



Deconverted Hearts in a Deconverted Church

The Therapeutization of Intra-Evangelical Deconversion

ARIANE KOVAC

Center for Religious Studies, Bochum; Institute for the Study of Religions, Leipzig

ABSTRACT In recent years, many evangelicals have been experiencing increasing discomfort with the conservative Christian subculture. While some leave organized religion entirely, others find a new spiritual home in more progressive evangelical churches. In this article, I analyze two such deconversions to “Churchome,” a megachurch based in Seattle and Los Angeles that particularly caters to disenchanted or deconverted evangelicals and in which I have conducted two years of ethnographic fieldwork. While both of my interviewees echo classic Protestant critiques as reasons for their deconversion, they do not express these in moral or theological but rather in emotional and therapeutic terms. I will show that, as my interviewees re-evaluate previously learned theologies and practices from the perspective of a new emotional and therapeutic style, their deconversions function like therapy. Churchome not only guides this process as a church for the deconverted, but also presents itself as a deconverted church, making “continuous deconversion” its primary identity.

KEYWORDS Evangelicalism, church switching, deconversion, therapeutization, intra-evangelical deconversion, faith deconstruction, anthropology of Christianity, Churchome

Introduction

In conversations with followers of the Seattle-based non-denominational megachurch Churchome, at some point, almost everyone began speaking about what “put them off” about evangelicalism—and how Churchome did things differently. Some recounted negative experiences in other churches, such as abusive pastors or pressure to engage in church activities that led to burnout. Others spoke of a more general uneasiness with what American evangelicalism had, in large parts, become: unabashedly aligned with the Christian Right, prominently headed by scandal-ridden preachers who seemed to be in it only for fame and money, more interested in shunning homosexuals from church than in spreading a message of love and forgiveness, and associated with aggressive fire-and-brimstone preaching and a sentimental, corny emotionality. My interviewees did not want to be *those* Christians and they certainly did not want to go to church with them. Churchome, to them, was not only unlike any church they had experienced [1]

before but was also how a Christian church was supposed to be: authentic, inclusive, accessible, and focused on love and forgiveness. Thus, for many, joining Churchome was part of a process of reflecting on and distancing themselves from previously held beliefs and practices. Churchome, conversely, takes up such criticisms and presents itself as a home for believers disappointed in or repelled by evangelicalism. Sermons often circle around how churches are doing things wrong, and head pastor Judah Smith shares stories about his upbringing in church the audience can relate to.

The Churchome members I spoke with are not alone: Due to the increasing alignment of conservative evangelicalism with the Republican Party in recent years (Williams 2010; Du Mez 2020), many evangelicals who do not form part of or do not want to be associated with the Christian Right have started to question evangelical beliefs and practices. Sometimes, this makes people leave evangelicalism or organized religion altogether. However, not everyone who experiences discomfort with evangelicalism abandons the church. Instead, this may lead to a quest for a new and different church, as was the case with my interviewees. Churchome places a theological focus on free grace, or the idea that faith alone accounts for salvation. It rejects the programs and ‘how-to’ guides that other churches, such as Rick Warren’s Saddleback, publish, and claims that these lead to an unhealthy focus on religious practice over an individual relationship with Jesus. Emphasizing transparency and vulnerability, Churchome also distances itself from the positivity central to many other churches, for example, Joel Osteen’s Lakewood. Giving more room to sermons than worship and critically reflecting on the ‘showy-ness’ of megachurch evangelicalism, Churchome also sets itself apart from more event-oriented churches such as Hillsong. [2]

In this article, I will focus on the trajectories of disenchanted, critical or “reflexive” evangelicals (Schuurman 2019, xiii), for whom joining Churchome was part of a process I understand as an intra-evangelical deconversion. I am interested in these deconversions as an example of “what happens when Christianities interact” (Bielo 2011, 199). In recent years, processes of polarization and politicization of evangelicalism have profoundly transformed the religious landscape in the US. In reaction to these developments, scholars have, for example, analyzed how alliances between religion and politics contributed to the emergence of a Christian Right (e.g. Williams 2010) or how conservative evangelicals react to an increasing stigmatization of their religious and political views (e.g. Diefendorf 2023). How disenchanted evangelicals work on finding a new spiritual home and how their church switching transforms the churches they newly attend, however, has so far evaded scholarly attention. [3]

I understand the church switching of disenchanted evangelicals as deconversions, whose retelling follows distinctive narrative patterns. My interviewees make deconversion an essential aspect of their religious identity, to an extent that, analogous to Coleman’s (2003, 19) concept of “continuous conversion,” Churchome’s position is best described as one of “continuous deconversion.” Analyzing Churchomians’ deconversion narratives, I show that my interviewees frame both their critiques of other churches and their current religious experiences in therapeutic terms. My interviewees’ deconversion narratives are an example of the interconnectedness of psychotherapy, self-help, and evangelicalism in the US (Rakow 2013). While the reasons they give for their deconversions can be traced back to common Protestant reservations against institutionalized religion, they embed these critiques in a therapeutic framework in which religious doctrines can only be true when they emotionally benefit the believers. I argue that deconversion processes at Churchome involve a therapeutic restructuring of religious principles and that, to the believers I interviewed, deconversion functions as a therapy in itself. [4]

To explore intra-evangelical deconversions and their therapeutic framework, I will analyze stories of deconversion from two Churchhome members, “Rachel” from the US and “Jennifer”¹ from Germany. Rachel’s and Jennifer’s stories stand as examples for similar stories I have encountered during my research. I chose them primarily because of their level of detail and openness. Both women were raised in a conservative evangelical milieu and, through their deconversions, have found ways to reflect on their religious upbringing and to develop a new concept of and relationship with God. [5]

Before reconstructing and analyzing these narratives, I will first explore previous scholarly work on conversion narratives, evangelical identity, church switching, and intra-evangelical critiques and deconversions. After this, I will give a brief overview of my methodological approach. Then, I will turn to my case study and show that Churchhome caters particularly to disenchanting evangelicals and presents itself as a church for the deconverted. I will continue my analysis by turning to the two deconversion narratives, which I will recount in detail before analyzing how deconversions function as therapy for the believers. I will finish the article by exploring deconversion as a central identification marker for Churchhome and by expanding on the concept of “continuous deconversion.” [6]

From Conversion Narratives to Deconversion Stories

In order to analyze intra-evangelical deconversion stories and to examine how these are shaped by therapeutic ideas and terms, it is necessary to take the social construction and narrativity of evangelical conversion experiences into account, which I will turn to in the first subchapter. After this, I will give some background on the role of church switching and deconversion in US evangelicalism. [7]

The Narrativity of Evangelical Conversion

Early sociological research on religious conversion, such as the classic process model by Lofland and Stark (1965) or Bainbridge’s (1992) strain theory, understand conversion as a radical turning point that solves problems the convert experienced before their conversion. Thus, according to these theories, although conversion is a process accompanied by building relationships and learning new ideas and practices, one part of the process is a distinct moment that marks a discontinuity and creates a clear-cut before and after. More recently, scholars have voiced at least three strings of critique regarding this understanding of conversion as a radical, definitive turning point. [8]

First, people experience conversion in different ways and not every convert perceives their conversion as radical or can point out a distinct moment of conversion. Second, conversion does not necessarily solve the tensions or problems that led to religious change. Instead, the pre-conversion identity needs to be remembered to serve as a negative foil that believers can continually work on rejecting (Meyer 1998, 339–40). Therefore, tensions and problems become the object of a never-ending work of self-control and self-improvement (Müller 2015, 215). [9]

Third, in the course of the linguistic turn, Snow and Machalek (1983) showed that conversion narratives are always biographical reconstructions influenced by theological understandings of conversion and narrative patterns learned during the conversion process. Similar to paradigm [10]

1 Both names are pseudonyms.

changes in the natural sciences, converts experience a fundamental change in their “universe of discourse” that influences all areas of life, including how the convert evaluates and narrates their pre-conversion life (Snow and Machalek 1983, 256–66). Thus, if someone views their conversion as a radical change, they most probably do so because their universe of discourse has changed and because they learned to present conversion as a radical change.

While Snow and Machalek based their theory on findings from ethnographic research with converts to Buddhism, several scholars have adapted this narrative approach to research on conversion to evangelical Christianity. In evangelicalism, conversions are often narrated as instant, radical, and total, as so profound believers describe their experience as being “born again.” Mullen (2017, 23–26) showed how the emergence of an understanding of religion as a choice, not an inheritance, increasingly trained and required evangelicals to have a meaningful conversion experience. Believers are usually able to retell this experience concisely and vividly, and such narratives or “testimonies” are regularly brought up, referenced, and used for outward mission. Expanding on an understanding of conversion as a “process of acquiring a specific religious language,” Harding (1987, 178) showed how proselytizing or “witnessing” integrates the listener into the discursive universe of the faith and thus reconstitutes the listener as a (beginning) convert. Stromberg (1993, 5:16) examined the conversion narrative and its performance as a ritual in which a particular identity is acted out. Coleman (2003, 16) understands conversion as a “gradual and ambiguous socialization into shared linguistic and ritual practices.” His concept of “continuous conversion” encompasses both this processuality and the fact that the re-telling of conversion narratives and the fixation on the conversion of unbelievers are important parts of evangelicals’ religious practice.

[11]

Evangelical Identity and Church Switching

Evangelicalism, however, has never been a monolithic movement, and “evangelical” has always been a contested label (see also Altman 2019). The term evangelical itself only entered popular usage as an effort of intra-Christian boundary drawing in the US in the first half of the twentieth century: As fundamentalists advocated for a withdrawal from anything they perceived as “secular” and “modern,” those Christians who did not fear involvement with secular culture embraced evangelical as a label to distance themselves from fundamentalism (Harding 2000, 77). The second half of the twentieth century saw both progressive or left-wing evangelical activism and the growth and institutionalization of the Christian Right. Today, in the US, evangelical has come to designate someone who is “very religiously engaged and very politically conservative” to an extent that not only non-churchgoing Republicans but even conservative-voting Muslims or Hindus increasingly self-identify as evangelical (Burge 2021), while others tend to avoid this label even though it would be the closest theological marker for their beliefs (Du Mez 2020, 5–6). My case study Churchome also does not use the term evangelical. When I asked a pastor about it, he acknowledged that evangelical “in the truest sense of the word” was the best designator for what Churchome believed. However, he noted that “this separate term ‘evangelical church’ [...] refers to [something] more on a political side that would not be necessarily what we associated with.” In other words, Churchome avoided the term to not be associated with the Christian Right.

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These entanglements of politics and religious self-identification illustrate that, even though scholars have tried to pin down doctrinal aspects (e.g. Bebbington 1989, 2–3), definitions of evangelicalism have “always depended on the world beyond the faith” (Du Mez 2020, 5–6). This is not only true for politics but also culture. Evangelical media products such as

[13]

music, books, or television shows are created to be accessible without any prior knowledge of the Bible and make it possible to be part of the evangelical culture without attending an evangelical church. This “cultural evangelicalism” (Du Mez 2020), which coincided with a loss of importance of denominations (Wuthnow 1989) and the emergence of megachurches (Thumma and Travis 2007), has led to a doctrinal and aesthetic uniformity in US Protestantism and shaped a generic evangelical identity (Du Mez 2020; Ellingson 2007; see Bowler 2013, 6–7) that also influenced evangelicalism globally. Global evangelical megachurches have added to this uniformity, such as the Australian Hillsong Church whose worship music was omnipresent in evangelical churches worldwide (Klaver 2021, 16; Riches and Wagner 2017) until a series of scandals shook the church in 2020.

Basing evangelical identity not only on church or denominational belonging or on doctrinal positions but also on political affiliation and cultural consumption makes church switching within evangelicalism relatively easy. For many evangelicals, being evangelical or being re-born are more important identity markers than belonging to a certain church or denomination (Stolz, Favre, and Buchard 2014, 15). These markers become even more relevant for believers who attend non-denominational churches or megachurches that are only very loosely connected to a denomination. The uniformity of religious practices and aesthetics makes it easy to feel at home in another church. Often, however, switching to another church is not even necessary: With the wide accessibility of cultural products, believers can attend one church but consume books and watch recorded services from another. Digital media make it even easier to engage with a range of different churches, as believers can and often do follow various pastors and churches on social media. Social media platforms also offer suggestions and curate their users’ feeds through algorithms, enabling users to stumble upon new religious content. Such “split loyalties” (Coleman 2003, 19) are encouraged by many churches that not only cater to their members or potential new followers but also intend to attract consumers of their media products. Coleman takes this as an example of Taylor’s (1999) concept of “awkward conversion,” which describes that believers continue to engage in religious practices or hold theological positions associated with their previous affiliation after conversion. However, against the backdrop of a comparatively uniform evangelical identity that blurs denominational and doctrinal boundaries, there is nothing “awkward” in church switching or splitting up loyalties in evangelicalism, even though such practices of “church shopping” are sometimes frowned upon. [14]

Deconversion and Intra-Evangelical Critique

This comparatively uniform conservative evangelical culture, however, does not remain unchallenged. While some believers who feel discomfort with certain aspects of conservative evangelicalism depart from Christianity or organized religion altogether, many choose to stay within the broader theological and cultural context of evangelicalism and express their discomfort, for example, through church switching. Speaking in Hirschman’s (1970) classic terms, disenchanting believers have the option of exit and voice, which can interplay and trigger each other. [15]

In everyday language, deconversion is often only understood as the “exit” variant, as a complete departure from organized religion. Deconversion, however, encompasses many other expressions of disenchantment and disaffiliation. Streib (2014, 272) suggests six possible deconversion trajectories: Besides disaffiliation from organized religion, believers can adopt a different belief system or switch to another, but similar religious organization. Believers can also integrate new beliefs and practices into the religious organization they find themselves in, [16]

continue to practice their faith in private while disaffiliating from a religious organization, or appropriate a new faith without organizational affiliation. Barbour (1994, 8) investigates deconversion phenomena in historic autobiographies and notes that deconversion is often part of the quest for a more “authentic” faith and its practice. Connected to a search for authenticity, deconversion can thus, maybe paradoxically, lead to an intensification or revitalization of religious commitment.

Barbour (1994, 2) defines deconversion broadly as the “loss or deprivation of religious faith” [17] and notes that conversion and deconversion are inherently connected. Both entail a “turning from” and a “turning to,” of which believers might narratively emphasize one over the other (1994, 3). For this article, I will understand deconversion as an act of change in someone’s religious life that is connected to disenchantment, criticism, or critical reflection of previously followed religious ideas or practices. Deconversion can be instant, for example following a troubling experience in the religious group, or a long process. Often, believers first experience an inner change (e.g. different understanding of theology, loss of enthusiasm while continuing the same religious practice) before they take outward actions (e.g. church switching, vocally expressing their discontent). The path from the experienced crisis or disenchantment to the action someone takes does not, however, need to be clear-cut. Sometimes, believers will only notice their growing discomfort with their religious group once they encounter new ideas somewhere else. Deconversion can take on a form of dissent and vocal criticism but does not necessarily have to. Like conversions, deconversions are biographic reconstructions that follow particular narrative patterns. Deconversion narratives resemble conversion narratives in form and style. Thus, for the purpose of analysis, findings on the constructivity and narrativity of conversions can be applied to deconversions.

In this article, I focus on intra-evangelical deconversions. The believers whose stories I will recount below did not leave evangelicalism (although one of them went through a phase of only minimal religious involvement) but left their previous churches and started attending a different, less conservative² church. This deconversion strengthened their faith and their religious commitment. Following Streib’s (2014, 272) typology, they switched to a similar religious group. However, emphasizing continuities and similarities between churches and denominations does not do the experiences of my interviewees justice, who went through profound transformations in their relationship with God and their identity as Christians. [18]

Bielo (2011, 45–46) focused one chapter of his book on the Emerging Church movement on intra-evangelical deconversions. Emerging Church was a label given to pastors, other church authorities, and concerned laity who publicly criticized various aspects of contemporary evangelicalism in the late 1990s and early 2000s. When Bielo interviewed these critics about their religious life history, they did not recount conversion narratives, which would have been the answer scholars have come to expect from evangelicals. Instead, they chose to replace the traditional conversion narratives they would have retold before their connection to the Emerging Church with lengthy explanations of what had driven them out of the conservative evangelical milieu and vocal critiques of mainstream evangelical practices and theologies, or short, with deconversion stories. [19]

While the Emerging Church movement primarily voiced theological and intellectual critiques, at around the same time, young Christians who had grown up in an evangelical milieu [20]

2 “Conservative,” here, is not a designator my interviewees use but rather my own attribution. My interviewees did not use general terms to categorize churches and their theological, societal, and political views. Instead of “conservative,” they would describe the churches they turned away from as focused on enforcing religious rules, as “insensitive,” or simply as “religious.”

became increasingly discontent with evangelicalism's public image and its media, practices, and aesthetics. The evangelical author Brett McCracken (2010) coined the term "Christian hipster" for these forms and explorations of new evangelical identities that often went along with experiences of deconversion. Instead of publicly voicing their criticism, these young evangelicals tended to engage in practices condemned by the church or to coat their disaffection in irony. Schuurman (2019) explored a Christian church, The Meeting House in Toronto, that intended to playfully deconstruct conservative evangelical stereotypes through irony. He used the term "reflexive evangelicals" to describe believers who are "sensitive to the negative stereotypes of evangelicals [...] and seek to refashion a more culturally legitimate identity and attitude" (2019, xiv). According to Schuurman (2019, xiv), their "renovation of identity is less a conversion than a deconversion."

Starting with a Twitter hashtag in 2016, disenchanting evangelicals have more recently begun to voice critiques and to loosely organize, mostly on social media (Fekete and Knippel 2020), under the labels "ex-vangelical" and "faith deconstruction." Although the term ex-vangelical implies general disaffiliation with evangelicalism, these movements connect people who left organized religion altogether with others who continue to practice their faith as active members of evangelical churches or in private. Although these recent criticisms have received extensive media coverage in both Christian and non-Christian outlets, apart from the study on virtual community formation around faith deconstruction by Fekete and Knippel (2020) and chapters on evangelical feminist bloggers in books by Cooper (2022) and Laughlin (2022), not much has been published on the topic. However, two aspects of this phenomenon are particularly relevant to my following analysis: First, the movement seems to emphasize narratives of personal experiences, which coincides with the use of (interview) podcasts as the most important medium (Fekete and Knippel 2020, 172–73). These narratives usually follow particular patterns similar to the structure of (de-)conversion narratives. Second, while faith deconstruction as a term is often used to describe theological examinations and contestations of existing doctrines, especially on social media, it takes on a meaning much more centered around therapeutic self-help and introspective reflection. Social media posts that are supposed to help others in their deconstruction speak of "religious trauma," anxiety, or dysfunction, and advertise breathing exercises or starting a therapy. Also, the specialization in faith deconstruction has entered the coaching and counseling business (Andersen 2022).

[21]

Case Study and Method

My case study, Churchome, is a non-denominational megachurch based in a Seattle suburb and Los Angeles. In the evangelical world, it is primarily known for its extensive range of digital services which the church developed even before the Covid-19 pandemic, and for its head pastor, Judah Smith, who has become relatively famous not only through his preaching but due to his friendships with celebrities such as Justin Bieber. Judah Smith and his wife and co-pastor Chelsea took over the church, which was founded in 1992 as City Church, from Judah's father in 2009. Since then, they first grew the church into a multi-sited megachurch with several campuses in Seattle and Los Angeles and then began to venture into the digital. In 2017, the previous City Church was renamed "Churchome," a portmanteau of church and home that encompassed the idea that believers did not necessarily have to leave their home to practice their faith. At the same time, the church launched a variety of digital services such as live streams of sermons, digital home groups, and an app that features, among other

[22]

functions, daily “guided prayers” and “pastor chat,” a chat window through which users can have digital conversations with Churchome pastors during office hours. Since then, the church has reduced both its number of campuses and of live in-person services, focusing even more on digital media. Judah Smith regularly encourages the church’s followers to stay home on Sunday mornings and to instead open the church’s app or YouTube channel, where sermons usually reach several thousand and particularly successful ones up to several ten thousand views. The digital presence has also led to the emergence of international Churchome groups and members, many of whom consider themselves active members of the church without ever having been to an in-person service.

The following analysis is based on both in-person and digital research at Churchome I conducted from December 2020 to December 2022, of which I spent two months in Seattle and Los Angeles in the spring of 2022. Over the course of these two years, I participated in home groups and other church activities, both digital and in-person, took part in in-person services and watched live streams, conducted 19 interviews with Churchome members and pastors and one interview with a former Churchome pastor, and analyzed 97 sermons and three self-help books by head pastor Judah Smith. By combining digital and in-person ethnography, I was able to follow my interlocutors, who engaged with Churchome both online and offline (Laughlin 2022, 2). [23]

I worked with a Grounded Theory methodology (Engler 2011; Corbin and Strauss 2015) and followed different phases of research that each led to an iterative re-evaluation of my research design and my theses and questions. For this article, I analyzed two interviews with Churchome members from the US and Germany and particularly focused on the deconversion stories told by my interviewees. Additionally, I analyzed sermons and experiences from my participant observation to gain a closer understanding of Churchome’s self-presentation as a church for the deconverted. The interviews with Rachel and Jennifer lasted about two hours and an hour and a half, respectively. While Rachel started telling me her deconversion story before I could even ask a question, Jennifer explained how she switched to Churchome mostly as an answer to my first question on her religious life history. [24]

In the following chapter, when recounting the deconversion narratives, I try to stick close to Rachel’s and Jennifer’s perspectives and speech and thus quote not only longer passages but also words and phrases they used to describe their experiences. For Jennifer, whom I interviewed in German, her and my native language, I have translated her words as closely to the intended meaning as I could. [25]

Stories of Deconversion

Although my interlocutors do not use deconversion as a term to describe their experiences, I understand the stories they tell about how they came to and why they stayed at Churchome as deconversion narratives. While Rachel’s story structurally follows the classic format of evangelical conversion narratives, Jennifer’s more continuous story shows a particular self-reflective awareness of this format. Rachel, in line with the conversion narrative format of her story, also calls this her “testimony.” Before turning to the two interviews, however, I will engage more closely with the church that both interviewees joined as part of their deconversion, and explore how Churchome caters particularly to disenchanting—or deconverted—evangelicals. [26]

“Christianity Is Too Hard”: Deconversion as Message at Churchome

When I attended an in-person Sunday service at Churchome’s Seattle suburb campus in May 2022, a pastor spoke about a chat conversation. A woman from Europe had contacted him via “pastor chat” and told him about her inner conflict: She had been thinking about “accepting Jesus” but was worried that she would go to hell as she was divorced and had had an abortion after being raped. As Churchome’s theological foundation lies in grace theology, a soteriological view that deems faith to be the only condition for salvation, the pastor had explained that she did not need to worry, or, as he expressed it, he had been able to show her “who Jesus really is.” Through their conversation, the woman realized that she “had God all wrong.” The pastor turned to the cheering crowd and promised them that more conversations like this would be ensured should they decide to donate and tithe to Churchome. [27]

This anecdote is one example of how Churchome’s mission efforts seem to be directed more toward those who believe in a judgmental and angry God than toward those who do not believe at all. To put it differently, Churchome does not focus so much on conversion but rather on deconversion or church switching. This is true not only for publicly shared testimonies but also for individual experiences and the self-presentation of the church more generally. During my research, I quickly became aware of the importance of distancing oneself from other Christian and, more precisely, evangelical churches at Churchome. The vast majority of my interviewees had either grown up in evangelical churches or had been members of other evangelical churches before joining Churchome. The life stories they shared with me were stories of “turning from”: They spoke extensively about the hypocrisy of other churches, about being put off by the politicization of evangelicalism, and about how growing up in a conservative evangelical milieu negatively impacted their adult life. Churchome, to them, represented a different kind of church, one that was not political, was authentic and real, and relieved them of the pressure they had experienced in other churches. Listening to more and more sermons, I noticed that the church itself was “turning from”: Head pastor Judah Smith not only regularly criticizes other forms of evangelicalism or evangelicalism as a whole, speaking from a position of “we as Christians,” but regularly makes these critiques the main topic of his sermons. At the same time, while megachurches have become known to open themselves up as much as possible to visitors unfamiliar with Christianity (Sanders 2012, 331–32), Churchome’s sermons are full of references and jokes that only those familiar with the evangelical subculture will understand. [28]

When voicing critiques, Smith never names specific churches or denominations, but often satirically imitates other preaching styles and lets his performances and comments give hints to what he is aiming at. The 2021 sermon “Christianity Is Too Hard” is a good example: [29]

This is where Christianity gets it wrong. We’re like, you know how you make yourself at home with God: You read your Bible every day, you pray every day, and you be at church every day. Don’t you smoke or wear hats... I always get, like, a southern accent. (“Christianity Is Too Hard” 2021, 34:39–58) [30]

In this quote, Smith criticizes churches that Churchome’s followers would call “rule-based,” as compared to the “relationship-based” or “Jesus-focused” nature of Churchome. His satirical comment that he unintentionally gets “like, a southern accent” when proclaiming rules about what to do or not to do in church can be read as a humoristic attack against fundamentalist Bible Belt-based churches. [31]

Even when Smith does not explicitly speak about the downfalls of evangelicalism, many of [32]

his sermons can be understood as attempts to distance himself from other preachers, a strategy that seems to be very successful. Many of my interviewees, for example, spoke positively about Smith's openness regarding his weaknesses, as Smith often mentions his anger problem in sermons (e.g. "Are We There Yet" 2021, 18:30–19:00). While it is not unusual for preachers to openly speak about their imperfections, anger is definitively an emotion that most people would not associate with the role of a pastor. Smith even goes further than just sharing his weaknesses, as he proclaims vulnerability to be a strength: Humans will feel closest to God when they are weak, as successes will make them feel like they do not need to rely on God (e.g. "Heard and Happening" 2021, 45:16–47). Believers carry this celebration of vulnerability into the church's home groups, where members extensively dwell on their failures and imperfections.

Lastly, Smith presents Churchome as an apolitical church. Although the head pastors Judah and Chelsea Smith have, for example, openly expressed their support for the Black Lives Matter movement,³ taken a pro-choice or at least non-condemning stance on abortion (Acho 2022), and endorsed the Covid-19 vaccine ("When the Boat Breaks" 2021, 3:45–4:50), Judah Smith continuously claims that these positions are not political but simply a way of loving one's neighbor. Instead, he dismisses the politicization of religion, satirically comments on avid supporters of any party, and frequently calls his church's followers to listen to and make friends with people who share different political views. [33]

To conclude, at Churchome, distancing oneself from other forms of evangelicalism seems to be far more important than distancing oneself from the secular world. The church employs various strategies to cater to people who have grown up in the evangelical subculture while staying open to non-Christians. Much of head pastor Judah Smith's and the church's self-presentation directly addresses negative images and perceptions of evangelicalism visitors might have. At least for the church members I interviewed, this was mostly successful: They described Churchome as more authentic than previous churches they had visited, they perceived the head pastors as vulnerable and honest, and some highlighted the apolitical nature of the church as an antidote to polarization. Rachel's and Jennifer's stories, whom I will turn to in the following subchapters, give some more insights. [34]

"Taking Off the Mask": Deconversion as Search for Authenticity

Rachel was probably my most enthusiastic interviewee, both regarding the interview and regarding Churchome, which she had very recently joined. At the time of the interview, she was in her early 40s and had just moved to Seattle. The first time she heard about Churchome was more than two years earlier when a friend recommended to her the "guided prayers"⁴ the church publishes in its app daily. These are audio clips with prayer or meditation exercises presented by pastors that usually last five to seven minutes. Although she had been listening to these prayer exercises daily since then, Rachel did not get any more involved in the church until her move. At the time of the interview, she had just started a small group and was looking for people to join. I had emailed her asking for an interview about mental health, a topic that was inherently related to her "faith journey" of starting to engage with Churchome's content, leaving her previous church, and moving to Seattle. When we met on Zoom for the interview, she did not wait for my questions but immediately started narrating her "testimony," as she called it, and spoke for almost an hour without pause. Rachel had clearly already spent a lot [35]

3 Judah Smith on Instagram: https://www.instagram.com/p/CA_FbU8Fuh5/, last accessed May 7, 2024.

4 See <https://www.churchome.org/daily-guided-prayers>, last accessed May 7, 2024.

of time reflecting on her upbringing and how it related to both her faith and her mental health problems, and she had developed successful strategies to deal with her mental health issues that she was more than happy to share.

Rachel started her story by recounting that, growing up, attending a conservative evangelical church with her family taught her “the skills of dysfunctional communication [laughs], like many of us, passive-aggressive, shame and blame, dirty fighting.” During her childhood and youth, the church was primarily a place of hypocrisy, a place where her family had to hide their “dysfunctionality” and pretend that everything was all right: [36]

We would fight, fight, fight, and dirty fight six days a week and then my mom would take us to church on Sunday and we would push everything under the rug (laughs) and we [would be like:] (mockingly raises her voice to a childish, sweet tone) oh yes, we love God, it’s so lovely. And then we [would] sweep all the dirt out from the carpet on Monday morning and it would be the same. [37]

During that time, Rachel imagined God as constantly asking her to be and do better. Reflecting on this today, she recalls that she had conflated her image of God with her mother and their relationship. As her mother was the one in the family to introduce her to faith and was very critical of her, Rachel came to see God as “the one who was pointing the finger,” as she expressed it. [38]

For Rachel, her deconversion, which she called a “re-evaluation” of her faith, was mainly an “evolution” of her image of God: She learned to experience God not as angry and critical but as loving and forgiving. Words like “journey” and “evolution” show the emphasis Rachel put on the processuality of her experience. Later in the interview, she explained this by God paving the way for her, one step after another. Initially, she felt a need to change something about her life because she had experienced mental health issues for a long time. At the same time, she was struggling with her role as a stay-at-home mother. In this situation, a friend introduced Rachel both to a psychological self-help method based on visualization practices and to the daily guided prayers in the Churchome app. Rachel explained that her friend had, at that time, started to “re-evaluate” her faith and mentioned that her friend called this process “deconstruction.” [39]

The visualization exercises improved Rachel’s mental health. At the same time, the guided prayers gave her new ideas about God which she started to include in her visualizations. When she felt anxiety about a future event, she imagined God telling her that it would be all right. When she beat herself up over something she had done in the past, she visualized God telling her that he still loved her. It is worth noting here that Rachel did not understand these conversations with God as supernatural experiences in which God’s voice entered her mind from the outside (Luhmann 2012) but as a product of her own mind. Over time, however, during her visualizations, her thoughts and emotions changed and she “started to hear different things.” Thus, in her visualizations, which became a religious practice, she was both actively working on changing her image of God and passively receiving God’s voice and ideas. [40]

God’s unconditional love also changed Rachel’s self-perception: She understood that she was “not broken” and came to recognize the “sick expectation” she had been trying to live up to. At the time of the interview, she could accept that she was “not perfect,” and that she could be “vulnerable” and “have self-compassion.” During her visualizations, she often heard the word “daughter” and took this to be her “identity in Jesus.” Other than in Rachel’s relationship with [41]

her overly demanding mother, in her relationship with Jesus “daughter means unconditional love, daughter means I don’t have to strive.” She explained that

I don’t have to try to perfect and try to control. I can just (audibly breathes out) [42]
take a breath and be ME. And so, I hear daughter and that just (long pause) that to
me is this breath of fresh air, I’m like, huh, I can unclench the butt cheeks. (laughs)

Rachel’s new image of God and her new perception of self also changed her religious practice, [43]
for example, her Bible reading, which became “different,” as she started interpreting the verses
through a lens of “I’m not angry at you, daughter. I love you.”

Although Rachel had attended church before joining Churchome and moving to Seattle, she [44]
spoke of Churchome as a place that welcomed her back. What she experienced as a return
was the development of a personal relationship with God entrenched in every aspect of her
daily life. As Rachel expressed it, previously, God only lived “in church” and she had to come
to him, whereas now, he was always present. With this, Rachel echoed Churchome’s idea of
practicing faith not only during Sunday services but, as expressed in the church’s name, at
home.

Rachel started to get more involved with Churchome after coming to Seattle with her family. [45]
When an opportunity for moving opened up, she took this as a divine calling: “And like, all of
a sudden, God was like, yeah, I need you up in Seattle.” In Rachel’s understanding, God had
already planned for her to move when her friend had first recommended her Churchome’s
guided prayers and had, one step after the other, been “preparing the way the whole time.”
Now, her biggest concern was finding friends in Seattle in a similar position regarding their
relationship with God to “re-evaluate” faith together and to “ask the hard questions.”

As Rachel stated in the quote mentioned above, God’s closeness and forgiveness made [46]
her feel like she could finally be herself, “authentically and vulnerably.” Church had been
a hypocritical place not only during her childhood but continued to be so until Rachel
encountered Churchome. At the end of the interview, I asked Rachel whether there was
anything she did not like about Churchome. After pondering this question for a while, she
answered that she couldn’t come up with anything and instead listed several things that put
her off at other churches that she had experienced as unauthentic and arrogant. Before moving
to Seattle, she had participated in her previous church’s “façade” and pretended to “have
it all together” while she had been struggling with mental health and other issues. For her
deconversion, she used the metaphor of being allowed to take off a mask she had felt forced
to wear before:

In the past, the thing that would turn me off about churches would be that people [47]
looked like they had it all together (laughs). Heck, that was the mask that I wore
for years and years. Oh, you have to look like you have it all together [to look like]
a good Christian, okay, I’ll put on that mask, right. So. Now, that turns me off and
I try to take off that mask as often as I can.

As Rachel could be more vulnerable toward God, this also transformed how she behaved around [48]
other people. At Churchome, she found a church that allowed and encouraged vulnerability.
According to her, this was because the pastors treated people as equals and helped and
encouraged others instead of criticizing and shaming them. Her deconversion, however, was
still an ongoing process and she was struggling to find a community to continue it alongside
with.

Rachel's story functions similarly to the classic model of conversion narratives: She recounts a problem, or rather a series of interconnected problems—her mental health issues, her struggle to find a place in life, and her discomfort with the hypocrisy of evangelical churches—and these problems are solved through the slow and processual switch to Churchome. This shift began when Rachel started listening to the “guided prayers” by Churchome, which gave her new theological ideas that she started integrating into therapeutic self-help practices. After this, she moved to Seattle and started attending church services and hosting a small group. To her, all of this had been God's plan from the beginning, a notion that is common in evangelical conversion narratives. However, she seemed to consider her deconversion as not yet complete and still felt a need to “re-evaluate” her faith even further. [49]

Although Rachel had not fallen away from faith before joining Churchome, she described that her relationship with God had been distant due to her experience of hypocrisy in evangelical churches. Her deconversion, thus, meant developing a close, personal, and everyday relationship with God, which allowed her to accept her imperfections. The problem she narrated, the lack of authenticity in evangelical churches, is primarily a moral critique of institutionalized religion. Rachel's criticism, however, stays at an individual and therapeutic level, as she searched for the reasons for this experience of hypocrisy not in structural aspects of the churches she visited but in her upbringing and her relationship with her mother. [50]

“Taking the Pressure Out”: Deconversion as an Antidote to Anxieties

Jennifer also recounted her deconversion as a process of developing a closer relationship with God. In her thirties and living in Germany, she had been following Churchome digitally for several years before connecting with other European Churchome members through a small group and becoming a small group host herself. When I asked her about her religious background, it immediately became clear that “being a Christian” and “having grown up in church” were important markers of her identity, or, as she expressed it, that faith had always been her “foundation.” She started her answer by telling me that she “grew up Christian” in a German evangelical church, “gave my life to Jesus, so to speak” as a child, and “grew up in the congregation.” Her language was suffused with common evangelical expressions and showed that she, as a member of an English-language church, was used to speaking about her faith in English. We did the interview in German, her and my native language, but she used a lot of English words throughout and sometimes struggled to find German equivalents or stumbled over word choices as she tried to express her ideas and experiences with English-language churches in German. [51]

Jennifer's deconversion is connected to a switch from German to global, English-language evangelical churches. In her recount, finding Churchome started with a Hillsong conference that a relative took her to. She attended this event during a difficult time in her life and seemed almost surprised that it made her feel closer to God, as what happened to her at that time could, in her opinion, also have led her to withdraw from faith. According to her, it was God who brought her to this event. Jennifer did not reveal whether she attended more Hillsong events or sought to connect with Hillsong's churches in Germany after that initial conference. Instead, she directly continued her story with how she found Churchome. This moment happened when she moved out of her family's home and lived alone for the first time in her life. A relative had given her a book by Churchome's head pastor Judah Smith and, while she never finished reading it, she remembered this book when she stumbled upon one of Smith's sermons on YouTube. This video “captivated” and “touched” her and “gave me so [52]

much” that she started to regularly listen to his sermons. Next, she installed the Churchome app when it was launched and spoke with Churchome pastors through the app’s chat function. Jennifer did not throw herself into the church right away but became more involved in it little by little. Due to the unusual format of following a church digitally from afar, she had to learn “how exactly does that work now or, also, how can I get to know people.” Consequently, in her story, the process of joining Churchome was complete once she entered a small group, got to know other members, and got a grip on how everything worked.

While most of the people I spoke to at Churchome did not seem to recognize the extent to which the church caters toward those having grown up in the evangelical subculture, Jennifer explicitly mentioned this as one thing she found particularly attractive about Churchome. This might have been related to her location in Germany, where being an evangelical is a much more marginal experience than in the US. As Judah Smith grew up as a pastor’s son, she sees parallels between her upbringing in an evangelical church and Smith’s childhood and youth:

[53]

So, what captivated me was just, like, Judah’s character, [...] I think that I can identify with a lot of it, because his father was a pastor and he grew up in [the church], a lot of that enters his sermons, you can hear that, and I myself also grew up in congregations and I know a lot of different ones.

[54]

Further along in the interview, it became clear that Jennifer not only identified with Smith because faith had always been a natural part of both their lives and they shared a similar evangelical lingo. As Jennifer’s memories of her upbringing in church were not all positive and she continued to suffer due to some of the doctrines she was exposed to during her childhood, she recognized Smith as a fellow sufferer: “You can just hear that he [...] has experienced a lot inside congregations.” To her, Smith’s way of preaching the gospel was a therapeutic solution for the anxieties and suffering she ascribed to her religious upbringing. Growing up in a conservative evangelical milieu, Jennifer recalled that earlier in her life, she struggled with the assurance of God’s forgiveness or the question of whether she would be saved:

[55]

I was full of anxiety because I was scared that maybe I don’t believe correctly or hadn’t understood something or am not good enough and then I would get lost, you know. [...] And because I had quite strict grandparents, maybe that played into it [...]. Earlier, I also had a lot more contact with congregations that just were, that just had a lot stricter, that [stuck to] rules a lot more and so on, maybe because of that [I thought that] if I’m not good enough, right, that it won’t suffice.

[56]

The free grace theology that lays the foundation for Churchome’s beliefs is contrary to Jennifer’s childhood experiences. For Jennifer, knowing that she is saved by faith alone “takes the pressure out” that led to her anxieties. Although she had left the conservative churches where she spent her childhood and youth, she mentioned that the fear of not being saved was something that “lies deep” within her. Jennifer did not speak about grace, however, but called Churchome’s theological position “Jesus-focused.” According to her, the difference between the churches of her upbringing and Churchome was that whereas before, the focus was on what she did and how she believed, now “it doesn’t come down to me first and foremost, but, like, to the person I believe in.” This gave her “clarity” and “so much strength” and “encourages” and “builds me up again and again.” For her, it also helped to take the pressure out that Judah Smith openly spoke about his failures and negative character traits, or, in Jennifer’s words, that he was “so honest, so open, so authentic.” Since starting to follow Churchome, she noticed that

[57]

“something happens in my life because of his sermons” and she concluded that “it makes me feel good to identify with some of the things that [Judah Smith] speaks about.”

Jennifer’s deconversion story did not entail a moment of discontinuity or crisis but rather recounted a continuous process of changing her theologies and religious practice and of developing a closer relationship with God. In one moment, she even acknowledged this herself, as she expressed surprise about feeling closer to God during a difficult time in her life. Apparently, she was aware of both the crisis and solution format of evangelical conversion narratives and of the fact that her story of joining Churchome would in some contexts be expected to follow the narrative patterns of a conversion narrative. Jennifer also did not frame her story along a clear timeline. Her disagreement with the theologies she grew up with and her encounter first with Hillsong and later with Churchome seemed to influence each other. Instead, she structured her narrative through personal experiences. For example, she mentioned that her first contact with Churchome happened when she had just moved out and lived alone for the first time in her life, which indicates that she needed to cut the cord with her family at least to some degree to be open for a new and different church.

As Jennifer described the harmful effect that conservative evangelical theologies have had and continue to have on her mental health, it became clear that she had already reflected a lot on the topic. To her, Churchome’s theology of free grace was a solution to the anxieties, insecurities, and perfectionism she experienced before her deconversion and that she still had not completely overcome. Thus, it is maybe not surprising that Jennifer was my only interviewee who explicitly noticed and mentioned that Churchome strategically caters to disenchanting evangelicals.

Continuous Deconversion (as) Therapy in a Deconverted Church

Both Rachel and Jennifer criticize the pressure to perform and to be—or pretend to be—perfect, or, to stay in Rachel’s metaphor, to put on a mask of perfection.⁵ For Jennifer, this was even more existential, as she feared that she would not be “saved” if she did not perform well enough. For both, the solution to this problem could be found in the development of a personal relationship with Jesus. This is a classic Protestant critique that, broken down, could be traced back to the Reformation: The church is the problem, and Jesus (and only Jesus, as in the “solus Christus” principle) is the solution. Similarly, hypocrisy and distance from God are classic evangelical patterns of moral and theological critique (Scheer 2014, 126–29).

Rachel’s and Jennifer’s critiques, however, are only moral from an individual perspective. Even though both acknowledge as a side note that they are not the only ones who have had these experiences, neither of them discusses, for example, church structures or theologies and their context as the reason for pressure, anxieties, and hypocrisy at church. Their critiques are not theological, but directed at the therapeutic emotional style of the church they attend (Scheer 2020, 24; Illouz 2018, 1997:31–33). This is most clearly visible in Rachel’s exposure of evangelical hypocrisy and both Rachel’s and Jennifer’s acknowledgment of Churchome as particularly authentic. The strive towards authentic church or community is omnipresent in evangelicalism. However, what people understand to be authentic differs. The Emerging Church

5 Although I have heard similar critiques from male interviewees, it is not surprising that two women speak about their personal experiences of trying to live up to unrealistic standards. Regarding the particularly gendered demands evangelical churches set for women, see, for example, Griffith (1997), Bowler (2019), or Weaver-Swartz (2022).

representatives that Bielo interviewed in the early 2000s, for example, intended to recreate authentic faith in the sense of staying “true” to the Bible. Similarly, the converts to Orthodox Christianity that Ksenia Medvedeva writes about in this special issue (2024) understand their conversions as a return to “early Christianity” and contrast this “ancient religion,” whose traditions supposedly have not changed in 2,000 years, with “man-made” Protestantism. For Rachel, Jennifer, and my other interviewees, authenticity is not about theology but about emotions. To them, an authentic church is open, transparent, and vulnerable, and invites its followers to openly share stories of failure and imperfections.

During their deconversions, both Rachel and Jennifer disengaged with the religious ideas they had learned earlier in life and developed their own mechanisms to evaluate whether a particular religious interpretation was true or not. In these mechanisms, emotions are essential. As Brenneman (2014, 20) has noted, modern evangelicals tend to consider their beliefs “true because they feel true.” Similarly, Burrow-Branine (2021, 90) showed that evangelicals use the Sermon on the Mount quote “by their fruits you will know them” as a guideline for evaluating Biblical interpretations. In other words, for evangelicals, historical accuracies and contexts are often less important than the consequences of applying Biblical ideas to daily life. If theological ideas lead to harm and suffering, they cannot be true; conversely, when something feels good and leads to good things, it must most certainly be true. Other interviewees explicitly referred to this verse to evaluate churches and theologies, like Natalia from the U.S. East Coast, who told me that at Churchome “there’s fruit, right, you can see it,” or Carmen, who was pleased that Churchome had left behind some “old ideologies” where “fruit does definitely not abound.” While to an outside observer, this might seem like a tactic to evade discussions about Biblical literacy, the rhetoric of good and bad fruits can also be understood as an exercise in having faith and trusting God’s goodness and unconditional forgiveness (Elisha 2008, 64–66).

For Rachel and Jennifer, thus, (individual therapeutic) helpfulness or harmfulness became the most important marker for the evaluation of theologies and beliefs. Grace theology was not superior to the theologies Jennifer had been exposed to during her childhood because Jennifer had decided that the Bible said so, but because it took the pressure out of her faith and helped her build a close relationship with God. Rachel noted that reading the Bible at the time of the interview felt “different” because knowing that God is good and forgiving gave her a guideline for understanding the text and the trust not to dwell on passages that seemed to contradict her newly learned ideas. In this way, the learning process involved in deconversion worked as a form of therapy in itself: Rachel and Jennifer learned to listen to and trust their emotions and use these as guiding principles to know which religious ideas to follow and which to avoid. Also, they used their newly learned therapeutic awareness to analyze and re-evaluate their upbringing and family relationships.

Rachel and Jennifer were not my only interviewees whose deconversion stories had a therapeutic function. While Rachel struggled with her self-image and Jennifer with anxiety, stress and burnout were other topics that came up in interviews. Henry, a Churchome member from Asia, recalled hitting “burnout so often that I am like, is this really the God that I am serving?” For him, not being able to attend Churchome in person was a divine gift that kept him from involving himself to an unhealthy degree. Natalia had learned to “set boundaries” to her religious commitment and had, at Churchome, found a place that respected that she would “show up how I wanna show up.”

In both deconversion stories, mental health and positive emotions not only served as a parameter to evaluate theologies, but faith and therapy were intertwined in religious and

therapeutic practice. Jennifer's reflection on and distancing from previously learned theologies helped her against anxiety. Rachel's therapeutic self-help visualization practices were more successful once she added God to them. This interpenetration of therapy and religion is not new: Psychological and therapeutic ideas entered popular culture over the course of the twentieth century, especially in the US, which has led people to interpret their experiences and relationships from a viewpoint of (popular) psychology. This "therapeutic style" (Illouz 2018) has influenced all areas of society, including religion. Protestant seminaries started including findings from behavioral sciences in their curricula already at the beginning of the twentieth century (Muravchik 2011, 2–3). Pastors and other church authorities began adapting therapeutic ideas to counseling, mission, healing practices, church services, or self-help books (Rakow 2013, 486). However, Rachel's and Jennifer's experiences show a shift in therapeutic ideas and their adaptation to evangelicalism. In the 1990s and early 2000s, mainstream evangelicalism focused on therapeutic self-improvement and connected mental to spiritual health (Bowler 2013, 125). Preachers promoted changes in one's "mindset" as a strategy toward financial and personal success and shared dramatic rags-to-riches stories. Since then, (popular) psychological and therapeutic ideas in general society have shifted away from happiness and self-improvement toward concepts of mindfulness and resilience (Graefe 2019). Churchome and its followers, like other evangelical churches, have adapted these new ideas and embraced concepts such as vulnerability, transparency, and allowing and embracing all kinds of feelings, even negative ones. Rachel and Jennifer, consequently, did not deconvert from a form of evangelicalism uninfluenced by therapeutization to therapeutic evangelicalism, but their deconversions exemplified a shift in the particular therapeutic ideas the churches embraced and in how the churches adapted these ideas to their religious framework. Taking up a concept of Snow and Machalek (1983), therefore, a change of the religious "universe of discourse" during conversion or deconversion is also connected to other realms of thinking and speaking that might at first sight seem unrelated to religion, such as the therapeutic.

For both Rachel and Jennifer, Churchome was not the only institution that inspired and guided their deconversion. Both creatively appropriated other resources and ideas and adapted them for their own religious practice. Jennifer had visited Hillsong conferences and listened to digital sermons by various pastors before stumbling upon a sermon by Judah Smith. Rachel's deconversion was connected to "secular" therapeutic self-help practices that she used as a form of religious practice. Also, she was aware of the faith deconstruction movement and discussed related ideas with friends. It is noteworthy that during my interview with her, Rachel mentioned several times that although her friend called her deconversion process "faith deconstruction," she preferred the expressions "evaluation of the faith" or "evaluating one's faith." Although Rachel did not elaborate on this, she was most probably aware of the more generally critical and secular impetus of the faith deconstruction movement and would therefore have felt uncomfortable using this label. Of my interviewees, the only person who comfortably used that term for their own experiences was Natalia, who had "deconstructed from church culture and deconstructed from systems that hurt you instead of helping you." Both Rachel and Jennifer emphasized the importance of community for their religious practice in general and their deconversion processes more specifically. This mirrors Fekete's and Knippel's (2020) findings on the importance of connecting aspects of faith deconstruction and ex-vangelical groups on social media.

Rachel and Jennifer found this community at Churchome, which, at least in self-presentation, is not only a church for the deconverted but also a deconverted church. As it prioritizes the

[66]

[67]

process of distancing itself from more conservative, potentially “harmful” churches, theologies, and practices, Churchome offers a place for guided explorations of deconversion in a relatively mainstream evangelical megachurch setting. For this process, it provides believers with therapeutic instruments. Coleman (2003, 22–23) has noted that evangelicals focus so much on conversion that they not only constantly reinvoked their own conversion experience but that their identity as evangelicals depends, at least to some extent, on extending it out into the (unbelieving) world. Churchome paints a picture of “continuous deconversion”: Much of the church’s identity depends on a continuously reinvoked departure from conservative evangelicalism, to which Rachel’s and Jennifer’s accounts give testimony. Deconversion becomes a central part of the church’s mission, which intends to reach those put off by evangelicalism more than the “unbelievers” or “uncontacted.” Here, therapeutization serves not only as a guiding principle for deconversion but also as a means to avoid engaging in doctrinal conflict or discussion. Churchome does not need to give Biblical proof for how other churches are doing it wrong; instead, the stories of believers who recount having been “harmed” by conservative evangelicalism prove that these churches’ approach can hardly be “fruitful.”

Conclusion

In this article, I analyzed a specific case of how evangelicals who are unhappy with recent developments in their faith tradition react to this discomfort and disappointment. Instead of leaving evangelicalism, practicing their faith in private, or joining openly critical, progressive churches, my interviewees switched to a comparatively conventional megachurch that, in their eyes, did things very differently. The lens of deconversion was not only helpful as my interviewees themselves, in part, used terms related to conversion when telling their stories, but it also helped me analyze how they embedded their church switching in distinctive narratives. As reasons for their deconversion, my interviewees Rachel and Jennifer wheeled out classic Protestant critiques. However, they expressed these not in moral or theological but in emotional and therapeutic terms. The learning process involved in deconversion led them to a re-evaluation of previously learned theologies from the perspective of a new therapeutic and emotional style. As it is focused on introspection, personal life history, and relationships, this process in itself functions according to therapeutic concepts and practices, or, in other words, like therapy. [68]

I also showed that my case study Churchome caters specifically to disenchanting evangelicals. It not only guides their deconversion processes and gives the believers ideas and tools for reflection, but presents itself as a deconverted church that is aware of the negative image of evangelicalism and searching for ways to do things differently. As the church and many of its followers focus so much on deconversion, “continuous deconversion” can be used as a theoretical lens. Coleman (2003, 22–23) uses the concept “continuous conversion” to denote how conversion, in the form of testimonies as well as the potential conversions of unbelievers, is a central part of the religious practice of evangelicals. Churchome practices continuous deconversion: *Those* evangelicals, the conservative, rule-focused type that Churchomians do not want to be associated with, are always present. Believers distance themselves from them in the form of deconversion testimonies and a continuous work against old habits that need to be unlearned. At the same time, Churchome intends to save the Christians they distance [69]

themselves from, striving toward not the conversion of unbelievers but the deconversion of wrong-believers.

Due to the politicization of religion and the societal and political polarization in the US that also impacts discourses in other countries, intra-Christian contact and transfer will continue to occupy scholars of religion extensively in the future. Deconversions can be the result of intra-religious contact on an individual level. If this happens on a larger scale, it might force churches to react and adapt. Going back to Bielo's (2011, 199) question of "what happens when Christianities interact," a lot happened in recent years. One could mention actual or potential schisms (like, for example, the U.S. United Methodist Church's split over LGBTQ inclusion), new networks and alignments (like, for example, new and different associations with and usages of the term "evangelical"), or new actors that emerged (such as the ex-vangelical or faith deconstruction movement). Understanding such developments as cases of intra-evangelical deconversion and paying attention to how some Christians make deconversion their identity as a form of continuous deconversion can add productive perspectives. [70]

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