SECULARISM & NONRELIGION

How Religious Leaders Become Nonbelievers: A Four-Stage Model of Deconversion

RESEARCH ARTICLE

ALEXANDR ZAMUSHINSKI

ubiquity press

ABSTRACT

This article introduces a four-stage model of clergy deconversion (*ontological secularization*) based on grounded theory analysis of *The Clergy Project*, a global community of religious professionals who have lost their faith in the supernatural. Drawing on 59 in-depth interviews and surveys with clergy from 24 countries and multiple religious traditions, along with analysis of more than 300 autobiographical profiles, the study employs a netnographic approach combined with grounded theory to examine how deeply committed practitioners transition from a supernatural to a naturalistic worldview. The model identifies four stages in this trajectory: (1) Accumulation of Doubts — initial questions and contradictions generating cognitive dissonance; (2) Critical Trigger — a pivotal moment that deepens confrontation with doubt; (3) Internal Analysis — critical reflection and the progressive transfer of epistemic authority from religious tradition to personal inquiry; and (4) Acceptance of Nonbelief — a resolution shaped by social and cultural constraints. Central to the model is the concept of *epistemic secularization*: a structural transformation in how individuals evaluate religious truth-claims. By emphasizing *how* rather than *why* clergy reject supernatural belief, and by moving from a categorical to a staged account of this process, this study extends existing theories of religious change and advances understanding of ontological secularization as a structured, epistemologically driven transformation.

CORRESPONDING AUTHOR:
Alexandr Zamushinski
Defense Language Institute (DLIFLC) Monterey, CA, USA
alexandr.zamusinski@dliflc.edu

KEYWORDS:
The Clergy Project; deconversion; ontological secularization; epistemic secularization; apostasy

TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:
Zamushinski, A. 2026. How Religious Leaders Become Nonbelievers: A Four-Stage Model of Deconversion. *Secularism and Nonreligion*, 15: 15, pp. 1–16. DOI: https://doi.org/10.5334/snr.268

INTRODUCTION

This article argues that for clergy the *ontological secularization* — transition from belief to nonbelief in the supernatural — is best understood as a structured, epistemologically driven process rather than a sudden rupture or primarily emotional reaction. Drawing on a uniquely revealing dataset from The Clergy Project (TCP), a global community of religious professionals who have lost their faith in the supernatural, it proposes a four-stage model of this process and suggests that, while the clergy experience is distinctive, it may illuminate broader dynamics in how faith[1] erodes. Unlike many religious exiters (Cragun & Smith 2024) or *Dones* (Van Tongeren 2024), these individuals were not ordinary members of their faith communities. They were leaders, trained to guide others through spiritual crises. If anyone was positioned to defend faith against doubt, it was them. Yet they too crossed the threshold into nonbelief, through a gradual, often reluctant confrontation with doubt, contradiction, and truth-seeking.

WHAT DO WE KNOW ABOUT DECONVERSION

Decades of scholarship have mapped the terrain of religious deconversion — identifying and categorizing the reasons why individuals abandon religious belief, disaffiliate from religious institutions, or otherwise leave religion (Enstedt et al. 2019; Smith 2016; Streib et al. 2021). Barbour (1994) emphasizes the interplay of intellectual, moral, emotional, and communal dimensions in the deconversion process, while Mauss (1969) and McCann (1967) among others underscore the emotional and social contexts in which apostasy may emerge—such as dissatisfaction with religious authorities or rigid, emotionally deprived upbringings in fundamentalist environments (cf. Gull 2021). Zuckerman's *Faith No More: Why People Reject Religion* (2011), offers compelling typology of contributing factors, including education, personal misfortune, exposure to other cultures, political disagreements, moral qualms, and experiences of suffering or injustice (cf. Martínez-Ariño 2022). Importantly, Zuckerman emphasizes that rarely is apostasy attributable to a single cause. Rather, "people said that their apostasy was the result of numerous factors, working in conjunction with one another, steadily compounding over time" (Zuckerman 2011:115).

This multidimensional view is echoed across the literature. Scholars such as Brooks (2018), Cottee (2015), Cragun and Smith (2024), Exline et al. (2022), Streib et al. (2021), and Van Tongeren and DeWall (2023) affirm the complexity of religious exit and caution against simplistic, one-size-fits-all explanations. Cragun and Smith (2024), for instance, distinguish "push" factors — such as doctrinal inconsistencies or institutional failures — from "pull" factors such as the desire for autonomy or exposure to egalitarian values. Altemeyer and Hunsberger (1997) identify scriptural contradictions, incompatibilities with science, teachings on gender and sexuality, and the problem of evil as recurring triggers. Wright et al. (2011) organize deconversion accounts around four explanatory themes: intellectual and theological concerns, dissatisfaction with God, frustrations with fellow believers, and the influence of non-religious relationships.

This body of work has substantially advanced understanding of deconversion, and many of these scholars acknowledge its gradual, cumulative character (see also Brinkerhoff & Mackie 1993; Bromley 1998; Ebaugh 1988). The present study builds on these foundations while shifting analytical emphasis. Even accounts that attend to the processual dimensions of deconversion tend to foreground the factors and reasons that drive the transition — what pushes or pulls people away from religion — rather than the internal mechanism through which those factors produce transformation of worldview. As Cottee (2015) aptly observes, asking apostates why they left religion often yields retrospective justifications framed in terms of what now seems "right" to them, which, according to him, illuminates the reasons people give but not the process by which belief eroded and identity shifted. Prior scholars have gestured toward this distinction (Davidman 2015; Pérez & Vallières 2019), and the present study follows their call to attend to how the transition unfolds rather than simply why.

Importantly, scholars in the psychology of religion, sociology, and religious studies commonly draw on the concepts of *apostasy* and *deconversion* to examine processes through which individuals leave, revise, or distance themselves from religious commitment (Brooks 2018; Cottee 2015; Streib 2014). Although the concepts overlap, they carry somewhat different emphases. *Apostasy* has traditionally referred to the abandonment or renunciation of a religious faith or affiliation and often emphasizes the individual's departure from a religious tradition or community. *Deconversion*, by contrast, has generally been used to capture the broader and often gradual process of changes in religious belief, identity, and practice that may precede, accompany, or follow religious disaffiliation (Streib et al. 2021). Following Cragun and Smith (2024), I also recognize that *apostasy* can be conceptually and normatively loaded. I therefore use *deconversion* throughout this article to emphasize transformation rather than religious exit alone.

BEYOND REASONS AND TRIGGERS: THE CASE FOR AN EPISTEMIC MODEL

The present study builds on this growing body of scholarship while departing from it in several analytically significant ways that justify its contribution as a distinct theoretical development. The most foundational point of departure concerns the phenomenon under study.

Much existing scholarship on religious exit employs broad definitions of deconversion that encompass disaffiliation, drift, identity change, and religious switching (Cragun & Smith 2024; McLaughlin et al. 2022; Streib et al. 2021; Van Tongeren & DeWall 2023; Wright et al. 2011). As a result, samples in these studies include individuals who have left organized religion while retaining belief in supernatural phenomena — karma, afterlife, spiritual forces, or a higher power — that fall outside institutional religion but remain within the domain of supernaturalism. For example, Cragun and Smith (2024) include among "religious exiters" participants who leave organized religion while retaining supernatural beliefs, including belief in the Bible as the word of God or in hell (see Figures 3.5, p. 85, and 3.6, p. 86). Similarly, Streib et al. (2021:121) discuss deconverts who describe themselves as "religious in my own religion," who continue to affirm supernatural powers, protective or threatening forces, or signs from beyond the empirical world. Research on "religious dones" likewise includes individuals who no longer identify as religious but continue to believe in God or the supernatural (McLaughlin et al. 2022:515, 519; Van Tongeren & DeWall 2023:517–519). Finally, Wright et al. (2011:4) examine individuals who leave Christianity and reject belief in the Christian god, while some participants nevertheless describe themselves in spiritual terms, including as pagan or deist and admit belief in God. Taken together, these studies illustrate that religious exit or disaffiliation does not necessarily entail the abandonment of supernatural beliefs.

This is not a weakness of those studies; it reflects their legitimate interest in religious exit broadly conceived or in atheism in particular (cf. Pérez & Vallières 2019; Smith 2011). However, the internal process by which individuals come to reject supernatural belief as such — what the present study terms ontological secularization — is not the primary object of analysis in this literature and tends to be conflated with the analytically less precise category of religious departure. Moreover, the present study includes participants from non-theistic, non-Abrahamic traditions, allowing for an examination of ontological secularization that is not reducible to departure from theistic or Abrahamic religious frameworks.

Ontological secularization, as used here — and while acknowledging the contested nature of the term deconversion[2] itself (Cragun & Gull 2025) — does not refer to disaffiliation from a particular religious group, deidentification from a tradition (Van Tongeren 2024), religious switching (Loveland 2003; Suh & Russell 2015), or the adoption of individualized spirituality (Ammerman 2021; Davie 1994). Rather, it refers specifically to the complete rejection of supernatural assumptions in their entirety — soul, afterlife, karma, reincarnation, higher powers, destiny — and the adoption of a fully naturalistic worldview. Philosophically, this aligns with metaphysical or ontological naturalism: the position that everything that exists is part of the natural world and explicable through natural processes. The present study therefore avoids terms such as atheist or nonreligious, which often fail to capture this specificity — many who identify as atheists retain beliefs in supernatural assumptions (Pew Research Center 2025) — and describes participants instead as nonsupernaturalists: individuals who reject all supernatural claims.

The specificity of this definition is grounded in the dataset itself. Launched in 2011, TCP is an online peer-support community for current and former clergy who no longer believe in supernatural. Today, it includes more than 1,300 participants from over 50 countries. TCP requires members to explicitly affirm their nonbelief upon admission, including checking the following statement:

> I consider myself to be a non-theist who does not believe in a supernatural dimension. Specifically, I do not believe in an order of existence that is beyond the visible observable universe appearing to transcend the laws of nature, a mystical dimension, an afterlife, or a god.

TCP's public statement elaborates further on what this rejection entails in practice:

> Rejection of the supernatural has several implications. We do not believe in gods, angels, demons, ghosts, a sentient universe, psychic power, divination, mystical forces, or practices that emanate from belief in mystical forces such as chi, astrology, or feng shui, or using prayer, crystals, or magnets as a method of disease prevention. This is not intended to be a comprehensive list. A TCP Community Forum Participant necessarily holds a naturalistic worldview as explained above.[3]

Deconversion as studied here should therefore be understood not simply as a rejection of organized religion, institutional affiliation, or theism (cf. Smith 2011) but as a rejection of supernaturalism in all its forms. Indeed, many participants in this study remain active members or leaders of their religious communities, a pattern that itself underscores the analytical importance of distinguishing ontological secularization from religious exit (Zamushinski 2026). Two related concepts structure the analysis. Epistemic secularization refers to the process through which ontological secularization is reached: the gradual reorientation of how individuals evaluate religious truth-claims, as epistemic authority shifts from tradition to personal standards of evidence and critical inquiry. Ontological secularization is what epistemic secularization produces. The two are sequential and complementary rather than synonymous, and both are necessary to describe what this study examines.

This narrower and more precise focus yields a different model from those proposed in prior work — and one that is, the present study argues, necessary for understanding a phenomenon that broader frameworks have not yet fully theorized. It presents deconversion as an ontological transformation — the end-state reached through the epistemic reorientation process defined above — rather than a change in religious affiliation, identity, or institutional belonging. As Marin and Lindeman (2021) found, people's positions on the science-religion relationship are shaped far more by their ontological commitments — particularly supernatural beliefs — suggesting that transitions between religious and naturalistic worldviews are fundamentally ontological. They also demonstrated that what most meaningfully distinguishes those who reject supernatural belief from those who maintain it is not general reasoning capacity but a domain-specific shift in epistemic authority — from trust in religious sources such as sacred texts and clergy to reliance on personal inquiry and scientific standards of justification — a finding that empirically grounds the present model's identification of epistemic authority transfer as the structural core of deconversion.

A second departure — one that specifies and substantiates this contribution by identifying precisely where existing models fall short — concerns the relationship between this study and the model proposed by Pérez and Vallières (2019), which represents the most directly comparable prior work. Pérez and Vallières employed a grounded theory approach, drew on TCP testimonies, and explicitly called for future theoretical development of their model, describing it as "a possible starting point for future theoretical developments" in a field that remains "mostly explorative, descriptive, and atheoretical in nature." The present study understands itself as responding directly to that call. While the findings here are broadly consistent with the cognitive and reflective dimensions Pérez and Vallières identify, the present model differs from theirs in three analytically important respects.

First, Pérez and Vallières organize deconversion around three interlinked categories — reason and enquiry, criticism and discontent, and personal development — which they describe as simultaneously present and mutually reinforcing rather than sequential. Their model identifies what is present during deconversion rather than how the process unfolds in ordered stages. The present model proposes the latter: a sequential account in which each stage prepares the conditions for the next, and in which the order is not arbitrary but analytically necessary. This is not merely a reformatting of their categories; it is a different kind of theoretical claim.

Second, and relatedly, the present model centers epistemic reorientation — the structural shift in how individuals evaluate what counts as knowledge and evidence — as the unifying mechanism that links and orders the stages. Pérez and Vallières document intellectual questioning and critical thinking as features of deconversion, but do not theorize the deeper transformation by which the very criteria for evaluating truth are reorganized. The distinction matters: intellectual doubt, critical reflection, and cognitive dissonance are all compatible with continued religious belief and can be resolved without producing ontological secularization. What the present model attempts to identify is the mechanism by which they sometimes are not — namely, the progressive transfer of epistemic authority from religious tradition to personal standards of evidence, coherence, and rational inquiry, which, once sufficiently advanced, leads to ontological secularization.

Third, the present study focuses specifically on clergy — a population whose unique position makes the epistemic dimension of deconversion particularly visible. Unlike lay believers, clergy face the compound loss of faith, livelihood, professional identity, community standing, and in many cases housing and family relationships (Dennett & LaScola 2013; Zamushinski 2025a). Cragun and Smith (2024) identify gradual, unmarked drift as a very common form of religious exit among lay populations — a trajectory that is structurally implausible for clergy, whose institutional embeddedness makes any exit costly and therefore deliberate. Furthermore, clergy are professionally trained to resolve doubt in others — equipped with theological arguments, pastoral strategies, and institutional resources specifically designed to shore up belief. That they lose faith anyway, slowly and reluctantly, through sustained epistemic engagement, makes their experience analytically exceptional and theoretically revealing. Although Pérez and Vallières drew substantially on TCP testimonies, clergy appear in their analysis as one data source among others rather than as a distinct population whose occupational and institutional position shapes the deconversion process in analytically significant ways.

Taken together, these departures — the focus on ontological secularization rather than religious exit, the shift from a categorical to a staged account, the foregrounding of epistemic reorientation as the unifying mechanism, and the focus on clergy as an analytically distinct population — constitute what the present model adds to existing scholarship. It does not dispute that triggers, community dynamics, and emotional experiences shape deconversion trajectories; it proposes that for a specific population undergoing a specific transformation, these factors are best understood as inputs into a deeper epistemic process that existing models have not yet fully theorized. In this sense, the present study represents the kind of theoretical development that Pérez and Vallières identified as necessary.

The analysis contributes to this effort by proposing an empirically grounded Four-Stage Model of

Deconversion, capturing the stepwise dynamics of how belief unravels for individuals whose identities are uniquely intertwined with their faith; briefly, the four stages are: (1) *Accumulation of Doubts* — the gradual build-up of questions and contradictions that generate cognitive dissonance without yet producing a decisive break; (2) *Critical Trigger (Catalyst, not Cause)* — a pivotal experience that forces direct confrontation with accumulated doubts, functioning not as the cause of deconversion but as the event that makes continued compartmentalization impossible; (3) *Internal Analysis* — a period of critical reflection during which epistemic authority is progressively transferred from religious tradition to personal standards of evidence and inquiry; and (4) *Acceptance of Nonbelief* — the gradual recognition and acknowledgment of a naturalistic worldview, shaped by the social and occupational constraints specific to clergy. Each stage is elaborated and illustrated with data in the Analysis section below.

DATA AND METHODS

This study draws on a mixed qualitative approach integrating netnography (Kozinets 2019) and constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz 2006). Netnography adapts ethnographic techniques to online communities, enabling immersive, contextually rich engagement with naturally occurring digital discourse. It is particularly suited to studying populations — such as nonbelieving clergy — who discuss sensitive experiences under pseudonyms in closed online spaces, where authentic expression is more likely precisely because participants are not performing for an outside observer. Grounded theory guided data collection and analysis in iterative cycles, allowing categories and patterns — including the four stages presented here — to emerge inductively from the data rather than being imposed in advance. The combination of these two methods is deliberate: netnography provided access to a large volume of naturalistic narrative data, while grounded theory supplied the analytical framework for moving systematically from raw accounts to conceptual categories.

ACCESS AND DATA COLLECTION

The study was approved by the Institutional Review Board at the University of California, Riverside. Access to TCP was negotiated with organizational leadership, who made a public announcement introducing the study and the researcher's positionality to the community. Following this announcement, many participants contacted me directly to volunteer.

Data collection began in May 2021 and drew on three sources. First, I conducted 59 in-depth interviews with current or former nonbelieving clergy: 41 participated in synchronous online interviews (Zoom or Skype) or phone interviews lasting one to three hours; 18 chose to respond in writing to a 30-question interview guide, typically producing five to ten pages of detailed narrative per participant. Interviews were semi-structured, covering participants' religious background, the process of faith loss, emotional and social experiences during transition, and current identity. Second, I analyzed over 300 autobiographical profiles from TCP's SafetyNet community, where members share biographical details and personal narratives of their transition from belief to nonbelief. These provided a large corpus of naturalistic data independent of the interview process.

ANALYSIS

Following Charmaz's (2006) constructivist grounded theory approach, analysis proceeded through iterative cycles of open, focused, and theoretical coding. Initial open coding involved line-by-line examination of interview transcripts and profiles to identify recurring concepts and experiences. Focused coding then grouped these into higher-order categories. Through constant comparison — systematically comparing incidents, accounts, and categories across the dataset — four recurring stages emerged consistently across participants, traditions, and national contexts. These stages were refined through theoretical coding and memo-writing, and tested against deviant cases. The four-stage model presented in this article is therefore an empirically grounded conceptual framework that emerged from the data; it was not designed in advance.

The interview guide included both motivational questions — asking about triggers and reasons for loss of faith — and open-ended narrative questions, most notably: 'Tell me the journey of how you went from being a person of faith to a person without faith.' The four-stage model proposed in this article emerged primarily from analysis of participants' responses to these narrative questions, in which they described the internal process of their transition in their own words and at length. Crucially, epistemic language — references to evidence, intellectual honesty, standards of truth, and the inadequacy of faith-based answers — was not introduced by the interviewer but appeared consistently and spontaneously across participants' accounts. These patterns appeared not only in interviews but also in independently produced autobiographical profiles, suggesting that they are not artifacts of interview framing. At the same time, participants frequently distinguished their loss of belief from dissatisfaction with religious community or institutional life. Many described continued appreciation for their communities and relationships, even as they came to view their beliefs as untenable. This recurring distinction between social belonging and epistemic evaluation provides further evidence that the shifts analyzed here reflect participants' own meaning-making processes.

SAMPLE

Respondents were primarily middle-aged religious professionals: the mean age was 53 (median 51), with a range from 23 to 86. The sample included 46 men, 8 women, and 5 non-binary participants. The gender imbalance reflects both the demographics of TCP and the structural reality of many religious traditions in which women are barred from clergy roles. TCP's own statistics indicate that approximately 14% of its members are women or non-binary. Participants represented 24 countries across five continents, including twelve U.S. states. The majority (79%) came from Christian backgrounds, spanning a wide range of denominations. The remainder (21%) represented Jewish, Muslim, Buddhist, Zoroastrian, Native American, and various New Religious Movement traditions.

LIMITATIONS

Several limitations follow from the composition of the sample and the nature of the data. Although participants represent 24 countries, the sample is disproportionately composed of English-speaking clergy from the Global North and from Christian or broader Abrahamic traditions, which limits the cross-cultural applicability of the findings. In addition, the study relies in part on retrospective narratives, which, while rich in detail, introduce the possibility of selective memory and narrative rationalization, as accounts of deconversion are inevitably shaped by hindsight and may present a greater sense of coherence than was experienced in real time (Zuckerman 2011:12–13). These limitations do not undermine the model but rather situate it as an analytical framework grounded in this specific population, rather than a universally applicable schema.

FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

The following section presents the four stages of the model in sequence, based on patterns observed across the dataset. The model is not intended to replace existing frameworks but to complement them by foregrounding a dimension that has remained undertheorized in prior work on clergy deconversion (Dennett & LaScola 2013; Perez & Vallières 2019): the staged process of epistemic reorientation through which clergy come to reject supernatural belief. For each stage, an analytical description is followed by illustrative data drawn from interviews, surveys, and autobiographical profiles, and then by discussion connecting the empirical material to the broader theoretical argument. This section reflects the grounded theory logic of the study, in which analysis and interpretation emerged iteratively from the data rather than being imposed upon it. Before turning to the stages, a brief overview of the model as a whole is provided.

OVERVIEW OF THE FOUR-STAGE MODEL OF DECONVERSION

The four stages of the model — Accumulation of Doubts, Critical Trigger, Internal Analysis, and Acceptance of Nonbelief — are illustrated in Figure 1. As outlined in the Introduction, each stage prepares the conditions for the next, with epistemic reorientation serving as the unifying mechanism across all four. Each stage is elaborated and illustrated with data below.

It is important to acknowledge that not all religious professionals will follow these exact four stages, nor is the model intended to function as a universal schema for all forms of deconversion. The pathways through which individuals experience ontological secularization are diverse and potentially nonlinear, and it is likely that some clergy, depending on tradition, personality, or sociocultural context, may move through these processes differently. Similarly, the experiences of clergy should not be taken as representative of all deconverts. Those leaving high-demand or highly doctrinal religious environments may follow different trajectories than those departing from more moderate or culturally embedded traditions (Brooks 2018; Davidman 2015; Gull 2021). The Four-Stage Model should therefore be understood as a heuristic grounded in this dataset rather than a prescriptive or universal framework.

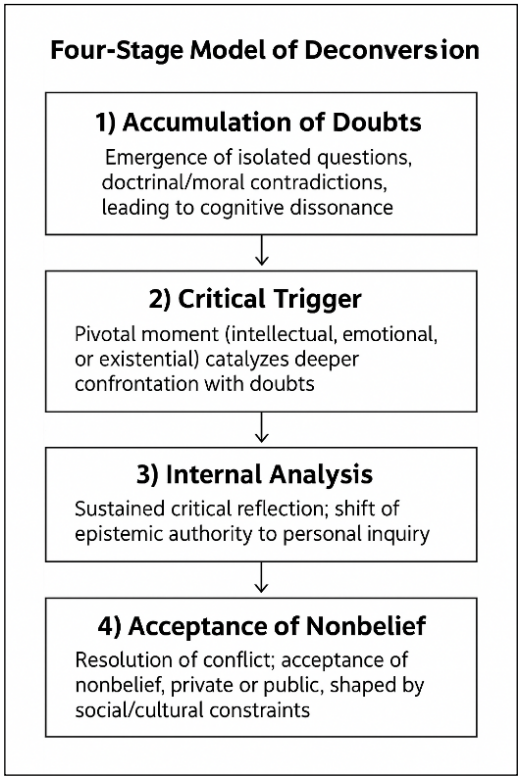


Figure 1 Four-Stage Model of Deconversion.

STAGE 1: ACCUMULATION OF DOUBTS

Analytical Description

The first stage is characterized by the gradual accumulation of questions, contradictions, and cognitive dissonance that could not be resolved within the existing faith framework. Doubt emerged incrementally, often over years, prompted by doctrinal inconsistencies, moral concerns, or tensions between religious claims and scientific evidence.

Initially, participants often suppressed or compartmentalized these doubts, seeking resolution through prayer, study, consultation with religious authorities, or intensified religious practice. Many described prolonged efforts to resist doubt before it became overwhelming. This resistance is analytically important because it shows that Stage 1 is not passive drift but an effortful process, helping explain why deconversion unfolds gradually. Doubt accumulation therefore functions as the mechanism enabling the later epistemic shift.

Data Illustration

When asked, 'Tell me the journey of how you went from being a person of faith to a person without faith'—one of the core narrative questions in this study—participants consistently reported that doubts had been present long before any conscious recognition of belief loss. Rather than identifying a single turning point, they described a pattern of recurring cognitive disturbance: moments in which their existing understanding of the world or their meaning system felt inadequate or internally inconsistent, yet which they were able to set aside, suppress, or rationalize — at least temporarily. These experiences accumulated over time, compounding gradually until they reached a threshold at which they could no longer be contained within the existing faith framework. What began as isolated and manageable questions eventually cohered into a sustained challenge that demanded confrontation.

Such cumulative logic of Stage 1 is captured by Doug, a former Pentecostal Church pastor from North-East US:

> I wish I had seen the whole pitiful truth all at once a long time ago… But the process was incremental, epiphanies gathering, gathering, until their weight was undeniable… It was the accumulation of scriptural discrepancies and horrors… It was the accumulation of prayers that never got answered… It was an accumulation of knowledge.

Doug's account is analytically rich. His regret that the process was not instantaneous is significant: the incremental nature of doubt accumulation is experienced not as a gradual awakening but as a prolonged and painful inability to see what, in retrospect, seemed obvious. This pattern recurred across the dataset. One participant stated: "Ultimately, the accumulation of knowledge and factual evidence overwhelmed my childhood teachings." Another described: "It was a slow process and my faith gradually wore down … There were years of feeling phony and less than genuine." This sense of inauthenticity is characteristic of late Stage 1, when doubts have accumulated sufficiently to produce cognitive dissonance but have not yet cohered into a decisive challenge to the belief system as a whole.

Željko, a former Seventh-day Adventist pastor from Croatia, a trained theologian, described Stage 1 in terms of mounting cognitive dissonance sustained over fifteen years:

> It was a long process, lasting, I assume, for some 15 years. I was a theologian — with a considerable education in philosophy — and I was finding numerous loopholes in my religion. I tried to patch them, but the holes were getting wider and wider.

Amir, a religious leader from Saudi Arabia, described a similar trajectory, emphasizing its emotional and existential weight. For him, Islam was not merely a belief system but the central purpose of his life. His deconversion took more than three years and involved an intense attempt to reconcile emerging doubts with traditional teachings. He initially searched diligently for justifications to resolve those doubts, but the deeper he explored, the further he moved from the faith.

Željko's and Amir's accounts illustrate a pattern in which advanced religious training intensified rather than prevented doubt, echoing Altemeyer and Hunsberger's (1997) observation that religious training can undermine itself by fostering truth-seeking and intellectual integrity that are eventually directed against one's own beliefs.

Analytical Discussion

One of the most consistent findings in the literature on deconversion is the gradual nature of the process (Cragun & Smith 2024; Zuckerman 2011). As Charles, a retired Episcopal priest from Utah, explained:

> This has been a fifty-year process. It has been a 'death by a thousand cuts.' Slowly moving away from literalism to a more liberal form of Christianity. From Baptist to Episcopalian, then radically inclusive universalist.

Similarly, Streib et al. (2009:95) note that "almost all deconversion narratives in our sample refer to gradual processes." The present study corroborates this pattern while seeking to specify more precisely what this gradual process entails, particularly at its earliest stage.

Within the proposed model, Stage 1 is treated as analytically prior and structurally necessary, forming the

foundation upon which subsequent stages unfold. This distinction carries important theoretical implications: if doubt accumulation were simply one factor among many, its absence would not preclude deconversion, since other factors could compensate for it. In the case of clergy, however, the model conceptualizes it as a necessary epistemic groundwork within which the triggers associated with Stage 2 can take root, ultimately leading to ontological secularization. Stage 1 is therefore defined by the gradual erosion of epistemic confidence—the destabilization of the cognitive and interpretive framework that had previously sustained religious belief and rendered it credible.

STAGE 2: CRITICAL TRIGGER (CATALYST, NOT CAUSE)

Analytical Description

Following the prolonged accumulation of Stage 1, a pivotal moment or experience often forces direct confrontation with doubts that had previously been compartmentalized or deferred. This moment — what the present model terms the Critical Trigger — can be intellectual, such as encountering a problematic scriptural passage or a compelling counter-argument, or emotional and existential, including personal loss, disillusionment with religious leadership, or exposure to suffering. What unites these varied experiences analytically is not their content but their function: they render continued avoidance of accumulated doubt impossible.

Among the clergy studied here, participants consistently pointed to a specific experience that forced confrontation with doubts that had previously been manageable — yet in almost no case did they describe this moment as the reason they ultimately lost faith. Rather, it functioned as a catalyst: the point at which pre-existing doubts reached a threshold that could no longer be deferred. The Critical Trigger was not the cause of deconversion but the event that made continued avoidance impossible. The same experience, encountered by someone without the prior accumulation of Stage 1, would likely have produced a different outcome — perhaps temporary distress, renewed commitment, or compartmentalization. What matters analytically is therefore not the trigger itself but what it activates: the sustained epistemic work that constitutes Stage 3.

Data Illustration

Even intellectually minor observations could function as Critical Triggers when embedded in a context of accumulated doubt. Andrew, a former Baptist minister from New York, described his trigger in terms that appear almost trivial on the surface: "A silly thought unlocked things for me: 'God didn't create broccoli.'" The observation itself is inconsequential. What made it a catalyst was the weight of accumulated doubt already present — doubt that had been building for long enough that even a small realization could open the door to a cascade of re-evaluation. Andrew's account illustrates that the significance of the Critical Trigger lies not in its magnitude but in its timing and in what it unlocks.

The "final straw" metaphor appears explicitly in Henry's account—a former minister from a conservative Calvinist background in Canada. For him, a specific intellectual encounter — the concept of the multiverse — did function as an identifiable trigger, and he named it explicitly: "When I heard of multiple universes, the whole thing went out the window… it was the straw that broke the camel's back for me." Yet he immediately adds that this single idea was merely the culmination: "Really, the thing that deconverted me was the accumulated weight of the history of science and astronomy, culminating in that mind-blowing idea of the multiverse." Henry's experience echoes a broader pattern: while a particular insight or revelation might seem like the turning point, it is more often the endpoint of a long intellectual and emotional struggle.

The theodicy problem — the challenge of reconciling immense suffering with belief in a benevolent deity — was one of the most frequently cited trigger types in this study, a finding consistent with prior scholarship (Dennett & LaScola 2013; Van Tongeren et al. 2025). For many participants, personal experiences with suffering or exposure to large-scale tragedies served as profound psychological and theological ruptures, prompting a reevaluation of their faith commitments. Birgitta a former priest of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Sweden, recalled a pivotal moment during a worship service held shortly after the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami:

> The church was full of shocked, crying people (over 800 Swedes lost their lives in that catastrophe). And I understood that I have nothing to say… I was angry at God—'Why did he let that happen?' And then I thought for the first time—'maybe he didn't, because he doesn't exist at all.'

Birgitta's account exemplifies the function of Stage 2: the trigger was not the cause of her eventual nonbelief but the moment that made continued avoidance impossible. Her anger at God gave way, within the same moment, to an epistemic question she had not previously allowed herself to ask. Crucially, she did not leave the church that day; what changed was the opening of a line of inquiry that had not previously seemed necessary or permissible.

Doctrinal conflict with personal identity operated through the same mechanism (cf. Cragun & Smith 2024; Dennett & LaScola 2013). For Carlos, a Protestant youth leader from Mexico, and Mikhail, an Orthodox priest in North Africa, the irreconcilable tension between their sexual orientation and their church's doctrine initiated a process of reassessment that extended far beyond the doctrinal position in question. As Carlos stated: "My

deconversion process started precisely because I was gay." The conflict did not directly produce nonbelief; it opened the question of whether the framework that condemned his identity could be trusted as a reliable guide to truth more broadly.

Institutional rupture functioned similarly. Several respondents described being marginalized or removed from their congregations while still strongly committed to their faith — ruptures that created the psychological space for subsequent cognitive and theological re-evaluation, a pattern consistent with prior research (Brinkerhoff & Mackie 1993; Pérez & Vallières 2019; Van Tongeren & DeWall 2023). Mirco, a former Raëlian priest from Balkans, described his expulsion, after twelve years of dedicated service as a priest, as the event that finally permitted him to confront what his accumulated doubts had been pointing toward:

> My sense of duty and responsibility, my fidelity to my values and to my 'mission', which I refused to betray, this is what ultimately caused my expulsion, which was the only way to allow myself to consider the idea that my beliefs were false.

Only after sustained reflection did Mirco reach a conclusion he had long been unable to face: "that I had been lied [to] from the beginning and that I had given 33 years of my life to a fraud." The expulsion did not produce this conclusion — the accumulated doubts of Stage 1 had already laid the groundwork. What it did was remove the institutional barriers that had previously made confronting those doubts too costly.

Not all participants could point to a discrete Critical Trigger. For some, Stage 2 manifested not as a recognizable rupture but as a diffuse tipping point — the gradual reaching of a threshold at which accumulated doubt achieved its own coherence without any single external event providing the decisive push. The accounts of John and Oleg illustrate this variation.

John, a former Christian missionary to China, initially described his deconversion in terms that suggest a sudden break: "One day — and I literally mean one day — the transformation happened within 24 hours. I simply realized that this stuff didn't make sense, and was never going to make sense… I rejected my Christian beliefs that day." Yet his fuller account reveals that this moment was the culmination of more than a decade of accumulated doubts, unresolved contradictions, and sustained intellectual struggle. Even after this moment of clarity, he noted that it took several additional days to fully relinquish remaining elements of religious belief. What may appear as spontaneous deconversion is more accurately understood as a moment of clarity—a final acknowledgment of conclusions long in development.

Oleg, a current Russian Orthodox priest, compared his faith to a rope, each strand fraying slowly over time. Stage 2 arrived not as an external event but as a quiet internal recognition: "Prayers don't work." The rope snapped — but only after years of prior erosion.

Taken together, these accounts suggest that Stage 2 operates along a spectrum. At one end, the Critical Trigger is a discrete, nameable event; at the other, a diffuse tipping point at which accumulated doubt achieves its own coherence. What remains consistent is the function: in every case, Stage 2 marks the point at which continued compartmentalization becomes impossible.

Analytical Discussion

The variety of trigger types documented in this study — theodicy, institutional rupture, doctrinal conflict, interpersonal betrayal, and even seemingly trivial intellectual observations — might appear to undermine the coherence of a stage-based model. If the trigger can be almost anything, what does identifying it as a distinct stage actually explain? The answer lies in the model's insistence that the trigger is analytically secondary to what precedes and follows it. What matters is not the diversity of trigger content but the consistency of its function: in every case, the trigger forces confrontation with accumulated doubt that had previously been managed, creating the conditions for the epistemic engagement of Stage 3. The trigger is the door; Stage 1 is what fills the room behind it.

This has implications for how prior scholarship on deconversion triggers might be read. Research documenting the role of trauma, moral disillusionment, institutional hypocrisy, and interpersonal conflict in religious exit (Brinkerhoff & Mackie 1993; Exline et al. 2022; Streib et al. 2021; Van Tongeren et al. 2025; Wright et al. 2011) identifies real and important phenomena, and the present study does not dispute their significance. Nor that the initial catalysts for doubt vary widely (Martínez-Ariño 2022; Zuckerman 2011). However, what are often described as reasons for deconversion are better understood here as *initial triggers*. Thus, the study argues against the tendency to treat the trigger as the primary explanatory event — as if understanding *what* the trigger was tells us *why* deconversion occurred. It suggests — at least among clergy — that such experiences tend to function as catalysts: disruptions that open psychological and cognitive space for deeper reflection rather than serving as sufficient causes of belief loss. Among the clergy studied here, participants did not attribute their loss of belief to a trigger alone. Rather, triggers tended to initiate or intensify processes of intellectual and epistemic reassessment that were already underway.

STAGE 3: INTERNAL ANALYSIS

Analytical Description

Stage 3 is where the most analytically distinctive transformation of the model occurs. Following the Critical Trigger, individuals undertake sustained and

emotionally taxing reflection, frequently accompanied by grief, anxiety, isolation, and identity disorientation. What defines this stage analytically is not the emotional texture of the experience but a structural shift in epistemic responsibility: the erosion of deference toward religious authorities and the assumption of personal responsibility for evaluating one's own beliefs.

Previously, faith or trust in authority had buffered doubts by providing a framework within which answers were assumed to exist beyond the individual's comprehension. In Stage 3, that deference collapses. The individual no longer asks "What does my tradition say about this?" but rather "By what standard should I evaluate what my tradition says?" This is the shift from first-order religious questioning to second-order epistemic questioning — and it is this shift that constitutes epistemic secularization in its fullest sense.

This distinction matters theoretically. Intellectual doubt, critical reflection, and cognitive dissonance are compatible with continued religious belief — they can be resolved by strengthening faith or seeking authoritative reassurance. What distinguishes Stage 3 is that the individual no longer accepts the authority structures through which such resolutions had previously been supplied. The question is no longer Is this doctrine true? but Can I still trust the framework through which I came to believe it? Once this second-order question is asked seriously, the epistemic ground shifts in ways that cannot easily be reversed.

Stage 3 also reveals a notable tension. While the model frames deconversion as slow and effortful, many participants described their loss of faith in passive terms — as something that "happened" to them, often against their will (Dennett & LaScola 2013). This tension is not a contradiction but an analytically significant feature of the process. The subjective experience of passivity reflects the depth of the epistemic shift: when the criteria by which a person evaluates truth have themselves been transformed, the loss of faith is not experienced as a decision but as a recognition. Clergy were simultaneously active agents — reading, questioning, reasoning — and recipients of a transformation whose cumulative force exceeded their conscious control.

Data Illustration

The epistemic character of Stage 3 is captured precisely by Charles, whose account frames the transformation in explicitly second-order terms:

> In particular, I became rather obsessed with the question: how do you know that what you think you know you actually know? In other words, I came to think that epistemology is too important to ignore.

Notably, Charles arrived at this formulation unprompted. This pattern recurred across participants from diverse national and religious backgrounds, suggesting the epistemic framing reflects a genuine feature of participants' experience. Many explicitly framed their experience in epistemic terms, referring to shifts in "philosophy of knowledge," "paradigm," or "worldview." One participant noted "I totally reassessed my epistemology… This destroyed the concept of faith for me." Participants constantly used stage-like language such as "first phase," "next shift," or "domino effect." The latter metaphor was especially common, capturing how questioning one belief led to the collapse of others: as one respondent put it, "Once the dominoes began to fall, all the tenets of my beliefs tumbled down," while another noted, "When the Bible went, the other dominoes fell … now, I lean on logic and reason and science."

The codes "evidence," "shift," "stage," "epistemic," and "authority" recurred consistently throughout the data. Testimonies and interviews associated with these codes provide substantial empirical support for the central claim of Stage 3 — that clergy deconversion involves a structural shift in epistemic authority. Maria, a former Presbyterian minister from the Midwest US, described losing confidence in scripture as the pivotal epistemic event,

> I became convinced that no church authority or interpretation of the Bible was right. I lost confidence in the Bible itself as inerrant, infallible, or even necessarily authoritative. Losing my faith in the Bible was the tug on the thread that unraveled my entire belief in the supernatural.

Hugo, a former Nondenominational pastor from the US South, framed his departure entirely in terms of epistemic standards,

> My path out of the church wasn't really about the many idiots I met while working in the church subculture; it was about logic and reason… study and critical thinking. It was about finding my brain later than most folks and, over time, learning to trust my own judgment.

These accounts share a common structure: the object of doubt is not supernatural directly but the framework through which supernatural had previously been known, and the replacement framework is explicitly evidential.

One participant estimated spending over 5,000 hours over thirty months "weighing the evidence for and against religion." George, an active Baptist minister from Louisiana, described the epistemic shift as applying to his own beliefs the standards he had demanded of others: while attempting to convert Muslims, he realized intellectual honesty required him to "falsify my own claims if evidence so required" — a standard that, when consistently applied, led to the dismantling of his own faith over several years as he "jettisoned various aspects of Christian doctrine one by one."

These accounts corroborate the model's claim that Stage 3 is characterized not merely by doubt but by the adoption of new criteria for evaluating truth-claims — criteria that religious frameworks, when subjected to them, could not satisfy. Critically, the data also support the model's sequential claim: the erosion of epistemic deference typically precedes and enables the rejection of supernatural belief rather than accompanying it simultaneously. One participant described this sequence explicitly: "I had come to the painful realization that in fact, there was no solid, factual, historical basis for anything I had believed… It was make believe… it was then a logical progression for me and a short step from 'no longer a Christian' to 'atheist.'" Another described the collapse of scriptural authority as the initiating event: "Once my fundamentalist/inerrantist view of Genesis 1–3 started coming apart, it begged the question, 'What other problems does the Bible have?'" In both cases, the rejection of the epistemic framework preceded and facilitated the rejection of theological content — precisely the sequence the model describes.

The intellectual intensity was also striking. Thomas, a former Baptist clergy from Australia who spent 11 years in Africa as a missionary, exemplifies all four stages within a single coherent narrative. Biblical discrepancies accumulated quietly across years of ministry — Stage 1. The Critical Trigger arrived through an unexpected intellectual encounter: Steven Novella's course Your Deceptive Mind, which Thomas described as providing "terms to things I'd always thought about — confirmation bias, shifting the goal posts, hit counting, falsification." What the course supplied was not new doubts but a new vocabulary for evaluating the doubts he already carried. Stage 3 followed in its most recognizable form: Thomas described reading ninety books in a single year — "on physics and philosophy and history and all sorts of stuff. I'm like a sponge for critical thinking" — pursued entirely within the context of ongoing ministry. Only through this sustained internal analysis did he arrive at Stage 4: the reluctant recognition that he could no longer honestly affirm what he had been preaching. All four stages unfolded while he remained active in ministry — consistent with the broader finding that clergy deconversion is less a departure from religious life than a transformation occurring within it (Dennett & LaScola 2013; Zamushinski 2025b).

Joey, a Lakota medicine carrier from the Sioux Nation, offers a contrasting trajectory that initially appears to compress Stage 3 entirely. After months of meditation, cultural exploration, and engagement with atheist content online, Joey encountered Matt Dillahunty's "gumball analogy"[4] on YouTube. What followed appeared rapid:

> It was like everything 'clicked' into place. Like he'd nudged one last piece into place, and suddenly I could see the image in the puzzle. Everything came cascading down in an hour and a half, and then I was an atheist… it had taken months really… but then that one day, and that one analogy… and it all coalesced into me leaving my religion, faith, and belief.

The present model proposes a different reading: the months of prior engagement constitute Stages 1 and 2; what occurred in ninety minutes was not the bypassing of Stage 3 but its compression — an accelerated epistemic reorientation in which the analogy supplied, in a single conceptual move, the framework through which accumulated doubts were simultaneously resolved. The "cascading down" Joey describes is the structural collapse of a supernatural worldview, the rapid reorganization of an epistemic framework that months of prior questioning had already undermined.

Joey's case illuminates an important dimension of the model: the duration of Stage 3 is variable. For Thomas it spanned months of intensive reading; for Joey it was compressed into ninety minutes. What remains constant is the function. What determines the length of Stage 3 is, in many ways, the degree to which prior stages have prepared the epistemic ground — where Stage 1 has been extensive and Stage 2 intellectually driven, Stage 3 may unfold rapidly because the conceptual infrastructure for a new epistemic framework is already largely in place.

Analytical Discussion

What unifies the varied triggers documented in this study is their capacity to initiate a common internal process: a critical reassessment of one's epistemic framework — a reevaluation of how one determines what is true, what counts as valid evidence, and whom or what can be trusted as a reliable source of knowledge (Marin & Lindeman 2021). The central question becomes: Can I still trust the framework through which I came to believe these things? This moment of epistemic dissonance initiates a cascade: If I was mistaken about this, what else might I be mistaken about? (cf. Fisher 2017).

The pursuit of epistemic rather than emotional resolution was emphasized consistently. This resonates with Cottee's (2015:61) ex-Muslim respondent Omar: "My doubts were intellectual doubts. I wanted an answer which would satisfy me epistemically, not emotionally. I didn't want emotional satisfaction. I wanted a reason to believe." This formulation captures the defining aspiration of Stage 3: not comfort, not community, not identity continuity, but epistemic justification. These cases support the conclusion reached by Pérez and Vallières (2019), who argue that while deconversion may begin with emotional turmoil or existential distress, it almost always ends with cognitive analysis and critical reflection. As they note, "detachment from religion … was neither due to disappointment with religion … nor

to being "angry at God"" (2019:10; cf. Brewster 2014). Emotional dissonance may act as the spark, but the fire of deconversion is sustained through intellectual engagement.

These findings add nuance to scholarship highlighting the role of moral and interpersonal struggles in motivating deconversion (e.g., Abbott & Anaya 2022; Exline et al. 2022; Krause & Ellison 2009; Saroglou et al. 2020; Van Tongeren & DeWall 2023; Van Tongeren et al. 2025). Such factors may be influential for lay populations. However, when Van Tongeren and DeWall (2023:519) suggest that "doubt is [just] one potential avenue toward disbelief," the present study indicates that for clergy specifically, doubt appears to be a necessary condition rather than one avenue among many. This difference may partly reflect the narrower definition of deconversion adopted here: if the term encompasses disaffiliation from a religious community, interpersonal tensions may suffice as explanations; if it refers to the complete rejection of supernatural assumptions, a deeper epistemic transformation appears required.

Altemeyer and Hunsberger (1997:211) observed that the "Amazing Apostates" departed from belief "brick by brick, until finally the whole design came crashing down." What Stage 3 adds to this picture is a theoretical account of what that dismantling actually involves: not the accumulation of reasons to disbelieve, but the progressive restructuring of the criteria by which any belief is evaluated.

STAGE 4: ACCEPTANCE OF NONBELIEF

Analytical Description

The final stage is marked by a resolution of internal conflict and the gradual acceptance of one's nonbelief. For many participants, this stage was less an active decision than a recognition — the realization that belief had already eroded to the point where it could no longer be honestly sustained. Stage 4 is not where deconversion happens; it is where the individual finally acknowledges what the preceding stages have already produced.

This stage may involve private acknowledgment or public disclosure, though the latter is often shaped by significant sociocultural constraints (Gull 2021; Lee 2022). Many clergy face substantial barriers to openly identifying as nonbelievers due to familial expectations, community ties, professional risks, and broader societal stigma (Zamushinski 2025b; 2025c), and Stage 4 may therefore remain internal for extended periods even after the psychological transition is complete. Full public disclosure of nonbelief also remains a privilege not equally accessible to all: gender, race, class, and national context play a significant role in determining who can safely reject religion openly (Abbott & Anaya 2022; Cragun & Smith 2024).

Data Illustration

The study aligns with research showing that deconversion is rarely a dramatic or sudden "lightbulb" moment in which faith collapses overnight (Altemeyer & Hunsberger 1997; Zuckerman 2011). Especially among clergy, what appears to be a sudden break is often a moment of clarity in which conclusions long in development are finally acknowledged.

The accounts of John and Oleg—introduced in Stage 2—illustrate this dynamic clearly when viewed from the perspective of Stage 4. John's statement that "one day, the transformation happened within 24 hours" might, in a survey or brief testimony, appear to support the sudden-break narrative. Yet qualitative interviewing revealed a much longer process. As he explained:

> For me, it was almost purely intellectual. Emotionally, I didn't want to abandon my beliefs… it was one of the most difficult and traumatic things that I've ever done. Which was why it took me over a decade of struggle to reach that decision. There was no single factor, just an ever-growing list of inconsistencies, fallacies, contradictions, etc., that finally reached the point where I could no longer justify believing it all, and no matter how much I disliked doing so, I had to admit it was all bullshit.

John's account illustrates that Stage 4 feels sudden not because the process itself is sudden, but because the final recognition arrives with unusual clarity after years of accumulation, triggering, and analysis. The suddenness belongs to the acknowledgment, not to the process that made it possible.

Like John, Oleg's Stage 2 did not involve a single external event but an internal tipping point at which the cumulative erosion of Stage 1 made continued belief cognitively unsustainable. His metaphor of a fraying rope captured the relationship between gradual accumulation and apparent collapse: each weakened strand undermined the structure, while the final break felt sudden only because it marked the culmination of prior deterioration. Importantly, this "final strand" did not itself constitute nonbelief but initiated a further period of epistemic engagement. Oleg described spending months studying history, biology, archaeology, and related fields before explicitly recognizing that he no longer believed (reaching Stage 4).

Analytical Discussion

The findings of Stage 4 point to an important methodological issue. The apparent suddenness of some accounts—the sense that deconversion happened "in one day" or "all at once"—reflects how Stage 4 is experienced phenomenologically rather than how the

process actually unfolded. This has implications for studies relying on self-report surveys or brief testimony: without qualitative follow-up, the cumulative and staged nature of deconversion may be obscured by the salience of the culminating moment. Extended in-depth interviews were therefore essential for making the earlier stages, particularly Stages 1 and 3, analytically visible.

It is worth noting what Stage 4 does and does not represent. Across the dataset, deconversion was often experienced not as liberation but as loss. Dennett and LaScola (2013:203) document this among clergy: "I didn't plan to become an atheist. I didn't even want to become an atheist. It's just that I had no choice." Many grieved not only the loss of God but of community, vocational meaning, and the framework through which their entire life had been organized. Stage 4 is therefore not the end of suffering but often its intensification — the point at which private recognition of nonbelief must be reconciled with a life built entirely around its opposite. It marks the completion of the epistemic transformation — the point at which ontological secularization is privately achieved — but not the end of the individual's engagement with religion or community. Many participants continued to serve in their religious roles long after Stage 4 was reached (Dennett & LaScola 2013; Zamushinski 2025a). The model stops here because what follows — navigating relationships post-deconversion, rebuilding identity, integrating into secular communities — falls beyond this study's focus on the epistemic process of belief loss itself.

Synthesis and Theoretical Contribution

A consistent pattern emerged across the accounts examined in this study: participants described a gradual reorientation in how they evaluated knowledge claims. Over time, they relied less on revelation, institutional authority, or tradition and more on evidence-based reasoning, critical inquiry, and personal epistemic responsibility. Once their belief system no longer appeared intellectually defensible, continued adherence often came to feel inauthentic or self-deceptive. Deconversion was therefore rarely described as a voluntary or impulsive choice, but rather as a conclusion participants gradually felt compelled to accept.

The findings suggest that clergy ontological secularization is best understood not as a singular event or emotional rupture, but as a process of epistemic reorientation through which supernatural belief becomes cognitively untenable. The four stages proposed here are not merely descriptive categories but analytically ordered phases, each preparing the conditions for the next. The progressive transfer of epistemic authority, rather than any single trigger, appears to constitute the structural core of the deconversion process documented here.

The present study does not dispute the role of emotion in deconversion (Hood & Chen 2013; Potter 2026), nor does it suggest that the present findings necessarily generalize to lay populations. Prior research demonstrates that emotionally charged experiences may significantly influence religious exit among some individuals (Exline et al. 2022; Van Tongeren et al. 2025; Wright et al. 2011). However, the data presented here suggest that for clergy who ultimately rejected not only religion but supernaturalism itself, such experiences alone were rarely sufficient. Triggers appear to initiate or intensify doubt, but sustained epistemic engagement was typically necessary before participants concluded that supernatural claims were no longer credible.

This distinction is analytically important because religious exit does not necessarily equal ontological secularization (Cragun & Smith 2024; Streib et al. 2021). Individuals may leave religion while retaining beliefs in spiritual forces or an afterlife. The clergy examined in this study, however, described a broader transformation involving the rejection of supernaturalism altogether. In this respect, the present model differs from prior approaches by focusing specifically on the transition from supernatural to naturalistic worldviews across diverse religious traditions. The model also differs from Pérez and Vallières (2019) in proposing a staged progression in which each phase prepares the conditions for the next, rather than categories that coexist simultaneously.

Implications

The study carries several implications. Empirically, it centers an understudied population — religious professionals from diverse traditions and countries — whose experiences challenge common assumptions (in existing scholarship and public discourse) that deconversion and apostasy are primarily youthful, impulsive, confined to Abrahamic traditions in the West, or rooted solely in emotional dissatisfaction. Theoretically, it advances a process-oriented model that shifts analytical focus from *why* individuals become nonbelievers to *how* they do so, foregrounding epistemological transformation over motivational explanation.

The findings also carry methodological implications. Retrospective accounts describing deconversion as "sudden" may obscure prolonged periods of doubt accumulation, cognitive struggle, and epistemic reassessment preceding the final recognition of nonbelief. Extended qualitative interviewing was therefore essential for making these earlier stages analytically visible. Future research should continue examining not only the social and emotional dimensions of religious exit, but also the epistemic processes through which belief itself becomes cognitively untenable across different religious, cultural, and institutional contexts.

The findings also speak to a persistent misconception in public discourse (Lee 2022; Taira 2025). Prior research has shown that for some lay individuals, emotionally charged experiences—such as trauma, anger, or betrayal—may shape or accompany their exit from religion (Exline et

al. 2022; Hood & Chen 2013; Van Tongeren et al. 2025; Wright et al. 2011). Although these studies focus not only on negative emotions, and emphasize that deconversion is complex, nuanced and not reducible to psychological distress, they can still allow readers to conclude that emotional experience alone may be sufficient to produce nonbelief, and that "sudden rejection of God" not only occurs, but "may be associated with emotional factors" (Hood & Chen 2013: 540). Such interpretations, while not unfounded, risk inadvertently reinforcing what Cottee (2015:28) terms the "anti-apostate narrative" — the portrayal of departure as rebellion, moral failure, laziness, confusion, trauma response, simple ignorance, or psychological dysfunction, rather than a cognitive position — a set of misconceptions documented across diverse cultural contexts (Abbott & Anaya 2022; Brewster 2014; Lee 2022; Taira 2025; Zamuşinski 2025c). The present data offer no support for this narrative. Consistent with Altemeyer and Hunsberger's (1997:117) finding that deconversion typically arises not from rebellion, family dysfunction, childhood problems, or any emotional rupture but from perceived flaws in religion's truth-claims, and with Brewster's (2014) observation that none of her participants left faith out of anger or rebellion, the clergy in this study described nonbelief not as a reaction but as a conclusion — reached reluctantly, intellectually, and over considerable time.

Practically, these findings may assist religious institutions, counselors, and support organizations in understanding the distinctive pressures faced by clergy undergoing deconversion. For religious professionals, the loss of belief often unfolds privately while public religious performance, institutional obligations, and community expectations continue uninterrupted, potentially intensifying both psychological strain and social isolation.

CONCLUSION

The most significant transformation documented in this study is not simply the rejection of particular doctrines, but the reconfiguration of the criteria by which truth itself is evaluated. Across traditions and national contexts, participants described a gradual transfer of epistemic authority away from institutional authority or tradition and toward critical inquiry, evidential reasoning, and personal epistemic responsibility. The proposed four-stage model is exploratory rather than universal, but it highlights a distinction often underdeveloped in prior research: the difference between leaving religion and relinquishing a supernatural worldview. For the clergy studied here, emotional experiences or institutional conflict alone were rarely sufficient to produce ontological secularization without sustained epistemic transformation.

NOTES

1 Throughout this article, *religion* is used to refer to organized systems of belief and practice oriented around supernatural claims, while *faith* refers to the personal disposition of trust in and commitment to those claims. Neither term is used to encompass broader notions of meaning-making or spirituality that do not involve supernatural assumptions.

2 Cragun and Gull (2025) critique the term *deconversion* (and I agree) on the grounds that it implies a reversal or undoing of a prior religious conversion, thereby privileging conversion *to* religion as more normatively significant than conversion *from* it. They argue that this framing is conceptually misleading, as the processes involved in adopting religious beliefs and relinquishing them share similar social and psychological dynamics; thus, distinguishing "conversion" from "deconversion" is not analytically meaningful.

3 https://clergyproject.org/nonbelieving-clergy-join/, accessed on April 11, 2026.

4 The "gumball analogy" distinguishes between not believing a claim and actively believing its opposite — illustrating that rejecting the claim "the number of gumballs is even" does not require asserting it is odd, and thus that atheism need not carry the same burden of proof as theism.

DISCLAIMER

This article has been approved for public release by the Defense Language Institute Foreign Language Centre's Public Affairs Office. For verification please e-mail: mpao@dliflc.edu. The content of this article is not necessarily the official view of the Defense Language Institute Foreign Language Center, nor is it endorsed by the Department of the Army, the Department of War, or the US Government. All third-party materials featured in the article remain the intellectual property of their respective authors. Use of outside materials is done under the fair use copyright principle, for educational purposes only. The content of this article is the sole responsibility of the author(s).

COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to declare.

AUTHOR AFFILIATIONS

Alexandr Zamushinski orcid.org/0009-0006-7807-8811
Defense Language Institute (DLIFLC) Monterey, CA, USA

REFERENCES

Abbott, DM and **Anaya, EJ.** 2022. 'Breaking Free: A Grounded Theory Study of Atheist Women in the United States'. *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, 46(4): 501–517. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1177/03616843221115338

Altemeyer, B and **Hunsberger, B.** 1997. *Amazing Conversions: Why Some Turn to Faith & Others Abandon Religion*. Amherst: Prometheus Books.

Ammerman, NT. 2021. *Studying Lived Religion: Contexts and Practices*. New York: New York University Press. DOI: https://doi.org/10.18574/nyu/9781479804283.001.0001

Barbour, J. 1994. *Versions of Deconversion: Autobiography and the Loss of Faith*. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press.

Brewster, ME. 2014. *Atheists in America*. New York: Columbia University Press. DOI: https://doi.org/10.7312/brew16358

Brinkerhoff, M and **Mackie, M.** 1993. 'Casting Off the Bonds of Organized Religion: A Religious-Careers Approach to the Study of Apostasy'. *Review of Religious Research*, 34: 235–257. DOI: https://doi.org/10.2307/3700597

Bromley, DG. (ed.) 1998. *The Politics of Religious Apostasy: The Role of Apostates in the Transformation of Religious Movements*. Westport, Conn.: Praeger.

Brooks, M. 2018. *Disenchanted Lives: Apostasy and Ex-Mormonism Among the Latter-day Saints*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press. DOI: https://doi.org/10.36019/9780813592220

Charmaz, K. 2006. *Constructing Grounded Theory: A Practical Guide Through Qualitative Analysis*. London: Sage Publications.

Cottee, S. 2015. *The Apostates: When Muslims Leave Islam*. London: C. Hurst & Co.

Cragun, R and **Gull, B.** 2025. *Secular Conversion*. Oxford Research Encyclopedias. https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780199340378.013.1223

Cragun, R and **Smith, J.** 2024. *Goodbye Religion: The Causes and Consequences of Secularization*. New York: NYU Press. DOI: https://doi.org/10.18574/nyu/9781479825349.001.0001

Davidman, L. 2015. *Becoming Un-Orthodox: Stories of Ex-Hasidic Jews*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Davie, G. 1994. *Religion in Britain Since 1945: Believing Without Belonging*. Oxford: Blackwell.

Dennett, D and **LaScola, L.** 2013. *Caught in the Pulpit: Leaving Belief Behind*. Durham: Pitchstone Publishing.

Ebaugh, HRF. 1988. *Becoming an Ex: The Process of Role Exit*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press. DOI: https://doi.org/10.7208/chicago/9780226160535.001.0001

Enstedt, D, Larsson, G and **Mantsinen, T** (eds.) 2019. *Handbook of Leaving Religion*. Leiden: Brill. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004331471

Exline, JJ, Van Tongeren, DR, Bradley, DF, Wilt, JA, Stauner, N, Pargament, KI and **DeWall, CN.** 2022. 'Pulling Away from Religion: Religious/Spiritual Struggles and Religious Disengagement Among College Students'. *Psychology of Religion and Spirituality*, 14(3): 300–311. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1037/rel0000375

Fisher, AR. 2017. 'A Review and Conceptual Model of the Research on Doubt, Disaffiliation, and Related Religious Changes'. *Psychology of Religion and Spirituality*, 9(4): 358–367. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1037/rel0000088

Gull, B. 2021. '"We Are the Women Our Parents Warned Us Against": Identity Reconstruction and the Re-imagining of Gender After High-Cost Religious Disaffiliation'. *Symbolic Interaction*, 45(1): 97–122. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1002/symb.541

Hood, R and **Chen, Z.** 2013. 'Conversion and Deconversion'. In: Bullivant, S and Ruse, M (eds.) *The Oxford Handbook of Atheism*. New York: Oxford University Press, 537–551.

Kozinets, R. 2019. *Netnography: The Essential Guide to Qualitative Social Media Research*. London: Sage. DOI: https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003001430-2

Krause, N and **Ellison, CG.** 2009. 'The Doubting Process: A Longitudinal Study of the Precipitants and Consequences of Religious Doubt in Older Adults'. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 48(2): 293–312. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-5906.2009.01448.x

Lee, KM. 2022. '"In God We Trust?": Christian Nationalists' Establishment and Use of Theistnormative Legislation'. *Rhetoric Society Quarterly*, 52(5): 417–432. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1080/02773945.2022.2062435

Loveland, MT. 2003. 'Religious Switching: Preference Development, Maintenance, and Change'. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 42(1): 147–157. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-5906.00168

Marin, P and **Lindeman, M.** 2021. 'How do people perceive the relationship between science and religion? The roles of epistemic and ontological cognition'. *Applied Cognitive Psychology*, 35(5): 1146–1157. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1002/acp.3836

Martínez-Ariño, J. 2022. 'How Does One Become an Atheist?' In: Taira, T (ed.), *Atheism in Five Minutes*, 193–196. Equinox Publishing.

Mauss, A. 1969. 'Dimensions of Religious Defection'. *Review of Religious Research*, 10: 128–135. DOI: https://doi.org/10.2307/3510739

McCann, R. 1967. 'Developmental Factors in the Growth of a Mature Faith'. In: Knudten, RD (ed.) *The Sociology of Religion*. New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts.

McLaughlin, AT, Van Tongeren, DR, Teahan, K, Davis, DE, Rice, KG and **DeWall, CN.** 2022. 'Who are the religious "dones?": A cross-cultural latent profile analysis of formerly religious individuals'. *Psychology of Religion and Spirituality*, 14(4): 512–524. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1037/rel0000376

Pérez, S and **Vallières, F.** 2019. 'How Do Religious People Become Atheists? Applying a Grounded Theory Approach to Propose a Model of Deconversion'. *Secularism and Nonreligion*, 8(3): 1–14. DOI: https://doi.org/10.5334/snr.108

Pew Research Center. 2025. *2023–24 U.S. Religious Landscape Study Interactive Database*. DOI: https://doi.org/10.58094/3zs9-jc14

Potter, LE. 2026. 'Becoming Non-Religious: Exploring the Emotional Experiences of Apostasy and Refugee Status Determination'. *Secularism and Nonreligion*, 15(1), p. 1. DOI: https://doi.org/10.5334/snr.232

Saroglou, V, Karim, M and **Day, JM.** 2020. 'Personality and Values of Deconverts: A Function of Current Nonbelief or Prior Religious Socialisation?' *Mental Health, Religion & Culture*, 23(2): 139–152. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1080/13674676.2020.1737922

Smith, J. 2011. 'Becoming an Atheist in America: Constructing Identity and Meaning from the Rejection of Theism'.

Sociology of Religion, 72(2): 215–237. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1093/socrel/srq082

Smith, JM. 2016. 'Apostasy'. In: Zuckerman, P (ed.) *Beyond Religion*, 71–91. Macmillan.

Streib, H. 2014. 'Deconversion'. In: Rambo, LR and Farhadian, CE (eds.) *The Oxford Handbook of Religious Conversion*. Oxford University Press, pp. 271–296.

Streib, H, Hood, RW, Keller, B, Csöff, RM and **Silver, C.** 2009. *Deconversion. Qualitative and quantitative results from cross-cultural research in Germany and the United States of America*. Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht. DOI: https://doi.org/10.13109/9783666604393

Streib, H, Keller, B, Hood, R and **Silver, CF.** 2021. *Deconversion Revisited: Biographical Studies and Psychometric Analyses Ten Years Later*. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht GmbH & Co. DOI: https://doi.org/10.13109/9783666568688

Suh, D and **Russell, R.** 2015. 'Non-Affiliation, Non-Denominationalism, Religious Switching, and Denominational Switching: Longitudinal Analysis of the Effects on Religiosity'. *Review of Religious Research*, 57(1): 25–41. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1007/s13644-014-0197-7

Taira, T. 2025. 'Representing Atheism in Films'. In: Bobrowicz, R, Saggau, EH and Otterbeck, J (eds.) *The Signs of the Times: Intersection Between Popular Culture and Political Theology*. Switzerland: Springer. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-84006-7_5

Van Tongeren, DR. 2024. *Done: How to Flourish After Leaving Religion*. APA LifeTools Series. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1037/0000415-000

Van Tongeren, DR, Brady, I, Van Duinen, C, Burke, C and **Ravey, EP.** 2025. 'The Four Horsemen of Religious Deidentification'. *Psychology of Religion and Spirituality*. Advance online publication. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1037/rel0000580

Van Tongeren, DR and **DeWall, CN.** 2023. 'Disbelief, Disengagement, Discontinuance, and Disaffiliation: An Integrative Framework for the Study of Religious Deidentification'. *Psychology of Religion and Spirituality*, 15(4): 515–524. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1037/rel0000434

Wright, BRE, Giovanellig, D, Dolang, EG and **Edwards, ME.** 2011. 'Explaining Deconversion from Christianity: A Study of On-Line Narratives'. *Journal of Religion & Society*, 13: 1–17.

Zamuṣinski, A. 2025a. "Understanding the Role of the Clergy Project: Misconceptions and Realities of a Support Network for Nonbelieving Clergy." *Secularism and Nonreligion*, 14(1): 1–14. DOI: https://doi.org/10.5334/snr.211

Zamuṣinski, A. 2025b. "Hidden Apostasy: What Prevents Nonbelieving Clergy from Disclosing Their Lack of Faith?" *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 40(3): 383–399. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1080/13537903.2025.2580133

Zamuṣinski, A. 2025c. "How Anti-Atheist Prejudice Keeps Nonbelieving Clergy Silent: The Clergy Project Participants Share Their Pain." *Journal of Religion and Culture*, 30: 5–34.

Zamuṣinski, A. 2026. 'Can Clergy Be Religious Without Supernatural Belief? Rethinking Secularity Through Religious Naturalism'. *Critical Research on Religion*. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1177/20503032261493473

Zuckerman, P. 2011. *Faith No More: Why People Reject Religion*. Oxford University Press. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199740017.001.0001

TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:
Zamushinski, A. 2026. How Religious Leaders Become Nonbelievers: A Four-Stage Model of Deconversion. *Secularism and Nonreligion*, 15: 15, pp. 1–16. DOI: https://doi.org/10.5334/snr.268

Submitted: 18 November 2025 **Accepted:** 30 September 2026 **Published:** 18 November 2026

COPYRIGHT:
© 2026 The Author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC-BY 4.0), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited. See https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/.

Secularism and Nonreligion is a peer-reviewed open access journal published by Ubiquity Press.