Stepping Out

Narratives of Former Fundamentalist Christians

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Abstract

Religious marketplace research has focused on the relative success strict religious groups have had in maintaining their members. This paper looks at why this might be by focusing on individuals who leave these groups. Defectors from fundamentalist religious groups undergo an identity transformation process through which their understanding of the world and themselves is changed. This paper details this process using data gathered from interviews with former fundamentalist Christians. The defection process described here includes a series of stages leading up to a schism with the group.

Keywords: fundamentalism, identity, defection, transformation, Christianity, religious marketplace

Introduction

The profound impact of strict churches on the religious marketplace has been covered extensively (Scheitle and Adamczyk 2009; Stark and Finke; Iannaccone 1994). Yet, the fate of those who leave these groups has been understudied. The literature on the "church-sect" spectrum is vast (Kelley; Sherkat; Stark and Finke), with sects typically viewed as "groups that create strong social and symbolic boundaries around themselves" (Scheitle and Adamczyk 2009). These relatively strict groups often justify higher levels of attendance and labor commitments via an exclusive theology. Some church-sect researchers have theorized that the expectation of heavy commitments allows sect-like groups to thrive in the same marketplace where less strict churches are losing membership (Iannaccone, Olson and Stark; Scheitle and Adamczyk 2009; Iannaccone 1992, 1994). Comparatively few researchers have examined the

impact sect-like churches have on their defectors. Those who leave these groups often incur higher social costs for their choice than those leaving church-like groups. In this paper, I examine the process and consequences of leaving a sect-like group, namely fundamentalist Christian groups, through a series of interviews with those who have left these types of churches. Using interviews, I will offer a bottom-up perspective on the strict-church market phenomenon. My research reinforces current theories by illustrating how difficult it is to leave these groups at an individual level.

Religious switching among those who previously attended sect-like churches is associated with a number of unique effects, including health consequences (Scheitle and Adamczyk, 2010) and relative difficulty finding acceptable alternatives in the religious market (Scheitle and Adamczyk 2009). These consequences may be the result of the relatively high cost of being a member of these groups such as requiring particular styles of dress, prohibitions on a number of foods, restrictions on secular media of various kinds, and reduction of exposure to non-members (Iannaccone 1992). These restrictions serve not only to test the commitment of members (which may protect the group from "free riders" (Iannaccone 1992) but also to decrease their connection with the outside world, where they may potentially explore other options offered by the religious marketplace (Scheitle and Adamczyk 2009). While excellent for viewing the topic from a macro-level, the religious marketplace literature fails to say much about individual lives and experiences among churchgoers. As a result, this study integrates both the religious marketplace and identity transformation literature to understand the impact of sect-like churches on individual defectors.

At the individual level, leaving a fundamentalist church is an identity transformation process. In order to understand why this is so, it is useful to look at how these groups keep their members apart from mainstream society. The physical, social, and ideological boundaries of strict communities, which Arthur Greil refers to as encapsulation, are a crucial part of what creates an identification with a strict group. A high level of physical encapsulation is present when members of a group avoid going to places where they will encounter non-members, or where they may be exposed to media representing the ideas of those outside the group. Isolating members from the outside world contributes to social encapsulation, in which members of a group spend little or no time with non-members. Ideological encapsulation refers to the level of exposure a group member has to ideas outside of the group's paradigm – this is the ultimate goal of strict groups. Greil identifies institutions which establish high levels of encapsulation within their members as identity transformation organizations (ITOs), referring to the change in identity individuals undergo, both upon entering and leaving these groups.

Greil illustrates the impact of ITOs by drawing on the experiences of Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) members, showing how high levels of social and ideological encapsulation can exist even without a high level of physical encapsulation. This feat is accomplished by asking members to attend 90 meetings in 90 days, known as the 90/90 challenge. Those who take up the challenge become socially encapsulated by foregoing time spent with people outside the group in order to attend meetings. When an individual decreases their exposure to competing paradigms by increasing time spent within a group, they become more ideologically encapsulated as well, which leads to a stronger belief in the group's social reality.

AA members are similar to fundamentalist Christians in that they live in a world full of non-members, yet these groups demand a high level of social encapsulation. The expectation of intense commitment from congregants is one way in which fundamentalist churches are unlike most mainstream forms of Christianity. According to the religious market literature, this difference is what allows them to thrive. Among Eastern religious movements, such as the Krishnas and Moonies, this is well documented (Stark and Bainbridge). This has also been shown amongst strict Christian groups such as Southern Baptist and fundamentalist-evangelical sects, which have been shown to be growing faster than more liberal churches with lower demands of their congregants (Roof and McKinney; Iannaccone 1992). The relatively high demands of strict groups increase member's level of encapsulation, thereby leading the individual to more closely identify with the group which in turn helps these groups retain members.

Another reason strict churches thrive is that they instill in their members an identification with the church that is unparalleled in more open institutions by treating "members of the mainstream religion from which it is derived as faithless apostates" (Herriot: 27). The use of an exclusive theological belief allows the church to present itself as offering an exclusive product with no comparable item in the marketplace (Scheitle and Adamczyk 2009). Exclusive theological beliefs intensify the members' ideological encapsulation by teaching them to resist other forms of Christianity, which come to be viewed as lesser forms of the faith. As referenced above, those I interviewed were former members of a particular kind of sect-like group, fundamentalist Christians. Fundamentalism may be defined as "a discernable pattern of religious militancy by which self-styled 'true believers' attempt to arrest the erosion of religious identity, fortify the borders of the religious community, and create viable alternatives to secular institutions and behaviors" (Almond, Appleby and Sivan: 17). Although this definition does not describe all of my participants, it does describe the communities of which they were a part. My interviewees had left groups that had set up high boundaries in order "to arrest the erosion of religious identity."

Participants of the present study came from several different denominations of Christianity, wherein they took part in a variety of rituals, were taught a mix of beliefs, and were held to various rules and expectations. However, what they all had in common was the high degree of sacrifice each church required from its members. Each institution encouraged frequent attendance, social isolation from nonmembers, and belief in their particular truth as the exclusive path to salvation, as is common amongst sect-like groups (Iannaccone 1992). The problem for these institutions is that modern life often impedes congregants' devotion, as people commonly need to work or attend school surrounded by non-members. Frequent attendance increases physical encapsulation; however, this method is not as effective as in a walled off society because members still live and work in the secular world. Since physical seclusion is difficult to obtain, most churches advised members to avoid socializing with people outside the group, except for the purposes of converting new souls. All outsiders, including Christians from other churches or denominations, were considered potentially polluting because they lacked the exclusive theological beliefs that separated the fundamentalist group from others (Scheitle and Adamczyk 2009). Internalizing the belief that outsiders were potentially corrupting served two functions: to keep members away from ideas

that might interfere with their ideological encapsulation, and restrict a member's social support outside the strict church.

While each church sought a high level of commitment, some participants were more committed than others. Variation in devotion was frequently a function of how well families supported the process of encapsulation, as some caregivers were better at isolating children from secular influences than others. The effect this variation had on ex-members' time in the church and in their exiting process is clear. For example, one way in which a family might affect the encapsulation of an individual is the extent to which children were kept from secular media. All participants in this study came from churches that expected members to limit their exposure to outside influences; however, the extent to which the church's attempts to encapsulate were successful often depended on the participant's parents.

Method

I interviewed 20 individuals who self-identified as former fundamentalists or conservative Christians. Participants were recruited through posters, as well as through snowball sampling. The interviews took place in private, either in person or via Skype. I use pseudonyms to retain the privacy of participants. The ages of participants ranged from 21-67, with the majority between 25 and 35. The sample contains 16 women and 4 men; however, I do not believe this 4 to 1 ratio distorts my findings; the stories of men and women did not differ any more than they did from individuals of the same gender. One third of participants identified as gay or bisexual. While LGBT identity did impact the stories of some participants as a major reason for exiting, it was not a factor in all of the narratives of those who identified as LGBT. Gay rights issues, such as support for same-sex marriage, were often influential even for those who did not identify as gay or bisexual, due in part to having been exposed to those who were. I believe the over-representation of this group does not skew my data, as having an LGBT identity was not the determining factor in whether or not these issues were important in someone's exit. All participants espoused the political belief that same-sex marriage should be legal, a stance they did not hold during their time in a sect-like church. This indicates that the topic is a common indicator of ideological shift.

One area in which my data is imbalanced is in the overrepresentation of white participants; 18 participants identified as Caucasian and the remaining two identified as African American. Additionally, all participants had at least some college education; most had attained a bachelor's degree or were currently enrolled in a four-year degree program. This over-representation of white, educated individuals is likely due to my recruitment method, as I recruited largely from a college town in the Midwest. Recent research (Pew Research Center) indicates that a majority of disaffiliated/atheists are white, therefore the over representation of white individuals in this sample is not disproportionate relative to the population. Also, irreligiosity is more prevalent among educated people (Lynn, Harvey, and Nyborg), so the predominance of educated participants is also reflective of the non–religious population.

Interviews lasted no less than an hour and a half, and most went over two hours. These long interviews allowed me to co-construct full and nuanced narratives with participants. This interviewing style was developed from the literature on narrative methodology (Eakins), which emphasizes co-creating narratives with interviewees by loosely guiding the interaction while also allowing participants to lead the conversation toward what they believe to be important

about their stories. As a result of the interview style, participants were able to create stories containing "thick descriptions" (Geertz) of their lives. This, in turn, allowed me to analyze their stories with greater depth. I analyzed participants' narratives by taking extensive notes on each interview and then identifying themes among the narratives. This technique, which allows the theoretical framework to be shaped by the data, is often referred to as a grounded theory approach (Charmaz). The narratives guided my analysis of the themes that I identified across all participants' stories, and my theoretical framework grew out of these themes. I understood much of what was told to me because I am a fundamentalist defector. However, I often asked participants to elaborate on subjects I felt familiar with to ensure we had the same understanding. I did not reveal my own history to participants until after the interview, and only when asked, in an attempt to ensure their knowledge of me did not shape their answers. My own experience of leaving fundamentalist Christianity was undoubtedly a factor in my interpretation of my data. As any qualitative researcher knows, there is a fine line we must walk when we are an insider amongst our subjects (see Greene). On one side of the line lies deep insight and expansive knowledge of the subject; on the other lies potential bias. I used a number of techniques mentioned in Greene's article to protect my study, debriefing and reflexivity in particular. Reflexivity requires researchers to take into account their own consciousness's role in interpreting data. Debriefing involves discussing one's study with peers, which "allows the researcher to think critically about the research, test hypotheses, and to acknowledge any feelings that may affect judgment" (Greene).

Erosion of Encapsulation

Participants traversed unique paths in leaving their sects. Their encapsulation was worn away slowly; no single factor caused them to leave. A wide range of experiences predisposed them to question their religious beliefs; these experiences were similar to those found by Lynn Davidman in her work on Orthodox Jewish defectors, which she split into three categories. The first category was exposure to the secular world, often through media or school. Public schools were often places in which participants found themselves surrounded by those outside their religious groups and exposed them to the secular world. Fear of exposure to the outside may have been why roughly a third – 6 of 20 participants – were sent to private Christian schools or were homeschooled. Whether or not participants attended a public school, all participants cited going to college as a step towards defection, even those who attended private Christian campuses. Colleges forced participants to interact with people who were outside their church group and generally more familiar with the secular world. Non-fundamentalist Christians were just as prone to exposing fundamentalists to the outside world as non-Christians, because they viewed Christianity in new and possibly conflicting ways. Exposure to new ideas often led fundamentalists to question their beliefs. In addition to experiences in secular public education, many participants cited watching television, listening to music, or reading secular books as an early source of contact with the reality outside their church.

A second childhood experience that led some young fundamentalist Christians to question their faith was family discord. Divorce or revelations about a parent's wrongdoing, which may result in one or both parents leaving the church, led some children to question parental authority. In the most tragic of cases, verbal, sexual, and physical abuse by caregivers led individuals to distrust the reality presented to them by their parents. Since caregivers are a

crucial part of maintaining a child's encapsulation, these incidents often served to diminish participants' connection to the church.

The third category involved the hypocrisy perceived among leaders of participants' congregations. Participants described irregularities in the ways officials handled scandals; for some this was the result of the religious leaders protecting abusers or passively ignoring abuse, while in other cases leaders of the church were actively involved in situations considered salacious. Those in leadership positions are expected to be morally pure by their congregations; any incident in which church leaders were seen to be willfully defying the lessons they expected the congregation to follow ripped the fabric of the fundamentalist "sacred canopy" (Berger). A collection of these experiences wore away individual's encapsulation until they finally found themselves to be an outsider amongst their sect.

Exposure to the Secular World

Participants differed substantially in their exposure to the outside world during childhood. Some were allowed to view secular media, but only if pre-approved by parents, while others were denied access to mainstream media. The extent to which secular media was restricted in a household directly affected the relationship of participants to forms of media.

Those who did have parentally sanctioned access to secular media often talked about the seemingly arbitrary choices their parents made about what was or was not permitted. Many participants' parents would not allow their children to watch anything they had not previously screened. Most participants had similar experiences in which parents seemed to choose what was and was not acceptable based on personal preferences. For example, one participant reported that, according to her mother, the *Smurfs* were too demonic looking, and *Rainbow Bright* was banned because her mother believed rainbows were a symbol of the occult. Another participant reported that her father only allowed her to watch what he wanted and as such she grew up with *Star Trek* and sports, but little else.

Nearly all participants began to covertly consume secular media, some did so from a young age and others not until they were well into their twenties. In her mid-twenties, Louise began to watch PBS programs explaining evolution:

> I hadn't been exposed to the actual evolutionary theories. My exposure to evolution had been from a religious perspective, which is crazy. So I think once I decided I'm going to give this stuff a look with this nagging Christian conscience telling me to distrust everything that is being said. Once I started paying attention I thought, "oh it's not hard to put this stuff together."

Fundamentalist Christian churches reject the theory of evolution because it conflicts with a literal interpretation of the Bible in which the earth was created in seven days approximately 6,000 years ago. Louise had lived her life disregarding evolution, even into her mid-twenties, well after she had stopped attending church. She attributes her rejection of evolution to a persistent "nagging Christian conscience," which may have been a latent influence of lingering ideological encapsulation from her time in church. In Louise's experience, we can see the way in which secular media led her to question the taken-for-granted ideological encapsulation of her church group.

Beyond exposure to television or other secular forms of media, going away to college entailed an immersion in the secular world. College served as a catalyst for defection for all participants. The defectors who were already beginning to shed their faith and the rituals and practices ascribed to it used going away to school as a means of escape from those who had kept them from exploring the secular world, namely parents and church leaders. University attendance increased the level of freedom for all participants; however, it was particularly powerful for those who had not previously experienced any major reduction in their encapsulation.

This finding contradicts previous research on college and religiosity. According to Uecker, Regnerus, and Valaar, college may actually have a net positive effect on religious belief, but their study focuses on less strict churches. For those in mainline religious groups, colleges, especially Christian colleges, likely reflect the level of encapsulation they have experienced throughout their lives. For fundamentalist Christians, however, colleges represented a dramatic reduction in social encapsulation, especially for those who had retained a high degree of it up to that point. Suddenly, they were surrounded by individuals who spoke using references to cultural touchstones about which participants had little or no knowledge. Their classmates talked about movies and music that "everyone" knew, and participants felt lost, lacking the cultural knowledge to connect to other students. This was even true for those who went away to Christian colleges. Exposure to relatively secular Christians represented a dramatic drop in social encapsulation.

Exposure to Christians who followed less strict forms of Christianity was a jarring experience. All fundamentalist churches that were attended by participants of this study portrayed Christians of other denominations as being just as bad as non-Christians. According to Scheitle and Adamczyk (2009), sect-like groups benefit from framing their group as possessing "exclusive theological beliefs" and others as not real Christians because this dichotomy decreases the likelihood members will seek out other groups on the religious marketplace. Participants in this study reinforced this assertion. The expansion of one's social group led to transformative interactions with Christians and non-Christians outside their group.

Perceived Hypocrisy amongst Parents and Pastors

For young fundamentalists, the exposure of a parent's wrongdoing can be devastating: infidelity, drunk driving, or abuse, especially when these actions result in divorce or church sanctions, may lead people to question their beliefs. In families that are highly encapsulated, parents serve to reinforce the rules of the church. However, when parents fail to live up to these standards, the impact on an individual's encapsulation can be dramatic. Similarly, when the leaders of the group fail to live up to the standards they set for their followers, believers are forced to reconcile the distance between what they believe to be right and their devotion to the church.

Interviews with participants for this study showed that issues within the family unit frequently occurred in conjunction with perceived hypocrisy within the church. A parent's wrongdoing and the subsequent reaction of the church often aligned, leading participants to question both. Additionally, since parents and religious leaders are often the primary guards against other detriments of encapsulation, when their authority is called into question, so are

their restrictions. Davidman refers to these incidents as "tears in the sacred canopy," which often lead to a loss of encapsulation. Any one tear is by no means a definitive cause of defection, but it contributes to a propensity to question one's faith, especially if it occurs in conjunction with other tears. Questioning one's faith undermines the taken-for-granted nature of the belief system, unless a satisfactory religious explanation can be found. Participants were unable to retain their faith, though many of them tried. The tears were too great, too common, and too incomprehensible for them to ignore. Searching for a new place to go on Sunday was rarely successful; only one in five participants were affiliated with a new church. The reason many ex-fundamentalists gave for having trouble finding a new place was that their leaders had often taught them to be critical of other brands of Christianity, or alternatively, they could not bring themselves to believe again after their initial break with their church. This difficulty is consistent with Scheitle and Adamczyk's (2009) finding that exclusive theological beliefs, common amongst sect-like groups, make the market place less desirable to former sect members.

Leaving

When a person's encapsulation fails and a tear occurs, a period of questioning begins. Questions about the validity of the restrictions being placed on them led participants to press at the edges of their world. Transgressions were framed as acts of rebellion, a term commonly applied to covert consumption of secular media, especially for those with strict parents. Participants spoke of this as a means of reaching for some small amount of control over their lives in a situation where adults made most of their choices. Many participants talked about "testing the waters" to see if they would be caught or punished, and appeared to be full of pride when telling about acts of defiance. Participants were not only testing the limits of their parents' power, but also whether God might intervene, as they had been raised to believe that God would punish those who did not obey. This way of speaking about transgressions is quite similar to the way Davidman's Orthodox Jewish defectors spoke about transgressions as a means of testing the world around them in order to see what the consequences might be. All participants of this study said they transgressed in a number of similar ways: using secular media, making friends outside the church, and skipping church services were present in everyone's stories. Each of these transgressions undermines a different kind of encapsulation: media lowers one's ideological encapsulation by facilitating access to the ideas of those outside the fundamentalist group, while non-church friends interfere with one's social encapsulation by diversifying one's social circle, and skipping church results in a loss of physical encapsulation as well as a decrease of exposure to social and ideological encapsulation. The three types of encapsulation often interact with each other. For example, skipping church may also reduce the amount of time spent with others from your church, and decrease exposure to sermons, decreasing the other types of encapsulation as well.

Participants commonly attended church three or four times a week. While skipping church was not in itself seen as a sin, it was often viewed as a symptom that one's devotion to the church might be waning. There were many ways to frame this concern. Some churches asked members to "put the kingdom first," or simply made it clear they were missed and that the absence raised concerns for her or his soul. At some point, all participants stopped going

to church. One participant, Carol, said this was one of her first disputes with the church that prompted her to stop attending.

In her late teens, Carol began attending a church that asked members to attend four to six times a week. There was almost always some activity in the church for people to attend. Carol tried to make every service, attending more frequently than her parents. However, as time went on and Carol began devoting time to school, she allowed herself to miss a service or two per week. Her absence was immediately noticed, and concerned members of the church began asking her where she was, or began to suggest that she might need to reprioritize her life. While Carol understood the concern, she felt drawn to school events. She joined a theater group and began to make non-Christian friends. Her time outside the church lead to an appreciation for secular life, which tore at the sacred canopy protecting her faith. She recalled that during this time "People would say things like 'we miss you' but not in a 'we miss you' way, more like a 'where the fuck were you.'" Nearly all participants had some experience similar to Carol's, during which members of the church attempted to bring them back into the fold. All participants talked about this period of their life in which they felt as though they were between two worlds. For some, this period lasted weeks while for others it went on for years, often dependent on the individual's ability to pass as a member of the group.

"Passing" is a term used to describe those who hide a stigmatized identity (Goffman). This term is often used to describe people of the LGBT community who keep their sexual identity a secret from those who would think negatively of them for it. Similarly, this term is used by Davidman to describe Orthodox Jews who must continue to appear as if they are members of the group because they are unable to leave the community for a number of reasons, for example lack of resources, family commitments, or lack of knowledge. Passing is often necessary for those in a liminal period between two worlds. Unable to leave behind those they love, they diplomatically maintain relationships by hiding who they are to avoid being stigmatized or cast out.

For several participants, passing was made simpler because they underwent the bulk of their transition outside their childhood home, in a place geographically separate from their church and family, usually on a college campus. Upon returning home, however, many felt the need to continue to present themselves as "good Christians" to their parents and loved ones. Many recognized that their coming out as non-Christian, or even just non-fundamentalist, would result in parental disapproval or even in being disowned. This was particularly threatening for those who were financially reliant on their family. Fear of an authority's reactions often lead individuals to continue to pass as a fundamentalist Christian by lying about their church activity, whether or not they were attending church, praying, abstaining from sex, or any of a number of other possibilities. One participant, Colleen, described creating "two personas; the persona I am for school and the one my parents think I am."

After Colleen went off to college and began to transition out of being a fundamentalist, she continued to return home during breaks from school. She explained that she had no choice in this matter because she lacked the resources and opportunity to go elsewhere. As such, she felt the need to create two versions of herself: one persona contained all of the changes she was going through at school, while the other was a facsimile of herself before she left for college, a devoted Christian woman. She felt the need to downplay what she was learning in

college as many of her family members disliked the educational system, especially beyond high school. The anti-education mentality was present in the curriculum at Colleen's Christian private grade school, where she learned from textbooks created by and for fundamentalists about the evils of higher education. During college Colleen became interested in the social sciences, but she kept her interests hidden from her family because this field was particularly deplorable in her family's eyes. Colleen's experience was common among participants for whom college campuses became a safe space where they could try out a secular identity while retreating to their old self amongst parents and church members.

Nearly all participants, 17 of 20, eventually stopped trying to pass as fundamentalist. It should be noted however, that those who continued to pass were in college and dependent on family support to some degree. Coming out was not always intentional. Failing to pass can come with tragic consequences, as Colleen learned one Thanksgiving. During a conversation with her uncle, who had been like a father to Colleen growing up, she made a comment about her uncle's shirt which displayed a saying that was disparaging of LGBT individuals. She made it clear that her comment was not an attempt to directly support LGBT people, as she knew this could infuriate her uncle, but regardless of her attempt to be diplomatic about the topic, her uncle flew into a rage about her comment and demanded she leave his home. Colleen has not spoken to her uncle since. Having failed to pass as a conservative Christian, Colleen was shunned by her uncle. Passing becomes an important part of retaining relationships with friends and family who remain fundamentalist because once an individual is outed as an ex-believer they will be rejected from the group and will therefore no longer be seen as acceptable company. This means that those who leave must retain the image of an untainted person if they wish to be accepted by those remaining in the group.

For former fundamentalists passing is not an all or nothing matter; there are degrees of passing. Those who become atheists, for example, may allow family members to think they still go to a church or still believe in God. This allows family members to maintain contact with less conflict. Family members may be able to justify their continued contact by believing they may even be able to reintegrate the defector into the group. Those who continue to stay in touch with members who have stopped passing may do so in a way that is drastically different than the prior relationship. Participants reported being treated with condescension or pity by members of their group, which accelerated their exodus.

Participants found it difficult to leave friends and family behind. Once they did, they often found themselves in unfamiliar territory where they had a lifetime of learning to do; this was particularly difficult for those who were heavily encapsulated, as they lacked knowledge about what was considered normal amongst non-fundamentalist Christians. Those who had no access to popular television shows and music, for example, found themselves without the ability to relate to their peers. This inability often hindered their attempts to form social bonds and make friends. Without secular friends, defectors often found themselves rejected by family and church members with no substitute social circle. Finding a new reference group outside one's former church was the most important factor in determining how difficult the transition to secular life would be; those who had established secular friends during their transitional period had a support network after their exit. Those who left suddenly, or without having spent time in the secular world, often experienced isolation and longer periods of emotional distress.

Finding new people to spend time with was not the only challenge participants faced. Roughly two-thirds did not become a member of any other organizations after they exited their church, often citing deliberate avoidance of other religions and a lack of interest in becoming a member in any large structured organization. Those who did join another religious group mentioned the lack of structure in their new church, such as the two who joined a Unity group. Those who joined Unity explained the teachings of Unity as being more self-directed without rigid rituals. Additionally, they praised the lack of an "us and them" mentality, which was present in their previous church, and praised Unity for lower levels of encapsulation. This lack of rigidity and social walls encouraged exploration of the world outside, even occasionally teaching philosophy or religious principles of other religions. Another former fundamentalist joined a Wiccan group, which he described proudly as being a group where "if you were to ask what is Wicca to 12 witches you would likely get 13 answers." This group appeared to lack the encapsulating aspects present in fundamentalist churches, not even having a set idea of what it means to be a member.

None of the 20 participants returned to an organization that had heavily encapsulating practices. When asked about any desire to join such a group, they often cited what they wished to avoid in a new group, such as communities with rigid structure that limited individual critical thought. Essentially, what they wished to avoid were practices that might make an organization encapsulating.

The Lingering Effects of Encapsulation: The Past Stays with You

Many participants were still sorting through their past, and being interviewed allowed them to put into words what had been going through their minds for years. No matter how long ago one had left her or his church, unresolved feelings lingered. One participant had been out of her church for decades, and was surprised to find that something still bothered her when thinking back upon her time in church: "I have no idea why, but I feel like I have a resentment against that church and . . . I'm unable to find any explanation for why that might be." As the interview continued, she began to think that the issue was that "there was something about the expectations there." The high expectations that fundamentalist churches hold for their congregants distinguished their members from those who attended other churches by establishing the church as a central part of their lives. Those who exit encapsulating organizations are not only leaving behind a place or a group of people, they are changing themselves into new people. Another participant put it this way: "I invested my entire identity in this. I had invested countless hours thinking about and researching and studying this, so it's a mess trying to talk about why I left because there were a million reasons why I was in it."

Fundamentalists do not simply go to church; their group is a constant factor in their life. It consumes their thoughts and their time. Those who leave are leaving a role in which they have become, for all practical purposes, experts. Ex-fundamentalists often possess a dictionary of jargon that would be unfamiliar to most non-fundamentalists Christians. This is because the high level of encapsulation instilled by the church has a tendency to create professional Christians. Many of them know the Bible and its stories, the history of their church and its relation to other churches, and their sect's set of specialized religious rituals. Their devotion

to the church allows them to gather a pool of knowledge that leads to an expert level of familiarity.

Those who leave professional roles often experience a greater level of residual effects from their former role. "Role residual" is used in the identity transformation literature to denote a "hang-over identity" or the power of an ex-role (Ebaugh: 173). Those who identified strongly with their role prior to leaving it, such doctors, lawyers, or wives tend to have stronger ex-roles where the former identity stays powerful in the person's new conception of themselves. Those who fill roles with a lower level of professional training tend to have an easier time leaving the role behind, such as a janitor, or someone who attended a less encapsulating church. Ex-fundamentalists continued to identify themselves as an "ex"; regardless of whether they became an atheist or a Christian, the "ex" role stuck with them as a part of their identification. The influence of this identification manifested itself in a number of ways. For some it was in a mental orientation, which one participant called an "evangelical orientation towards reality."

This orientation meant different things for each person. For some, it was taking the good from Christianity and leaving what they thought was negative. Many described this as taking on a "Jesus-like" persona, spreading love to people without judgement. Others recognized the way fundamentalism changed how they approached social causes. They could not sit silent with their beliefs. They felt the need to proselytize, spreading their opinions to others as they had when they were in church. This is similar to the way in which someone who is an ex-fireman may be prone to seeing and warning others about fire hazards; it is such a part of their identity that regardless of what they are doing with their life, the past identity bleeds through.

Participants were in the process of learning new ways of living outside of their church, becoming socialized into a new world. They entered into a process of unlearning the rules of their church while learning the practices of those around them. During this process they may be taken aback with someone saying "Jesus Christ," as "taking the Lord's name in vain" is a sin. They may continue to abstain from drinking or smoking, or continue to dress modestly, retaining the church's stance on these cultural phenomena. The process of unlearning may take years. Many participants unconsciously retained beliefs of the church – creationist beliefs were the most common idea participants cited. And many lived outside the church a decade or more before they questioned their stance on evolution, or their belief that the world was 6,000 years old. It simply had not occurred to them to rethink these things in light of their new identity. Becoming an ex-fundamentalist is far different than never being one at all. One participant put it:

> Atheists who have been atheists their whole life don't understand what it is like to have something as dear to them like faith, to have something that rules their life in a way that is passionate, zealous. What it is like to have an identity outside their own identity that is divine, that they believe is superior to anything else on this earth.

Ex-fundamentalists, atheist or not, have had an experience that for a time was so central to their identity that everything after it has been impacted. The transformation of their identity has made them something different, but they will always retain remnants of their former identity. The former role is a pivotal aspect of all identity transformation. An analogy for this

is that many people enter retirement and find that they are missing something, a purpose, a drive for their lives (Kim et al.). How people grapple with the search for purpose and meaning after the loss of a major identity is crucial to the way they live their life from that moment onward.

Conclusion

This study illustrates the impact of sect-like churches or religious groups on those who leave them. Encapsulation of members limits their ability to seek out and accept alternatives to their group. This finding adds to the growing understanding about the power of sect-like groups to maintain membership. My research suggests that encapsulating groups have similar effects on members who leave regardless of the particular experience of the exiting member. Leaving a highly encapsulating group is made difficult by the way in which these groups limit their member's connection to the outside world, to both people and popular culture. This effect is perhaps more powerful amongst sect-like religious groups which contain exclusive theological beliefs, as these beliefs often emphasize life or death narratives. Future studies into highly encapsulated groups may explore what effects are the result of encapsulation and which are unique to fundamentalist Christian churches.

Davidman's work with orthodox Jewish defectors, presents a similar process of leaving despite a profoundly high level of physical encapsulation. Participants in Davidson's study were leaving a group whose members lived within a literal walled city, and their exit had a clearer inside/outside demarcation. By contrast participants in the present study lived their entire lives surrounded by non-believers, and their departure from church had far more to do with abstaining from church attendance and severing social ties rather than a physical move away from their group. However, both types of defectors appeared to follow a similar process of exiting which began with "tears in the sacred canopy" leading to transgressions, a period of passing, and ultimately a break from the group. Fundamentalist groups are on the rise according to a number of theorists (Iannaccone 1994; Iannaccone, Olson, and Stark; Almond). Understanding the impact these groups have on members and former members, will continue to be an important area of study.

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