

# Deconversion and “Spirituality”— Migrations in the Religious Field

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### Abstract

The Bielefeld-based Cross-cultural Study on “Spirituality” has been inspired by the previous Bielefeld-based Cross-cultural Study on Deconversion. In this chapter we review this previous study and highlight the open questions and desiderata for the present study. Linking the two research perspectives implies the interesting question: Does “spirituality” and biographical development toward “spirituality” involve processes of deconversion? Because both are changes in the religious field that are associated with the “spiritual” self-attribution, our model of the religious field may help to understand this link. Where is privatized, experience-oriented religion located in the religious field?

It need not be kept secret: The inspiration for studying the semantics and psychology of “spirituality,” which is presented in this volume, originates in our previous study on deconversion: When this previous study, the Bielefeld-based Cross-cultural Study on Deconversion (Streib, Hood, Keller, Csöff, & Silver, 2009) came to a conclusion, we reflected on the most urgent desiderata following from this research.

And one of the unexpected findings was that deconversion was associated with a strong preference to identify as being “more spiritual than reli-

gious” and to a lesser degree with being “neither religious nor spiritual,” but in any case with a reluctance to identify as “being religious” (Streib et al., 2009, pp. 85–87; 239). Correlations of self-identified “spirituality” with scales on personality, fundamentalism and religious schemata, and also careful reading of the interviews with a selection of deconverts did profile the self-identified “spirituality” to some extent. Still, we could not determine precisely what our respondents mean by the word “spirituality.” This led us to note a desideratum and conclude that “further research is needed about the semantics of spirituality in a cross-cultural comparison” (p. 240).

Chapters 5–10 in this volume present an empirical response to this desideratum. In this chapter we aim at outlining the conceptual frame and locate “spirituality” and deconversion in our model of the religious field (Streib & Hood, 2013).

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## The Bielefeld-Based Cross-Cultural Study on Deconversion

The Deconversion Project was the collaboration of two teams, one based at the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga, USA and the other based at the Bielefeld University, Germany. Field work was completed in 2005. Besides the book publication (Streib et al., 2009), a number of articles and chapters address detailed questions such as the relation of conversion and deconversion (Paloutzian, Murken, Streib, & Namini, 2013; Streib, 2014), interpreting deconversion trajectories (Keller, Klein, Hood, & Streib, 2013), or the relation of deconversion and atheism (Hood & Chen, 2013; Streib & Klein, 2013).

The Deconversion Project was based on a triangulation of qualitative and quantitative data, starting with the qualitative. The study included a total of 129 deconverts in the two countries. Narrative interviews and faith development interviews were conducted with 99 deconverts from a broad variety of religious groups and organization in the USA and Germany. Aside from these qualitative instruments, an extensive questionnaire was answered by all deconverts; in addition, in-tradition members also answered the questionnaire (“in-tradition members” is the term used in the Bielefeld-based Deconversion Project for members of the religious groups from which the deconverts have disaffiliated), the goal being to interview ten in-tradition members per deconvert. Thus, the quantitative database includes questionnaire data from 1067 in-tradition members and 129 deconverts. The measures included in the questionnaire assess self-identification as “spiritual” and “religious,” personality traits, psychological well-being and growth, religious fundamentalism, right-wing authoritarianism, and religious styles. In addition to the 99 faith development interviews of deconverts, 177 faith development interviews with in-tradition members were conducted. As can be seen from this brief characterization of the data, this research on deconversion is based on an innovative design triangulating quantitative and qualitative data; also this design has inspired the present study on “spirituality.”

## Deconversion Trajectories as Migrations in the Religious Field

Preparing for the empirical assessment of deconversion, it was not only necessary to develop and profile a concept of ‘deconversion’—there we have identified a set criteria such as *loss of religious experience, intellectual doubt, moral criticism, emotional suffering and disaffiliation from the community* (Streib & Keller, 2004; Streib et al., 2009, p. 22). It was also necessary to conceptually clarify the possible deconversion trajectories as migrations in the religious field. And this conceptual work resulted in a reconstruction of the model of the religious field, as we know it from Weber (1921) or Bourdieu (1971a, b); for this reconstruction, Troeltsch’s (1912) expertise on mysticism (see Chap. 1, this volume) has revealed very helpful, but needs to be translated into the framework of the religious field—as we will describe below in this chapter.

In the Deconversion Project, we considered as deconversion trajectories the following options (Streib et al., 2009, pp. 26–28):

1. *secularizing exit*: termination of (concern with) religious belief and praxis, termination of membership in organized religion;
2. *oppositional exit*: adopting a different belief system of, or engaging in different ritual praxis in, or affiliation with, a higher-tension, more oppositional religious organization, which could mean e.g. conversion into a fundamentalist or new religious group;
3. *integrating exit*: adopting a different belief system of, or engaging in different ritual praxis in, or affiliation with, an integrated or more accommodated religious organization;
4. *privatizing exit*: termination of membership, but continuity of private religious belief and private religious praxis; this is what is meant by ‘invisible religion’ (Luckmann, 1967);
5. *heretical exit*: individual heretical appropriation of new belief system(s) or engagement in different religious praxis (syncretistic, invisible religion, spiritual quest) without new organizational affiliation.

The first four of these deconversion trajectories can be understood within the framework of the (traditional) religious field with church and sect as most powerful actors in competition for the affiliation of lay people: secular exiters could be expected to leave the religious field, oppositional and integrating exiters migrate between church and sect, and religious switchers move between churches of similar degree of integration.

In contrast, privatizing and heretical exiters pose a problem to the traditional concept of the religious field because they continue holding religious beliefs and engage in religious praxis of some sort—eventually a rather different sort, or a kind of quilt composition of beliefs and practices—but privatizing and heretical exiters do not care about, and turn their back on, the organized religious actors (church; sect), and only a few may have become private clients of magicians. The privatizing and heretical exiters apparently have changed the “rules of the game.” To account for these kinds of migrations, we have therefore proposed the identification of a segment in the religious field that is not “organized,” i.e. not dominated by powerful religious actors such as churches and sects, but are highly privatized and characterized by rather occasional networks or scenes.

In the empirical work of the study, the deconversion trajectories have been explored. Using the biographical information from the interviews, the deconversion trajectories of the 99 cases could be identified. All types of deconversion trajectories are represented:

29	Secular exiters
24	Privatizing exiters
9	Heretical exiters
13	Religious switchers
16	Integrating exiters and
8	Oppositional exiters.

Thus almost two third of our deconverts have left the field of organized religion: one third in privatizing and heretical exits; and 20 out of these

29 privatizing and heretical exiters self-identify as “more spiritual than religious.” However, even from those who took secular exits, not all can be regarded atheist, but eight of them self-identify as “more spiritual than religious.”

Thus, these deconverts, who have been identified and categorized on the basis of personal interviews, contribute to the unexpected high number of “more spiritual than religious” deconverts in this previous Deconversion Project. Results from the quantitative data support and detail this qualitative finding.

Higher Self-identification  
as “Spiritual” Among Deconverts

As Table 2.1 shows, our quantitative results reveal high numbers of people who self-identify as being “more spiritual than religious”: more than 18 % members in religious organizations in Germany and almost 37 % in the USA. However, the *deconverts*’ preference for the “more spiritual than religious” self-identification almost doubles to 36.5 % in Germany and 63.6 % in the United States.

It was an unexpected finding and it is a challenge for interpretation that deconversion is associated with such strong preference to identify as being “more spiritual than religious.” Of course, for the self-identification as being “neither religious nor spiritual,” the difference between deconverts and in-tradition members is even greater; but this may be easier to understand because of the relatively strong presence of secular exiters. But in both cases the question arises: what do the deconverts mean when self-identifying as “spiritual”?

We may speculate that a person who has just disaffiliated from a “religion,” eventually including emotional suffering and moral criticism, is rather reluctant to identify as “being religious” and—perhaps because of the lack of alternative options in the questionnaire item—thus identifies as “spiritual.” But this still leaves open the question of the semantic of “spirituality.”

**Table 2.1** Spiritual/Religious Self-identification of Deconverts and In-tradition Members in the USA and Germany in the Bielefeld-Based Cross-Cultural Study of Deconversion

		More religious than spiritual (%)	More spiritual than religious (%)	Equally religious and spiritual (%)	Neither religious nor spiritual (%)	Total (%)
Germany	In-tradition members (n = 356)	43.3	18.3	32.6	5.9	100.0
	Deconverts (n = 52)	19.2	36.5	23.1	21.2	100.0
United States	In-tradition members (n = 649)	10.2	37.0	46.8	6.0	100.0
	Deconverts (n = 66)	6.1	63.6	13.6	16.7	100.0

Source Bielefeld-Based Cross-Cultural Study of Deconversion

### The Open Question for the Semantics of “Spirituality”

It is obvious from this detailed observation of deconversion trajectories and their association with self-identification as being “spiritual” that there may be a variety of different meanings associated with “spirituality” in the different deconversion trajectories. However, based on the data from the Deconversion Project, the questions for the semantics of “spiritual” self-identification could not be answered. Thus, it was clear that, at the end of the Deconversion Project, we had to conclude with a desideratum and call for further research on the semantics of “spirituality.”

However, there is another insight from the Deconversion Project in regard to “spirituality”: It is clearly suggested to understand “spirituality” in terms of the religious field including migrations in the religious field. It is obvious that the varieties of both deconversion and “spirituality” suggest a revision of Weber’s and Bourdieu’s model of the religious field.

### The Religious Field and “Spirituality”

#### The Legacy of the Classics

According to Weber’s (1921) work and Bourdieu’s (1971a, b) reconstruction, the basic pattern for a model of the religious field is the distinction between church and sect. The church-sect distinction has become one of the basic tools for

understanding religion in sociological terms and for constructing the religious field.

As detailed in Chap. 1 of this volume, when taking a closer look into Weber’s work, we find a distinction not between two, but between *three* actors. Not only the *sects* with their prophets compete with the churches and their priests; the third party of actors in the religious field are the *magicians*. What has been widely ignored, but is the longer the more necessary to recall (Daiber, 2002), is that also Troeltsch (1911, 1912) talks about *three* types, but called this third type *mysticism*.

Bourdieu’s (1971a, b) work sets the stage for a sociological perspective on what is called a “field.” His model of the religious field is close to Weber’s in respect to the religious expert actors and their characterization. It is noteworthy that it also includes the third religious expert actor which, in accord with Weber, is the *magician*. But Bourdieu’s special concern has been the dynamic in the (religious) field.

According to Bourdieu, a field is constituted by the dynamics of competition which follow a field-specific principle (*nomos*) and field-specific “rules of the game.” Thus actors, specialists who know best, and act according to, the rules of the game, compete with each other, they invest and accumulate the specific type of capital which is relevant in the field. They act on the basis of “wealth,” i.e. previous achievements, previous accumulation of capital. Thus, in the framework of this rather strict economic model of the field, as presented in Schäfer, Seibert, Hahne, Tovar, and

Stockmeier (2008) careful reading of Bourdieu, already the relation to the lay people appear as “external relations.” Bourdieu, however, in his (1971b, p. 6) sketch of the religious field, has seen the necessity to *include* the lay people as a fourth pole in the religious field; Bourdieu used two different arrows to indicate the distinction between the kind of relation between the specialist actors and the lay people: Specialist actors (church, sect, magician) interact in relations of competition; lay people interact with these religious suppliers in relations of “transactions” or exchange of commodities. We may take this clearly higher regard for the lay people as justification to go even one step further in considering the influence of lay people in the contemporary religious field.

There appear to be more questions than answers in regard to the application of Bourdieu’s strict economic model to the *religious* domain. Several questions are not easy to answer: What exactly is the “nomos” of the religious field? What are the “rules of the game” here? What is “religious capital”? What is the “product,” what are the “means of production” in the religious field? For our purpose, the following characteristics of a ‘field’ are important: There is competition between various religious actors; religious actors compete with each other in attracting people as clients; religious actors greatly differ in the degree of achievement and “wealth.” The “wealth” of a religious actor is difficult to specify: We could take the degree of organization, the number of personnel, the power of a tradition, influence in culture and society, and finally economic capital as indicators. But all of this can be very low or zero, as in the case of the self-employed actors or “small entrepreneurs” such as some charismatic preachers, most magicians or mystics, who nevertheless can become serious competitors in the religious field. Thus there must be something else to constitute the “wealth”—in other words: the religious capital—of a religious actor.

The discussion of the concept of religion as detailed in Chap. 1 of this volume may help us spell out an answer to the question of religious capital and thus allow to construct the religious field in a way that does not contradict, but include Bourdieu’s, Weber’s and Troeltsch’s expertise—

and finally better account for the influence of the (“lay”) people. Here is our suggestion:

The “wealth,” or capital of religious actors is their expertise in *transcendence management*. This includes:

- (a) Mediation of transcendence, i.e. expertise in the most plausible answers about how to make, cope with, and come to terms with experiences of “great” transcendences in a way that the creative potential of the individual profits most;
- (b) Mediation of ultimate concern, i.e. expertise in the most plausible answers to questions of meaning-making, supply of the best answers to questions of ultimate concern.

This immediately makes clear that religious actors with no organization, no personnel, no tradition, no money can hold the most capital and can be very successfully competing with established and well-organized religious actors in the religious field. This may be the reason for the success of “spiritual” actors who are completely without any organizational power and wealth.

And finally: This understanding of religious capital allows account for the individualization that has influenced and changed Western societies so heavily. In principle, anyone can become an actor in the religious field, when the only necessary capital is the wealth of transcendence management, and neither tradition, cultural or economic capital, nor the power of an organization are required. Thus, this model of religious field is open for and may include “spiritual” actors. And the most sociological form of organization may be the workshop or the “spiritual” scene.

## Reconstruction of the Religious Field

The religious field needed to be designed to account for the dynamics of change in contemporary religion. The primary focus has been on the religious institutions, on the churches as the well-established, powerful and “wealthy” institutions, the second focus was on the sects and prophetic movements as serious competitors in the

religious field. About the third type of actors in the religious field—whether it is the magician (Weber; Bourdieu) or the mystic (Troeltsch)—there has been uncertainty regarding the organizational status and sociological relevance already in the early sociological discourse (see Simmel, 1911).

With reference to a plentitude of studies of contemporary religiosity, we conclude that there is an important—and possibly growing—segment of the religious field which has sociological relevance, but is clearly and radically individualistic, features individual immediacy to the transcendent and allows for no authority other than the individual experience-based evidence. Of the three classics, we find most resonance with the detailed and thoughtful analysis of Troeltsch on mysticism. Therefore, we find it justified to include all kinds of mysticism and radically individualized religiosity into the religious field and indicate that it is located in an low or not organized segment of the religious field (we may talk about religious or spiritual *scenes*, occasional networks), thus claim for the mystic the status of a full, powerful and eventually wealthy religious actor.

In a second step of reflection, we need to account for the fact that, as detailed in Chap. 1 of this volume, individuals greatly differ in their understanding of transcendence: There is *vertical transcendence* and ultimate concern and there is *horizontal transcendence* and ultimate concern. But exactly this may constitute the second coordinate for our construction of the religious field. Thus we work with two coordinates in constructing the religious field which can now be integrated into one model: There are (a) differences in the way transcendence is understood and socially reconstructed, differences in the direction of transcendence and ultimate concern: vertical and horizontal; there are (b) differences in the degree and structure of mediation of transcendence and ultimate concern: institutional mediation vs. individual mediation.

In Table 2.2, the ideal types of religious actors are presented. But also the middle ground variants in both dimensions are accounted for in separate cells. This way, we think, the types of actors in the contemporary implicit and explicit religious fields in the America and Europe can be outlined.

The distinction between vertical and horizontal constitutes one coordinate of the religious field. Table 2.2 visualizes this dimension as axis y, the horizontal versus vertical axis. To describe the endpoints on the vertical and horizontal axis: Vertical transcendence and ultimate concern is characterized (a) by the social reconstruction of experiences of “great” transcendences in other-worldly symbols and (b) by a direction of ultimate concern to a supernatural world; the most common symbol here is the “heaven” with God, or gods or other divine beings. Horizontal transcendence and ultimate concern is characterized (a) by the social reconstruction of experiences of “great” transcendences in this-worldly symbols, e.g. as “generalized entanglement” or in metaphors of wholeness and (b) by a direction of ultimate concern to the sanctity and the creative potential of life, including the individual person, humanity, or nature.

We are aware that we suggest a major change in the dimensions of the religious field by the inclusion of horizontal transcendence. As noted already (see also Chap. 1, this volume), the type of religiosity featuring horizontal transcendence has been identified by different terms, “invisible religion” and “implicit religion” among them. We regard this inclusion absolutely necessary for an adequate understanding of the contemporary religious landscape—and we may be among the first to suggest this inclusion into a religious field model which is derived from the classics. Thus we expect that this model of ideal type actors in the contemporary religious fields in America and Europe may elicit critical and constructive response, but will also be conceptually helpful for understanding the developments in contemporary religion and “spirituality”—and that it stands empirical testing.

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### **Conclusion: “Spirituality” in the Religious Field**

It is also obvious in Table 2.2 that “spirituality” in various versions has a place in the religious field. The three ideal types of mysticism in the



**Table 2.2** Ideal-Types in the US and European Religious Fields Constructed in the Frame of Two Coordinates: Symbolization (y) and Mediation (x) of Transcendence and Ultimate Concern

	Max. ← mediation of transcendence and ultimate concern → min. (thus: degree of organization)		
	Institutional	Charismatic	Individual
<b>Vertical</b> ↑ Symbolization of transcendence and Ultimate Concern ↓ <b>Horizontal</b>	<b>Churches</b> , established religious organizations or institutions featuring theistic symbolizations of transcendence and ultimate concern	<b>Theistic religious sects</b> , oppositional, prophetic religious groups (eventually around a charismatic), featuring theistic symbolizations of transcendence and ultimate concern	<b>Theistic religious mystics</b> , individual religious belief and practice with theistic symbolizations of transcendence and ultimate concern, practiced in private or occasional networks
	<b>Non-theistic religious traditions</b> , old and new established religious traditions and institutions, featuring non-theistic religious symbolizations of transcendence and ultimate concern	<b>Non-theistic (new) religious groups</b> , religious groups (eventually around a charismatic) featuring non-theistic religious symbolizations of transcendence and ultimate concern	<b>Non-theistic mystics</b> , individual religious belief and practice, featuring non-theistic religious symbolizations of transcendence and ultimate concern, practiced in private or in occasional networks
	<b>Implicitly religious organizations</b> , established organizations that are (rather not regarded “religious,” but) featuring experiences of transcendence and (ultimate) concern with the sanctity or creativity of life and nature	<b>Implicitly religious groups</b> , groups (eventually around a charismatic or idea) that are (rather not regarded “religious,” but) featuring experiences of transcendence and (ultimate) concern with the sanctity or creativity of life and nature	<b>Implicitly religious mystics</b> , individual belief and practice (rather not regarded “religious,” but) featuring experiences of transcendence and (ultimate) concern with the sanctity or creativity of life and nature; practiced in private or occasional networks

right column correspond to three versions of “spirituality,” which here, as in Chap. 1 of this volume, is no more, but no less than a conceptualization in the framework of the theory of religion and the religious field.

But this way, three ideal types of “spirituality” can be identified: “spirituality” in terms of vertical symbolization of transcendence, where “spirituality” may be just seen as part of traditional, e.g. Christian religion, or experiences of transcendence are communicated in other theistic symbol systems. And there is, in the middle row, the version of “spirituality” in which experiences of transcendence come to terms and are communicated in non-theistic symbol systems, which are not based on symbols of a God or divine beings in heaven, however still include the notion of something beyond or an “other” world—whether this “other” world is populated with person-like beings such as ancestors, ghost, helpers, or filled with higher power and energy.

Mysticism, in the third row/third column, would be the place for a kind of “spirituality” in which experiences of transcendence are symbolized in this-worldly terms and every notion of an “other” world behind or above is not needed. Instead nature, the universe, humanity or the (inner, higher) self is seen as holy.

Certainly, we do not expect that individuals with these three versions of mysticism, especially the latter, implicit version, self-identify as being “spiritual” in each and every case. It is, of course, possible that symbolizations of the creativity and sanctity of nature, humanity and self are not at all associated with “spirituality” or any symbol that may belong to the semantic clusters of religion, faith, spirituality or the sacred. But, there is the possibility that research participants may associate these kinds of non-theistic or implicit religious symbolizations with “spirituality.” Some people have no problem and see no contradiction to self-identify as “atheists” or “non-theists” and

as “spiritual” at the same time. So we should not be surprised to find this in empirical research, especially when listening to research participants in interviews. When we write this here in the second chapter of our book, we of course know that our data include just this kind of “spiritual atheists and non-theists.” The reason to present this here is concern with the framework of interpretation: In our re-construction of the model of the religious field, we have such conceptual framework that may stand the empirical test and allow to better understand our participants in research.

Finally, the model of the religious field is a way to understand dynamics and migrations. Other than the—relatively static—Table 2.2 may suggest, there is movement and migration between the cells. Therefore, it is consistent to link conversion/deconversion with “spirituality.” Results from our study on deconversion even suggest that movements are not restricted to once-in-a lifetime decisions, but there are individuals with multiple deconversions and conversions. This is consistent with a vast empirical literature on conversion, spiritual transformation, and deconversion (Hood et al., 2009; Chap. 8, this volume).

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