

Stepping Out: Narratives of Former Fundamentalist Christians

By

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Thesis Abstract

Fundamentalist churches are unlike most mainstream forms of Christianity because of the elevated level of encapsulation these groups attempt to instill in their members. Encapsulation leads individuals to develop closely held identities that strongly impact their everyday lives. When an individual exits a fundamentalist group they enter a process through which their identity is transformed. This transformation occurs throughout a number of stages which appear to be similar to those leaving other encapsulating groups, such as orthodox Jewish communities. The process begins with the defector recognizing holes in the sacred canopy their church has wrapped them in, and ends with a complete transformation of identity.

Table of Contents

Title Page	i
Acceptance page	ii
Abstract	iii
Table of contents	iv
Stepping Out: Narratives of Former Fundamentalist Christians	1
Introduction	1
The Life World of Fundamentalist Christians	3
Methods	6
Tears in the Sacred Canopy	9
Exposure to the Secular World	10
Secular Media	10
Going Away to College	12
Family Discord	13
Hypocrisy within the Church	14
First Transgressions	16
Skipping Church	17
Secular Friends	18
Reactions to First Transgressions	19
Passing	21
Between Two Worlds	21
Stepping Out	22
Life after Leaving Fundamentalism	23
Feelings of Loss	23
The Past Stays with You	25
Conclusion	26
References	2

Stepping Out: Narratives of Former Fundamentalist Christians

Introduction

The sociology of religion prior to the 1970s was dominated by the secularization thesis, which suggests that the influence of religion would inevitably decrease in modern societies. Proponents of the secularization thesis included Emile Durkheim, Max Weber, Peter Berger, as well as many others, whose work remains influential to the sociology of religion today. Berger argued that as the number of religious choices increased each religion would appear less compelling; because to laymen the distinctions between groups might appear arbitrary, leading to a feeling of apathy about the choice (Berger, 1967). However, Mary Jo Neitz challenged this dominant hypothesis about secularization in *Charisma and Community*, which reframed much of the discourse in the sociology of religion. Her research suggested that joining a church was the result of rational choices that shaped the social reality of those who became members. Contrary to Berger's ideas about religion in pluralistic societies, Neitz suggested that consciously choosing a religion strengthened one's attachment to it, rather than undermining its legitimacy.

In the 1970s sociologists of religion continued to study secularization even as a plethora of new religious movements arrived to the U.S. from the eastern world. These groups provided researchers with the opportunity to study a variety of religious experiences. Students of religion studied who joins these groups and how do they account for their joining. The articles written at this time covered a range of movements such as the Levites of Utah (Baer 1978), UFO cults (Balch, 1979; Balch and Taylor, 1978), and the Moonies (Barker, 1981; Bromley, 1979). These studies yielded a number of process models of conversion which attempted to diagram how

people come to join a religious group. Subsequently there were articles comparing these models, attempting to see which was more accurate.

Although the topic of conversion has been covered extensively, few have looked at those who leave religious groups. The first full-length sociological study on exiting these communities was written in 1989 by Janet Jacobs. Titled *Divine Disenchantment*, Jacobs' book studied individuals who left religious groups in which a charismatic leader was the central focus. Jacobs discovered that members often left because their relationship with the group leader deteriorated. Those who left had to redefine their social reality in order to bring it in line with the world outside their group. This reconfiguration is a fundamental aspect of all identity transformations; which means that her findings can be applied to a variety of groups such as LGBT individuals coming out, or those who go through a divorce.

Following Jacobs' book, there were no other major studies of the process of exiting a religious community until 2014, when Lynn Davidman published *Becoming Un-Orthodox: Stories of ex-Hasidic Jews*. Davidman interrogated the difficult, often painful, steps involved in defecting from an insular ultra-Orthodox community. She adapted Berger's idea of the sacred canopy, "the overarching shelter enclosing and securing a religious community's way of life and shielding its boundaries from outside intrusions," (29) to describe how her respondents came to experience tears in this canopy. Davidman began with stories of childhood experiences that led to "tears in the sacred canopy," (Davidman, 2014) reference to the variety of factors defectors reported that conflicted with their communities' ideals and their personal lives. These tears in the tightly woven fabric of the community's way of life provided an opening for these individuals to question the taken for granted social reality of their religious group.

The work of Davidman and Jacobs are the rare exceptions to a lack of scholarly attention to deconversion. This paper builds upon their work by focusing on those who leave fundamentalist Christianity. My study analyzes the exit narratives of fundamentalist Christians in order to trace the processes through which these defectors left their religious communities. Those who exit fundamentalist churches undergo a transformation of identity that involves a series of five steps similar to those outlined for the ultra-Orthodox defectors in Davidman's book. First, the individual experiences tears in their sacred canopy. Second, they begin to test the boundaries of their world by breaking the rules of their organization; at first this will occur in secret, as the individual continues to try to pass as a member of the group. Passing is the third stage, during this period defectors navigate between two identities, trying to appear as if they are still members of their fundamentalist group while covertly subverting the group's established rules. At some point, the exiter will stop trying to pass and step out, entering the fourth stage wherein the defector leaves the church or group in a visible way. Finally, once outside the church, defectors often find that they retain remnants of their past which manifest in various ways, such as in a feeling of loss or aversion to groups like their church. These steps proceed chronologically and sometimes simultaneously throughout the process. By tracing the path of fundamentalist defectors, this paper adds to the body of work on identity change, as well as the under-developed field of disaffiliation.

The Life World of Fundamentalist Christians

The process of leaving a fundamentalist church requires a change in identity. In order to understand how the transformation process occurs, it is useful to look at how these groups keep their members apart from the mainstream society. In his article "Social Cocoons: Encapsulating

and Identity Transformation” Greil uses the term encapsulation to describe a high levels of physical, social and ideological boundaries maintained by strict religious groups (1984). A high level of physical encapsulation is present when all members of a group live in close proximity and are instructed to avoid going to places where they will encounter non-members, or where they may be exposed to media representing the ideas of those outside the group. Social Encapsulation is the extent to which individuals interact with people outside their group, someone with a high amount would almost never interact with non-members. Ideological encapsulation refers to the level of exposure a group member has with ideas from outside of the group’s paradigm. Greil identifies institutions with high expectations for their members as identity transformation organizations (ITOs), because the commitment these groups evoke in their members leads to a change in identity, both upon entering the group, and leaving.

The impact of ITOs is illustrated by the experiences of Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) members. Greil wrote about AA groups to show how high levels of social encapsulation can exist even without a high level of physical encapsulation (1984). AA members are similar to the fundamentalist Christians I interviewed in that they live in a world full of non-members. Both AA and Christian fundamentalists maintain a high level of social encapsulation by encouraging members to spend less time with people outside the group. When an individual decreases her/his exposure to competing paradigms by increasing time spent with his/her group they are in a state of ideological encapsulation.. This expectation of intense commitment from congregants is one way Fundamentalist churches are unlike most mainstream forms of Christianity.

Focusing on fundamentalist defectors, as opposed to anyone who was raised Christian and left, is an essential distinction. Strict religious groups instill in their members an identification with the church that is un-paralleled in more open institutions by treating

“members of the mainstream religion from which it is derived as faithless apostates” (Herriot, 2007), a statement that reinforces ideological encapsulation. Studying the transition out of fundamentalist churches can provide insights not only into those who leave religious groups but to people exiting any highly bounded organization, such as the military, or an enclave community. An individual’s intense connection with a particular organization sets the stage for the identity transformation that occurs when she/he exits by influencing the degree to which they identify with their group. If an individual did not initially identify with the church, leaving would not result in a transformation process; the individual already had a strong sense of identity.

Strict Christian groups form congregations that are highly encapsulating, in an effort to keep out the secularizing forces of modern life. Fundamentalism may be defined in a number of ways, but for the purpose of this study, I have chosen to adapt the definition of Almond et.al. “a discernable pattern of religious militancy by which self-styled ‘true believers’ attempt to arrest the erosion of religious identity, fortify the borders of the religious community, and create viable alternatives to secular institutions and behaviors” (Almond, Appleby & Sivan, 17). All my respondents told me they were brought up in this type of community. The groups my interviewees left were ones that had set up high boundaries in order “to arrest the erosion of religious identity.” They came from different denominations of Christianity, which emphasized different rituals, rules, and expectations of their members.. Each institution attempted to retain members by encouraging frequent attendance, social isolation outside of the group, and the belief that their church’s Truth was the singular way to be saved.

Despite the significant attempts of strict churches, modern life often impedes congregants’ devotion, as people commonly need to work or attend schools in which they were

surrounded by non-members. Frequent attending the group's activities increases physical encapsulation, but this does not approximate the kind of enclave society Davidman describes in her book. Churches are unable to completely seclude their members although their leaders advise adherents to avoid socializing with people outside the group, except for the purposes of converting new souls. All outsiders, including Christians from other churches or denominations, were considered potentially polluting. This belief served to keep members away from ideas that might contradict the church's teachings. By this means, they reinforced members' mental barriers against unacceptable ideas.

Although each church sought a high level of commitment, some individuals in my study had been more devoted than others. Members' variations in commitment was shaped by the extent of their family's ability to encapsulate their children. One example of the way families separated themselves from the world was by teaching their children to avoid secular media. All of the people in this study came from churches that expected members to limit their exposure to outside influences; the parent's success in doing so shaped the communities abilities to establish boundaries around its members. Protection from secular forces could include limiting access to media or sending children to private Christian schools or homeschooling them.

Methods

I interviewed fifteen individuals who identified as a former fundamentalist or conservative Christians. Participants were recruited through posters, as well as through snowball sampling. The interviews took place in private, either in the sociology department of the University of Kansas or via Skype as per the preference of the participant. To retain the privacy of my participants, pseudonyms have been given to those mentioned in this paper. The ages of

my participants ranged from twenty one-sixty seven; the majority were between twenty five and thirty five. My sample contains twelve women and three men. It is hard to say whether this four to one ratio distorts my findings, although I found the stories of men and women did not differ any more between the two groups than they did within the groups. One-third of my participants identified as gay or bisexual. LGBT identities emerged as a factor related to their defection in a few of the narratives. Gay rights, such as same-sex marriage, was often influential even in the lives of those who did not identify as gay or bisexual. By becoming friendly with someone who was gay, non-gay defectors supported gay rights within the church. Whether being gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgendered led to different narrative accounts of exiting I would need a significantly larger sample. It was clear my respondents had changed their earlier stances on LGBT rights and same sex marriage.

My pilot study has several limitations that prevent me from making generalizations based on this data. One important factor is that whites are overrepresented in the sample; thirteen of my interviewees identified as Caucasian, while the remaining two identified as African American or Hispanic. Additionally, all of my participants had at least some college education, most had a bachelor's degree or were currently enrolled in a four year degree program. This over-representation of white, educated individuals is likely due to my recruitment method, as I drew upon people in a college town in the Midwest. Recent Pew research ([Pew Forum](#)) indicates that a majority of disaffiliated/Atheist individuals are white, therefore the overrepresentation of white people in my sample is not disproportionate relative to the population. In addition, in the United States the higher a person's level of education the less likely they are to identify with a religion (Lynn, et al. 2009), so here too my sample may be representative of a larger population of defectors.

My interviews lasted at least an hour and a half, and most went over two hours. These long interviews allowed me to co-construct full and nuanced narratives with my participants. My interviewing style was developed from the literature on narrative methodology (Eakins, 1999), which emphasizes co-creating narratives with interviewees by encouraging them to address each question in terms of their own set of concern with their story. My use of narrative methodology encouraged participants to co-create rich stories about their lives, providing me with the opportunity to develop an in-depth analyses.

As a fundamentalist defector myself, I understood a lot of what was being told to me without needing to probe further. However I often asked participants to elaborate on subjects I felt familiar with to ensure we had the same understanding. I did not reveal my own history to any of my participants until after the interview, to ensure that their knowledge of me did not shape their answers. My own experience of leaving fundamentalist Christianity was always present for me during my interviews. Many of the stories I heard reminded me of my own. In order to understand respondents' stories on their own terms I did my best to bracket my own feeling and experiences. My ability to remain conscious of what I took for granted because of my fundamentalist background was greatly aided by my advisor, Lynn Davidman, as she was able to catch instances where I used concepts that were unclear to those outside of fundamentalist Christianity.

I recorded my interviews and later analyzed the narratives of my participants by taking extensive notes on each recording and then locating the common themes in their stories. This technique, which allows the theoretical framework to be shaped by the data, is often referred to as a grounded theory approach (Charmaz, 2006). By using this approach, the narratives themselves formed the analytic and conceptual framework for this research.

Tears in the Sacred Canopy

Strict religious communities provide a sacred canopy that holds members of the group together, and establishes boundaries between members and all outsiders. This Canopy serves as a shelter for the religious community's beliefs and practices, which allows the congregants to take their church's social reality for granted. When a community's metanarrative is accepted by all members, its leaders present their teachings as unquestioned Truths for all to follow, despite the lack of certitude among some congregants.

Some ex's reported early experiences in their lives that led them to question the community's taken for granted realities. Their narratives depicted a wide range of experiences that predisposed them to question their religious beliefs, such as exposure to the secular world through forbidden media, or having a family that deviated from the group's norms, lead my respondents feel marginal. They began to see tiny holes in the sacred canopy enclosing and sheltering members of their group. The themes that arose in their narratives resembled those found by Lynn Davidman in her work on Orthodox Jewish defectors.

Exposure to the secular world can take place through interviewee's experiences in school. Public high schools were often places in which my participants found themselves surrounded by those outside their religious groups; making them aware of the existence of other religious points of view as well as exposing them to the secular world. One-third of the Parents' were so fearful that their children would stray, if exposed to outside influences, they chose to send their children to private Christian schools, or homeschooled them.. Regardless of respondent's high school education, all of my participants said attending college, including Christian ones, provided them

with exposure to the secular world. ; . At college they came to understand the concept of relativity, which deepened their questions about the truth of their own religious communities.

A second childhood experience that led young fundamentalist Christians to question their faith was family discord. Parent's divorcing, or breaking other community norms confused their children and led them to question which parent was the right kind of Christian. Similarly, respondents reported that a parents' leaving the Church community, exposed them to tears in their sacred canopies. In the most tragic cases, verbal, sexual and physical abuse by caregivers led vulnerable young children to question their community's taken for granted realities.

A third category involved the hypocrisy my respondents perceived among leaders of their congregation. Interviewees described irregularities in the way officials handled scandal such as the pastor protecting abusers or passively ignoring abuse. In other cases leaders of the church were actively involved in situations my participants believed to be counter to the lesson's the leader taught. Those in leadership positions are expected to be morally pure by t their congregations; any incident in which church leaders were seen to violate their church's teaching created another rip in the fabric of the fundamentalist canopy.

Exposure to the Secular World

Secular media

My participants differed substantially in their exposure to the outside world during childhood. Some of those I interviewed were allowed to view secular media, but only if pre-approved by parents, while others were denied access to mainstream media altogether.

Louise:

“We had pretty strict rules about what we could watch on TV. I basically watched what my sisters watched and my sisters watched what my mother allowed.”

“My mother wouldn’t allow us to watch Smurfs or Rainbow Bright... The Smurfs looked like little demons to my mother.”

Louise’s television watching was limited; her mother would not allow her daughters to watch anything she had not previously screened, although Louise did not always understand why certain shows were forbidden. Like my other respondents I spoke to, Louise talked about the seemingly arbitrary choices their parents made about what was or was not permitted. Louise was told that the Smurfs were too demonic looking, and Rainbow Bright was banned because her mother believed rainbows were a symbol of the occult. Louise held to the restrictions her mother placed on her until she was 16.

“16... driving my car, I started listening to the oldies station”

Louise began consuming various forms of secular media by starting with music she enjoyed. As she went on she continued to explore many secular forms of entertainment, which lead to further doubts, and widened the holes she saw in her group’s sacred canopy. In her mid-twenties Louise started to watch PBS programs explaining evolution.

“I hadn’t been exposed to the actual evolutionary theories. My exposure to evolution had been from a religious perspective, which is crazy. So I think once I decided I’m going to give this stuff

a look, despite my nagging Christian conscience telling me to distrust everything that was being said. Once I started paying attention I thought, oh it's not hard to put this stuff together."

Fundamentalist Christian churches disagree with the theory of evolution because they believe in a literal interpretation of the Bible in which the earth was created in 7 days, 6,000 years ago. Louise had lived into her mid-twenties without ever thinking about evolution, although she had stopped attending church in her late teens. Ultimately it was her exposure to secular media that dissolved her belief in creationism.

Going Away to College

University attendance increased the degree of freedom for all of my participants, however it was particularly powerful for those who had not before experienced any major tears in their sacred canopy. For those who grew up in a highly encapsulated religious group the move to campus initiated a profound questioning of their world views. Their new found freedom in college made some feel lost. This was particularly true for Colleen, a highly encapsulated pastor's daughter.

Colleen:

"I am not going to go to hell for swearing? What the hell is this?"

Before she attended college, Colleen went to a private Christian high school, in which she had few chances to experience the secular world; her parents strictly regulated her activities. Leaving home for college immediately exposed Colleen to a radically unfamiliar world.

Colleen's roommates at college, one of whom was not a Christian, frequently broke basic rules of Christianity. Colleen was shocked to find that her roommates seemed to be able to swear, dress immodestly, and have sex all without being struck down by God. Colleen had not met people like this before. At the private Christian school she attended students who violated even basic rules, such as skipping church or smoking, would have been expelled immediately.

At College, Colleen met others with alternative understandings of the meaning of being a Christian. Among these new acquaintances was Colleen's first gay friend, who came out to her in secret. This was a powerful moment for Colleen, who told me she had struggled with her own sexuality for years. Although she sensed as a child that she was bisexual, she suppressed these desires which were explicitly forbidden by her church. Building a friendship with a gay man opened Colleen's eyes to the infinite ways people can construct their own lives sans church restriction.

Family Discord

For young fundamentalists the exposure of a parent's wrongdoing—such as infidelity, drunk driving or abuse -- can be devastating. These transgressions were particularly devastating when they led to divorce and the breakdown of the family; the fundamental building block of the Church. Such experiences often served as the tear in the sacred canopy that bound together my interviewees, their families and community.

Amy:

"I was paranoid all the time about being in the house alone with him"

When Amy was 8, Child Protective Services removed her and her step-siblings from their home. At the time, Amy was young and no one explained to her what was happening. Eventually Amy's step-siblings, who were in their mid-teens, were put into foster care while Amy was returned home to her parents. When Amy returned she found that her father had lost his church membership and would no longer be allowed to attend services. Amy had no idea why she and her siblings were taken away or what had happened with her father.

After donating a large sum of money to the church, her father was reinstated as a member and life went on as usual. Since then Amy felt other members of the church looked at her family differently, making it difficult for her to make friends. Years later Amy saw her step-sister again and learned what had happened: Amy's father had been molesting her step-sister for years. With this knowledge Amy's view of her father changed; she began to fear him and could no longer respect him as a moral authority. Amy became afraid to be alone in the house with her dad; she suddenly understood why people seemed to avoid her family. Amy's opinion of her mother also changed: *"My mother claimed my sister seduced him but my sister was nine at the time."*

As is often the case, her mother had been aware of her daughter's sexual abuse and ignored it. When Amy talked to her mother about the incident, her mother actively defended her father. Knowing that the group leaders reaccepted her father because of a donation he'd made, diminished their authority in Amy's eyes. Not only did the incident affect Amy's perception of the group and her parents, she experienced profound social isolation. Amy's lack of social ties diminished her social encapsulation making her less bonded to her church community.

Hypocrisy within the Church

When the leaders of a group failed to live up to the standards they set for their followers, believers were forced to reconcile the dissonance between what they felt is right and their devotion to the church. For some, this leads to a hole in the sacred canopy too great to ignore.

Sarah:

“One of the children’s ministers was inappropriately touching people regularly.”

Sarah was devoted to her church until she was 16 years old. She had attended four times a week, at one point she quit a job because it interfered with her church participation. She had volunteered for the children’s ministry and gave donations; anything she was asked to do she did. However, when Sarah was 16 she discovered that one of the youth ministers was touching teenagers in the church inappropriately, she explained that her church taught her not to talk about such things because talking about negative feelings or fears would *“speak them into being.”* As Christians they should only talk about the good aspects of life. It wasn’t until months after Sarah learned her youth minister had molested other teens that her mother learned about the abuse of other children. Sarah’s mother reacted by removing both Sarah and her older sister from the church. Sarah did not want to leave and argued with her mother. After her mom promised to take them to another place of worship on Sundays she agreed. The trouble was, having been a devoted member of her previous group Sarah had learned to judge other denominations harshly, making it hard for her to become a part of other organizations. Her difficulties in finding a compatible church and maintaining her beliefs was exacerbated when she entered college and met several people who interpreted the Bible differently than she had been taught.

It is not uncommon for multiple tears to occur along a defectors path out of a fundamentalist world view and way of life. Tears in the scared canopy often led my respondents to a perceived discontinuity between the world and their church. A tear is the first step in the long, painful and challenging process of defection. Having experienced that tear, however, my respondents became predisposed to question their lives in fundamentalist communities. Those I spoke with eventually became unable to retain their faith, although many of them had tried, knowing their lives would be simpler if they remained in their fundamentalist communities. The tears were too great, too frequent and too incomprehensible to be ignored by my interviewees. Their Search for a new church community to go on Sundays was rarely successful; only one in five of my sample affiliated with a new church. The reason many ex-fundamentalists gave for having trouble finding a new place was that their pastors had often taught them to be critical of other brands of Christianity. Others reported that they could not bring themselves to believe in God again after their initial break with their church

First Transgressions

In our conversations, respondents told me that once they had seen the tears in the sacred canopy and began questioning their church, they were unable to find satisfying answers within their group. Their questioning intensified; and they began to feel too restricted by their community's guidelines and practices. My respondents told me of various rules they began to break as their rebellion grew more intense. My respondents told me their transgression were a means of wresting control away from their families and communities and gaining more power over their own lives. They told me about testing the waters, to see if they would be caught or punished, as they had been socialized to believe. They appeared to be full of pride when they

told me about these acts of defiance. This way of speaking about transgressions is quite similar to the way Davidman's Orthodox Jewish defectors spoke about their first sins: they served as a means of testing the world to see if their violations would bring God's punishments upon them (2014).

All of my interviewees transgressed in a number of ways: they watched secular media, made friends outside the church and skipped church services. Each of these transgressions undermined some forms of their churches' encapsulating efforts. By watching and reading secular media, members broke their ideological encapsulation. Similarly, making friends with non-Church members diminished their social encapsulation. They violated their ideological encapsulation because their new friends introduced the ex's to new ideas. Their physical encapsulation was broken when they skipped church attendance. My respondents' accounts revealed that breaking the rules and escaping their group's encapsulation often involved more than one type of transgression: for example, by skipping church transgressors were also increasing the amount of time spent with other group members, and missing the pastor's sermons, avoiding his weekly talks threatening hellfire and brimstone.

Skipping Church

Carol:

“People would say thing like ‘we miss you’ but not in a ‘we miss you’ way, more like a ‘where the fuck were you.’”

Interviewees told me when they were young, they generally attended church three or four times a week. As they came to church less regularly, others members often saw their lack of presence as a symptom that their devotion to the church might be waning. Sometimes members of the community asked them to “put the kingdom first;” their absence raised concerns about their eternal souls. My interviewees all told me that they reached a point when they stopped going to church altogether.

For Carol, it was one of her first disputes with the church that prompted her to stop attending Church services. She recounted that in her late teens she began to attend a church that required members to attend church services and activities four to six times a week. There was almost always something going on in the church for members to attend. Carol tried to make every service, attending more frequently than her parents. As time went on, and Carol began devoting time to school, she allowed herself to miss a service or two per week. Her absence was immediately noticed and concerned members of the church began asking her where she had been suggesting that she might need to reprioritize her life. Although Carol understood their concerns, she herself preferred to attend events at school where she joined a theatre group and began to make non-Christian friends. Her time outside the church clarified for her that she preferred a secular life, further tearing the sacred canopy protecting her from secularizing influences.

Secular Friends

Most of those I interviewed met their first non-fundamentalist friend in their public high school or at college, even if they attended Christian college. These friends served as ambassadors to the world outside their church. In their narratives the defectors told me they ceased to believe

that secular people, even those who lived lives that clearly violated the church's views, would ultimately be in deep trouble with god

Rebecca:

“He seemed to be embodying the lessons of Christianity better than the people in my church”

One example of friendship pulling a member out of church came from Rebecca. Rebecca's journey out of Christianity came after a long period of being single. After searching for years to find a partner within the church, she began to believe that her excess weight made her unattractive to the men in her community. Finally Rebecca turned to an online dating site to find a partner, trying to find one who was Christian but ultimately choosing a man who wasn't. At first Rebecca kept her relationship a secret from her church friends, fearing their disapproval. When she finally did introduce her new boyfriend to members of her church community many of her friends treated him with disdain. The disapproval of her friends drove Rebecca to focus her attention on her new boyfriend, thus removing her energy from the church. Rebecca came to feel that her partner, who was kind and compassionate, better exemplified the lessons of Christianity than the members of her church who had treated her boyfriend with condescension.

Reactions to First Transgressions

Several of my respondents told me that even when they still identified as Christians, they transgressed frequently or broke large taboos, resulting in feeling fear and self-loathing. Amy exemplifies this point.

Amy

“I pretty much came to terms with the fact that I was a bad person, and I was on Satan’s side and we were going to lose.”

Amy, like some other respondents, felt guilty about her transgressions and felt they signified that she was *“a bad person.”* She and others like her felt as if their desire to transgress was an essential part of who they were, which they could not change. For many, the feeling that something was wrong with them often resulted from, and increased their doubts about, their religion. For Amy, her search to discover how she fit into the world became more important than religious beliefs and practices. Her transgressions were a way of testing the boundaries of her faith. With a friend, another member of her church with a worldly parent, she began to seek out all the taboos they had been told about were forbidden. They purchased an Ouija board and tried to speak with spirits, they visited houses that people claimed were haunted, and tried to worship Satan. Amy said in this period of her life, when she was about sixteen or seventeen, she sought to test the truth of what she had been taught about the devil, and whether or not he actually existed. She knew that if she continued to believe, her life would be simpler: she felt if she could verify the existence of the devil it would imply the existence of God and help her maintain her faith. Failing to find the devil led to a great rip in her sacred canopy, the last major tear before she left the church altogether. As Amy continued to she went into the world outside her Church, breaking the bounds of the ideological encapsulation that was an essential part of her religious upbringing. Her exposure to new ideas helped her frame her post-church life, something she eagerly sought.

Passing

Between Two worlds

Amy continued to transgress frequently and felt she was no longer a good Christian. Inside her parent's home, however, she continued to act as the religious girl she had been raised to be. She began passing back and forth between her secular world and the religious one of her parents and community. Passing is a way people who no longer identified with their upbringing, such as LGBT's, negotiated passage between their former world and the new ones they found so compelling. Similarly, this term was used by Davidman to describe Orthodox Jews who transgress outside their community boundaries but within them, they continued to present themselves as religious. It was quite difficult for them to actually leave; they lacked resources, they feared losing their families and they lacked knowledge of the secular world. The stage of passing is a liminal one, in which those who eventually defected moved back and forth between two worlds.

For several of my participants passing was made simpler because they underwent the bulk of their transition outside their childhood home, in a place geographically separate from their church and family, usually on a college campus. While away, these individuals could openly explore a secular identity without fear of reprisal. Upon returning home however, many felt the need to continue to present themselves to their parents and community as "good Christians." They understood that their coming out as non-Christian, or as a non-fundamentalist, would result in their parent's disapproval, or lead their parents to dis-own them. Their financial dependence on their families made it hard to risk these relationships. Fear of an authority's

reactions often led individuals to continue to pass as a fundamentalist Christian by lying about their church attendance and whether they prayed. They never told their families whether they were following the rule to be celibate until marriage.

Colleen spoke of her experience of passing as follows:

“I created two personas; the persona I am for school and the one my parents think I am.”

Even after Colleen left home to attend college and began her transition out of fundamentalism, she continued to return home over the holiday and summer breaks. She felt she had no choice in this matter, because she lacked the resources and opportunity to go elsewhere. She had become completely different from the person she had been socialized to be: a devoted Christian woman. When she was with her family Colleen played down her new ideas and the new ways of life she was learning in college.

This passing stage may stretch out for months or years. Living between two worlds often continued until some precipitating event brought the passing stage to a close. For many this moment occurred after a confrontation between the exiter and family members, or because a church leader gave the individual an ultimatum. For others, the passing stage ends as soon as they are able to afford to live outside their parents’ home, since prior to this they need to pass in order to sustain their needs.

Stepping Out

For many of my participants defecting created tension between them and their families; parents often disowned children, or discouraged their choice. This tension exacerbates the challenges of leaving. Many also found themselves without any of their church friends, as these

people frequently broke contact after the defector left. My interviewees told me that during this period they often felt isolated and depressed, left to sort out their lives alone.

Life after Leaving Fundamentalism

Leah

“You are basically walking away from everything you’ve known.”

Leah left fundamentalism shortly after graduating from college, and found herself separated from the only social context she knew, her church. Leaving behind a familiar world for the unexplored universe beyond is often just as terrifying as it is exciting. My conversation partners found it difficult to leave friends and family to plunge headlong into another world. Exiting led them to unfamiliar territory where they had to catch up with the knowledge of those who had been secular all their lives. This was particularly difficult for those who had been thoroughly encapsulated. Those who had no access to popular television shows and music, for example, found themselves without the cultural capital to make friends.

The transition out of their encapsulated communities was easier for those who found a new reference group. Those who had met and created friendships with secular people during their transitional period, had more support after their exit. Those who left suddenly, or without having spent time in the secular world, often experienced isolation and longer periods of emotional distress.

Feelings of Loss

Outside their familiar church communities, defectors had to forge new identities for themselves. Those who found themselves lacking in social capital often had particularly difficult

times navigating who they were in the larger secular society. Many respondents described how difficult it had been for them to be in a world in which they did not have a purpose, since they were raised to feel they had a clear part in God's plans. Many of my interviewees spoke of feeling a painful sense of loss upon leaving their church; they were leaving behind a world that had made them feel they were part of something greater. This was especially true for the majority of my respondents who had grown up in strict communities that raised children to believe that individuals were nothing without God.

Lilah:

“When your identity is so caught up in your religion, when you step out you don't know who you are. I always knew I was going to be a prophet but no one cares about that now, welcome to the real world, no one cares that you are a prophet.”

Lilah was told from a young age that she was going to be a prophet, someone who could look into people's eyes and tell them what God had in store for them. Lilah went to a Bible college that taught her how to hone this skill and for a number of years she regularly travelled to different Churches so she could prophesize to their members. After a series of personal tragedies the tears in her sacred canopy became too numerous for her to stay. She left, although stepping out for her meant leaving behind more than my other interviewees. Leaving required her to give up her sense of purpose in life, and a specific vocation she had been training for since she was a child.

Those I spoke to filled the gap in their lives in a number of ways. Most came to terms with the idea that there was no God-created plan, and so they focused instead on making the world a better place. They talked about trying to be a good person, which most defined as being kind to others, and caring for those around them. Most ascribed this philosophy to the church in one way or another, saying it was extracted from what they believed to be the essence of Christianity, a call to love one another.

The Past Stays with You

Unlike those who convert into a religion, for whom there is a set script to follow, those who exit fundamentalist, or strictly Orthodox religious communities, felt they were “scriptless.” (Davidman, 2007). My respondents, like Davidman’s, described exiting completely structured lives and entering a world in which nothing was familiar and they had no distinct sense of purpose. . Those who leave must find their own ways to unlearn the beliefs and embodied practices that were engrained in them as children. Although they felt they had completely left their former lives behind, they told me stories about occasions in which their old habits and beliefs emerged without warning. Many still had difficulty learning to be comfortable around scantily clad women, hearing others swear, or using the name of Jesus Christ as an expletive. One woman told me that for years after she left Fundamentalism, every time she heard someone say “Jesus Christ!” she would be filled with fear and anger. Her reaction reveals how deeply ingrained early socialization can be. Some of my conversation partners spoke about how they retained philosophies of life they had learned from Christianity, such as the call to love their neighbors. Others kept what one person called an “evangelical orientation” to the world, which he described as a need to tell others about his passions.

None of the people I interviewed had any intention of returning to a fundamentalist church; they no longer accepted the basic teachings and way of life of their former religious communities.

Conclusion

Defecting from a fundamentalist church requires a major identity transformation. My study of defectors illuminates processes that might be common to other circumstances in which people must create a new sense of self. For example, Greil found that Alcoholics Anonymous organizations teach their members to leave behind their former drinking selves and embrace a new identity as a sober person who never again touches alcohol. AA accomplishes this by encapsulating members and introducing them to new ideas about a higher power. His article on AA showed how high levels of social encapsulation can exist even without physical seclusion; this is made possible by asking members to attend 90 meetings in 90 days, known as the 90/90 challenge (1984). Those who take up the challenge become socially bound to the group by foregoing time spent with non-members in order to attend meetings. AA newcomers are taught a new way of thinking about alcoholism, that it is a disease they can avoid by abstaining from drinking for the rest of their lives. When an AA member befriends non-drinking people, they are creating a reference group that reinforces the ideology of AA. They begin to participate in new social contexts in which they can create and enact new identities as a non-drinkers. This process is similar to the way in which fundamentalist Christian defectors find new people with whom they try on and preform new non-fundamentalist identities.

The emphases in Davidman and my respondent's exit narratives reflects the different orientations of these two religious communities. Although Orthodox Judaism emphasizes embodied ritual practices, Fundamentalists are primarily concerned with members' religious beliefs. In order to exit these distinct communities, those who were Orthodox Jews had to change their daily bodily routines; in contrast, those exiters from Fundamentalism emphasized the difficulty of shedding beliefs ingrained in them since childhood. . The exiting process described by our respondents highlights the challenges facing people who leave their core identities. In order to know whether the similar stages of defection Davidman and I found in our research are widely applicable, we need many more studies of those who leave encapsulated as well as non-encapsulating communities to see whether other forms of exiting have similar or distinct stages.

One fundamental difference between the group I studied and Davidman's, is that in contrast to the Fundamentalists I interviewed, the orthodox Jewish defectors began their journey in an enclave community separated by a physical barrier. My interviewees grew up without such boundaries separating their communities from the rest of the world, and so, they grew up with more access to the larger secular society. Although they now consider themselves "out," many of them walk the same streets. What has changed for them is not the physical location, but their perception of the world, and more importantly their perception of themselves. Those who defect never do so lightly, because what they are leaving behind is not only a group, but a version of themselves.

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