

Summary: Research on experiences in changing or distancing from religion or philosophy

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Research design and used methods

In this research, we focus on the experiences of individuals and organizations involved in processes that lead to distancing from one's own worldview ("deconversion") and possibly changing to another worldview ("conversion"). This study was commissioned by the Agentschap Binnenlands Bestuur – Afdeling Gelijke Kansen, Integratie en Inburgering. The first objective of the research is to better understand the experiences of individuals and organizations involved in changing or distancing from religion or worldview in a Flemish context. A second objective is to put these research insights into practice and policy and develop policy recommendations, supported by insights from civil society organisations, experts and policy makers. We look at changes or (de)conversion processes between the seven religions that are recognized in Belgium: six religious groups - Catholicism, Protestantism, Anglicanism, Islam, Judaism, and Eastern Orthodoxy, as well as non-religious philosophical organizations.

Considering the nature of this study we used qualitative research methods. Via snowball sampling we surveyed 43 participants. They were selected on these criteria: 1) (de)conversion processes by philosophical community from which they renounced (and possibly joined another worldview): Christianity, Islam, Judaism, or their non-believing/freethinking worldview, 2) (de)conversion processes experienced in the last 10 years, 3) variation according to migration background, gender, age, LGBTQ+, 4) living in Flanders or the Brussels Capital Region. With the respondents we also look at important intersections with migration history, ethnical origin, gender, and age. Each respondent was surveyed during an in-depth interview, at a location of their choice or online. Out of the 43 respondents, 22 identified themselves as male and 21 identified themselves as female. Age ranged from 21 to 61, with the largest group being between 18-25. Even though a lot of respondents had a migration background, most had the Belgian nationality.

Research questions and results

Below we discuss the research questions which we answer based on the findings of the respondents and the input of the experts and organizations. The first research question is, *"What are the positive and negative experiences in (de)conversion processes of religion or worldview and how these experiences evolved during this process?"* We distinguish between conversion and deconversion, since these two processes differ greatly in terms of experience. The positive experiences in deconversion found in this study are mainly about feelings of freedom, relief, and pride. The negative experiences, on the other hand, are very diverse: despite the experience of freedom, one maintains the urge of something meaningful, often - and especially in closed communities - one must build a new life, one may experience feelings of anger, fear, and sadness, and one could be afraid of reactions, which in turn gives rise to a double life (mainly among Islamic respondents). Positive experiences found in conversion are feelings of relief and peace, the support of the new philosophical community and better coping with grief. Negative experiences were mainly the result of reactions of others. These are often negative, across all faith communities. These reactions were prompted by fear or lack of understanding

The second research question is: *'What barriers and facilitating factors do people experience before, during and after these processes?'* We surveyed this on a macro-, meso- and microlevel. At a macro level, discrimination, stigmatization or stereotyping can have a negative impact on a (de)conversion process. In cases of conversion, respondents who convert to Islam often experience negative reactions. But also, when conversion to Christianity occurs, respondents often experience stereotyping. They are being called "stupid" or "disadvantaged" for believing. This group of converts experiences disbelief for doing something contrarian in a secularized society. In conversations about religion and their conversion, they are put on the defensive and have to answer for what is wrong within Islam or the Roman Catholic Church. Another barrier cited by respondents is that they are expected to take a stand against their former worldview. Respondents who no longer adhere to the Islamic faith feel they are being used as pawns to validate the Islam critical and Islamophobic agenda of far-right parties and others.

At the meso level, the interviews showed the influence of expectations from the religious community. The few respondents who converted to Judaism indicated that Judaism does not encourage conversion at all, which complicates or even halts their process. The respondents who converted to Islam felt strong pressure to practice "correctly. It is not always clear whether this pressure comes from the religious community or from the respondents themselves. An annoying factor experienced by former Muslim respondents was that there was no room for questions in their former religious community. In the case of deconversion it is often the (expected) reactions of one's own social network that can be bothersome. Some respondents that left Judaism say that they had to leave their entire community, including friends and family. On the other hand, being in a secularized society is found to be facilitating in a deconversion process. Respondents who have left Christianity often go through a rather uneventful deconversion process. A high degree of openness in the network of the person involved can be strongly facilitative. This is mentioned among both believing and non-believing respondents. Respondents also noted geographic differences, with metropolitan areas perceived as more "open minded. At a micro level, many of our respondents indicated that they often started questioning their religious identity during adolescence/puberty. For some respondents in this study, personal crisis experiences are identified as prompting them to become religious. It is also often this group of respondents who draw much peace and structure from their faith itself to address their problems. Respondents who faced more difficult periods in their lives referred more often to the meaningful function of religion, and to a lesser degree to its community function.

The third research question is, *"What are the needs of the people involved during these processes on a psychological, social and existential level?"* Here a distinction between conversion and deconversion is also relevant. In conversion processes, respondents indicated that having a supportive social network is found to be very important. This social network is usually offered by the religious community itself. Nevertheless, loneliness does occur among converts, as there is a feeling that they do not really belong fully to any group. Existentially, the meaningful function of religion is something that may attract respondents to convert. In deconversion processes, respondents indicate that it is mostly important to engage in conversation with someone who understands them. Since they feel alone in their process, their psychological and social needs are strongly intertwined. The need to engage in conversation with like-minded people is strong, so many respondents started looking for similar experiences and conversation partners on the Internet. Existentially, questions about death are prominent among the respondents.

A fourth research question is, *"Are there differences between the experiences during (de)conversion processes according to the type of religion or worldview one distances oneself from?"* The biggest differences between religions and philosophies exists among respondents who have distanced themselves from Judaism, especially the Jewish Orthodox community, as there is a strong break with the community, including friends and family. Often it concerns respondents who have lived in strong isolation from society, meaning that they often do not speak the Dutch language, do not have an extensive network, have little knowledge of the social map (*'sociale kaart'*) and usually do not have a recognized diploma. Assistance for them should therefore be more practical in nature in the first period, with a focus on network expansion. Noticeable for the respondents who have left Islam is that in most cases (11 out of 13) they only selectively tell others about their deconversion. They mainly do so out of fear for negative reactions from their social network or because of their loyalty to their parents, who raised them Islamic. Respondents who have left Christianity mostly experience this as an uneventful process. Consequently, the reactions of those around them tend to be rather indifferent. However, there are exceptions: respondents who emigrated from countries where religion has a more prominent role than in Belgium, often experience more resentment from their families. A few respondents who grew up in Belgium, but where brought up in a strongly Catholic way, also experienced more backlash from their family networks. Thus, the fluidity of a deconversion process seems to depend heavily on the family context and the degree of secularization in the country from which one migrated. Those who are no longer a-religious or non-believers, and in other words have converted often experience stigma, and this irrespective of whether they have converted to Christianity or to Islam.

The fifth research question is, *"What information channels do those involved use to support such (de)conversion processes?"* A common medium mentioned is the internet: web pages, YouTube videos and online groups or forums. The internet is easily accessible and ensures anonymity. This makes it popular among respondents, especially those who deconvert. In the case of conversion, respondents use the above media, and additionally religious books or oral information from their new religious community. The interviews show that respondents look up substantive as well as practical information. Respondents seem to search less for questions of how to deal with the (emotional) reactions of others. In terms of information channels respondents encounter some problems. Firstly, there is too little supply of accessible websites. Sites that do exist are often not inviting or attractive. There are often conflicting opinions online, making it not easy to find correct, appropriate, and adequate information. Finally, respondents missed informative sites that were targeted to the Belgian and Flemish context.

The sixth question is, *"What types of organizations currently support (de)conversion processes and how can their operation be facilitated or strengthened?"* First, there are initiatives that are not specifically focused on religion. Psychological counseling is one type of support that respondents regularly mention. These are usually respondents who sought help from a psychologist for a variety of reasons, with religion more likely to be an additional factor. Another variant is social assistance. This is mainly for more practical matters, aimed at providing tools to participate in society on their own. Even though various respondents said that these initiatives were helpful, some respondents mentioned some disadvantages. It can be difficult to take the necessary steps to ask for help with the (de-)conversion process, often because one fears that non-religious social workers without a migrant background

would find it difficult to understand them. In addition, when they do dare to take the step, this help is not always adequate. Despite good intentions, these organizations or initiatives are often not focused on discussing sensitive religious or cultural themes. Besides this general assistance a second type of support that was mentioned focuses specifically on religious or cultural themes: volunteer organizations and help from the religious or philosophical community. However, the expert interviews revealed that volunteer organizations often do not have sufficient resources. In addition, it is difficult to maintain a balance between anonymity and accessibility. Websites with the aim of guarding anonymity often have an uninviting appearance. This is perceived as unattractive and daunting. Finally, there are some preventive measures that can be taken to facilitate (de)conversion processes. Raising awareness, normalizing and breaking taboos concerning the topic are frequently mentioned measures. Respondents also suggested to stimulate faith communities to cooperate more, with each other, but equally with the government or civil society organizations. Several respondents also mention that the substance and system of philosophical subjects at school should be rethought with an increased focus on freedom of choice, diversity and flexibility.

Policy recommendations

Based on these findings we propose the following policy recommendations:

- Accessible informative websites with a focus on (de)conversion
- Attention for (de)conversion in the philosophical subjects in schools, a review of the system and the use of innovative tools regarding (de)conversion, cultures, us-them thinking and polarizing subjects
- Awareness campaign with a focus on free choice and a general acceptance of (de)conversion
- Creation of a second-line care knowledge center to assist caregivers
- Creation of a manual for caregivers
- Expansion of the social work landscape, with a focus on:
 - o identifying and supporting existing initiatives
 - o outreach work and buddy systems
 - o education/training for experts by experience
 - o strengthening the offerings of religious communities with a focus on spiritual care.
- Expansion of subjects around diversity, intercultural work, religion and philosophical literacy and sensitivity in social agogic, health-related and psychological studies, educational training and in-service training for police, teaching staff and social workers
- Expand interfaith dialogue
- Design and use training tools against discrimination and stigmatization
- Set up and strengthen discussion groups or workshops about (de)conversion
- Setting up online assistance

These policy recommendations are some possible suggestions based on the empirical findings of this study. Obviously, more and other options are possible. The combination of different policy initiatives also seems interesting. At the same time, we also want to recommend that the problems that (de)conversion entails should always be seen in a broader perspective. Many (de)conversion processes are unproblematic, are part of different transitions and/or are captured and supported by the professional networks one calls upon. It is up to policy to take specific initiatives to accommodate those people who have help requests and adjust the assistance accordingly.