How We Get Somewhere Religiously:
Deconstruction, Deconversion and Religious Education Today

Abstract

Engaging the work of Robert Kegan, Mary C. Boys, and John Caputo, this essay explores the demands of postmodernity and asks whether disaffiliation, or more accurately deconversion, is becoming one possible outcome of successful religious education forming a more mature religious consciousness. Kegan’s constructive-developmental theory provides a frame for developing contemporary maturity. Boys presents a pedagogy built on the presence of religious difference that triggers deconstruction of religious teachings on behalf of that encounter. Caputo argues this type of critical questioning of what has become fixed religiously represents a truer religious effort. The constellation of these developmental, philosophical and religious educational theories suggests deconversion studies might offer significant theological and practical material for reflection on how we get somewhere religiously.

Do not quench the Spirit. Do not despise the words of prophets, but test everything; hold fast to what is good. ~ 1 Thess 5:19-21

The words of the first epistle to the Thessalonians articulate a deconstructive process integral to religious life and learning, and suggest a more fluid and contested notion of tradition. The early Christian letter admonishes resistance to the implied movement due to its Spiritual origin. Christian tradition is not a static deposit reproduced again and again. It is, and has been, a responsive historical process inspired, we believe, by God’s activity in the world. From the mendicants and the Reformation to liberation theology and the 12-Step Movement, persons and groups drive the traditioning process by choosing what is essential and nonessential in religious practice and identity, often in contradiction to authoritative teaching. Tradition develops as its members respond to the world they live in. The thesis of this brief paper is that the teaching-learning relationship in the present dynamic context of increasing religious disaffiliation in the United States presents an interesting window into how we might be getting somewhere religiously.

This study is, by and large, a reflection on this normatively problematic movement in the hope of prompting more than a narrative of loss in religious education discourse. Could there be something good happening here? Engaging the work of Robert Kegan, Mary C. Boys, and John Caputo, this essay explores the developmental demands of postmodernity and asks whether disaffiliation, or more accurately deconversion, is

1 Deconversion theory employs the more affirming lens of conversion to disaffiliation and argues it can be a similar reflective process of learning and changing of one’s practices and beliefs. See John Barbour,
becoming one possible outcome of successful religious education due to the responsive practices of effective teachers that attempt to form a more mature religious consciousness for the present day.

Kegan’s constructive-developmental framework provides new understanding of contemporary maturity (1994). Boys provides pedagogy built on the presence of religious difference that alters Christian self-understanding by triggering a deconstruction of religious teachings on behalf of that encounter (Boys, 2000; Boys and Lee, 2006). Caputo suggests this type of critical questioning of what has become fixed religiously represents a truer religious effort (2007). The intersection of these theories begs the question, might educators who encourage critical thinking and engage religious difference be loosening the expectation of affiliation?

Leaving Religion

According to a number of recent studies, “the nones” represent 23% of the adult population in the United States. This number has more than doubled since the 1980’s. The majority of these agnostics, atheists and “nothing in particulars” (78%) were raised within a specific religion before discerning to leave it (Pew, 2016). While there are understandably increasing numbers of studies investigating the rise of the nones, many focus on why they have rejected religion and characterize the choice negatively. Notable exceptions explore what disaffiliates have come to believe and practice. What these studies indicate is that the lives of many contemporary adults call into question the assumption that it is “bad” to leave religion. Rather than characterizing disaffiliation from religious communities as a negative, secularizing, and shallow trend, careful examination of the lives of contemporary adults shows that their religious lives are more complicated than these assessments suggest.

Robert Kegan characterizes these shifts in the once provincial religious landscape and other new cultural demands as educational curriculum that teaches toward more appropriate maturity. The systems within which people live, move and construct their meaning develop and change over time, just as individuals ideally do. The evolving self develops more complex and integrative orders of consciousness required in each new age by contending with evolving cultural circumstances. According to Kegan, the greatest

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2 From 1980 to 2000 to the 2000’s the percentage jumped from 7.1% unaffiliated to 15.3% This 8.2 percentage point leap represents 25 million people. (A.B. Downey 2014, March 21)

3 Frank Pasquale’s study, A Portrait of Secular Group Affiliates, Phil Zuckerman’s Faith No More and the ongoing study by Tom Beaudoin and Patrick Hornbeck on Deconversion and Catholic Multiplicity represent three such exceptions (Pasquale, 2010; Zuckerman, 2011; Beaudoin & Hornbeck, 2014)

4 Christian Smith’s work with the National Study of Youth and Religion is a significant example of this perspective (Smith and Denton, 2005). Tom Beaudoin thoroughly critiques Smith and Denton’s analysis for its affiliation bias (2008).
catalyst of this growth is the experience of difference (1994, 210). Mary C. Boys agrees that learning in the presence of difference represents a significant religious gift of late or post-modernity to both individuals and traditions.

Boys’ work deals primarily with Jewish-Christian relationships but her views on inter-religious learning and a more capacious theology are transferable to the group in question here. Boys suggests religious education, done in the reality of religious difference, ought to engender an embarrassment at any attempts at absolutism and provide learners tools for responding to this wider world (2000, 27). She goes as far as to argue the conventional rendering of religion fails to foster healthy human or Christian development by creating and sustaining partisan identities (2000, 9). If Boys is correct, effective religious educators are already suspicious of the way Christians tell our story to ourselves concerning others who do not share that story, and are likely fostering dialogue and developmentally appropriate deconstruction of exclusive religious teachings (2000, 30).

Initial interviews with religious educators indicate many hope to introduce wider perspectives and more complex appreciations of different worldviews, and accompany their learners as they reimagine who they are in the world. These conversations raise an interesting question about what it means to be a “good student” in a religious education setting. Many of my pilot research participants spoke of their “good students” as those who shifted the locus of religious authority from an external sources to their own experience. Kegan theorizes this movement as an epistemic change in subject-object relations (1994, 34).

What a learner is “subject to” has been “written on them” by an external authority. Despite its external source, early in development a person identifies completely with these conventions (1994, 34). Education, however, moves more and more knowledge to an “object” relation – where a person can hold it at arm’s length, look at, investigate, take responsibility for, deconstruct and integrate it with other ways of knowing (Kegan 1994, 34). Similarly, Gabriel Moran argues religious education, even when teaching how to be religious in a particular way, develops a learner’s capacity to deal critically and imaginatively with reality. Like Boys and Kegan, Moran argues this includes allowing experimentation and participatory learning in today’s irreducibly pluralistic world (1989, 21). Maria Harris further emphasizes the prophetic quality of such critical thinking that offers what Bernard Lonergran calls “freedom from the book” (1967, 185). Questioning is the “center of the teaching act.” (Harris 1991, 65,72-73). One might say that the teaching-learning relationship is a sacred space of collaborative and deconstructive inquiry. (Brookefield 2008, 44).

Deconvstruction & Deconversion

L. Norman Skonovd first used the term deconversion in 1981 when he proposed a stage model for when members exit new religious movements. To Skonovd, "deconversion consisted of an acceptance of life's ambiguity and of the non-exclusiveness of
any so-called truth" (1981, 182). John Barbour, in his book *Versions of Deconversion*, further develops the understanding and use of the term to suggest conversion from and conversion toward are alternative perspectives on the same process (1994). The term draws from a more positive connotation of “conversion” to describe a process of transformative learning and changing of one’s practices and beliefs from an inherited religious tradition, as it is articulated by that tradition’s authorities (Beaudoin and Hornbeck, 2014). The process can lead to migrations within a tradition or a distinctive, self-authored and integrative form of faith and identity beyond the boundaries of tradition.

Deconversion research suggests the process begins when a religious learner, often in response to the encounter with pluralism, and for the sake of personal authenticity or a renewed sense of Divine presence, deconstructs what has been provided and searches for more salient notions than what ecclesial authorities emphasize (Beaudoin and Hornbeck, 2014). According to Heinz Streib’s comprehensive quantitative and qualitative cross-cultural study that explores disaffiliation through this more affirmative lens, leaving religion does not mean relinquishing concern with religion and religious praxis. At least half of deconverts maintain a religious or spiritual identity. (Streib et al, 2009, 39,98). Moreover, Streib and others suggest the majority of deconverts demonstrate measurable gains in many generally accepted virtues – including faith development.

Deconverts demonstrate significantly higher openness to new experiences, demonstrate a higher sense of personal growth and express a greater desire for inter-religious dialogue and xenosophia compared to religiously affiliated adults (Streib et al 2009, 232). Very similar to Boys’ conviction that religious difference ought to be a mustard seed sown in the church (Boys 2000, 22), Streib’s notion of xenosophia describes openness to the challenge presented by religious pluralism. Deconverts are receptive to the coming of the unexpected and resist ready-made answers. These theorists and my own initial interviews of educators suggest “good” religious education students, and apparently deconverts, value the creative potential presented by religious differences and believe wisdom may emerge from these encounters and a shared search for meaning.

**Religious Education Today**

John Caputo argues the deconstruction of both religious teachings and institutions on behalf of lived experience represents a posture and activity inspired by the Divine, that can even be a form of prayer. “God,” he says, “is the possibility of the impossible, the wholly other, the unforeseeable, the one who breaks down our ego-logical and mon-logical preoccupation and exposes us to the coming of the other, the incoming of what we did not see coming” (Caputo 2007, 55). Kieran Scott similarly argues that sometimes the only way to ensure religious life in the future is to call it all into question (1982, 207).

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6 Streib’s quantitative and qualitative cross cultural data indicate deconverts demonstrate a higher occurrence of individuative-reflective faith than synthetic-conventional according to James Fowler’s model. (Streib et al 2009, 218)
Like Boys and Harris, Jacques Derrida argues this meticulous activity of critical questioning represents an action-oriented affirmative hope that embodies more truly being “religious” (Caputo 2007, 55-56). Developmentally, critical questioning compels learners to reach from lower stages of consciousness toward more complex ways of knowing that respond to the evolving cultural curriculum and what Rahner calls the “perhaps possibility of revelation” in their own lives (1968, 22).

In light of the changing religious landscape represented in their classrooms, congregations or other teaching contexts, my hunch is that some effective educators are inviting students to explore the diversity they live and witness, and to test what is good. These religious educators are less interested in reproducing an adherence model of religious education or handing on a theology of affiliation but hope to support learners’ ability to form and practice their own values, feelings and meaning. As Maria Harris suggests, these educators create situations where human subjects are handed over to themselves (1991, 33). An inevitable result of encouraging this level of consciousness is that learners relativize their understanding of authority to make this developmental and religious step – especially when conventional religious communities impose a perceived limit to that growth. Kenda Creasy Dean notes that conventional religious ministry will have a problem when young adults, who are “uniquely wired for theological reflection,” do not find corresponding critical thinking in their churches (2001, 30-31).

Questions for Further Study

Tom Beaudoin and Patrick Hornbeck suggest that the deconstructive and critical thought often initiating versions of deconversion are not only occurring outside the boundaries of faith communities but are quietly creating multiplicity within their walls. Beaudoin provocatively suggests that the number of deconverts performing ministry in churches might be staggering – if we could measure it (2013). In this same vein, research has not yet explored how these elements of deconversion might be influencing the theological and educational goals of those charged with passing tradition on.

The goals reviewed above by all three theorists extend beyond the academic or developmental, but derive from a larger goal of improving people’s lives and improving the our lives together. Embedded in all three theories is a sense of the human person as intrinsically interdependent with social and cultural others in an ongoing process of becoming. There is an appreciation of the human person and where human beings are going, together. Both persons and the systems within which people live, move and

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7 By this I mean a logic of consensus rooted theologically in an exclusive and fixed relationship with an institution. The position and pedagogy often resists multiplicity and reform.

construct their meaning should grow and evolve. Seen through this lens, the increasing rates of deconversion represent significant material for reflection for religious educators.

Life-giving and effective religious education encourages a certain style of religiousness that arises from the interplay of multiple ideas, perspectives and human experiences. Religious life and learning today must contend with and afford significant and permanent religious difference – maybe even more than one right account. This conversation historically has sustained the church, albeit not without resistance. Caputo suggests the Christian religion’s most aggressive example of this deconstructive critique and movement that opens tradition to necessary growth again and again comes from Jesus of Nazareth himself (Caputo 2007, 19). This Christ-like and reforming notion of deconstruction suggests that by letting go of old constructions, the church might embody a more prophetic authenticity and get somewhere new.9

To conclude, the work of Kegan, Boys, Caputo and deconversion researchers together complicate conventional views that increasing rates of disaffiliation is a crisis. In light of these theories, it is possible some educators have found conserving tradition and allowing it to release onto new situations is not mutually exclusive. According to the theorists engaged here, the encounter with religious difference, occurring more and more frequently in the lives of both educators and learners today, forms an openness to a genuine learning process and growth that moves beyond preconceived images and old assumptions, and may uncover something new about ones own religious tradition (Schmidt-Leukel 2009, 40) – and it may invite one to leave it. As educators shift pedagogical and theological goals to respond to this world they and their learners live in, they are forming the capacity to give expression to their tradition in a new time and place. However, until the boundaries associated with that tradition reflect the same development and growth, these educators, whether they know it or not, may be loosening the expectation of affiliation.

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9 John Sivalon, makes a similar argument for a paradigm shift in understanding mission – from a self-preserving, homogenizing ecclesial or personal project to a journey searching for, proclaiming, and witnessing the Trinitarian mystery of life – in response to God’s revelation in postmodern culture (2012, 91-92).
References


