

# **Intergenerational and Interpersonal Disaffiliation from a church, and Phases of Conversions with an Internal Conflict<sup>1</sup>**

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*The article focuses on conversions away from religious believe by persons who are deeply involved in a church structures. Such a conversion involves a movement from more to less normative environment, switching a reference group, changes in guilt distribution, and different perspective of converters, their significant others, and relatively unbiased observers. Practical distinction between intrapersonal and three-generation model of a conversion is suggested.*

*Keywords: Religious conversion, interpersonal and intergenerational disaffiliation, guilt distribution, normative environment*

A century ago, Czech republic was a religious country with dominantly catholic background, but it became mostly secularized during this time, so less than 10 % population attends masses regularly now. This process has many causes inside and outside of churches, among them also the communistic oppression plays an important role.

The processes of disaffiliation from churches can be divided into two big groups:

- a) Intergenerational or three-generation disaffiliation. Starting with traditional religion by grandparents, over temporary drop out of parents, to fully atheistic children.
- b) Intrapersonal disaffiliation, which is also called a conversion away from church in this article, which took place in a life period of a single person.

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<sup>1</sup> *This research project was a part of my thesis at Department of Psychology, Charles University, Prague, Czech republic, which were finished in 1996, translated in English in 1999. A name and a theme of the thesis was:*

*“Psychology of a person in the field of Catholic moral”*

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### **Intergenerational disaffiliation**

This intergeneration disaffiliation is probably the most common way of losing a religion and applies probably to most proportion of atheistic population in Czech republic.

Intergenerational disaffiliation is marked by unsolved problems, which are given over generations. A traditional believe of grandparents cannot apply for lived problems of their children – future parents. The second generation is unable to resolve demands of changes in new environment by use of the traditional religious approach. Its reaction is not leaving the church, but only a temporary drop out, which of course may turn out to be permanent. Important is though that children of the second generation is brought up without a formative influence of church teaching. The parents do not speak about their religious conflict most of the time. As they do not have solutions, so they do not know how to speak about Christ, sexual teaching, etc. These children may see how their parents started to attend the masses again in older age, but this change is perceived as a curiosity or peculiarity of the parents, but nothing to be followed. The third generation is fully secularized and atheistic, opened to influence of new religious movements or any other ideology.

Following reasons usually blocks the reverse tendencies to return back in the church:

- a) Alienated approach of churches to seekers and newcomers
- b) Old, unsolved injustices of church representatives
- c) Unkind church public relations
- d) Poor knowledge of church teaching among the laymen as well as priests. Many superstitions are saliently taken as a church teaching.
- e) Biased and unbalanced presentation of church teaching with bad priorities (e.g. exaggerated sexual staff – prohibition of contraception – versus underestimated importance of healthy interpersonal relations.)

### **Contrast between intrapersonal and intergenerational disaffiliation**

An interpersonal conversion must comprise in just one life period of the individual all these important landmarks of previous intergenerational disaffiliation. This fact gives rise to cognitive dissonance which is subjectively urgently felt. The intergenerational disaffiliation can also be understood as inability, passive avoidance, and following deferring to undergo such traumatic process in life span of the second generation.

The cognitive dissonance must include changes of reference group, relieve from normative environment, and changes in guilt distribution. The process of dissolving the cognitive dissonance is marked by a few phases, which are more or less typical in all disaffiliation from higher to less normative environment. These phases are typical with discrepancy between overt and inner behavior. This produces many misunderstandings between the converter and his or her neighborhood.

Important view in understanding the process of affiliation and disaffiliation must take into account normativeness of the environments before and after conversion. The moral teaching of churches is usually much more normative than secularized society. So in many cases, the disaffiliation is perceived as relieve from unbearable demands of a particular church. On contrary, converters coming into a church do not perceive the moral demands as thread, but speak instead about a sense of life, a need of order or to belong somewhere, etc.

### **Phases in interpersonal conversion with deeply engaged people**

An individual who is deeply involved in church structures (priests, monks or other engaged laymen) may realize that he is slowly, step by step diverging away from the church. This process takes place in five characteristic stages, which are similar to coming out of homosexuals. To understand these phases, it is necessary to keep in mind three point of views:

**Insider** - the person undergoing the conversion, his or her inner behavior,

**Outsiders** - members of his or her reference group or community, and finally the point of

view of

**Psychology** – relatively unbiased, objective observer - plain observation and depiction of the process and causality behind.

All these three points of views are blind in some sense. Insiders usually do not understand the mechanisms that govern their behavior and feelings, especially projection of self-hatred or other self-destructive mechanisms. Outsiders do not pay much attention to changes in their close persons and are usually very little tolerant to interpersonal differences. And finally cold, impersonal approach of psychology prevents us from feeling the power and intensity that uses to be released in these processes.

These processes may be closely related with sexual addiction among catholic priests, which is discussed these days, and you can find an answer here, why people hate so much the left church after the conversion, so that we have almost no remedy for them.

### **I. Latent stage**

This stage can be revealed usually only by means of retrospection, as it is the only reason that led to the conversion afterwards. In the latent stage, neither the person concerned nor his surrounding can observe the approaching changes. The only observable sign is overt or hidden praxis of the person who shows such activities or fantasies that are incompatible with his or her conscious attitudes.

These grounds can be various, but there is a common feature, which is an existing discrepancy between what he or she is or does and what he or she wants or strives to be. The subject though considers the discrepancy to be unimportant and surmountable on this stage and, what is more important, the subject does not identify himself with these inclines or strains, which withstand his conviction. The discrepancy can have both psychological or moral dimension. Pure psychological can be in a case of immoderate religious perfectionism that contravenes limits of abilities of the person. The subject tasks himself with inadequate demands that he or she cannot

naturally fulfill. He or she has consequently feelings of permanent failure. Although we can often meet less striking phenomena like anxiety, hazy feelings of guilt which transform and project on concrete fears and scruples.

The discrepancy can get a moral dimension when it is matter of some sort of inveterate vice in the field of heavy or capital sin. This conflict between activities and attitudes of the patient can be firstly unconscious, but nevertheless it becomes conscious one day. Say the subject realizes his dissatisfaction with himself, his life, his difference from environment or somebody (e. g. confessor) may point out such a discrepancy.

The person tries to cope with this problem, as he considers it to be surmountable and he feels he can overcome it. He has still the feeling that these activities are not a part of his personality. He takes them to be unimportant, temporary and interim. If the activities disappear, then they were really just a plain habit and everything is all right. Although when the attempts steadily end with failure, it indicates that the source of the discrepancy is in the mind of the person.

## **II. Stage of striving to overcome the discrepancy, effort to conformity**

A row of unsuccessful attempts to suppress the habit or undesirable tendencies discourages self-confidence of the person, because (like every failure) they mean some sort of frustration, which the person tries to compensate by higher effort to overcome the bad habit. It is just simple result of the law of compulsion to repetition. This way the conflict become even more conscious in the mind of the person and other images starts to stick to it and step by step there appears a complex in the meaning of Jung. On this stage, the person has a need to talk about the problem, because bites of conscience are compensated by his effort to overcome the discrepancy, or to suppress the habit. Discrepancy is still understood as something heterogeneous, but it has shifted to the main problems of him. It has a form of typical cognitive dissonance at this stage.

### III. Stage of inner resignation

The person realizes slowly that it exceeds his limitations to overcome his tendencies or the vice and gets to a conclusion that he cannot conform with his reference group (what it is a church in his case) no matter how much he tries. He recognizes he will have to live with the vice or discrepancy possibly all the rest of his life. In this moment, a very important turn point takes place in his mind, which is important first of all from the moral point of view.

The person thought till now that the given deficiency can be overcome, and therefore that he bears his part of responsibility for it. He found out after a few frank and vigorous attempts that he is not able to overcome the discrepancy. Then there appear feelings of personal helplessness and the subject does not consider the reproaches of the others to be valid, as he feels he has made everything possible what he can.

There appears a sense of injury, but nevertheless he is identified rationally with the reproaches. He rationally agrees with them, but he feels helpless to fulfill them. The more the consciousness of voluntary will, responsibility and involvement disappear, the more (according to the definition) subjective sinfulness disappears too. The person feels that he does not do these activities voluntary and therefore they cannot be ascribed him as a sin.

The further development depends in a good deal on the nature and magnitude of pressures leading to suppression of the dissonance. The pressures can be both outer (i.e. parents, friends, confessor), or inner (like reproaches of conscience, the image of God in his mind, etc.)

When the pressures are small, like for instance in the case of smoking, the person can resist them more or less permanently. When they are of categorical nature 'either - or', they can lead to an escalation of a conflict.

The transition can be stepwise: He loses feelings of guilt for the discrepancy, and therefore he starts to put it down as not to be a problem of him, but problem of his environment, which induces him feeling of inferiority, viciousness, etc. At the beginning, the discrepancy looks like

doubts or temptation, but it becomes stepwise opener according to the intensity of pressures on the person.

There is very important role of an image of God in the mind of the person too. Such mental representation of God can behave rigidly, and insists die-hardly on suppression of undesirable activities and tendencies with a threat of various punishments (whether it is fear of hell or of failure in work, life, etc.). In such case, it ceases to be the discrepancy what jeopardizes the psychic stability of the person, but it is this image of God. The person usually does not realize that it is only his deformed image of God, but he thinks and lives as if God was such cruel in reality.

The reproaches against God can appear especially in exhaustion, when they are strongest. There can appear furies similar to psychasthenic reactions, because the concerned person has got the feeling the God does not take him seriously. It is important to point out that such behavior of God's mental representation is just projection of self-hatred and we can find correlation between tendencies to manipulation of the person and the his cruel image of God. Therefore the behavior of mental representation of God is mirroring picture of his own behavioral and cognitive patterns. It is clear that the more vigorously the human is involved in Church's activities the more vigorous is self-hatred because of losing referential group, and the more hostile is the mirrored behavior of mental God. Unfortunately the subject is usually not aware of such interconnections and mechanisms.

We can find more scenarios, e.g. when the idea of God is idealized. The person may not dare to criticize directly God, but his frustration or inner aggression turns against church and he changes confession. (\*\*\*) partnery po rozchodu)

Some break or disruption, which is hard to verify, marks this changeover quite often and we conclude its existence only from external marks. It is usually a conflict in the relation to God: an unfulfilled promise in a matter which was fundamental for the subject, severe harm he faced, etc.

This event is the last straw of injury. The person feels like a chased dog, he still must to fight the discrepancy and God does not give him even that of uppermost importance. We have to realize that the mind of the person is 'top-heavy' and it can lead clear to neurotic signs, because he reconstructs his world-view. It is a period of strong fights that do not although precipitate into observable behavior. Simply said, the human has enough of menacing impulse form his mind and therefore he does not long for any discussion with his environment that can shake his precarious stability. When he ever speaks about his problems then only with people with whom he feels secure.

This break represents the conscious top of the iceberg, which is the previous development. We cannot speak about a pretense, even if an outer observer may have such impression. This break can later be alleged to be the reason for the turn. In some cases, it is on contrary kept in secret. Especially, when it is a delicate matter and instead of there is a tendency to talk about "objective" reasons of the conversion. The break take place in the third stage, but we usually find it out only in the fourth stage, when it is already consciously elaborated into some 'official' version or proclamation.

Such a break is present also in the following story of a veteran about whom G. W. Allport (1976, p. 53) refers and whom he has known before as an exceptionally devotional man. "When this man was lying in a land of 'nobody' and was awaiting an attack, he prayed. Just in that moment, a grenade exploded just close to him. He has lost an arm, was crooked and blind. In this moment he became a total and militant atheist."

This break is enacted while the other outer activities of the person are maintained further. It takes place in the bosom of him. He does not speak about it or he does but only with people, where he feels himself to be safe and secure, where he will not be blamed. This stage is characterized in piecemeal working out the consequences, which the denial of officially held outlook will have. He forms somehow an official plea. A new conviction is incubating in these



days, but the environment does not know about it. The subject continues in hitherto praxis, but there is noticeable less effort and consecutive quenching of emotional relations toward things and people with relation to the problem. This stage gradually verged into the following stage.

From the pastoral point of view, there is important a change in communication. Whereas a good priest or psychologist can prevent upcoming process in the first two stages, it is difficult to get to the core of the matter now. It is very often a process that is not overtly observable. Besides this man should be very careful, as any other reproaches, accusations or even punishments from a position of authority or power will close the possibility of communication for a long time, even if the person still submits himself formally.

Sometimes this stage take place in absence of threatening authority, say when a girl works far away from home - religious parents - as au-pair and afterwards she returns and announces them she will not visit Sunday's masses anymore. The third stage took place aside from parental religious authority, but the prepared official announcement represent already the next stage of open confrontation.

#### **IV. Stage of open confrontation**

In some time, the person overcomes inner conflict and internal reproaches fade out. In the meantime, he thinks over the consequences, which the confession will bring. Namely, the environment can exert great social pressure at him. The person can suffer from imagination of condemnation by his community. This imagination cannot be realistic and they are possibly exaggerated, but nonetheless they are an expression of expected punishment and feelings of guilt. The person starts to show a tendency to speak with people and defend the change in his world-view. He still expects attacks and reproaches in this stage, but he feels himself to be strong enough to overcome them now.

A human is a gregarious creature and his self-evaluation is a reflection of how his environment evaluates him. The more he is convinced about his innocence and his new

conviction strengthens, the more he worries into open discussions which have only purpose: To defend his value, his new outlook, and reasons which make him to change his attitudes. Until he succeeds in this, he would not be sure he did right. His bosom is still fussy by overcome turn, and therefore he particularly strives to avoid the discussions about his interior.

Whereas in preceding stage of inner resignation, he pursued people by whom he found understanding and empathy, now, in this stage, he seeks people by whom he expects depreciation or a conflict. From the poignant point of view, there is no reasonable talk with him any more. His interior is though weak, but he did not want to be accepted as some mental cripple, but as a peer, and therefore he does not want to talk about his psychic drives, but only about the "objective reasons" – theology, philosophy or ethics.

There are members of sects in this stage, e.g. witnesses of Jehovah. We have to realize that these people have made a lot irreversible changes in their lives, there are often no way back or forth. Vehement evangelization is often a defensive compensation of inner dubiety, what they cannot to talk to opponent (us) about. They approach us with expectations of refusal and conflict and therefore it is not of much use to have a talk with them about theology at factual level, because their goal is personal acceptance rather than theology. Nonetheless they cannot concede this fact to themselves, and there is no little use to overtly show "personal acceptance" from bystander.

Not to be hypocritical, the only meaningful talk is at the level of personal experiences (albeit it is not easy to induce it): What bring you to God, what you like in the community, at evangelization, what you want your children would be like, etc. Even when the talk seems to be friendly, we have to watch not to let us drift into theological controversy, what their interior is incline to. There is a phenomenon typical of this stage, which is called inveteracy of heart, malice (*malitia*) in church terminology, in other words, indocility of the person to submit to church authority. Nor even psychologist can reverse the running process. When whoever (say

confessor) would send the person to psychologist, he would consider it to be depreciation of his personality unlike the previous stage and namely quite rightly, because he has overcome the stage of fight yet in his mind. Now he is in a stage, when the conflict moves out in his environment, when he wants to finish the construction of consistent picture of himself not only in his mind, but also towards his neighbors. The tolerance of environment plays an important role: When its reaction to the announcement of the person's change is exaggerated, then the person expects conflicts in other situations too and it makes the crisis even deeper.

There are known cases, when a wife accepted understandingly transvestitism of her husband and the family consolidates surprisingly, as the tension diminished, that ferrets him and that was induced at all the family. The same way, when the only son apostatizes from belief of parents, then the amount of quarrelsomeness is in direct proportion to reaction of the parents and the environment to this change.

Seeking of companionship of people of the same or similar thinking is another characteristic of 3rd and 4th stage. Open breach leads sometimes to the lost of social background – friends, acquaintance. The person shuns sometimes his kith and kin not to have to talk to them about his change. He finds himself in a social vacuum. This feeling of loneliness and abjection are interpreted often as a conviction about his exceptionality and psychological exclusiveness. He has the feeling he discovers inexperienced – that what is out of sight of other people. Dullness and illiberality of the environment confirm him in this. We have to admit he experiences something he has never did before and what he has never heard about from his environment. When a priest abandons a church and starts to live in secular way, it uses to be a great change for him, as the man who was highlighted all time long is just a common citizen. In psychic level, there takes place an identification of the person with his activities. For instance, the entrenched habit that was considered to be a heterogeneous in regard to his personality, is now accepted as proper one and also is defended as such.

## **V. Stage of consolidation**

And as the fourth stage is diminishing, the new world-view is getting accustomed and the human can have outlook at his or her relation to environment. The human builds step by step new social relationships and partly renews the old ones.

The timing and duration of particular stages is different and depends on various conditions. For instance the more reproaches in the fourth stage the worse and protracted his or her adaptation is, and the less any communication is possible between him and the representatives of the former group he belonged to.

In a similar way the course of the whole conversion need not to be so straightforward. We can encounter oscillation between 2nd and 3rd stage and between 4th and 5th one.

## **Possibilities of therapeutic intervention**

Considering the complexity of the whole process, it is not easy to intervene effectively. The latent stage is obscure. We cannot predict the future evolving in the stage of effort to conformity. In the third stage, the human withdraws from the other. In the fourth stage, it is almost too late to do anything except palliation. It is thus not possible to blame anybody for the conversion for not preventing it.

There is the optimal possibility to influence the process in the second stage. The striking sign of dangerous process is presence of insurmountable incompatibility between what the subject wants to be and who he is and what he does. The loss of subjective peccancy or sinfulness is quite alarming phenomenon at which all counselors should be sensitive. From this moment on, every psychological or moral pressure is considered as injustice and can potentially trigger the irreversible fourth stage. It is just a question of random event that we cannot control when the mentioned break between the second and third stage takes place.