
Faith No More
Why People Reject Religion



Phil Zuckerman

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Introduction

A wind of secularity is currently blowing across North America. No one can predict the overall course of this wind—whether it will gain speed in the years ahead or eventually run its course and peter out. But for now, it is blowing quite steadily. The growth of irreligion in the United States in recent years is undeniable. According to sociologists Barry Kosmin and Ariela Keysar, the increase in the number of Americans eschewing religion in recent years “has been one of the most important trends on the American religious scene.”¹

Surveys tell much of the story. According to the American Religious Identification Survey, 15% of Americans now claim “none” as their religion, up from 8% back in 1990—a near doubling of “nones” in 20 years. These findings were supported by the Pew Forum’s U.S. Religious Landscape Survey, which reports that 16% of Americans are religiously “unaffiliated.” According to the Harris Poll, in 2003, 4% of Americans were atheist, in 2006 it was 6%, and in 2008, the number was 10%—with another 9% being agnostic. These are the highest rates of atheism/agnosticism ever reported in an American survey. Finally, a 2009 survey undertaken by the nationally syndicated *Parade* magazine found that 27% of Americans “do not practice

any religion” and 22% said that religion was “not a factor” in their lives. Again, these are the highest levels of secularity among Americans ever seen.²

The recent growth of secularity in the United States is evident in other ways as well. There has been a slew of best-selling books in the last few years that are highly critical of religion, namely Sam Harris’s *The End of Faith* (2004), Christopher Hitchens’s *God Is Not Great* (2007), and Richard Dawkins’s *The God Delusion* (2006). Additionally, there has been a notable growth recently among atheist groups in America, such as the Freedom from Religion Foundation, which reported an unprecedented 25% membership increase in 2006 alone. The Secular Student Alliance—a college campus group for nonbelievers—now claims over 200 chapters nationwide, up from 42 in 2003. And secularity has skyrocketed among younger Americans, of which the percentage of religious “nones” is estimated to be somewhere between 30% and 40%. One recent study found that only 53% of Americans born after 1981 believe in God.³

This increase in irreligion is not occurring because secular people are having a ton of babies. Quite the contrary; it is the strongly religious who have the most kids. In fact, compared to all religious groups, nonreligious people are the least likely to have lots of children. This means that most of the nonreligious people in America today were actually raised with some religion, and then at a certain point, they opted out. They rejected their religion. They became apostates. Thus, in the words of social psychologists Bruce Hunsberger and Bob Altemeyer, the “real story” underlying the increase of secularity in North America is “the growth in apostasy.”⁴

The word “apostasy” comes from the Greek “apostasia,” which means “a defection or revolt.” Benjamin Beit-Hallahmi defines apostasy as “disaffection, defection, alienation, disengagement, and disaffiliation from a religious group.” David Caplovitz and Fred Sherrow define apostasy as “the relinquishing of a set of religious beliefs” but add that apostasy involves “not only a loss of faith, but rejection of a particular ascriptive community as a basis for self-identifica-

tion.” David Bromley succinctly defines apostates as “individuals who once held a religious identity but no longer do so.”⁵

Just as with religiosity, there are various forms or types of apostasy. Armand Mauss has put forth a three-type classification, based on the reasons that underlie individuals’ withdrawal from religion: intellectual apostasy (they just don’t believe anymore), social apostasy (a disintegration of social bonds with coreligionists or the formation of social ties outside one’s religious community), and emotional apostasy (one has psychological reactions to perceived church hypocrisy, or one comes to apostasy as an outgrowth of an unhappy family life). Merlin Brinkerhoff and Kathryn Burke offer another three-type classification: “ritualists” who have lost some or all of their religious beliefs, but continue to identify with a religious community and still participate in various ceremonies and rituals, “outsiders” who still maintain clear religious beliefs but no longer identify with a religious community, and finally “true apostates,” those who have both lost their religious beliefs and become totally disaffiliated from a religious community.⁶

Based on my own analysis of interviews with 87 people who were once religious but are no longer, I can offer my own typology of apostasy. First, in acknowledgment of *when* in the course of his or her life an individual rejects religion, we can make a distinction between *early* apostasy and *late* apostasy. The former refers to individuals who were raised in a religious home and were socialized into a religious identity as children without much of a conscious choice in the matter, who then go on to reject that religion as soon as they became teenagers or young adults. In other words, they shed their religion once they were no longer under the direct influence of their families. This type of apostasy is closely linked to an individual’s general maturation process, of growing up and finding one’s own individuality, fashioning one’s own identity, and rebelling against or simply rejecting certain elements of one’s parents’ lives or beliefs—of which religion may often be a part. Early apostasy is quite common among the non-religious. For instance, in a study of members of secular-human-

istic groups in the Pacific Northwest, Frank Pasquale found that the majority of people knew they were nonreligious by the time they were 22, and in fact 25% of them knew they were nonreligious in their teenage years. In contrast to early apostasy, late apostasy refers to individuals who adopted their religion on their own as adults, not because they were raised to be religious by their parents. Their religiosity was thus not a direct result of childhood socialization but of a conscious choice made as mature, unfettered adults. And then, such individuals subsequently abandon their religion much later in life. What makes late apostasy qualitatively different from early apostasy is the fact that it isn't as interwoven or interconnected with the general process of growing up and creating one's own identity outside of family influence. Late apostasy, admittedly, is quite rare. It is far more typical for people who were raised in a certain religious tradition to reject it in their late teens or early adulthood.⁷

There is also the matter of just how deeply an individual's rejection of his or her religion goes. That is, we can make a distinction between *shallow* apostasy and *deep* apostasy. Shallow apostasy refers to the phenomenon of people rejecting their religion but who still consider themselves to be strongly spiritual, or at least not wholly or completely secular. They may not believe in Jesus as the Messiah anymore, but they may still consider him to be a special, moral teacher worthy of respect and reverence. They may not believe in the God of the Bible anymore, but they still think that there is "something" out there, some supernatural force of love or sacred unity that upholds and permeates the universe. They may not belong to a church anymore, but they don't mind going to a religious service once in a while, especially around the holidays. While such individuals have rejected a specific religion and have experienced a weakening of faith, they are not totally secular. They may have no problem calling themselves ex-Catholic or ex-Mormon, but they are simultaneously not comfortable calling themselves atheists. Deep apostasy refers to individuals whose break from religion is total and absolute; they no longer consider themselves religious in any way, shape, or

form. Nor do they consider themselves spiritual. They are convinced nonbelievers and are totally uninterested in participating in anything religious. They are positively secular, through and through. The main point to be gleaned from the distinction between shallow and deep apostasy is that not all apostates end up in the same place. The depth of their rejection of religion varies significantly. While many of the men and women interviewed for this study do classify themselves as confirmed atheists, many others do not. Many classified themselves as open-minded agnostics, believers in “something out there,” Buddhists, and so on. Others, particularly those who had been raised as Jews, Mormons, and Catholics, considered themselves to be still somehow culturally linked to their religious tradition, even though they are no longer true believers. The individuals interviewed for this study were about evenly divided between deep and shallow apostates.

Finally, there is the matter of just how truly significant or personally transformative the shift from religiosity to secularity is for given individuals. While all 87 apostates that I interviewed withdrew from religion, not everyone was as strong in his or her religious convictions or religious identification to begin with—so the withdrawal from religion took on greater or lesser significance, depending on how religious the person originally had been. The distinction here is between *mild* apostasy and *transformative* apostasy. The former refers to individuals who rejected religion but weren’t all that religious in the first place; the religion he or she rejected was never that significant a part of life, so letting it go wasn’t all that big of a deal, entailing few personal consequences, little social disruption, and no real psychological turmoil. Transformative apostasy refers to the phenomenon of individuals who were deeply, strongly religious who then went on to reject their religion. For such people, apostasy is a true personal revolution, a life-altering transformation. It involves not only a massive psychological reorientation from a religious to a secular worldview, but it also often entails a loss of close friendships, alienation from a strong community, and even rejection by one’s family.

While these three dimensions of apostasy—early/late, shallow/deep, mild/transformational—manifest themselves in various combinations, it is the stories of deep and transformational apostasy that are obviously the most dramatic. One such apostate is Nathan. He is a 42-year-old African American who was raised in Philadelphia but who now lives in Alabama, where he is a college professor. Religion was central to Nathan's family life and his personal identity when he was growing up. For his first 27 years, he was devoted, committed, enveloped, and engrossed in all aspects of religion.

I was really active in the church. . . . I got really serious as far as religion. . . . I mean, my worldview was totally that God is in control of everything.

Nathan attended his family's Pentecostal church several times a week, he prayed constantly, and he was so enthusiastically devout that his family referred to him as their "own little Jesus." After high school, Nathan attended Oral Roberts University, majoring in church ministries and evangelism. He started up a prison ministry, where students could preach the word of God to inmates at nearby prisons. During his summers, he went on missions to Jamaica and Mexico. He even spent one summer riding the subways of New York City, preaching the word of God to anyone who would listen. After graduating, he attended graduate school at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School and Regent University—both strongly Christian institutions. A master of both Old and New Testaments, a servant of Jesus Christ, a man of God, a convinced believer—Nathan's entire life was his faith and his church and his Bible.

And then, the doubts and questions seeped in, little by little, over the course of several years. For a long time he countered them with earnest prayer and even greater piety. He overcame the seeping skepticism by engrossing himself ever deeper in his religious studies and his church. But the questions and doubts persisted.

For Pentecostal Christians, the ability of God to heal is central. Nathan had believed in God's healing powers all his life. Then one

day, it finally occurred to him that he never actually saw any proof of miraculous healing. He saw the very opposite:

I remember the day that I rejected Christianity. . . . It's weird . . . but one day I was driving to the gym to work out and I thought about a good buddy of mine who was in a wheelchair. He was a brilliant guy. I thought to myself: "If Rick ever got up out of that wheelchair, it would be on CNN. . . . If a blind person got healed, it would be on CNN." I watch CNN every day, and I've never seen a story about a paralyzed person or blind person . . . so then I thought: God doesn't heal. I had already kind of come to that conclusion, but this way of thinking in terms of it is a fact in my mind that the God of the scriptures that claims to be a healer does not heal today. . . . Then I concluded that if God doesn't heal, then the God of the Bible does not exist. If the God of the Bible does not exist, then I don't believe in God. It was really that simple.

For Nathan, the transition was extremely difficult. It was a solo journey, for which he had no road map and no comrades. No one in his family could understand his rejection of Christianity. His parents were quite worried about his apostasy, and they continue to pray that it is merely a phase that he will soon pull out of. Most of his friends were unsympathetic, worried, disappointed. And when Nathan goes out on dates now, he finds that his irreligiosity is often a "deal breaker."

Life for Nathan as a new apostate clearly entailed a dramatic change:

I had to learn how to be a non-Christian. There was a lot of sort of angst in that. Here I am now, 26 years old, 27—I don't remember the exact age—and I've been pretty much a Christian all that time. A serious Christian. So I have to now learn . . . there was a lot of sorrow in the fact that I now was in a world, a dangerous world, where I didn't feel I was protected by anything, where I was on my own and things were just kind of random. . . . So I had to kind of like learn this new worldview. So on the one hand there was a lot of angst and frustration and a lot of—but that didn't last long. The freedom, the tremendous freedom overcame the frustration—the sorrow and the loss, I overcame it because I'm a free thinker. . . . Here I am now, I can be whatever I want, I can

re-invent myself, I can do whatever I want, I can create my own moral system, and I don't think I ever looked back. I got to the point where I really embraced the freedom, I never looked back. So this period of frustration, of loss of regret, of how am I going to make it . . . was superseded by the tremendous, almost worship of freedom. . . . I worship freedom now instead of God.

People like Nathan are rare. But they certainly exist—now more than ever. What do we actually know about such people? Social scientific research on those who have rejected their religion is actually quite minimal. As Stan Albrecht has noted, “religious leave-taking has received far less attention than has religious conversion.”⁸ However, from the handful of sporadic studies that have appeared over the past 50 years, certain findings have been consistently reported. For example, apostasy rates are higher among men than women. Apostates are also more likely to be left-leaning politically than non-apostates. Finally, apostates are more likely to be better educated, to get higher grades, and to describe themselves as having an “intellectual orientation” than their religious peers.

That men are more likely to become apostates than women aligns well with a much broader pattern, one supported by a significant body of research: men tend to be less religious than women over all, on every measure of religiosity and in all societies for which we have data.⁹ This may be the result of innate genetic or physiological predispositions, different patterns of childhood socialization, or different levels of wealth, power, status, agency, or prestige within society. As for apostasy being strongly correlated with left-leaning, progressive, or radical political views—this too conforms with a broader trend: secular people in general tend to be more liberal and progressive than their religious peers, being less likely to support the death penalty, the War in Iraq, the governmental use of torture, and more likely to support Democratic candidates, women’s equality, and gay rights.¹⁰ One has to wonder: does rejecting religion lead people to hold left-wing political values, or is it the other way

around—that holding left-wing political values leads people to become apostates? Or are both caused by some third, as-yet unidentified factor? While we can't be sure, what seems plausible is that people who question the official teachings of their religion are probably more comfortable questioning other “official versions of reality.”¹¹ Hence, those who don't feel comfortable accepting the power of religious authorities are probably less likely to accept the political powers that be. And conversely, it seems plausible that people who question the status quo are suspicious of political leaders; are concerned with inequality, power dynamics, and corruption as they exist in the wider society; and might also be sensitive to such things as they play out in religious institutions, leading to an increase of skepticism and doubt. Finally, as for apostasy being strongly correlated with intellectualism, higher education, or as Bob Altemeyer and Bruce Hunsberger have stated, being “very bright,” this pattern is also consistent with a larger body of research showing that education appears to have a corrosive effect on religiosity in general. Indeed, higher education has been positively correlated with atheism and secularity in many other studies.¹² High educational attainment probably makes it more difficult to maintain a strong belief in one's religion when learning about the social construction of religion, the history of religious development, the diversity of religious claims, and the inability of many religious claims to be supported by scientific verification. Also, attending college often means meeting people with other viewpoints, which can undermine one's ability to maintain allegiance to a specific set of religious ideals. Furthermore, attending college is often a time away from one's family and childhood friends, thereby loosening social bonds that otherwise might keep tendencies toward apostasy in check.

While the above research is important, it does have its shortcomings. Nearly all of the studies ever published on apostasy over the past 50 years are based on samples made up solely of college students. Therefore, I made sure that the majority of people I interviewed were no longer in college but were older and at

different ages and stages in life. A second shortcoming of previous research on apostasy is that the majority of studies were based on survey data, wherein people answered short questions with limited responses available, filling out forms wherein they checked a box or filled in a bubble. Such survey data, while very informative, can often be extremely narrow. Answers tend to be shallow and information tends to be truncated so as to be easily quantified. However, as Janet Jacobs revealed in her pioneering study about people who left new religious movements, apostasy is a story that takes place in a person's life. It involves a "before" period when one is religious, a "during" period at which time a person is in the process of rejection, and an "after" period, when a person is living as a nonreligious individual. Stories of apostasy are also idiosyncratic in terms of the specific causes and personal consequences. Apostasy is a story indeed, and stories just aren't very amenable to survey analysis. For most people, their apostasy is larger, more colorful, more personal, and often more complex than that which can be captured or measured by a short questionnaire. Thus, in our growing understanding of apostasy, what is needed to enrich, embellish, and deepen the existing survey data is data based on in-depth interviews, wherein people have the chance, with the extended time that an open-ended conversation allows, to convey their stories of how and why they rejected their religion.

Such stories are extremely valuable. As sociologist Kirk Hadaway declared some 20 years ago:

We still do not know enough about why people become apostates.... Perhaps the most fruitful direction for further research in this area would be case histories...of apostates....Though complex, such data would add valuable information to our understanding of the process through which persons reject religion.¹³

This book is an attempt to heed Kirk Hadaway's call for the accumulation, presentation, and analysis of case histories of apostates. I've sat down and talked with people who have rejected

their religion, and in listening to their stories, I've tried to learn something about their journey from religiosity to secularity. My analysis is thus based upon the often compelling stories of apostasy as conveyed to me by 87 individuals who were once religious but are no longer. These individuals come from and/or live in various parts of the United States, have a range of ages from the late teens to the late seventies, and represent a diversity of racial, ethnic, and class backgrounds.¹⁴

Of course, I am well aware that asking people to explain their own loss of faith is not without its methodological shortcomings. Individuals' own recollections of their personal life stories can be unavoidably biased. As Daniel Carson Johnson has pointed out, "apostate accounts are essentially autobiographies, and autobiographies are never perfect works of non-fiction."¹⁵ When looking back on their lives in an attempt to explain their present identities, some men and women may have a tendency to highlight certain details and downplay others—even unconsciously—so as to paint a picture of themselves that makes them comfortable with their current life choices. Some people may inadvertently reconstruct events or embellish memories so that they are not accurate. Others may not even truly know why they are apostates; if Freud taught us anything, it is that people are not always completely or fully aware of their own motives and they are not always readily cognizant of the underlying sources of their decisions. While recognizing these potential pitfalls that come with relying upon people's personal accounts of their own life stories as data, I still think that the best way to find out why people reject religion is to ask those individuals that have actually done so—to get the story directly from the horse's mouth, so to speak.