences is at once directly apparent as the “mystical” motif outlined by Lofland and Skonovd (377), down to the detail that “the experiences cannot be expressed in logical and coherent terms.” Numinous Experiences and Ritual Behaviors also shared one of the highest co-occurrences of all themes, occurring together in 27% of all cases. In particular, there seemed to be a strong connection between Prayer and Numinous Experience.

Granqvist and Kirkpatrick noted that “mystical experiences . . . are often preceded by stress and turmoil” (927); they further note that in times of crisis, individuals turn more so to *prayer* than *church*, perhaps because of the private and more immediate nature of prayer. Thus, we suspect that Prayer very possibly induces Numinous Experiences (or at least makes them more likely to be interpreted as happening), although arguably this can be seen as a joint instance of the theme of Openness to Experience, perhaps especially in the case of a nonbeliever (i.e. one must be open to praying in the first place). Importantly, Hardship also co-occurred most often with Numinous Experiences and Ritual Behaviors, suggesting that Hardship influences the occurrence of Numinous Experiences (or, again, perhaps at least makes interpretations of them more likely). This may point to a set of interrelationships between Numinous Experiences, Hardship, and Prayer.

Social Ties (49 of 111 cases; 44%)

The theme of Social Ties pertains to social networks, interpersonal influences, and personal relationships. In other words, relationships with other people who were usually central to one’s life facilitated a connection to Christianity in a discernable way. As with church attendance above, most often this was a relative, lover or spouse, friend, or, in fewer cases, a more casual acquaintance (see Wallace). As such, this theme is much like Hardship (below) in being a longstanding finding in the study of religious conversion (Lofland and Stark), and, again like Hardship, can be regarded as a predisposing condition for religious change, rather than directly causal.

Later my great uncle who was himself a priest became vary [sic] ill with cancer. We went to visit him after a mass he gave and after talking he asked me to take a walk with him just to talk about god. He knew I was an atheist, but I guess he knew he would not get better and this would be the last time we would get to talk. I was quite a bit better then, than during confirmation so I agreed. During this walk we talked at great length about Jesus, god and the church. During this time I asked about other religions and why if there was a god that he would make so many different religions. He smiled and quoted a book he had read where a rabbi when asked this question said “Well, did god make only 1 kind of tree?” That perplexed me and I went to bed more confused than I had ever been. The next week he finally lost his battle with cancer but he kept giving his masses till the end. I went to the funeral which is when everything clicked [and] I saw how selfish and arrogant I was being and how much he impacted the people around. This persuaded me to go to mass for the first time in awhile and I found I was the most happy I had ever been.

The work of Stark and Bainbridge (1985; see also Baumeister and Leary) suggests that belonging to religious groups, which itself is often facilitated directly through social ties, often precedes belief in a groups’ theology or doctrine, implying that for many, there is a stronger

need to belong than a need to believe (Gebauer and Maio). From their standpoint, explaining changes in the composition of such groups would depend more so upon social relationships and networks than religious ideology and belief as cognitive explanations. We found that Social Ties and Ritual Behaviors shared one of the highest rates of co-occurrence, appearing together in 27% of all cases, which reflects the commonplace extent to which Christian rituals take place in communal contexts.

Hardship (44 of 111 cases; 39%)

This theme reflected a substantial variety of negative life circumstances. These included *social* issues (i.e., death of loved ones; romantic relationship problems); *psychological* and individualized issues (i.e., health problems; anxiety, depression; self-harm behaviors; drug abuse); and external life problems (e.g., financial problems). In other cases, we found general allusions to “being at a low point,” “going through some very difficult things in life,” being in a “downward spiral,” or suffering an “existential crisis.”

I was clinically depressed, was suffering from panic attacks frequently, and everyday was a titanic struggle with never-ending anxieties. I “knew” that my problems were just chemicals in my brain that I could overcome by my own power. So I tried every tactic that I could think of to beat the anxiety. Yet, nothing worked. My intelligence and abilities, upon which I had always relied, failed me utterly, and so I faced a choice: “Either I commit suicide and die, or I try to believe in God.”

Related to both Contra Atheism and Hardship, Rauff’s examination of why unchurched believers begin attending services uncovered an influential factor of “the effect of personal crises that unsettled [interviewees] lives,” which he labeled as “personal crisis” (96). This element is also found in Wong’s study of Chinese atheists, and in Altemeyer and Hunsberger’s study of those raised in nonreligious environments who come to acquire a religious identification later in life. Elsewhere, factors such as distress, tension, strain, and crisis are identified as characterizing many conversions (Kim; Granqvist and Kirkpatrick; Rauff; Hay; Nock; Smith 2006; although cf. Hierich).³ Although “acutely felt tension” is more precise than the broad use of “hardship,” Lofland and Stark refer to this as a *predisposing condition* for conversion. Based on our analysis, we regard Hardship as a sufficient, but not necessary, element in only some specific cases of conversion. That is, Hardship can facilitate specific behaviors and a certain kind of openness (e.g., search or quest), which in turn connect a person to other themes.

This understanding of Hardship allows us to conceive of religious ideologies, practices, experiences, and groups as functioning adaptively, in terms of self-regulation, problem-solving, and general psychological support and defense. Humans employ both sacred and secular methods to cope with challenges, threats, and hardships in general (McCrae; Maynard, Gorsuch, and Bjorck). To the extent that hardship taxes one’s existing resources for coping

³ Hood, Hill, and Spilka identified three classes of hardship: “illness, disability, and other negative life events that cause both physical and mental distress; the anticipated or actual death of friends and relatives; and dealing with an adverse life situation.” We point this out because we think it is important to strike a distinction between kinds of hardships, as this bears theoretical and methodological implications for future research.

and self-regulation (Laurin and Kay), and to the extent that a person lacks a strong social support network or a foundational meaning system (e.g., secular humanism), one may end up in search of restoration, stabilization, or reprieve under a sacred canopy (Paloutzian and Park; Park, Edmondson, and Hale-Smith). Furthermore, to the extent that a nonbeliever is even marginally aware of such resources, this can increase the odds that such resources will be drawn upon in times of material need or psychological vulnerability. It also suggests that Ritual Behaviors can serve ameliorative functions when dealing with Hardship (Steffen, Masters, and Baldwin; Marks), or at least help one cope with associated negative emotional states (Atran).

Unfamiliarity/Pseudo-familiarity with Christianity or Christians (37 of 111 cases; 33%)

Various encounters and experiences with specific individuals or even congregations revealed that the narrator possessed negative preconceptions of Christians or Christianity (often imparted by parents or relatives during upbringing), or self-assessed ambiguous or unclear preconceptions. When narrators began to have encounters of their own with Christians or the Bible, instead of relying upon information provided to them by hostile or uninformed sources, this sometimes resulted in gradual but eventual conceptual change or clarity (see also Hierich; Greil; Gooren: 27).

. . . I could not conceive of these things as a child and did not know enough to realize they are not what the Bible teaches. Consequently, I came to believe that anybody who believed in God was just silly, superstitious, ignorant, and unlearned. As I read the Bible through again and again, I began to realize that not all of the things I had been told about God and religion were what the Bible said. They may have been what organized religion said or what some men taught, but not what the Bible itself said. I began to recognize that this was not the biblical concept of God. . . . My mother used to point to that [church] as we drove or walked by and say, "Look at that. How could anybody believe in God when the church looks like that." I realized that the Bible did not teach that the church is such a structure.

Unfamiliarity or pseudo-familiarity with Christianity or Christians can be linked to Social Ties, and through these ties, further linked to the Ritual Behavior of church attendance, as the narratives reflected corrections to previous conceptions of the religious services themselves, or their Christian attendees.

In our view, understanding this theme requires a consideration of specific life biographies and the particular (religious) socialization background of each case. Although Christianity is often a normative and pervasive social context in many countries, its cultural varieties and its many different forms ensure a proliferation of different ideas and attitudes concerning it. We suggest that not only will at least some of these ideas be negative or underdeveloped, but that to the extent a person inhabits a social milieu *without* quality religious models and positive institutional experiences, we might logically expect underdeveloped ideas about and negative attitudes toward Christianity or Christians, including apathy and detached religious nominalism. Along with under-exposure or narrow exposure, another consideration is exposure during childhood to negative parental or peer attitudes toward Christianity.

Ultimately, whatever familiarity or attitude a person may have about any given body of ideas, religious or not, must be seen to lie with the frequency and nature of all prior experiences and exposure; childhood, adolescence, parental socialization, and religious socialization are particularly crucial for the status of both of these (Argyle; Hood, Hill, and Spilka). Accordingly, unfamiliarity or pseudo-familiarity are more likely to characterize those raised in non-religious, explicitly atheistic, or nominally religious households.

Openness to Experience (34 of 111 cases; 30%)

This theme encompassed a person being willing to openly consider or explore the potential of Christian truth (i.e. to approach it as though it could be true), or the instance of realizing, and subsequently lowering, attitudinal barriers and volitional resistance to Christian beliefs and ideas. That is, this theme was characterized by the setting aside of reluctance and skepticism and engaging the actions, ideas, and experiences to which one was previously closed off. We found very forthcoming mentions of being deliberately closed off to Christianity or belief in God and subsequent resolutions to “give faith a try,” regarding the validity of Christian scriptures, church, and Christians themselves.

And one day, my sister had a conversation with me and got me thinking about the fact that I both decided I didn't believe in God and wasn't willing to even allow a possibility that he existed. I decided that I owed it to my wife and children to at least attempt, one more time, to see if God was out there. This time, rather than just read the scriptures and pray about it, I would actually try to live one commandment. Only one, and see what happened. This crazy thing happened. The promised blessings in the scriptures regarding this one principle actually came true. This seemed absurd to me. How did this happen? It must have been a coincidence.

There is a strong connection between Openness to Experience and what Lofland and Skonovd term “experimental conversions.” While their use of the word “experimental” focuses on the idea of “trying on” a different identity (i.e. an experience characterized by seeking and curiosity), the Openness to Experience content in our sample spoke more to *realization* of one's closed attitude than to curiosity per se, but is still consistent with both concepts, and is further consistent with spiritual seekership (see Warburg; Straus; Wuthnow 1998) and a gradual occurrence of conversion. Like Hardship, we see this kind of generic attitude or approach of openness as a facilitating or predisposing factor, that is, as a contextual factor that creates an increased possibility of belief change.

Authentic Example (32 of 111 cases; 28%)

This theme covered finding either Christianity or Christians to be authentic, typically by way of direct interpersonal experiences with (sometimes close) individuals, or groups (e.g., in church). For our purposes, *authentic* means approximately the same as “inspiring” or “impressive.” By way of analogy, the inverse of this theme might be thought of as *hypocrisy*, or rather, the deleterious effects of witnessing religious hypocrisy.

The love that my fellowship showed to me was a kind of love I had never seen before – not from my friends, not from my family. It's not a kind of love that is capable by human hands alone – and even if it was, it's not one that comes

easily. But for these people in my fellowship, there were no second thoughts and no contemplation of what reaching out to me and crying with me might do for their reputation, their busy schedule, or even their own emotional well-being. This was no “special event” for them. The choice to love was not one that required much thought or hesitation. Their only goal was to show wholehearted love to those who had otherwise made themselves unlovable – me.

Despite that they co-occurred in only 14% of 111 cases, in our view there is a large degree of conceptual linkage between Authentic Example and Unfamiliarity/Pseudo-familiarity. The primary fulcrum of their conceptual relation consists in how gaining new knowledge or experience can result in being inspired, impressed, and thus possibly motivated to learn more about Christianity or the lives of Christians. As such, even as they are conceptually distinct, it is likely that many instances of one theme would implicitly reflect the nature of the other.

Openness to Experience is also related to Authentic Example and Unfamiliarity or Pseudo-familiarity, insofar as these involve an attitudinal openness or willingness facilitated by personal experiences. Furthermore, to the extent that church attendance or reading the Bible impress or enlighten a person, Authentic Example and Unfamiliarity or Pseudofamiliarity also bear logical connections to Ritual Behaviors. Returning to Rauff’s (63) study on why unchurched believers returned to church, Rauff related a theme of “the influence of Christian people” (i.e., “the inspiration or influence of other persons who were religious and witnessed, either silently or verbally, to their faith”), which captures the essence of our theme of Authentic Example.

Religious Study (28 of 111 cases; 25%)

This theme represented engaging extra-biblical or non-biblical (i.e., non-Christian) religious ideas, including the writings of Christian theologians, and usually multiple non-Christian religious traditions (i.e., New Age, Pagan, Hinduism). Some narratives revealed deep and long exploration, sometimes for years, through various theologies, philosophies, and the study of both Christianity and other religions. Religious Study enabled, or was a part of, arriving at new ways of seeing things, a refinement of existing thought, or even the evolution and clarification of older perspectives.

So I began to search for meaning and for spirituality. First off, I began to look into New Age philosophy . . . I tried it out for a few months but this philosophy proved quickly to be wrong. Next, I turned to the philosophy behind the power of positive thinking. This belief says that you can have anything that you want in life if you can just think and visualize that it has already happened. I tried this out for a while and it did seem to bring me positive results. However, when I tried my new-found beliefs and it backfired while [gambling], that’s when I realized that this positive thinking thing wasn’t all it was made out to be . . . I continued to explore philosophies and religions, searching for the right one for me but I wasn’t finding anything that would stick. My search would continue for an additional five years. During those five years, I went from philosophy to philosophy and religion to religion, but I always found some kind of flaw in the belief system that I was researching.

Some study of religion occurred in a context of assessing the validity of Christian ideas, whether in and of themselves, or as compared with other spiritual traditions. Such study was also motivated by a desire to find peace, a sense of place or belonging, or a spiritual philosophy that most suited these individuals and gave them a pragmatic way to understand and approach the world. This can be conceptually linked to the influence to *Contra Atheism* (below). Insofar as the works of theologians like Aquinas, Augustine, Anselm, and Kierkegaard can be regarded as appealing to the intellect, Religious Study may also be tied to Intellectualism. Additionally, to the extent that Religious Study is motivated by search and quest, it might be characterized by Openness to Experience, especially as this could lead to “trying out” various Ritual Behaviors in the cases of some individuals. That is, seeking a reliable or coherent worldview or life philosophy could lead a person to attend a church service, read the Bible (as our narrators often did alongside non-Christian holy texts and material), or “experiment” with prayer or other forms of ritual activity.

Contra Atheism (27 of 111 cases; 24%)

Our least frequently occurring theme, *Contra Atheism*, represented a sense of anomie or being “ungrounded” in the larger scheme of existence. In such instances, atheism was sometimes explicitly connected with hopelessness, despair, or nihilism. In other cases, a person reported feeling empty, generally unsatisfied with life, or as lacking positive affect, without explicitly linking this to the fact that they were an atheist. We further observed reports of a vague feeling of having everything in life that could be desired but still feeling “empty inside,” that is, a sense that “something was missing.” Secular life was unfulfilling, and a secular worldview (that is, a lack of a substantive ideology or life philosophy) was less than intellectually or existentially satisfying. For others, a scientific worldview was found lacking, as it did not contain a defense against the effects of despair, death, or meaninglessness.

I was an atheist. I didn't believe in anything I couldn't see, and I was proud of my reasoning. But my life felt empty. There wasn't anything to fight for, everything was pointless. What do I strive for? Why should I care for someone, for something? I felt the world selfish and cold, and I was becoming so. Yet I went on, day by day, walking, but without a destination. I tried many hobbies, but was never interested in anything. I loved, but not with all my love. I cried, but not all my tears. In other words, I always felt things in half, everything missed something. I was missing myself.

We interpret *Contra Atheism* as essentially involving a problem of ultimate meaning in life. Accordingly, the opposite of this theme would be having a meaning system or existential anchor that provides life meaning, purpose, and perhaps a moral code, which all prevent existence from seeming arbitrary or not worthwhile. While some nonbelievers have such a meaning system (i.e., secular humanism), it was clear that a minority of our narrators did not.

Whether explicitly linking “worldviewlessness” to atheism or not, aspects of emptiness, purposelessness, or meaninglessness seemed to drive individuals to seek a more viable worldview, which connects this theme to Religious Study in the form of seeking and religious quest (Cook et al.). Relatedly, in Ganzevoort's use of narrative theory of crisis in connection with both belief and unbelief, encounter with crisis disrupts one's ability to use a personal frame of reference to make interpretations, and thus the ability to render life experiences

meaningful through a coherent integration of interlocking beliefs (Berger). Such a disruption can drive efforts to establish a functional and effective frame of reference. This is a very useful view to link atheist responses to Hardship events, as these events would appear to be especially consequential for those occupying a “non-position,” i.e., being without a worldview.

As a result, we regard Contra Atheism as highly interconnected to Hardship and suggest that Contra Atheism could, in some cases, be considered a special or distinct kind of Hardship. Some instances of Contra Atheism could be characterized as psychological issues from an *existential* standpoint (Exline). Often, the nature of experienced Hardships were, at that time in their lives, not perceived by narrators as amenable to material solutions (e.g., money, shelter, a job, or having more friends, romantic partners, or hobbies), and, in some cases, individuals tried various and alternate (i.e., non-religious or non-spiritual) solutions before turning to religious or spiritual solutions, sometimes quite reluctantly. In this way, Contra Atheism, like Hardship, would be tied to Ritual Behaviors.

General Discussion

Because we made use of a combined Results and Discussion section above, here we wish to briefly finalize our discussion with four insights pertaining to our findings. First, we suggested earlier that it was uncertain as to whether many of the findings in the extant literature on religious conversion would apply to atheists. We find that many, if not all, of our themes are located not only in the broader literature on religious conversion (i.e., religious switching, conversion from one religion to another), but are also echoed in the few existing studies that give us at least some insight into atheists coming to a belief in a god. Thus, as to our central question of how atheists become Christians, we can conclude that it is apparently for reasons or factors that also characterize changes in *religious* beliefs, allegiances, and identities within or between traditions. In other words, many of the same underlying or operative factors involved in changing religions or switching within-tradition are in effect when *religious* change for atheists is considered.

Second, the sequence and configuration of all factors that facilitate religious change for one individual are obviously unique to that person’s life. However, it is clear from examining our themes that their specific interaction is largely what facilitates the changes in question: not only are the proposed interconnections logically feasible, but very few of our cases appeared to be characterized by only one thematic influence. As a result, while a *limited* number of elements can be expected for any person’s overall case, there is virtually no limit to considerations of specific sequences and combinations of these elements. That is, each person’s personal history and trajectory possesses finite similarities (i.e., a certain and limited number of thematic elements) and virtually infinite differences (i.e., various sequences and combinations of these themes).

Third, our results endorse certain modern approaches to the study of religious conversion that are inductive and descriptive in nature; such approaches avoid the sequential or stage-based elements of previous approaches (Gooren; Rambo). This is an acknowledgment that general and universal conversion models have not worked well, due primarily to a nomothetic use of strict processes, sequential stages, or necessary, as opposed to sufficient, factors. Notably, the approaches of Gooren and Rambo are closer to models or frameworks (Fisher), as opposed to formal theories, and contain the analytic flexibility required to address the

considerable variation found among religious conversions. This would include a regard for how a person changes *from* and *to* a given position.

Lastly, and consistent with Emmons and Paloutzian's proposed multilevel interdisciplinary paradigm, our results suggest that social scientific understandings of religious conversion should seek to make simultaneous use of multiple theoretical perspectives originating from general domains in psychology, cultural anthropology, and sociology (see van Belzen). Such an approach would see researchers selectively draw upon and combine applicable frameworks to examine how *combinations* and *interactions* of factors (i.e., themes and specific sequences) work in conjunction to produce conversion outcomes across a variety of contextual considerations (i.e., historical period, culture, geopolitical locale, social class, ethnicity, etc.).

Future Research and Limitations

Because interviews may produce different outcomes than open-source narrative text,⁴ the 10 themes can be assessed in a confirmatory fashion in future research by allowing respondents to gauge whether these themes and their descriptions adequately capture their own conversion experiences (e.g., Colaizzi's method; see Morrow, Rodriguez, and King). Importantly, interviews could be accompanied by a survey design. Furthermore, those raised with nominal Christian backgrounds should be expected to differ from those who grow up as atheists; that is, one can be raised with no theistic perspective, or one can come to reject the beliefs of their upbringing later in life. A superior methodology might seek to investigate the consequences of this distinction in follow-up studies. Future research may also seek to employ a framework where emergent themes are considered for how they may exert *push* (negative) and *pull* (positive) influences on individuals, as this would be consistent with other viable approaches to religious change that consider the mechanics of preferences, constraints, resources, and personal choices (Sherkat and Wilson).

A number of limitations apply to our study. First, there is a concern about identity status. Atheists tend to be younger in age and, given adolescence and young adulthood as times of identity formation, change, and flux, those who are atheists during this time may inhabit a period of *identity moratorium* (i.e., those who are currently exploring identity options but as of yet have no enduring commitments). We cannot be sure that the narrators only temporarily considered themselves as atheists during what was otherwise a period of religious doubt between two phases of possessing a belief in God. A solution to this issue might be to ask future interview respondents about the specific character, nature, certainty, and timing of their prior atheist period. Critically, how and why a person is an atheist to begin with needs to be captured and related to any subsequent transition to a different identity or set of beliefs.

Second, open-source qualitative analysis does not allow for additional or directed questions. It also does not allow for collecting demographics (Lee; Knight, Woods, and Jindra)

⁴ At the time of our writing, Ph.D. candidate Jana Harmon defended her dissertation, entitled "Religious Conversion of Atheists to Christianity in Contemporary Western Culture," at the University of Birmingham's (UK) Department of Theology and Religion. Though this work has not been released as of yet, in personal communication with her we were told that many of our insights and findings were replicated in her work, which was completed through 50 digital and face-to-face interviews with atheists-turned-Christians.

and previous work has suggested gender to be an interesting variable while studying atheists (Schnabel et al.). Third, our analysis cannot address the larger structural or contextual social forces in play which may increase the probability of atheist-to-Christian conversions. It is a foregone certainty that conversion processes would work differently across different cultures (Henrich, Heine, and Norenzayan), if the concept of “conversion” would even apply to certain religions or have currency in certain cultures (Hefner; Percy).

Fourth, the design of our study inherently emphasizes self-reported behaviors, and there are at least two problems with this. The first involves recall error and retroactive identity construction via biographical narrative: people may remember themselves and their histories as they wish and not as these actually were, particularly if they join a religious organization that contains a predetermined salvation narrative learned by converts during induction. The second problem is widely known in general psychology: people are often not fully aware of the factors influencing their behavior. Rational or at least *conscious* reasons tend to be emphasized, when it would probably be more accurate to describe this as “rationalization” of what are otherwise unknown or unrecognized causal influences on behavior (Bargh and Chartrand). While we are given some degree of confidence by the fact that our findings are reflected in previous research, both of these methodological problems underscore the need to very cautiously interpret self-reports and personal narratives, and themes resulting from such methods should be viewed provisionally, especially given the under-researched status of our topic.

Conclusion

Schoenrade said that “the challenge of all such attempts to map out conversion experience must be ‘equal to the challenges of extreme variation in circumstance’” (239). This statement perfectly applies to our current foray into how atheists become Christians. We find that many, if not all, of our themes are represented in a great deal of other studies on religious conversion, and even in the few previous studies involving atheists. Our suggested approach to religious experience coincides with the more modern inductive and descriptive approaches, and does not take aim with the precision found in formal theorization, yet is still analytically useful. When we break down conversion experiences into patterns of recurring elements, we can engage an interdisciplinary effort to employ theories that link these elements together and explain how one theme can possibly be related to, or lead to, another in a sequence specific not only to each person’s biographical narrative, but one that accounts for the specificities of time and place as well.

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