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International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research

RESEARCH ARTICLE

OPEN ACCESS

ARTICLE INFO

Received:

October 22, 2025

Revised:

December 29, 2025

Published Online

December 31, 2025

KEYWORDS

Religion
Deconversion
Spirituality
Life Satisfaction

Life Satisfaction and Spirituality Among Filipino Deconverts: A Narrative Study

Nicholas S. Manlangit, Jacob Ryan G. Monroy, Maridette Joyce D. Maranan, PhD, LPT

College of Liberal Arts and Education

Lyceum of the Philippines University - Cavite, Philippines.

ABSTRACT

As secularism in a third world collectivist religious country continues to rise, a new field in religious deconversion is emerging. With that, the study sought to explore the deconverts' narratives regarding their experiences before, during, and after deconversion, as well as to explore their views about their life satisfaction and spirituality. The study utilized a narrative research design and utilized purposive sampling to gather four Filipino deconverts, and the data was analyzed through thematic network analysis. The first research question was answered by three global themes that shows the deconverts' experiences before, during and after deconversion wherein the themes was named: Religious Experience Turned from Sweet to Sour, Deconversion is a Conviction, and In Losing Religion, Liberation, respectively. Furthermore, to answer the second research question, the global theme Inverse Relationship of Deconverts' Life Satisfaction and Religiosity emerged. And lastly, the third research question was answered by the global theme Religion was a Gateway for Spirituality. In conclusion, the narratives of the deconverts showed that deconversion started from doubts in the religious teachings, in God, and practices which stemmed from the religious community, accompanied by declining life satisfaction. In the end, however, deconversion has made the participants freer and more autonomous.

INTRODUCTION

Religion has been present in human history as early as 60000 BCE [1]. Participating in religious practices is found to positively correlate with resilience [2] and better mental health outcomes [3], and to negatively correlate with symptoms of depression [4] and anxiety [5, 6], and other signs of psychopathology [7]. Among its other positive correlations is life satisfaction [8, 9], and it is defined as a person's subjective feeling of being satisfied or positive with their lives as accompanied by happiness [10, 11]. This is also true for spirituality, which has been inextricably linked with religion. However, there is a clear distinction between the two. Spirituality refers to something more personal such as the drive of people to acquire a personal meaning to their lives [12, 13], while religion has mostly pertained to religious affiliation and the practice of religious beliefs that hardly ever changes [14]. It can also mean another thing entirely, depending on the culture asked to define it. In the context of Filipinos, spirituality is comprised of being connected to something perceived as sacred, a sense of meaning and purpose, and how it is expressed in one's daily life [15].

While being religious has been found by research to have many positive correlations, some individuals still choose to opt out from it. This is called religious deconversion, or simply deconversion, and it is the act of disaffiliating with a religious organization. This is because deconverts found religious teachings incongruent with scientific findings, criticisms against their religious community, and wanting to feel freer and more empowered [16].

Data has also shown that it's becoming more prevalent nowadays [17], especially in affluent countries [18]. The Philippines, a heavily religious Christian country, has also shown a lower regard to religion [19].

With all that said, it is important to study what drives individuals in a religious country such as the Philippines to deconvert. Given that both religion and deconversion may have positive impacts on a person, it is also interesting to find out whether

deconversion positively or negatively impacts an individual's life. Finally, the field of religious deconversion is relatively young during the writing of this paper. Therefore, this paper could serve as a stepping stone in understanding the potentially lasting phenomenon of deconversion.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

This research aims to explore the narratives of the deconverts in the Philippines. Specifically, this research aims to: (1) explore the narratives of the participants regarding their experiences before, during, and after deconversion; (2) explore the narratives of the participants regarding their views on their life satisfaction throughout their journey of deconversion; and (3) explore the narratives of the participants regarding their views on their spirituality throughout their journey of deconversion.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study is a narrative research designed to gather the stories of participants regarding their experiences as they deconverted, and how it simultaneously affected their life satisfaction and spirituality. Participants were gathered through a purposive sampling technique. They were only eligible to be part of the study when they have met the following criteria: the person (1) is a Filipino citizen, (2) is 18 years old or above by the time the study was conducted, (3) does not identify/affiliate with any religion for at least 6 months, (4) has resided in the Philippines in the majority of their time identifying as a deconvert (5) has deconverted from a Christian faith denomination, and (6) feels like discussing their experiences as deconverts will not pose any psychological distress.

In gathering their responses, the researchers utilized a 31-item semi-structured questionnaire containing a series of questions pertaining to the participant's stories about their journey of deconversion, as well as their stories of life satisfaction and spirituality before, during, and after it. It underwent face validation and content validation through three subject matter experts. Another questionnaire was created after the initial interviews to serve as a guide in a follow-up focused-group discussion.

Given the nature of the design of this study, the researchers gathered participants using purposive sampling and found participants who are qualified with the criteria set by the researchers. Afterwards, the researchers provided informed consents for the participants to know the nature of the study, their rights as a participant, risks and benefits, and the contact details of the researchers. Upon signing the consent form, the researchers requested the participants to write an essay detailing their experiences as they became and have lived their life as a deconvert. The researchers also noted that the participants should include any significant stories, events, or thoughts that come into mind as they were going through deconversion.

After collecting the essays, the researchers conducted one-on-one interviews with the participants. These interviews lasted around one to two hours per session, and one to two sessions per participant. Upon analyzing the data gathered from the one-on-one interview session, the researchers created a new interview questionnaire that includes the follow-up questions based on the data gathered from the one-on-one interview sessions. With the new formulated questionnaire, the researchers conducted a focus group discussion to further gather more information about their stories and sentiments as a deconvert.

After collecting the data, the interviews has been transcribed and has undergone narrative phenomenology to make the narratives chronological. It then went through thematic network analysis [20] to make sense of the data through the emerging thematic networks pertaining to the participants stories of deconversion, alongside their views about their life satisfaction and spirituality throughout their journey of deconversion. Particularly, the researchers utilized the written protocol that the participants have provided, the transcripts from the one-on-one interview sessions, and transcripts from the focus group discussion to create a triangulation of data to validate the accounts of the participants. Furthermore, the researchers executed peer debriefing as they scrutinized the collected data. Afterwards, upon creating the thematic networks, the researchers conducted member checking to further validate their findings then revised accordingly.

To adhere and demonstrate proper ethical approach in this study, the researchers explained and provided informed consent to the participants for them to understand the nature of the study. This also includes discussing with the participants about their rights and responsibilities such as the right to withdraw at any point of time during the study, right to information, providing adequate incentives, and protection from any type of harm that the procedures of this study might induce. Secondly, the researchers practiced privacy and confidentiality upon handling the data in accordance with the Data Privacy Act of 2012. Lastly, in reporting the findings of the study, the researchers ensured the participants' anonymity by using pseudonyms to protect their identity.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The responses of the participants were analyzed and organized into a thematic network which highlights the global, organizing, and the basic themes with regards to their narratives.

Presentation of Findings (Research Question 1)

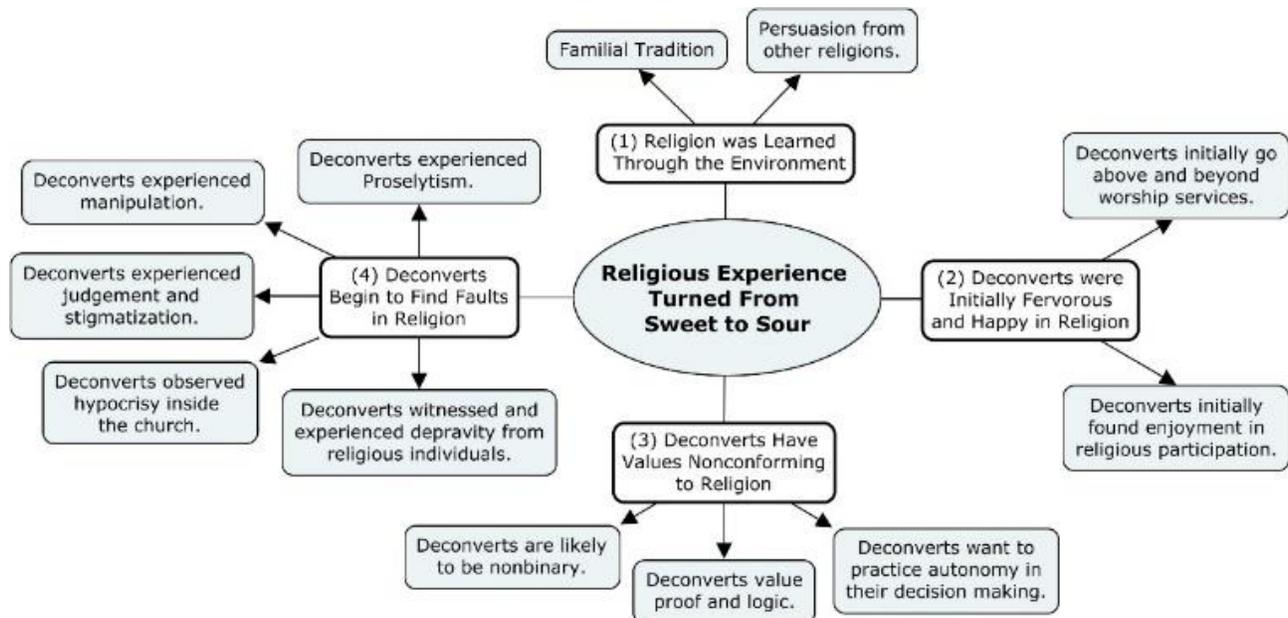


Figure 1. Thematic network for “Religious Experience Turned from Sweet to Sour”.

This thematic network follows a chronological nature, starting with the introduction to religion, how they practiced religion, the traits they developed as they grew older, and the various reasons that contributed to their decision to deconvert.

Organizing theme 1: Religion was Learned Through the Environment.

This theme shows that the participants learned and accepted religion through extrinsic forces. Their environment can be considered conducive and encouraging to learn and practice religious teachings.

Basic theme: Familial tradition.

The participants have become accustomed and has started practicing religion in their early formative years as they learn from their devout families. They have also described their extended families are also very religious; albeit these individuals may be practicing faith different from the household they were born in:

“Do’n sa old church ko, maliban sa lola ko, ‘yung mga tito-tita ko rin anak ng lola ko. Lahat kasi sila din ay, ‘di naman sila member talaga ng org, pero, active sila sa church.” (P1)

Basic theme: Deconverts experienced persuasion from other religions.

Despite practicing the religion introduced to them by their families, the participants have also experienced other believers inviting them to other religious practices.

“...ayun parang nahila ako doon sa [second religion]. Ayun, naging, naging [member of second religion] ako, naging Christian ako.” (P4)

“Pero hindi ko naman talaga kinonsider na Christian ako. Parang nagpa-baptize naman ko for experience doon.” (P2)

Organizing theme 2: Deconverts were Initially Fervorous and Happy in Religion.

This theme highlights how deconverts were happy, enthusiastic, and passionate during their most participative days inside the church.

Basic theme: Deconverts initially go above and beyond worship services.

The deconverts described themselves to have been active in religious gatherings. The participants were so active that they were rarely, if ever, unable to attend worship services.

“Praise. Pagpe-praise, yung Wednesday, Thursday, Saturday, yun yung [religious community]. And then Sunday it's like normal church.” (P2)

“And we hold charities for those vendors. Like, may hold charity events. Like, parang kung may mga mini-concert tapos yung mga attendees, they can like, may donation box. Tapos pag natuwa sila mga mga nanonood, whatever they can there. And then we would donate all the proceeds for the vendors.” (P1)

Basic theme: Deconverts initially found enjoyment in religious participation.

Not only were the participants very active in all activities inside the church, but they also found joy and fulfillment as they did all of these activities.

“It was fun. Like, ayun siguro, isa sa mga ano ko yun, mga good things.” (P4)

“Masaya naman siya. Masaya siya. Kasi like, lalo na kapag Saturdays. Kasi kapag Saturdays, pumupunta kami sa Parañaque. And then yung ano doon, yung venue doon is like, super laki like sitting namin doon is like picnic.” (P2)

Organizing theme 3: Deconverts Have Values Nonconforming to Religion.

The theme emphasizes the traits and values of the deconverts which may be observed by the religious community as deviant.

Basic theme: Deconverts want to practice autonomy in their decision making.

With religion having certain rules and regulations for the religious individuals to conform and abide, the participants prioritized their own autonomy with regards to their decision making and morals.

“Ah, okay. Sa gano'n kung ano lang yung gusto ko, yun yung gagawin ko...” (P2)

“I think I mentioned this before, but I practice my morals even if my methods were discouraged by the church” (P3)

Basic theme: Deconverts value proof and logic.

Participants have expressed the opposite of faith in the form of skepticism. They questioned the existence of God due to a lack of empirical evidence, and they pointed out discrepancies with the teachings of the Sacred Texts.

“I need logic and proof. Kahit nang bata ako. Kasi sabi nung makakatanda sa akin, napaka-stubborn ko. Kasi nga, hindi akong maniniwala unless nakita ko or nai-explain.” (P3)

“Yes I never believed in it. Kasi, I'm too skeptical. I'm too skeptical to blindly believe something.” (P1)

Basic theme: Deconverts are likely to be nonbinary.

The participants emphasized that their gender preference, while not being destructive to others, is looked down by the religious community and considered as a nonconforming trait.

“Kaya ako nag-cut off ties sa church na yun kasi, eventually, around 10 years old or 11, I was outed as a queer person.” (P1)

“Ayun nga ngayon – ganun pa din talaga kasi nga parang alam ko na na ganito ako [gay]. So, ayun. Kasi parang matagal rin siyang nagsasabi ng ganun talaga. Parang hini-hint – hini-hint lang. Pero nung sinabi nila talaga na demonyo.” (P2)

Organizing theme 4: Deconverts Begin to Find Faults in Religion.

The theme pertains to the time when the participants experienced or observed immoral acts committed by the religious community towards others.

Basic theme: Deconverts witnessed and experienced depravity from religious individuals.

The participants have said that they have seen blatant physical and sexual abuse from their religious leaders. Specifically, there have been cases of unwanted touching and outright physically hitting on some of the participants.

“Yung ibang prof nga, meron yung, straight-up inappropriate sabihin sa estudyante... Ito kunwari upuan ng teacher, tapos may lapis doon... sumigaw ng pabiro na, ‘Hoy sino to? Gusto niyo akong ...**... ha?’” (P4)

“Dahil na-out ako [as queer], isa na ako doon. And, what they do there kapag pinatawag ka is, yan. Sisigaw-sigawan ka, papahiyain ka ganyan.” (P1)

Basic theme: Deconverts observed hypocrisy inside the church.

It has also been observed by participants that churchgoers are contradicting themselves with regards to what they preach and how they behave.

“Pareho sila ng pinapaniwalaan. Pero in some way or another, sinisiraan nila yung religion nung kabila. Na, either kami lang ang makakaligtas etong religion ang tama, mali yung iba.” (P3)

“[T]hey will make you feel like they're listening... Parang ipaparamdam nila na my thoughts and feelings are valid. Parang ipaparamdam nila, pero gagawa sila [ng opposite].” (P4)

Basic theme: Deconverts experienced judgement and stigmatization.

The participants faced reprimand from the religious community. They have been judged and badmouthed by their community because of their beliefs and actions.

“Like, around 10 or 11 years old, du'n, du'n na ako, like na-out talaga. Like, doon na talaga mas naging firm yung belief nila na I'm queer. And, for some reason, yun. Grabe yung pag-demonize nila sakin nun at that time.” (P1)

“Tapos ni-label-an nila akong satanista (laugh). As in, yes, I was labeled as a follower, or naniniwala daw ako sa demonyo from first year hanggang fourth year as in. I was in a Christian school and satanista daw ako.” (P3)

Basic theme: Deconverts experienced manipulation.

As the participants continued their religious participation, they soon realized that they were being manipulated by the individuals inside the church by saying it is all in the glory and name of God.

“In regards of punishment? Um, based on the religions, punishment lang naman ang sinasabi nila eh. Pag di ka nag-participate ay magagalit ang Diyos. And Ano pa yan yung, “Hala, gusto mo bang mapunta sa impyerno?” O yung mga ganon. Guilt-tripping.” (P3)

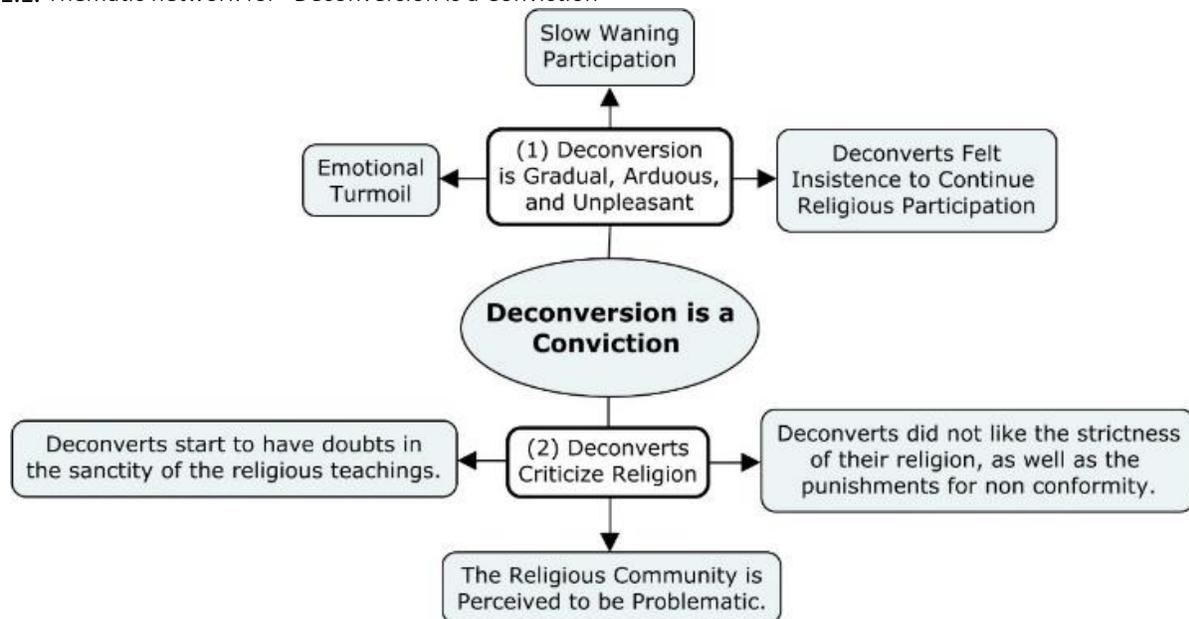
Basic theme: Deconverts experienced Proselytism.

As they were invited by other believers into their church, and some were successful in converting to these newly introduced religions, the participants were told that the new religions are the only ones that will be saved, or that these religions are the one and only true religion.

“...they're manipulating students na kapag hindi ganito yung religion mo, hindi ito yung religion mo. Ah, hindi ka masasalba nyan. Kasi there's only one true religion and it's [second religion].” (P4)

“Yeah, both churches were adamant that all other religions were ‘false.’” (P1)

Figure 1.1. Thematic network for “Deconversion is a Conviction”



The thematic network shows that despite the many hardships experienced during deconversion, a person must be convinced that this is something they must go through. One must also stand firmly on the reasons why deconversion must be done in the first place.

Organizing theme 1: Deconversion is Gradual, Arduous, and Unpleasant.

This emphasizes the experiences of the participants while undergoing the process of deconversion.

Basic theme: Emotional Turmoil.

The participants faced various negative emotions such as frustration, anger, sadness, hopelessness, and even overthinking the decision to deconvert.

“Kasi, you know, like I said, nagkakaroon kami ng honor beatings right? And it felt so hopeless to me as a kid na I couldn't tell anyone, and even when I told my grandmother, nagulat ako na aware pala siya. So like I felt so, ano, hopeless na parang hanggang dito na lang yung buhay ko.” (P1)

“...it [feeling of wanting to get out] was building up. Tapos, parang, nung una nato-tolerate ko pa. Hindi, sige. Para naman to sa Panginoon ganyan. Tapos, parang naman. “Para pa ba sa Panginoon? Ganyan, o parang ano lang ganyan. Parang hindi na tama.” (P4)

Basic theme: Slow Waning Participation.

The participants have decided to gradually withdraw from all religious activities, especially worship services. During this time, the participants also felt a decrease in their genuineness towards services in religion and for God.

“Gradually ko siyang ginawa. Kasi nga because of my family. Gradually ko siyang ginawa. Hanggang nasanay sila, nasasanay din ako. It's span of years bago ako completely nag-stop ng religion.” (P3)

Basic theme: Deconverts Felt Insistence to Continue Religious Participation.

The participants were directly or indirectly approached by some members of the religious community to ask them to continue worshipping or their obligations inside religion.

“Tanggap ako sa org. But, hindi. china-chat pa din nila ako (laughs).” (P1)

“...yung process nun, mahirap sya kasi family mo ayaw pumayag. Hindi agad-agad sila papayag. So, yes pumupunta pa rin ako kahit ayoko pakinggan sige sinasamahan ko na lang kasi gusto nila.” (P3)

Organizing theme 2: Deconverts Criticize Religion.

This theme emphasizes the accounts of the participants regarding various aspects inside religion which they found as concerning.

Basic theme: Deconverts did not Like the Strictness and Punishments of Religion.

The participants shared their stories and emphasized that religion is too rigid as it is too strict with regards to the rules and regulations to the point that these rules are considered as constraining.

“Pinagbabawalan ako ng religion ko na, parang, parang pinipigilan niya ako maging ako mismo.” (P2)

“Tapos kapag humiwalay ka doon [bloc-voting] parang may parusa. Parang, I don't – Hindi naman malaking parusa. May parang physical or ano. Pero, parang mare-reprimand ka” (P4)

Basic theme: The Religious Community is Perceived to be Problematic.

The participants expressed their criticisms towards the irrationality of the religious individuals within the religious community.

“And, like there's this thing called honor beatings. They would yan. They physically hit the students. Who go in the chapel na tingin nila ay may ginawang malaking kasalanan.” (P1)

“Ang hirap nila i-convince. Masyadong close-minded. sinasabi ko na, “Paano ako maging satanista? Hindi nga ako naniniwala sa religion nyo, eh part yun ang religion nyo, concept yun ang religion nyo.” Ayaw nilang maniwala.” (P3)

Basic theme: Deconverts Started to Have Doubts About the Sanctity of Religious Teachings.

The theme shows that the deconverts have also come to criticize the authenticity of the teachings inside the church due to their respective experiences.

“You cannot really prove to yourself or have a concrete evidence that God exists. But, they have arguments.” (P3)

“Parang na-realize ko na, parang I'm blindly following something lang. But at the same time, yung fina – parang blindly following something based din, syempre sa mga teachings ng church na yun” (P4)

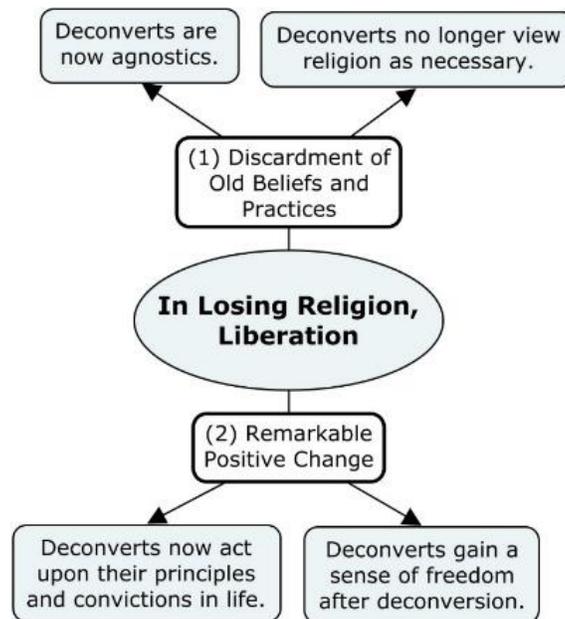


Figure 1 Thematic network for “In Losing Religion, Liberation”.

Some beliefs and practices were lost, and in losing them, the deconverts have found something new which they can argue as something better than what was lost.

Organizing theme 1: Discardment of Old Beliefs and Practices.

The theme pertains to the abandonment of the participants with regards to their former obligations, beliefs, and practices upon completely disaffiliating with their former religion.

Basic theme: Deconverts are now agnostics.

The participants’ doubts about the existence of an omnipotent, omniscient, and benevolent God have only grown stronger, making them unsure of whether or not such a God exists.

“In denomination, still part pa rin akong [religion]. Kasi sa records, I'm a [religion]. Pero kung tatanungin mo ako if I really practice it? hindi. Hindi as in, you could label me as an agnostic.” (P3)

“Pero, not necessarily I believe in God. And, maybe there's higher being, entity. Maybe there isn't, who knows?” (P4)

Basic theme: Deconverts view religion as unnecessary to them.

The participants no longer view religion as something essential, nor do they still see it as guidance to how a person should behave. Furthermore, the participants have fully stopped participating in religious gatherings and have rid themselves of most religious practices.

“...if kindness is the main thing that is being taught across all religions, edi maybe I don't really need a religion to be kind.” (P1)

“...dahil sa mga nangyari na yun, parang na-realize ko na hindi ko na kailangan ng religion para mabuhay. Mag-guide sa buhay ganyan.” (P4)

Organizing theme 2: Remarkable Positive Change.

This theme emphasizes the notable positive changes that the participants experienced after deconverting from their former religion.

Basic theme: Deconverts gained a sense of freedom after deconversion.

Deconverting from their respective religion created a sense of freedom wherein the participants felt that they are no longer bound to religion. This freedom has ultimately given them feelings of relief.

“Dahil I gained the freedom and autonomy back. Although hindi instantly, like gradually. Mas nagagawa ko na yung mga gusto ko talaga sa buhay.” (P1)

“Parang ever since nung umalis ako sa ano na yun, it's like this overwhelming feeling of relief, of, like, final freedom, ganyan. Like, ang overwhelming.” (P4)

Basic theme: Deconverts now act upon their principles and convictions in life.

The freedom that they have gained has also granted them the right to act upon their own beliefs without fear of what the religious community would say.

“I'd rather just be the compassionate one, rather than follow someone else's definition of compassion, even though it's not necessarily kind.” (P1)

“Somehow, yun wala kong, wala kong ibig sabihin sa mundo but I can still control my life. I can still do anything I want. I can still believe in anything I want..” (P4)

Discussion of Findings (Research Question 1)

The results have shown that religion was learned mostly through the environment as the deconverts were indoctrinated while they were still young through their devout families, and behaviors related with religious participation was reinforced. Most of the deconverts have also undergone religious initiation, particularly baptism. Despite that, deconverts ultimately decided to disaffiliate from religion. This finding does not support the projections of previous research as they have found religious initiation and being surrounded by religious individuals are negatively correlated with deconversion, [21, 22]. However, it was also found that strong religious demands coming from the family are one of the reasons for deconversion [23]. This is mostly evident in the expectations from their family and the whole religious community on continuing their practice and remain as a part of their former religion (especially seen in the following discussions). The participants have also experienced a lot of persuasion coming from others to join their religion. This could be attributed to the religious Christian culture of the Philippines where the Bible encourage believers as stated in Matthew, 28:19-20 [24]. As such, it can be a common occurrence that in a predominantly Christian country individuals of different faiths share their beliefs in the hopes of converting others to their faith. In the case of the participants, three have successfully converted into a new religion.

The results have also shown that deconverts were initially very active in their religious participation, and this was marked as a positive experience among all participants. This is congruent with a research which found that commitment to a religious belief produces positive emotion [25]. The participants have been intent and devout in their religious participation that they also participated in other various activities, going beyond what is required in their religious obligations. This is congruent with the fact that public religious engagement and participating in youth organizations decrease the likelihood of deconversion as the participants did not share any thoughts or behaviors that were indicative of deconversion when sharing their experiences during this time period [26].

Moreover, it could be said about the deconverts that they possessed values that were not exactly in line with religious teachings. Among these traits are being autonomous, as they have mostly acted upon their own will rather than what the religious community expects them to do. This is line with previous research that deconverts are less likely to endorse values that are conservative and traditional [26, 27]. These studies, however, included participants who have already deconverted. Given that these values are already present before deconversion may suggest that deconverts will always clash with religion due to differences in values, ultimately leading to deconversion, and this was also inferred by other studies the found deconverts change their religious beliefs and practices before actually starting to deconvert [28]. The participants have also shown to value proof and logic as characterized by their skepticism towards religious teachings. This is in line with previous findings that reported individuals who are analytical mediates the negative relationship between intelligence and religiosity [29]. And the last among these nonconforming traits is identifying as nonbinary. Given that the participants ultimately deconverted, this is in line with another study where it was found that in religious communities that are anti-homosexual, individuals identifying as such cite this as a major driver of their journey of deconversion [30].

Lastly for the findings before deconversion, the participants eventually noticed faults within their respective religious communities. The first among these faults pertains to their negative experiences of depravity, experiences of manipulation, and experiences of judgement and stigmatization. This has also been reported to be in the form of religious trauma and social pressure [31], and in the form of interpersonal religious struggles [32]. Nonbinary individuals are also at a greater risk of bullying and stigmatization [33], which is a trait of most participants. The Philippines is generally regarded as a country tolerant of nonbinary individuals, but its culture that is deeply entrenched in religious traditions. As such, it was also found by other researchers that Filipinos highly value with keeping the purity of the body and spirit, a trait incompatible with the LGBTQIA+ Community [34]. With that, the participants eventually experienced judgement and stigmatization within their religious community, and this is a factor towards their deconversion. Moreover, there were also observations of hypocrisy, which supports the study where perceived hypocrisy is positively associated with deconversion [36]. Deconverts have also reported

proselytism stemming from a realization that the persuasion from other religions was actually a ploy to manipulate them to joining. These reasons eventually catalyzed the whole deconversion process as it pushed the participants to deconvert. In their decision to finally deconvert from their respective religions, the participants have slowly infrequently attended religious gatherings, a phenomenon observed even by other researchers [28, 36]. The latter also reported that deconverts did not disaffiliate without trying to fight for their faith, which explains why some participants took a long time to deconvert [37]. It is also reaffirmed that deconverts during this time starts to distancing themselves from the religious community [37, 38]. Moreover, during this time, deconverts experienced a lot of negative emotions which built-up during the whole process. This could be attributed to the many challenges they faced at the time including the loss of their community and social structure, limited autonomy, and the religious trauma acquired [39]. This can also be explained by personality, as other researchers have suggested that deconverts are more neurotic compared to their religious counterparts [26]. In addition, various kinds of religious/spiritual struggles have most likely exacerbated these negative affects [32], as well as the insistence of their devout families to continue in religious participation [36]. This build-up of negative emotions is not in congruence with a study that reported that emotional stability increases during deconversion [28]. It is possible that the difference in findings is due to the difference of the environment of the participants. Their study was conducted in Netherlands, which can be characterized as a secular country as more than half of the country reports no religious affiliation [40], and the government has a drive for religious freedom [41]. Because of this, the Dutch can be seen as more lenient towards irreligious people, as compared to the religious culture of the Philippines. Finally, deconverts have been persuaded by members of their religious community to come back and serve the church once again, but ultimately carried on their deconversion. This is correlated by personality researchers whom found deconverts to become less agreeable during this process [28, 42]. When pieced together, deconverts who had religious trauma are more motivated to deconvert than other individuals with different reasons [31].

As for their criticisms, it can be seen as a more well-founded stand on the faults the deconverts have seen within the church before they deconverted. Among these criticisms are the doubts that arose regarding the truthfulness and verifiability of religious teachings. This is congruent with studies that found deconverts are less likely to believe in God as they struggle to confirm His existence [31, 32]. The participants have also criticized their religious community and described them as problematic, which has mostly stemmed from the previous depravities and manipulation they have encountered and experienced. Finally, deconverts have criticized religion's need for conformity and the notion of punishments. To add, deconverts perceived religion to be restricting the freedom of its members [23]. All these criticisms are seen by the researchers as the main drivers of deconversion from the participants as they continued to withdraw from religion despite the many challenges posed by their environment.

After fully disaffiliating from their former religion, deconverts have lost and acquired new behaviors and beliefs. This is evident as they no longer view religion as necessary; thus, most of their religious beliefs and practices are now gone. This is in line with a paper that showed deconverts who have fully discontinued are now less likely to engage in religious practices [31], and that deconverts acculturate to new ways of life [39]. Deconverts are also skeptical in the existence of God, yet they remain open to the possibility [31]. However, the participants have truly stopped in their religious participation, which is incongruent with the findings of the previous research.

Deconverts have also shown remarkable positive changes, as they are now more willing to act upon their own convictions in life [36]. Among these convictions are the right of people to freedom and respecting the beliefs of others regardless of religious beliefs or lack thereof [23]; and valuing the welfare of all people [26].

As to how the data can be explained by the Grounded Theory of Deconversion, it shows that the participants' experience underwent was gradual, with a build-up of urge to get away from religion, marked with particular experiences that strengthened their urge to undergo deconversion [16]. The participants also expressed their doubts about the validity of the sacredness of the church's teachings, as well as a need to prove the existence of God. All of these fall under the category of Reason and Enquiry. There were also criticisms against observed hypocrisy within the religious community and the church's stance on certain moral issues, both of which can be categorized as Criticism and Discontent. Finally, the incompatibility of personal beliefs and the church's teachings stirred up inner conflict within individuals, making the final category of Personal Development evident. All three categories were evident in all four participants, but one category stands out the most as their primary reason for deconversion. For Mayor, it was Reason and Enquiry, and for Hippo, June, and Mikee, it was Criticism and Discontent. As for other factors that influenced deconversion, close context factors that inhibited the process to deconvert include the religious families of deconverts who always encouraged the participation of deconverts inside the church. Finally, the wider context factors that inhibited participants' deconversion process include the religious culture of their country of Philippines. This theory, however, did not account for the agnosticism acquired after deconversion as it posits atheism. This could again be attributed to the highly religious culture of the Philippines, as well as the spirituality developed by the participants after fully deconverting.

Presentation of Findings (Research Question 2)

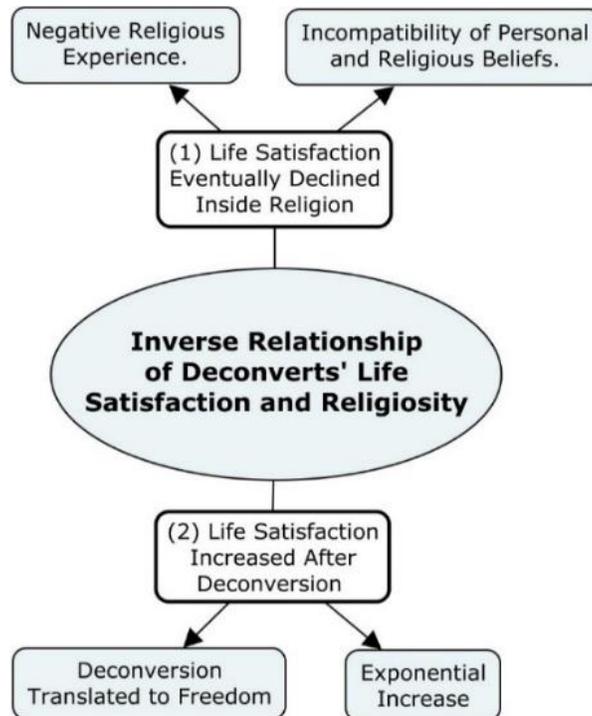


Figure 2. Thematic network for “Inverse Relationship of Deconverts’ Life Satisfaction and Religiosity”

The thematic network on Figure 2 exhibits the findings about the current views of deconverts with regards to their life satisfaction. Their accounts have shown that life satisfaction inside religion changed over time.

Organizing theme 1: Life Satisfaction Eventually Declined Inside Religion.

The theme pertains to the participants’ respective experiences which contributed to the decline of their life satisfaction while they are still part of their respective religion.

Basic theme: Negative Religious Experiences.

The theme highlights the participants’ negative experiences wherein, the participants stated their respective experiences that eventually led to their life satisfaction going into a state of decline.

“Hindi ako satisfied with it. Yung sa work ethics ng kabuuan... it was so chaotic, it was chaotic. Tapos dun naman sa [Second Religion], yung second church ko... dahil dun sa strictness nila. Hindi ko masasabing I was ever satisfied.” (P1)

“Kasi nga di ba like I’ve said before, the yung ni-labeled ako as satanista ng mga classmate ko, no? Actually, the whole school. So, it categorizes under the negative religious experiences” (P3)

Basic theme: Incompatibility of Personal and Religious Beliefs.

With the participants having nonconforming tendencies, the participants also have personal beliefs deviating to the religion. Moreover, their personal beliefs were deemed incompatible with religion. With that, the participants’ life satisfaction was negatively affected by their own circumstances and tendencies.

“Um actually oo, kasi magkaiba talaga yung religious belief nila sa personal belief ko. Um, yung mga bagay doon na hindi ko ah paano ba? Paano? Hindi ko siya gustong gawin.” (P3)

Organizing theme 2: Life Satisfaction Increased After Deconversion.

This emphasizes the views of the participants about their life satisfaction after deconversion. They have felt an increase in life satisfaction after deconversion, and this mostly revolves around their newfound freedom.

Basic theme: Exponential Increase.

Upon deconverting, the participants felt a significant increase in life satisfaction due to the immediate sense of relief after being disaffiliated with their respective religion.

“And when I gradually distance myself from religion itself, yun na yung nakakaroon ako ng slope pataas. Even though may satisfaction nowadays being an agnostic person. It still fluctuates. But it’s not as erratic as before.” (P1)

“Like as in, skyrocket. Parang (upward hand gesture) ganun na talaga.” (P2)

Basic theme: Deconversion Translated to Freedom.

Due to deconversion and the participants being disaffiliated with religion, the participants felt the sense of freedom from responsibilities, restrictions, and time constraints that the religion imposes on their lives. With that, the participants' life satisfaction was significantly influenced by the instance.

"...mas nabawasan yung abuse na I went through. So, naturally, tataas yung satisfaction ko. Kasi nabawasan ako ng responsibility. Tapos nabawasan na rin yung mga mistreatment and all. And also, nawala na din yung pressure na ever since I stopped na talaga with like religion." (P1)

"I felt more free. Parang nagawa ko na talaga yung mga gusto ko nang gawin." (P2)

Discussion of Findings (Research Question 2)

As the bottom-up theory of life satisfaction suggests, the overall evaluation of one's life satisfaction is only sum of its parts [43]. With that, the participants did recall parts of their lives where their levels of life satisfaction had been at various levels throughout their journey of deconversion. In which the study's findings showed that negative experiences and incompatibility of personal beliefs towards religion negatively influenced the deconverts' levels of life satisfaction. Furthermore, the organizing theme Negative Religious Experience was supported a study that emphasized high levels of life satisfaction can be observed in individuals who see the world as just [44]. In the case of the deconverts, they felt that their respective negative religious experiences were objectively unpleasant and unfair. Moreover, having incompatible beliefs with religion created more opportunities for unpleasant life events to happen coming from the religious community which negatively affected their life satisfaction. Moreover, a paper has stated that feelings of captivity negatively affect one's life satisfaction, wherein the deconverts being bounded to religion, experiencing the strictness of the rules inside religion, and various negative experiences while being a part of their former religion imposed feelings of constraint to the deconverts which is also a huge factor as to why deconverts' life satisfaction eventually declined during their time in their religion [45]. With that, upon disaffiliation, the deconverts' life satisfaction was positively influenced. This is due to the freedom and autonomy that the participants gained after being unbound in religion, in which the notion of autonomy positively correlates with life satisfaction [46]. However, literature shows that being religious correlated to higher levels of life satisfaction [47], but it is also important to note that religiosity only plays a little part in one's life satisfaction, and a whole lot of factors will primarily account for the deconverts' life satisfaction. Notably, the participants' respective negative experiences, incompatibility of their personal convictions with religion, and freedom were among these factors.

Presentation of Findings (Research Question 3)

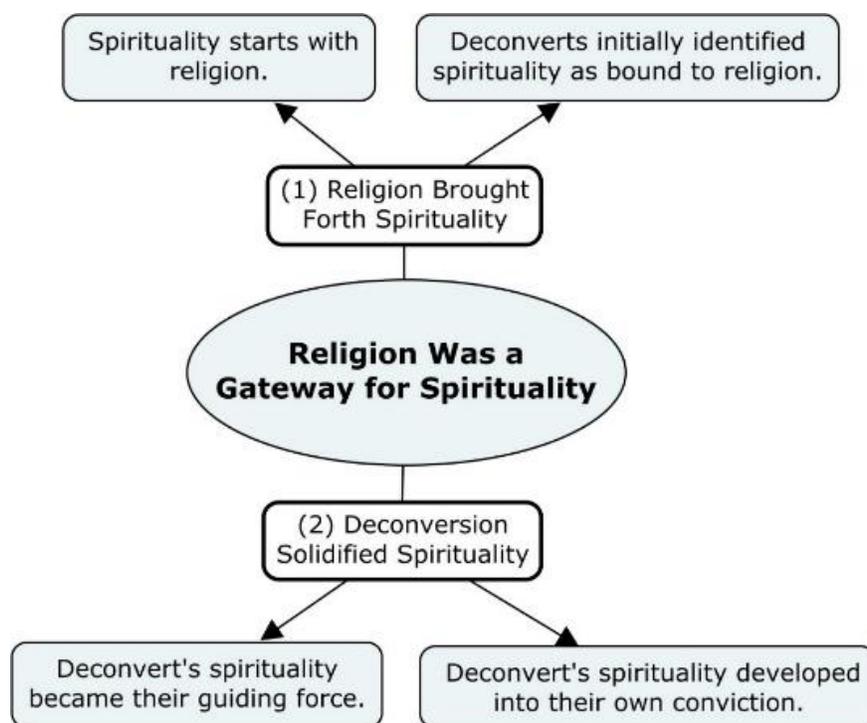


Figure 3. Thematic network for "Religion Was a Gateway for Spirituality"

The thematic network represents the views of the deconverts towards their spirituality. Particularly, the thematic network emphasizes that religion is a starting point on developing one's spirituality, and deconverting from a religion strengthens one's spirituality.

Organizing theme 1: Religion Brought Forth Spirituality.

The organizing theme emphasizes how the participants' spirituality developed at the first place wherein, religion was the starting point of the participants' spirituality.

Basic theme: Spirituality starts with religion

Due to spirituality being a personal conviction or belief, one cannot develop their convictions without any idea where to start with. With that, due to the early exposure of participants in religion created an opportunity for their convictions to start and prosper.

"You could say that spirituality starts with religion." (P3)

"So yeah, I feel like, uh, initially, my spirituality started with religion nung nag-convert ako dun sa Christian, but, right now, I feel like, hindi na, hindi necessary yung religion to become a spiritual person." (P4)

Basic theme: Deconverts Initially Identified Spirituality as Bound to Religion.

Even though the participants started creating and nurturing their own beliefs inside religion, these convictions are indistinguishable from the participants' religiosity at first.

"But back then I did feel my spirituality but it wasn't as strong as now kasi kumbaga ano na-o-override ng religion yung spirituality ko. Kumbaga it's both faith but in different fonts but dahil I constantly resist the religion with my spirituality." (P1)

"...initially, it started na parang parang nasa belief, parang belief ko dati na, ayun nga, parang spirituality is bounded by religion, na kapag wala kang religion, you're not a spiritual..." (P4)

Organizing theme 2: Deconversion Solidified Spirituality.

The organizing theme emphasizes that through deconversion, the participants' spirituality has also become more defined and more evident in their lives.

Basic theme: Deconvert's Spirituality Developed into Their Own Conviction.

Being unbound to religion created opportunities for the participants to practice and develop their convictions and further discover what their spirituality really means to them.

"...nung nag-deconvert ako, mas na-strengthen yung sarili kong conviction alongside with its spirituality. Kasi yun pa rin naman yung spirituality ko before. Yung pinapaniwalaan ko, same pa din, but na-strengthen lang siya." (P3)

"I feel like, it's parang ang ironic, ang ironic sa part na because nakawala ako sa religion, mas parang somehow, nagkaroon ako na parang spiritual connection with myself, ganon." (P4)

Basic theme: Deconvert's spirituality became their guiding force.

Upon relying onto one's spirituality with regards to their beliefs and choices, the participants nurtured and strengthened their spirituality, which became their personal guiding force in terms of decision making and what to value in their personal lives.

"But ever since I left, like, officially that when I was 18 like stopped going to churches, mas napa-practice ko siya and because I'm more -- I'm freer now it's that sense of spirituality is stronger it was strong before but now it's stronger." (P1)

"...through my own parang sense of spirituality, ganon na when, hindi lang naman when sa hardships, ganon, even in like, day-to-day life, ganon, na because of my own spirituality, I feel guided" (P4)

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS (RESEARCH QUESTION 3)

In summary, the findings showed that religion is a pathway into one's spirituality. Particularly, starting one's journey inside religion gave way for spirituality and disaffiliating with religion strengthens one's spirituality. Notably, the spirituality of deconverts started and been nurtured inside religion, in which the deconverts initially identified spirituality and being religious as almost identical. This is congruent with a study that suggests religion is just a subcategory of spirituality [48]. Both prioritize the search for the sacred but differ in the way that spirituality is much inclined to be individualistic, while religion requires one to be a part of a religion and deal with the religious community. With that, in the case of the deconverts, them being introduced early at religion and knowing nothing about religiosity and spirituality concealed the true meaning of spirituality to them and made them see that spirituality and religiosity is undistinguishable with each other. Nevertheless, studies emphasized that religiosity and spirituality are distinct with each other, the former highlights being in a system that practices religious beliefs and activities, while the latter highlights the internal processes and connection with the self and others [49]. Furthermore, studies also show that intelligence has a negative relationship with religiosity [29], wherein it was mentioned that due to the intelligent person's tendency to analyze and question their beliefs, they are likely to be irreligious or deviate from the religion itself due to the inconsistencies in general, leaving them unconvinced with the religious teachings. In the case of the deconverts, they do value proof and logic to the point that they questioned the sanctity of the religious teachings. Moreover, due to the discrepancies with the teachings and hypocrisies from the religious community, doubt and skepticism arose, making them disaffiliate with their respective religion. With that, upon deviating from their former religion, deconverts were left with their own beliefs, conviction, and spirituality in which they developed inside religion. With them having to depend only on that, strengthened their overall spirituality and became their personal guide about their decisions and what to value in their lives. Lastly, the findings also aligned with Filipino Spirituality [15]. Which shows that (1) deconverts value the connection with the Sacred. Although the deconverts do not know who really is the true Sacred is, or them having different forms of Sacred, the

deconverts strongly believe and have faith in a Sacred which guides them on their everyday journey, life decisions, and what morals to uphold. (2) deconverts see their spirituality as a way to find meaning and purpose through the means of their own convictions. As the deconverts value their convictions and deviate from their former religion through the means of practicing their convictions through autonomy, they see that as an opportunity to make meaning of their lives. And lastly, (3) the deconverts being unbounded to religion opened a way for them to express and freely practice their convictions in the form of their own spirituality.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

In conclusion, deconversion among selected Filipino deconverts were caused mostly by doubts in religious teachings, doubts in God, and problems stemming from the religious community. It was a gradual process and unpleasant, and levels of life satisfaction until this point has declined. Nonetheless, pushing through has borne fruit to the participants as characterized by feeling freer, more autonomous, more satisfied in life, and more spiritual.

With the study's findings, implications were drawn wherein the researchers would like to emphasize the practicality of the findings of this study. Starting from the deconverts, they may utilize this study to further inform other deconverts who are not well informed about the collective experiences of deconverts to let them better understand their current emotions, thoughts, and situations for the sake of their well-being. Moreover, knowledgeable deconverts could create an advocacy or change with the current system in religion for the organizations who are having the same concerns as presented in this paper. For the spiritual leaders, conducting programs through seminars and workshops to reduce judgmental and stigmatization tendencies towards deconverts and religious nones in religious communities, which can help with the stigma towards nonreligious individuals. Finally, the researchers do recommend the future researchers to develop further research that focuses on opening opportunities for counseling to be widely integrated inside churches to better address individuals undergoing religious crisis and other mental health concerns that stems from their religious experiences. Moreover, utilizing different research designs more on the quantitative aspect and considering other related constructs will be a good addition to the current findings of the study.