

## **De-Conversion: Why People Leave the Christian Faith – and (Re)Turn to It**

Many of us know individuals who have abandoned the Christian faith of their youth, often for intellectual reasons and the onset of deep doubts. These reasons should be understood and fairly examined. But so should the reasons of those intellectuals who have (re)turned to the Christian faith and have found—as C.S. Lewis and G.K. Chesterton did—that it brings illumination and clarity to the whole of reality.

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### **I. *Characteristics of Deconversion: What Deconversion Is (John Barbour, *Deconversion*)***

- A. DOUBT
- B. DISAPPROVAL
- C. DISRUPTION
- D. DISMISSAL

### **II. *Cases of Deconversion***

- A. Ed Babinski
- B. Charles Templeton (former colleague of Billy Graham's):
  - 1. INSCRUTABILITY OF EVIL
  - 2. INFELICITIES IN SCRIPTURE
  - 3. IMPOSSIBILITY OF MIRACLES
  - 4. INCOMPREHENSIBILITY OF DOCTRINES (e.g., Trinity)
  - 5. INCOMPLETENESS OF REVELATION (“if you had been born in X, would you believe in Jesus?”)

C. John Loftus: Former pastor/atheist blogger: Outsider Test for Faith: “Test your beliefs as if you were an outsider to the faith you are evaluating.”

1. ASSUMPTION OF REASON AND SCIENCE

2. BURDEN OF PROOF (on holy books)

3. CONSISTENCY OF TREATMENT

D. A.N. Wilson, author of *Jesus: A Life*

E. Bill Wichtermann (lawyer, former Special Assistant to Pres. George W. Bush):  
“I lost my faith at an evangelical college.”

F. Bart Ehrman, NT scholar:

1. FORGERY

2. FALSIFICATION

3. FABRICATION

4. FAILURE

### **III. Causes of Deconversion: What Prompts People to Leave the Faith?**

A. Conflict with science

B. Contradictions in Scripture (*contra* biblical inerrancy)

C. “Christian” hypocrisy

D. Concept of hell

E. Challenges from Scripture

F. Concerns with “fundamentalism”

#### IV. **Counters to Deconversion: Reasons for Belief in God...from Atheists Themselves**

A. Many naturalists themselves often contribute to the case for God's existence

B. Challenges to Examine:

**Challenge #1: The Outsider Test for Faith (cf. Loftus):** Outsiders are often allies for the faith, having been entering the church from the beginning. Outsiders ought to approach the Christian faith as a knowledge tradition (trust in God isn't opposed to evidence). Outsiders can consider the significant number of scientists who profess belief in God.

**Challenge #2: On Science and Faith:** *Elaine Howard Ecklund*: Nearly 50% of US academic scientists have a traditional religious identity.

**Challenge #3: "Problems with Inerrancy" (the Bible is truthful in what it teaches/affirms):** Keep the main thing the main thing (inerrancy is secondary to faith in Christ [e.g., C.S. Lewis]).

**Challenge #4: The Problem of Evil:** The atheist's key argument against God becomes an even more difficult problem without God: "When belief in God becomes difficult, the tendency is to turn away from Him; but in heaven's name, to what?" (G.K. Chesterton).

- No God, no standard: Evil turns out to be a pointer to God's existence. Evil is a departure from the way things ought to be.
- No God, no solution: The biblical God is involved with our world (e.g., Incarnation and atonement of Christ); he faces evil and suffering; in his weakness, he provides redemption.
- No God, no cosmic justice: God's existence guarantees that evil will be righted in the end.
- No God, no reconciliation of virtue and happiness: Mother Theresa's self-sacrifice for Christ's sake while feeling far from God won't yield to ultimate happiness if there's no God.

#### V. **Counterparts to Deconversion: People Who Have Come (Back) to the Christian Faith**

A. The Aesthetic and the Literary

B. The Philosophical/Scientific Supports for God's Existence

C. The Re-enchantment of the World

D. The Community of Christians

E. The Impact of the Christian Faith in History

## F. The Powerful Figure of the Historical Jesus

### Summary:

**1. INFLUENCE OF STORIES:** Deconversion stories have power, but they are a two-way street. Why give deconversion stories more weight than (re)conversion stories? Listen to **both**.

**2. INSISTENCE ON APOLOGETICS:** Historically, apologetics and philosophy have made an important contribution to the life of the church and theology—a ministry not to be neglected.

**3. IMPORTANCE OF CONFESSIONS:** Naturalists themselves often acknowledge the general inadequacy of naturalism to explain many features of the universe and human experience.

**4. IRRELEVANCE OF SCIENCE:** By itself, science still proves inadequate for life's most pressing questions of purpose, meaning, morality, human dignity, etc.

**5. INCORPORATION OF HUMANNESS:** The full range of the human condition should be considered—existential needs (guilt, shame, significance, purpose, security, fear of death)—not simply scientific or even philosophical aspects.

**6. IMAGINATION OF HUMANS:** The aesthetic, the imaginative, and the literary can help humans get in touch with true humanness.

**7. INERRANCY AS SECONDARY:** Keep the main thing the main thing—creation, Jesus' resurrection (not inerrancy, not the age of the earth).

**8. IGNORANCE ABOUT DOUBTING:** Doubt is not an unusual condition for *anyone*, but it must be dealt with appropriately (e.g., not assuming a standard of 100% certainty for knowledge). Doubts can lead to/strengthen faith.

**9. INESCAPABILITY OF PRIVILEGING:** *Bob Dylan*: "You've gotta' serve somebody." *R.W.L. Moberly*: Everyone will choose to privilege *something* (e.g., an experience of evil, abandonment of a parent, the loss of a child) over another thing (e.g., the goodness of God).

### Further Reading:

Clark, Kelly James. *Philosophers Who Believe*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1997.

Moberly, R.W.L. *The Bible in a Disenchanted Age*. Grand Rapids: Baker, 2018.

Vitz, Paul. *Faith of the Fatherless*. San Francisco: Ignatius, 2013.