Article

A Faithful Journey. Following a Married Couple's Religious Trajectory over the Adult Lifespan

Abstract: This article addresses the question how the religious narrative identity and subjective religiosity change over the course of 15 years. The cases portrayed are deconverts who have changed their religious affiliations multiple times. It will be carved out what led to their deconversion and what remains as a core of their faith after they have turned away from organized religion for good. Interviews have been conducted at three time points and are analyzed using content analysis. It will become clear that the needs and expectations of the two individuals differ highly, as well as the reasons for turning away from a religious community; yet what is a common core in this joint faithful journey is their need to live their religiosity, now in a private setting.

Keywords: qualitative analysis; deconversion; case study; Faith Development Interview; subjective religiosity; narrative identity; content analysis

1. Introduction

What happens with people who leave a religious community? Where do they go? Some of them find a new church, a new community which subjectively fulfills their needs and expectations in a more adequate way. Some turn their backs on religion completely. Others, while leaving the field of organized religion altogether, continue a private practice of religion. Gudrun and Werner (names which are, of course, pseudonyms), a married couple from Germany, can serve as case illustrations for the latter—and for a lifelong journey within faith. Because while they do leave first the Jehovah's Witnesses and later a Charismatic parish, they do not leave the religious field, but instead establish a privatized practice of worship and believing. And even though they have been together throughout this journey, they can still be described as two sides of the same coin, since the analysis will show how very different their needs and expectations toward (organized) religion are, even though they have left and joined the same communities. On the basis of three interviews from each spouse, conducted over the course of 15 years (and thus following them from young old to old old age), I will carve out how each of them describes attachment and disentanglement from their communities and, in a second step, how their subjective religiosities, i.e. the way they describe their own way of being religious, changes over the years. It will be demonstrated how certain needs, but also hopes and aspirations, possibly cannot be fulfilled outside a religious community and how those two people find their way—individually and as a couple. Parts of the analysis presented here have been taken and adapted from my dissertation ([…]) in which I focused on the consecutive subjective reconstructions of narrative identities of married couples—something which has, at least to my knowledge, never been done before. The case study here will, in an exemplary fashion, demonstrate how these joint lives may differ regarding the way the individuals develop and how they reconstruct their own religiosity.

2. Previous Research and Theoretical Considerations

The data used in this article stem from a project that is dedicated to investigating religious development over the lifespan. The original focus was on people who left their religious tradition (Streib et al., 2009) and with the consequently developed longitudinal design, we are able to follow these deconverts' paths over the course of, in the meantime, 20 years (for the report on the 2-wave data, see Streib et al., 2022; the publication for the 3-wave data is in preparation). One of the questions that were at the core of the original

research project was: where do people go after they have left a religious tradition? The theoretical framework for this research is the Faith Development Theory as introduced by James W. Fowler (1981). This theory has, at its basis, a very broad concept of 'faith,' basically trying to examine what is of "ultimate concern" for each individual, regardless of whether they are traditionally religious or firm atheists. Thus, it is possible to follow and understand the trajectories of deconverts, even when they leave the field of organized religion for good.

The central instrument of the research project is the Faith Development Interviews (FDI) which was developed by Fowler (1981) and has since then been refined and adapted (see Fowler et al., 2004; Streib & Keller, 2018). This interview format consists of 25 questions covering the areas of life review, relationships, values and commitments, and religion and worldview. The questions thereby touch onto complex topics and aim to elicit narratives that offer extensive material. As has been proposed by Streib and his team (Keller & Streib, 2013; Streib, 2005), the research focus here is directed toward narrative and other reflective responses in the interview. Accordingly, this article will focus on how a narrative identity, and, consequently, a religious narrative identity is created. Narrative identity is to be understood as "the integration of all the important elements of the person we are in the world, from the most public to the mainly private" (Josselson, 2017, p. 16). Since the topic of religious development and the presentation of subjective religiosity is most relevant here, some aspects that may be constituent for the narrative identity will necessarily have to be neglected in favor of carving out in detail the religious identity of the cases presented here. Putting the development of a religious identity over the lifetime is something that is only possible with the longitudinal research design that is—for the first time within this research tradition—applied here, and thus, results are so far scarce.

When people look back on their own life, they create a subjective theory about themselves, by leaving out, by exaggerating, or by downplaying events, in order to tell a coherent story of how they became who they are today. The event of leaving a religious community may clearly be seen as a turning point for a life, thus eliciting the need for autobiographical reasoning, i.e. the creation of a chronology with motivational and thematical implications which elucidate the relevance of the memory (Habermas, 2011). Autobiographical reasoning can thus be described as a crucial element of the identity work performed in the interview, and this may be realized in the form of autobiographical arguments as they were introduced by Habermas (2011) and Köber and colleagues (2015; 2018) and which the narrating person may use by referencing a developmental background, by marking an event as a turning point, or by indicating that they have "learned their lesson."

The design of the project makes it possible to reconstruct narrative identities and subjective religiosities in consecutive interviews. That means it is possible to "distinguish between change as reported and change as observed" (Keller et al., 2022, p. 100); in other words: People may report change as they perceive it, and in the analytical procedure, change may become apparent when looking at two or more subjective reconstructions of an individual biography. This perspective on assessing change has been termed as double diachronicity (Keller et al., 2022). This design gives the unique opportunity to study reconstructed subjective religiosities and religious narrative identity, allowing for answers to the question where people "go" after they have left their religious community which has shaped their life for a considerable amount of time.

3. Methods and Material

The most important method in the analysis presented below is a content analysis. In order to be able to get access to the different themes that the interview touches, a coding guideline was developed with the help of the qualitative data analysis software ATLAS.ti. The process of establishing a coding guideline was mainly bottom-up oriented, guided by

what the material provided. However, there were some pre-existing categories that were deemed useful and important to keep and rediscover from earlier research (as for example the deconversion criteria that were found in the initial study on deconversion; see Streib et al., 2009) or from other areas of research, for example focusing on argumentation techniques like the autobiographical arguments described by Habermas and his research group (Köber et al., 2015; Bluck & Habermas, 2000; Habermas, 2011)—thus, deductive and inductive approaches to the material were combined (for a detailed description of the coding guideline, its development and application, see Steppacher et al., forthcoming; […]). This form of analysis proves to be a suitable instrument when trying to analyze narratives and longer answers regarding their content as well as their argumentation structure. In the case study below, it is, in a first step, used to reconstruct the main elements of the couple's "faithful journey," i.e. the pathways they took together over the years, joining and leaving religious communities. Having the chance to analyze their accounts in interviews at different timepoints, this offers the possibility to observe how talking about this journey also changes over the course of about 15 years.

In a second step, I will analyze the changing subjective religiosities of Gudrun and Werner, implementing a mixed-methods design which analyzes an answer from the FDI in combination with additional data from the extensive survey that has always been part of the study design as well (the method has been first implemented as part of longitudinal 3-wave case studies in […]): The answers to Question 20 ("Do you consider yourself a religious, spiritual or faithful person? Or would you prefer another description? What does it mean to you?") of the FDI are presented and analyzed, with special regard to how they change over the years. These results are put into perspective using a forced-choice item of the survey ("more religious than spiritual"; "more spiritual than religious"; "equally religious and spiritual"; or "neither religious nor spiritual") and free text entries from the survey in which the participants were asked how they define the terms 'religion' and 'spirituality.' These different kinds of data allow for a comprehensive assessment of the participants' understanding of the terms religion/spirituality as well as a rather coarse self-categorization and, in the interview, the opportunity to elaborate on what these terms mean for them personally, subjectively. As per the nature of Question 20, the kind of answer that is to be expected is a spontaneous, more or less extensive presentation of the participant's own thoughts regarding their religiosity, spirituality or lack thereof, combined with a possibly critical reflection on what the different concepts might mean. And while being asked to choose between four options might make the participants opt for a statement that is "the least ill-fitting," in a space offered by the quantitative research method, the content analysis will show that there is a lot more to be found when people are allowed to elaborate on that question.

For the case study below, the data of a married couple are taken into consideration. Both have been firstly interviewed in 2003 during the Deconversion study. As per the study design, the focus persons, i.e. those who had left a religious community, were administered a narrative interview before the FDI in which they were encouraged to describe the process of how they came to be a part of said community and how the deconversion happened. Accordingly, both individuals have had a total of four interviews out of which I take the extensive quotes to outline their journey and their religiosity. Since the interviews were conducted in German, I provide the original German text as footnotes below the translated quotes. In section 4.2, I will also draw on data from the surveys to enrich the analysis.

4. Case Studies

Gudrun and Werner are a couple from Germany who have been interviewed three times in the course of 15 years. At time 1, in 2003, they are in their middle to late sixties. The other interviews took place in 2013 and 2018, so, at time 3, they have reached advanced old age. Their mothers each came into contact with Jehovah's Witnesses, so they

were both introduced to that religious organization as children. As adolescents, Werner and Gudrun met at a Witness congregation. Werner claims to having been on the verge of leaving the group before he met Gudrun, while she was rather convinced of the doctrine and "pulled him back in." After years of marriage, doubts toward the Witnesses' doctrine accumulated, especially articulated by Werner, and finally led to them both deconverting from that denomination in 1977, after having discussed controversially the Witnesses' prediction of Armageddon for 1975. After a period of time in which they went to regional ("mainstream") Protestant services, they started attending congregations of a Charismatic church, a group they were in the process of leaving at the time of the first interview. At the time of the third interview, they are both engaged in a private Bible study, supported by lectures of a theologian that they listen to together.

Werner and Gudrun look back at a long time period of a joint life and jointly lived faith, which went along with affiliations to different religious groups. In the German religious field, Jehovah's Witness can clearly be placed in the corner of "oppositional" organizations (cf. Streib et al., 2009, 25f., adapting and expanding Bromley's (1998) categories), while the regional Protestant church is well integrated into German society. The Charismatic parish they attended after that could be classified as "accommodating," i.e. as "working toward integration" (Streib et al., 2009, p. 26). The following analyses will present their respective motifs for deconversion, including gains and losses going along with that, with a focus on the development of their subjective religiosity over time and a comparison of their approaches.

4.1 Joint Deconversions—Different Motifs

4.1.1 A Reconstruction of their Deconversions

As has been mentioned in the introductory biographical remarks, Gudrun and Werner both grew up and met in the context of the Jehovah's Witnesses. Werner, at the time of first acquaintance, was, according to his reports, alienated from the group and was planning to leave it altogether:

> During my vocational training I had colleagues and became friends with one of them and because of this friendship, I started my withdrawal by not attending congregations that regularly anymore. Erm, like, I just neglected that. We'd rather take our motorbike and drive to […] [city S] instead of being interested in the congregation.[1] (Werner, Narrative Interview, time 1)

Werner describes his younger self here as someone who deviates from the expectations the group of JWs might have. Making friends outside this group, he finds other recreational activities more interesting and fulfilling than going to congregations. Thus, the narrative identity that is exhibited here is that of a rebellious, non-conformist adolescent who is not that interested in the rather narrow boundaries of his religious group. Interestingly, what is mentioned here is the social aspect of the group rather than any content or teaching that he might disagree with. This is brought across with an autobiographical argument referring to a *developmental status*, more or less implicitly alluding to adolescence being the time of deviation from established rules that are perceived as all-too-normative. So when, in this mood, on the verge of deconverting, he meets his future wife, he is rather unhappy about the fact that, going along with getting to know each other better, he is drawn deeper into the JW's circles again. He presents this incident as a turning point in his biography:

[1.] Ich lernte dann in meiner Lehrzeit Lehrlingskollegen kennen und freundete mich mit einem an und begann aufgrund meiner Freundschaft meinen Ausstieg, in dem ich nicht mehr so ganz regelmäßig mit in die Versammlungen ging. Äh, also einfach das vernachlässigte. Wir nahmen lieber unser Moped und fuhren […] nach [Großstadt S], […], als dass mich da irgendwie die Versammlung interessiert hat.

And yes, one got to know each other a bit better and that's what started my personal disaster because a clique with young Witnesses developed who drove to the nearby town after going from door to door on Sundays […]. And there one had lunch and studied the Watchtower together. Of course. And then, in the evening, one attended the assembly together. Like that. And so I was back on track. […] [My wife] was warned against me, I was a maverick or just not the right company for her. She was like a loyal, good, eager sister, while I was just tagging along. [2] (Werner, Narrative Interview, time 1)

A, more or less implicit, reproach is made here: Werner blames his wife for tying him tighter to the group that he did not want to be a part of any more and in which he was, allegedly, as suggested by the label "maverick" that was attributed to him at the time, an outcast and rather unconvinced. The line of argumentation made up here is clear: Werner is the rebel, his wife the "eager sister" and it is for the sake of the relationship with her that he has to swallow his doubts and remain in the sect for the next years, yet feels emotionally manipulated which might have influenced the marriage in a negative way from the start.

It does not come as a surprise that the initiative for their withdrawal from the Witnesses mainly lies with Werner. This is not debated by his wife who, at time 1, describes the process as follows:

> And we were, since '75, in a controversial discussion with each other. […] And I think that was part of the reason why we managed this exit so effortlessly. […] Because I was the convinced one and felt my husband drifting away more and more. But, yes, what can I say? I have tried to keep him. And I worked with counter arguments. My husband then ordered all kinds of literature. And I sensed, when I held the first book in my hands, that it is over now. And then I read it all myself, and funnily, in that instance, it fell like scales from my eyes. […] I was still like, "Yes, but this is the truth." But then it was really like, "It is over now." [3] (Gudrun, Narrative Interview, time 1)

Gudrun lines out here the discussion they engaged in during the time in which the Watchtower Society, for the last time since, announced the end of the world in 1975. Especially Werner was not willing to follow the Witnesses' doctrine anymore while Gudrun, as she says herself, was "the convinced one"; thus, this line of argumentation and the positioning of the respective other is strikingly similar in both of their interviews at time 1. It becomes clear throughout her interviews that, for the sake of sociability and harmony, Gudrun is willing to overlook discrepancies on the content level as long as she gets along well with the people around her. Werner is of a different kind and, as becomes clear in the quote above, nurses *intellectual doubts*, which is one of the main criteria for deconversion (Streib et al., 2009). With literature he chooses and makes her read, he finally achieves a moment of enlightenment with Gudrun, or so it may seem at least when she vividly describes this realization as "scales [falling] from my eyes." This narrative is mainly kept up

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[2.] Und ja, man lernte sich dann doch n bisserl näher kennen und dann begann das für mich persönlich Verhängnisvolle, dass sich ein Freundeskreis mit jungen Zeugen bildete, die nach dem sonntäglichen Haus-zu-Hausziehens […] in den Nachbarort fuhren, […]. Und da aß man zu Mittag. Und gemeinsam Wachturm studiert. Natürlich. Und dann ist man abends gemeinsam in die Versammlung. So. Und da war ich wieder voll „drin." […] Sie wurde gewarnt […] vor mir, ich also sei Querdenker oder sei einfach nicht der richtige Umgang für sie. Sie war ne treue, brave, eifrige Schwester und ich war halt so'n Mitläufer.

[3.] Und wir waren, man kann sagen, so ab '75, schon in ner heftigen Diskussion miteinander. […] Und ich denk, dass das auch mit alles dazu beigetragen hat, dass wir dann diesen Ausstieg auch so problemlos geschafft haben, eigentlich. […] Weil, ich war die Überzeugte und ich spürte, wie mein Mann immer mehr abdriftet. Aber, ja, wie soll ich sagen? Ich hab schon versucht, ihn zu halten. Und hab immer auch noch mit Gegenargumenten gearbeitet. Mein Mann, der hat dann auch Literatur, alles mögliche, bestellt. Und da spürte ich dann, als ich da so dieses erste Buch in Händen hielt, jetzt ist aus. Ich wusste, jetzt ist es vorbei. Und dann habe ich das aber selber gelesen, und komisch, das war in dem Moment, fiel's mir wirklich wie Schuppen von den Augen. […] Es war wohl dieser Prozess, der dahin geführt hat. Ich war immer noch, ja, es ist ja die Wahrheit. Aber dann war das wirklich: „Jetzt ist vorbei."

in all of Gudrun's interviews and is told in a similar fashion by Werner himself. Interestingly, though, in his third interview, the deconversion process from the Witnesses is described as a joint decision that ended in them writing a letter to the Eldest together, declaring their exit. Werner has, over the years, changed his story, presumably paying tribute to the fact that the image that he holds of his wife has changed considerably over the years and he can, in the last phase of his life, see her strengths and her role as a partner that always stood with her husband.

A similar pattern can be observed when Gudrun and Werner, after a time of attending their regional church's services, were part of a Charismatic parish whose teachings and practices (i.e. healing by laying on of hands) became more and more dubious to Werner. Again, Gudrun follows Werner when he leaves the parish for good, albeit rather reluctantly it seems when looking at this quote from her time 2 interview:

> My husband basically always is the leading one and is always the first to notice the fly on the ointment (laughs). With the Witnesses, he was the one who got us out, I have to admit that. The same goes for the Charismatic movement, where he again was the one who said, "Listen, something's not right here" and that's … yes. I felt really comfortable there and for me that was a slump because he really worked against it to free me from these activities and … for me that was— (quietly) it is still a very hard time. I cried a lot. Because I always thought I'd lose my faith and have nothing left. Because I always thought, "That's it! That's the only way to cultivate or practice your faith … within that community."[4] (Gudrun, FDI, time 2)

It becomes clear here that Gudrun also notices the parallelism of events and recognizes a pattern in her husband's behavior. The hierarchy in this relationship is underlined here, Werner is the one making important decisions for them both, having his will and enforcing his convictions on his wife even if Gudrun visibly has a hard time bearing the consequences; the process of being forced to terminate her affiliation with that parish is marked as a *formative experience* for her biography, something that still has a negative effect on her well-being all those years later. This quote also makes clear what was (or still is) important for her in a religious community: she cherished the way faith was practiced in the Charismatic parish and she liked being part of a community of like-minded people. These obviously are two relevant factors for Gudrun which allows her to overlook flaws in the teaching and to tolerate opinions that are different from her own. Werner, on the other hand, is more focused on the "content" that is offered by the group. He presents himself as seeking personal enlightenment and as sensitive when the teachings do not agree with his own moral compass anymore. His personality allegedly being more authoritative, he does not seem to consider Gudrun standpoint that much, even though he seems to be eager to convince her with good arguments.

4.1.2 What do Gudrun and Werner Expect from their Religious Community?

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4.   Mein Mann ist immer eigentlich da der Federführende und der hat immer als Erstes irgendwo gemerkt, wenn wo der Hase der Pfeffer (lacht) liegt. Er war bei den Zeugen derjenige, der uns rausgeholt hat, muss ich sagen. Und auch da in der charismatischen Bewegung war er derjenige, der gesagt hat: „Du, da stimmt was nicht" und das ist … ja. Ich habe mich sehr wohlgefühlt und das war für mich ein Einbruch, weil er dann sehr dagegen gearbeitet hat, dass ich auch von diesem ganzen Umtrieb da frei werde und … das war für mich eine- (leise) ist eigentlich eine sehr schlimme Zeit. Da habe ich sehr viel geweint. Weil ich immer gemeint habe, ich verliere meinen Glauben und ich habe dann nichts mehr. Weil ich immer gemeint habe: „Das ist es! Und nur so kannst du deinen Glauben pflegen oder ausüben … in dieser Gemeinschaft."

The reconstruction of their religious journey above has shown that Gudrun and Werner, even though they have spent most of their adult lives together and have always formally been members of the same religious groups, have very different expectations toward the respective community—which might explain their different coping strategies.

Gudrun is a person who enjoys the community of others, especially when they are like-minded. In her interviews, there are some hints to connections with people outside her religious community as well, and she is able to see those people as enriching for her life, but her most important relationships are within the religious community she is part of. This is what made the deconversions so difficult for her: While she admits to understanding her husband's *intellectual doubts* and his *moral criticism* (see below), she herself would presumably have been able to endure those dissonances for the sake of the community. Gudrun sees the *community practice* as an essential part of her own religiosity, and, after turning away from the Charismatic group, feels like she, respectively her faith, may not ever be whole again.

Werner presents himself as a person with a critical mind (a characterization that is mostly supported by his wife). And while he does admit to having been drawn toward the Charismatic congregation because of their open and more modern way of practicing faith and their insistence on a personal relationship with God, he is not willing to keep silent when he notices, as his wife puts it, "the fly on the ointment," that is, when the teachings of the religious group do not align with his own moral or intellectual standards. His concerns with the Charismatic group are exemplified with a story about a congregation where people were supposedly healed by laying on of hands. In his narrative, he talks about a man with cancer who was part of the congregation:

> And in Charismatic circles it is common to pray, to lay on hands, to pray. I wouldn't even object to that. Because that is justifiable with the Bible, so I was not against it. But when there is a spiritual leader who says, "[…] God showed me you will be healed." And also tells that to his wife. And not just this one. The leader as well as some members. […] And the man died. […] And he was heavily prayed for every 14 days. A lot of people who stood around him laid on hands and so forth. Like, I said, I don't object to that. But for a leader, or a non-leader, to make such statements, and this happened more than once, […] "Oh well," they said afterwards, "I was certain he'd be healed. I'm all surprised he died." And you know, that's where I draw the line. The hubris to convey hope to a terminally ill man and his wife, and people like them will clutch at every straw. […] I made myself guilty as well. I prayed intensely there as well.[5] (Werner, Narrative Interview, time 1)

The way Werner builds his argument here is interesting: First, he names the procedures of laying on hands, stressing that this is something that can be justified by the Bible. What he does criticize, in the following passage, is the hubris displayed by the leader of that group who conveys a certainty that he should not have about the positive outcome of the procedure. *Emotional manipulation* as a form of *moral criticism* can be found here as

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5.   Und dann ist es ja in charismatischen Kreisen üblich, dafür zu beten, Handauflegen, zu beten. Da hätte ich noch nichts einzuwenden. Weil, das ist biblisch begründbar, da hatte ich noch nichts dagegen. Aber wenn dann ein geistlicher Leiter hergeht und sagt: „[…] Mir hat Gott gezeigt, dass Du geheilt wirst." Und dass auch seiner Frau so gesagt. Und nicht bloß einer. Sowohl Leiter als auch Mitglieder. […] Und der Mann ist gestorben. […] Und ist alle vierzehn Tag schwer für ihn gebetet worden. Viele, die um ihn rumstanden, haben die Hände aufgelegt und so weiter. Wie gesagt, dagegen habe ich nichts einzuwenden. Aber, dass dann Leiter oder auch Nichtleiter solche Aussagen machen, und das ist nicht nur einmal passiert, […] „Ach", kam hinterher, „ich war eigentlich der Meinung, er wird geheilt. Bin ganz überrascht, dass der gestorben ist." Und wissen Sie, da irgendwo, da hört's bei mir auf. Die Anmaßung, einem todkranken Menschen und seiner Frau hier eine Hoffnung zu vermitteln und solche Menschen klammern sich ja an jeden Strohhalm. […] Ich habe mich da auch mit schuldig gemacht. Ich habe da feste auch mitgebetet.

a motif for deconversion. At the end of this quote, Werner takes a bit of blame for himself too, since he also took part in the rituals—implying that, from today's perspective, he thinks he should have known better. This is a line of argumentation that is found in different places in Werner's interviews: When he criticizes an organization, or followers of an organization, he often includes himself in this critique as well, the point being made only becoming stronger by that.

With little narratives like this, Werner underlines his skeptical stance. Throughout the years, it becomes clear that Werner seeks *personal enlightenment* and is disappointed when he does not find it in the community that he is part of. Not willing to sacrifice this claim, he prepares to leave by finding and presenting evidence for the wrongness of said teachings to his wife. The community itself does not seem to play as big of a role as in Gudrun's experience, even though he mentions being attracted to the more enthusiastic and modern music of the Charismatic group.

4.2 Subjective Religiosities—Changes and Consistencies

Both Gudrun and Werner can unambiguously be categorized as religious people, going by their self-categorization in the questionnaires in which they each chose the category "more religious than spiritual" consistently (with one exception: at time 2, Gudrun opted for "equally religious and spiritual"). Thus, by just looking at this, change and/or development cannot be deduced. To determine how they categorize themselves, when given more space to elaborate, Tables 1 and 2 show their (slightly abbreviated) answers to Question 20 of the FDI ("Do you consider yourself a religious, spiritual, or faithful person?").

Table 1 Gudrun's answers to Question 20: "Do you consider yourself a religious, spiritual, or faithful person?"

time 1	time 2	time 3
[I: Do you consider yourself religious, faithful, or spiritual?] (Laughs) Definitely not the last one. Erm, I'd rather not choose religious because religious people—that's something fanatic. […] Well, that's what I link that to. [I: Would faithful be the correct term then?] Faithful almost sounds too weak for me (laughs). [I: Okay. How would you characterize yourself then?] Convinced Christian. (Laughs) Faithful, I believe in God. I believe in the resurrection. [6]	[I: Do you consider yourself religious…] Yes! [Or either spiritual or faithful?] Everything. A bit of everything. [I: Or would you prefer a different self-description?] No. So, I am faithful, I am spiritual [and religious.] [I: And what does that mean for you?] Don't know. […] How should I (laughs) answer that? I like being in this role. And if someone points the finger and says, "See, here comes the pious woman," then I don't care about that as well. […]	Religious, yes. Well, yes, that's very pronounced. So, the last question was—faithful? Faithful belongs to that as well, right? [I: Exactly, faithful, and also spiritual was in the question, yes.] I believe and… and this faith, that there is one God and that Jesus will face us as a person, as savior, as brother, and whatever, shepherd. This makes me religious, believing in Him. (smiles) Yes. [I: What does that mean for you?] This carries me, yes, that's good. [8]

[6.]   [I: Halten Sie sich für religiös, gläubig oder für spirituell?] (Lacht) Das letzte nicht. Äh, religiös möchte ich eigentlich auch nicht, weil, religiöse Menschen, das ist ja auch irgend so was Fanatisches. […] Also so, das verbinde ich jetzt damit. [I: Wär gläubig dann das Wort?] Gläubig klingt mir fast zu schwach. (lacht) [I: Ah ja. Wie würden Sie sich dann bezeichnen?] Überzeugter Christ. (lacht) Gläubig, ich glaube an Gott. Ich glaube an die Auferstehung.

[8.]   Religiös, ja. Also, ja, das ist schon ausgeprägt. Also, die letzte Frage war ja, gläubig? Gläubig gehört ja da auch mit rein, ne? [I: Genau, gläubig auch und spirituell hieß die Frage, ja.] Ich glaube und ... und dieser Glaube, dass es einen Gott gibt und dass Jesus ... uns als die Person gegenübertritt als Erlöser, Bruder und was auch immer, Hirte, das macht mich dann religiös, dass ich dann an ihn glaube. (lächelt) Ja. [I: Was bedeutet das für Sie?] Das trägt, ja, das ist gut.

> But yes, in general, religious fits bet-
> ter. [I: That means you feel con-
> nected to Christianity.] Yes.[7]

In the first interview quote, Gudrun denies being "spiritual" vehemently. This might be due to the fact that she associates this term with a form of new age religion or esotericism which she rejects; however, not having her formal definition in the survey (the questions "How would you define the term 'religion'?" and "How would you define the term 'spirituality'?" were not part of the original Deconversion study), this is rather speculative. Interestingly, being religious for her is linked to fanaticism, yet calling herself faithful seems too weak. Lacking a better label, she however fills the latter with the core principles of Christian faith and calls herself a "convinced Christian." This assessment has changed ten years later, when she emphatically affirms being "religious" and even goes so far as stating that all terms offered are fitting for her. Even being called "pious" would not feel odd for her. At this timepoint, Gudrun gave definitions for both 'spirituality' and 'religion' in the questionnaire which allow for the conclusion that she sees both as different aspects of the same phenomenon, spirituality being about the personal practice ("mental connection with God, by praying"[9]) and religion the superordinate structure ("unification of people who think about God and the world"[10]). At time 3, another five years after the second interview, she associates being religious with belief and trust in God and Jesus, an association that has not been explicitly made in the other answers displayed here. The God she relies on is benevolent and leading.

The comparison of these statements outlines the development Gudrun went through over the course of 15 years: while at times 1 and 2, she is, if not struggling, but at least rather preoccupied with the labels offered to her, she seems to have detached herself a bit from labels of any sort at time 3. It is noticeable how she positions herself in relation to others in the earlier interviews (e.g. those who are "religious" at time 1 or those that would point the finger and call her "pious" at time 2), while at time 3, she stays close to her own personal belief. This may lead to the conclusion that, for Gudrun, her religiosity over the years has developed to be less determined by her affiliations and more by her personal and strongly felt belief in God and Jesus. These findings are congruous with her answers regarding her image of and relationship with God and Jesus. Throughout all time points, she keeps the image of a loving, benevolent and caring God, exemplified in this statement from her time 3 interview:

> I mean, for example I always believed (smiles) in the evolution theories and, I mean, not in the six days, but […]. And this realization about the evolution and so on, that knocked me off my feet, so to say. Insofar my worldview has changed. […] And my image of God is not affected at all by all of this, because that has always been my support; I knew I was in Jesus' hands and that I knew I was sheltered and held. […] And now, reading Eugen Biser, who says in the end: what the Church needs to recognize is that it has to abandon this punishing God

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7. [I: Halten Sie sich für religiös, ...] Ja! [I: oder auch für spirituell oder für gläubig?] Einfach für alles. Von jedem was. [I: Oder würden Sie vielleicht noch eine andere Selbstbeschreibung bevorzugen?] Nein. Also ich bin gläubig, bin spirituell [und religiös.] [I: Und was bedeutet das für Sie?] Weiß nicht. […] Wie soll ich (lachend) das beantworten? Ich fühle mich in dieser Rolle gut. Und wenn jemand mit dem Finger zeigt und sagt: „Guckt, da kommt eine Fromme", dann macht mir das auch nichts aus. […] Aber ja, religiös ist an sich richtiger. [I: Das heißt, Sie fühlen sich dem Christentum verbunden.] Ja.

9. Geistige Verbindung im Gebet mit Gott

10. Vereinigung von Menschen, die über Gott und die Welt nachdenken

and has to recognize that He is a God of infinite love. […] And that's totally convincing for me.[11] (Gudrun, FDI, time 3)

The line of argumentation she follows here is to start with an affirmation of a belief in a scientific view of the world. Having laid out this foundation, she then goes on saying that this knowledge has not changed her image of God as a benevolent and supporting God—making clear that a belief in science and in God are not mutually exclusive for her. By citing an authority, Eugen Biser, a German Catholic fundamental theologian and philosopher, whose writings she and her husband have been studying intensely, she underlines her argument to embrace the image of the loving God, something she has done all of her life.

All of these different aspects taken together suggest that Gudrun's faith, especially her beliefs in God and Jesus, has stayed rather constant over time. And even though her life is characterized by search trajectories and deconversions, this, however, did not shake the core of her belief system.

Turning now to Werner's answers to Question 20, it becomes apparent that he takes a different stance:

Table 2 Werner's answers to Question 20: "Do you consider yourself a religious, spiritual, or faithful person?"

time 1	time 2	time 3
Faith for me means that I consider things to be true that I have so far believed only. Like a life in another world. Being sheltered, that He accepted me. That's being faithful for me. Yes, I have to put it in a nutshell: If you ask me now, "What do you think, should you die tonight, will you go into God's kingdom?" And my answer would be a confident "Yes."[12]	Faithful. That means I feel responsible for my deeds. And that also means that I have to give account for all my doings. Has nothing to do with hell. Just give account to the Last Judgment. That can be a very, very painful matter, when you are confronted with sins-by-omission where you could have effected something good, but didn't. Not even to mention Adolf Hitler or Stalin, who have millions of people on their conscience. They will be confronted with their deeds as well. That is faithful to me.[13]	I don't like any of these terms. "Spiritual" is rather for people who are not faithful, I think. […] As a person enlightened by scientific Biblical studies, I must say: Faith, yes, but please keep in mind that it's not orthodoxy, as it is often practiced and understood. I'm about to write a reader's letter, which is about a [right wing party] deputy who was cited in the pious magazine "Name A." And he cited the Tower of Babel to prove that God wanted to have differentiated people. So, and there are people who read this and say, we

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11. Ich meine, ich habe zum Beispiel immer an die Evolutionstheorien (lächelt) geglaubt und ich meine, zwar nicht an die sechs Tage, aber […]. Und diese Erkenntnis, die neuste Erkenntnis über die Evolution und so weiter, das hat mich dann auch vom Hocker gerissen, sage ich mal. Insofern hat sich das Weltbild schon geändert. […] Und mein Gottesbild ist dadurch in keiner Weise betroffen, weil das für mich sowieso immer mein Halt war, dass ich wusste, dass ich in Jesu Händen bin und dass ich von ihm geborgen und gehalten mich weiß. […] Und jetzt durch dieses Lesen von dem Eugen Biser, der dann am Schluss sagt, was die Kirche und überhaupt erkennen muss, dass sie weg muss von dem strafenden Gott und erkennen muss, dass er ein Gott der unendlichen Liebe ist. […] Und das leuchtet mir völlig ein.

12. Glaube heißt für mich, dass ich die Dinge für wahr halte, an die ich bisher nur glaube. Also an ein Leben in einer anderen Welt. Aber ein Geborgensein, dass er mich angenommen hat. Das ist für mich gläubig sein. Ja, ich muss es jetzt mal so auf den Punkt bringen: Wenn Sie mich jetzt fragen, „Was glauben Sie, wenn Sie heute Nacht sterben, werden Sie in das Reich Gottes eingehen?" Da antworte ich mit einem zuversichtlichen „Ja."

13. Gläubig. Das bedeutet, dass ich mich verantwortlich fühle für meine Taten. Und das bedeutet auch, dass ich für mein Tun und Lassen Rechenschaft ablegen muss. Hat nichts mit Hölle zu tun. Einfach nur Rechenschaft ablegen im Weltgericht. Das kann eine sehr, sehr schmerzhafte Angelegenheit werden, wenn Sie konfrontiert werden mit Ihren Unterlassungssünden, wo Sie vielleicht Gutes hätten bewirken können, und nichts bewirkt haben. Abgesehen davon reden wir jetzt mal nicht über Adolf Hitler und Stalin, die Millionen von Menschen auf dem Gewissen haben. Die werden auch mit ihren Taten konfrontiert. Das ist für mich gläubig.

take it as it is. And he is faithful as well, for sure, but I differ from faithful people like that. I contradict him.[14]

At time 1, he talks about his faith in a benevolent and leading God, which, together with a deep trust in an afterlife, for him is the definition of being faithful. At time 2, his definition of 'spirituality' suggests a broader approach ("Having a spiritual interest and cultivating it. Engaging with questions of worldview"[15]), whereas 'religion' ("Contemplating religious questions, e.g. the question of theodicy."[16]) seems to mean something a lot more specific. In the interview, again, he opts for 'faithful,' conveying a strong moral claim surpassing the clerical realm and including also remarks on historical persons, thus combining elements of his definitions in the survey. At time 3, he is rather clear in his rejection of the term 'spiritual' since he claims this is something reserved for non-faithful people, which is consistent with his definition in the survey ("I personally rather dislike this term. This mindset is strange to me. It rather fits humanism than a religious way of thinking."[17]) It is interesting to see that, obviously, he does not only consider this term as not fitting for himself, but it is marked negatively ("dislike"). Again, he seems to be most drawn to the term 'faithful,' albeit with the clarification that he does not want to be understood as orthodox; and, again, he refers to persons of political or historical importance to clarify his stance. His own faithfulness is described as influenced, or enlightened, by scientific literature and thus a more thorough understanding of the Scripture.

The analysis of Werner's answers reveals that he, too, undergoes a development regarding his subjective religiosity that is especially visible comparing his time 1 and 2 statements. While his time 1 answer is personal, referencing his own belief in a benevolent God (for which he uses quite similar description as his wife at time 3), his last answer takes into account societal issues as well, broadening the scope to politics as well. This may lead to the conclusion that the focus of his agenda has changed and he shows some missionary ambitions towards people he deems less enlightened.

5. Histories of a Joint Life in Faith—Concluding Remarks

Having looked at consecutive reconstructions of deconversion processes of Gudrun and Werner individually, it has become clear that their deconversion trajectory, as they have been introduced by Streib and colleagues (2009), cannot be described with one term when followed and observed longitudinally. From the Jehovah's Witnesses, they first attend, for a time, services of their regional Protestant church which can be characterized as an *integrating movement*, i.e. toward a more established community. Their affiliation with the Charismatic parish then again is more oppositional, at least compared to the regional church. As a last step, they take a *privatizing exit*, using a more scientifically oriented Bible

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14. Da gefällt mir eigentlich nix davon. Also spirituell ist ja eher für, denke ich mal, für nicht Gläubige gedacht. Gläubig, gläubig ja, aber nicht wortgläubig. Also gläubig mit gewissen Einschränkungen. […], als jetzt bibelwissenschaftlich aufgeklärter Mensch muss ich eben sagen: Glauben ja, aber bitte beachten, dass es kein Wortglaube ist, wie er oft praktiziert und wie er oft verstanden wird. Ich sitze gerade an einem Leserbrief, da geht es um den AfD-Abgeordneten, der zitiert wurde in der frommen Zeitschrift "[Name A]". Und der also den Turmbau zu Babel zitiert, um zu beweisen, dass Gott die verschiedenen Völker will. Also und das sind eben diese Menschen, die das lesen und sagen: So nehmen wir das. Und der ist bestimmt auch gläubig, aber ich unterscheide mich dann von solchen Gläubigen. Ich widerspreche ihm.

15. Geistiges Interesse haben und pflegen. Sich mit Weltanschaulichen Fragen auseinandersetzen.

16. Religiöse Fragen durch zu denken z.B. die Theodizee-Frage.

17. Mit diesem Begriff kann ich persönlich nichts anfangen. Diese Geistesrichtung ist mir fremd. Sie passt wohl eher zum Humanismus als zur religiösen Denksweise.

study in the private practice. Overall, this journey resembles that of the *accumulative heretic* (ibid.; Gudrun has, in that volume, been described as a "synthetic conventional heretic") since they both seem to take elements from the communities they leave and implementing them in their current habits. The things they take, though, differ. While for Werner, it seems, the most important thing he has learned from their time with the Charismatic parish is the *personal relationship with God and Jesus*, Gudrun mostly cherishes the time she got to spend with like-minded people, and the *communal religious practice* she experienced with both the Witnesses and the Charismatic parish. Accordingly, the things they left behind are valued differently, too. Werner's main motifs for deconversion obviously are *intellectual doubt* and *moral criticism*, thus he looks back at these times with a critical eye and not much regret. Gudrun's stance is the opposite. There is not much criticism toward the teachings coming from her, instead she emphasizes how much she misses the good sides the communities offered her. Interestingly, though, in his last interview, Werner admits to feeling lonely himself and to envying his wife's praying circles that he is not part of.

Given the fact that they both consider themselves religious, and that religion has always played a major role in their joint life, it is not surprising that Werner and Gudrun, now devoid of, or disjoint from, an organized religious community, have jointly created and established their own rituals of praying and reading Biblical texts, as Werner describes it in his third interview:

> Yes, praying, yes. By the way, we do that together, in the morning. We contemplate a text, even though we are (smiles) becoming more critical regarding… There are those selected texts, like these 'daily texts' booklets, that select texts and we contemplate these. Sometimes we deviate and read comments relating to them. And sometimes there are very clever comments, very clever indeed. (smiles) And that's our topic for discussion, usually 15 minutes, early. We also pray together. […] [I: And what does that mean to you, these morning discussions?] Basically, that's an inner need. Especially, what is important for us, being thankful. Like not taking it for granted that we are still, measured against our age, rather well off, […] (Werner, FDI, time 3)[18]

It becomes apparent here that Werner obviously still cherishes an intellectual discussion and the way the ritual is describes he perceives it as something which is equally important to both him and his wife. In these short morning discussions, they may be coming to a common denominator regarding their religious needs, even though, as it has been analyzed in the paragraph above, they differ significantly in their subjective religiosity.

Having the opportunity of analyzing a long-term couple gives the opportunity to look at a joint life and/or a joint faith from two perspectives. However, despite the mutual influences, Werner and Gudrun's religiosities have taken different directions. And these directions may point to a typology of religious development: we have Gudrun's religiosity which becomes more privatized over the years, even though this path is not completely voluntary, but living with a stable core of faith in a surrounding that is changing, mostly against her will; obviously, theological doctrines and their intricacies have never been her main focus. Werner, on the other hand, lives his faith with a strong reference to the outside world, taking in new influences and thereby changing his own belief, which he for himself

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[18]. Ja, beten, ja. Das machen wir übrigens morgens gemeinsam. Wir betrachten einen Text, wobei wir (lächelt) da auch schon immer mehr kritisch sind, was unsere… Da gibt es ja dann die ausgewählten Texte, also diese Losungsbüchle, die Texte auswählen und die betrachten wir. Manchmal auch weichen wir ab und dann haben wir Kommentare dazu. Und da haben wir manchmal sehr gescheite Kommentare, manchmal sehr. (lächelt) Und das ist so Diskussionsthema, meistens eine Viertelstunde, früh. Wir beten auch gemeinsam. […] [I: Und was bedeutet das für Sie, dieses morgendliche Diskutieren?] Das ist eigentlich ein innerliches Bedürfnis. Vor allen Dingen, was uns wichtig ist, ist Dankbarkeit. Jetzt nicht selbstverständlich zu nehmen, dass wir noch immer einigermaßen, gemessen an unserem Alter, gut beieinander sind, […].

sees as a positive development toward a scientific form of faith, a conviction which also leads him to trying to convince others of his path.

6. Outlook

Many people who leave the field of organized religion continue to practice their faith in a more private setting, making them interesting subjects for research. Subjective religiosity, or the way people describe their own religiosity, changes over the lifespan. This makes the sample the cases analyzed in this article stem from so unique and valuable: it gives insights into three points in the lifetime of our interviewees and therefore grants the opportunity to actually portray development over a longer time period, possibly also paying attention to tasks that are related to certain life phases. The qualitative approach that was taken here allows for detailed analyses of individual trajectories which point to a possible typology of paths that people may take in the course of their religious lives. Development could be observed by looking at consecutive reconstructions of autobiographies, thus, by making use of the double diachronicity (Keller et al., 2022) we get with this research design.

This article with its case study has taken an idiographic perspective, focusing on the individuals and their respective unique life story. By broadening the focus, by taking into consideration more diverse biographies, also of non-religious people, it is possible to line out other potential trajectories (see […]). In order to be able to compare the individual with other individuals and/or with a bigger sample, the inclusion of survey data is promising (see, for example, Streib et al., 2022; Streib & Hood, forthcoming) and necessary for the understanding of the single trajectory. With this mixed-methods approach, as well as with a focus on the qualitative analysis and the content of the interviews, it is possible to get to the core of how people make sense of the world around them and how this changes over the lifespan—questions which may have different answers when people deconvert, but which also may have a stable core regardless of the formal affiliation.

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