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Five Dimensions of Religious Deconversion: Their Application to the Accounts of Young Pakistani Deconverts

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Abstract

A considerable amount of research has been conducted in the fields of religious psychology and social sciences on the topic of religious conversions, its reasons, and effects, but it is only in recent years that religious deconversion has attained the interest of researchers in the West. Though it has been observed since the last few years that religious deconversion is trending among the Pakistani youth, no considerable research has yet been done on this phenomenon in the Pakistani context. The purpose of this paper is to explore the phenomenon of deconversion among the young adults of Pakistan in light of the five dimensions of deconversion proposed by Streib et al. This research does not discuss the “reasons of deconversion”, rather it aims to present those experiences and perceptions of Pakistani young deconverts which contributed to their loss of faith in the religion. To carry out this research, in-depth interviews are conducted and these interviews will be analyzed within the framework of the 5 dimensions of deconversion.

Keywords: Atheism, religious deconversion, deconversion dimensions

Religion, belief, and faith have always been an important part of human life throughout history, and different beliefs and faiths have also played a significant role in the evolution of human societies. While 21st century has witnessed a very rapid and dramatic changes in each and every sphere of human life_ religious beliefs and faith are no exception. The elements of globalization and the developments in the fields of science and research have a direct influence on every sphere of personality development and cognitive processes of contemporary man. The young generation, in particular, has been affected by the rapid changes and

advancements in the world around them. The exposure to the variety of beliefs, value systems and the criticisms on different religious practices has resulted into doubts in their minds regarding the religious, social and cultural values which were upheld by their elders. They ask questions and when they do not get satisfying answers, they start to disaffiliate themselves from the belief system or the religion they were born into. This ‘disaffiliation’ sometimes leads to the complete abandonment of a religion and becoming atheist and agnostic. This process of breaking away from religious beliefs and affiliations has been termed as “deconversion”.¹

In previous researches, some different terms were used to discuss this phenomenon. Commonly used titles include “religious disaffiliation”, “apostasy”, “religious defection”, “falling from the faith”, “exit” etc.² Streib et al dismiss all the terms used previously in favour of “deconversion”, claiming that all the other terms have “negative connotations” while using the term “deconversion” makes it possible for a researcher to convey his/her neutrality, as according to these scholars “deconversion” allows for less prejudice.³ Fazzino believes that using the term “deconversion” highlights religious mobility in a subjective way.⁴ Thus, in this paper, the term “deconversion” is used to describe the phenomenon of becoming an atheist.

This paper aims to explore the dimensions of “deconversion” among Pakistani youth. The growing trend of atheism among youth from Muslim families around the globe generally and the youth of Pakistan specifically is a matter of concern. Hamza Tzortzis, while delivering a lecture in Pakistan in September 2023, expressed how shocked he was to see “atheism, liberalism, secularism, LGBTQ+, even more, intensified at the university space” in Pakistan. He claimed that the problem of atheism in Pakistan is “an elephant in the room”. While substantial research has been carried out in the West on the deconversion process, the subject has long been considered a taboo in Pakistani society, and very little research has been carried out in this regard, so this study aims to help fill that gap.

The data to carry out this research is collected through in-depth semi structured interviews of ten young Pakistani deconverts. These are from different social, financial and educational backgrounds and their ages range between late teens to early thirties. The age sample has been carefully chosen, keeping in view the fourth stage in Fowler's theory of faith development. This, according to Fowler, is the age of early adulthood when a person starts taking the responsibility for his decisions and actions. This is called the "individuating-reflective" stage. This stage is characterized by the re-examination of the previously held beliefs and the development of "self-identity and self-worth capable of independent judgement in relation to the individuals, institutions and world view that anchored one's sense of being up until that time."⁵ Fowler conducted his research in context of faith and conversion but, as Streib and Keller believe, Fowler's work "could be an important analytical perspective on deconversion, as well, and should be included in the design of empirical research on deconversion."⁶ Many researchers have also noted that the deconverts have a great amount of Fowler's Individuating-Reflective faith style.⁷ Thus our samples have been selected with the framework of "individuating-reflective stage of faith development."

As our participants belong to different cities of Pakistan and they were also very reluctant to show their faces, these interviews were taken on phone and were recorded. The participants were informed that their interviews will be recorded and will remain in the custody of the researcher. A brief introduction of the interviewees is given below: (All the names have been changed)

1. **Hammad:**⁸ He is in his mid-twenties and belongs to an upper-middle-class family. His parents are strictly practising Muslims and he himself used to be a rigid, conservative Muslim. He even did Hifz e Quran when he was young. He graduated in business studies.
2. **Khalid:**⁹ He is in his early thirties and belongs to a middle-class family which is moderately religious. He reports having an extremely abusive father whose behavior was the main reason behind his becoming an atheist. He has done BA and has a diploma in engineering and runs a small general store.

3. **Malik:**¹⁰ He is in his early twenties. Belongs to a lower middle-class religious family. He left his studies after doing FA, due to some mental disturbance. He has a great passion for Music and aims to become a singer one day.
4. **Mani:**¹¹ He is in his mid-twenties and belongs to a middle-class family, which according to him is considerably religious. He has done a BBA and works in the corporate sector.
5. **Mudassir:**¹² He is in his late Twenties and comes from a middle-class family. Parents, according to him are “typical Muslims.” He claims to have been a very practicing Muslim at a young age. He has been a student of science subjects.
6. **Munnawar:**¹³ He is in his early twenties and belongs to a very conservative tribal area. The family is financially strong and extremely religious but not educated. He spent many years of his childhood being a regular student in Madrassah. He is now studying anthropology.
7. **Muttayab:**¹⁴ He is in his early twenties and belongs to a middle-class family. He is pursuing a degree in computer sciences. The family is moderately religious.
8. **Raheel:**¹⁵ He is in his early thirties and belongs to a lower-middle-class family. He has a degree in media studies and works as a freelancer. The family is well-educated and moderately religious.
9. **Sabeeha:**¹⁶ She is in her mid-twenties and from a middle-class background. Her family is liberal Muslim. She is doing an MPhil in linguistics.
10. **Tallal:**¹⁷ He is in his late twenties and belongs to a middle-class family. He left his studies after O levels because he went into depression after losing faith and it took him a few years to recover. He works online and has a great interest in engineering and machines.

The responses given by our participants are analyzed within the framework of the five dimensions of deconversion proposed by Streib et al. Their proposed dimensions or characteristics are an improved version of the previously suggested dimensions of deconversion by different researchers.¹⁸ These are:

1. Loss of Specific Religious experiences,
2. Intellectual doubt, denial or disagreement with specific beliefs,
3. Moral criticism,
4. Emotional suffering,
5. Disaffiliation from the community (in this research we will look into it as “joining the likeminded people)

1. Loss of Specific Religious Experiences:

This indicates feelings of emptiness, lack of connection with the divine. Or, as Streib and Keller put it, “this means the loss of finding meaning and purpose in life; the loss of experience of God; of trust and of fear.”¹⁹ Simon Cottee terms this phenomenon as “spiritual alienation”.²⁰ We can also include the element of unanswered prayer and the problem of evil in this. This phenomenon has been frequently mentioned in our data in different ways. Some of the deconverts never registered any sort of spiritual or religious experience while some of them “lost” it gradually with the passage of time. For example, Mani, initially a strong believer, began to lose his “connection” when he read and contemplated on the translation of “*aazaan*” (call for prayer) and “*namaz*” (Salah/prayer). He started to wonder why God likes to be praised. “This is supposed to be human nature. Man wants to be praised...why God? I mean ok He created everything, but still... I started to think that my God is a narcissist.”

Tallal narrates that he had a very personal relationship with God. His God had never been a religious God. To him, God was like a personal friend. When he lost his faith, he lost his friend. He said that I had always thought that if God is Just, He will give answers to my questions, but He never did. He says that though he loves his mother and takes care of her, he is also upset with her for bringing him into this world without his consent. He believes that it is very selfish of the parents to give birth to their offsprings as life is nothing but pain and suffering. Tallal declares that he has not been able to find any meaning in life and he is no more interested in making an effort to find it.

Participant, Sabeeha describes it as a lack of effort from God. She says, “if Allah is really there, He should make us feel His presence.” She believes that life is “absurd”

and “meaningless”. She complains that “God (if there is any) quietly watches when people hurt my feelings, if he is there, he should make people realize when they do wrong to others.”

Another participant, Khalid reported sufferings due to an abusive father. “Religious people assured me that Allah listens to our prayers, He is *Rehman* and *Raheem*, I kept on praying and begging to Him for a miracle....to make my father a better person, but nothing happened. Then I realized that there is no God. And even if there is any, He doesn’t listen to me and He will never hear my prayers”. Khalid believes that man is the most foolish being on earth: “he sees all the evils and cruelties on earth and still has faith in God”.

Hammad shares his thoughts that came to his mind after he read the translation of the Quran and read the verses about non-believers. “In Quran, Allah is calling non-believers slurs and curses them and compares them to animals. My initial feelings at that time were extreme anger towards the almighty God.” He says that when he started to lose his interest in Islam and was “barely a Muslim anymore” he decided to perform Umrah. “I was expecting a spiritual awakening and call from God when visiting holy places of Islam. But I felt nothing, and I was very much distraught that my faith is going away.” Hammad states very clearly, “I never experienced any holy or paranormal experience or any spiritual awakening at all.” And he also declared: “I no longer crave for any spiritual need.”

Raheel, while narrating his reasons for deconversion, mentions the case of the young girl, Zainab who was raped and murdered when her parents were gone to perform Umrah. “If God cannot save a girl whose parents are out on a Pilgrimage to God Himself, then he either does not exist or He does not give a shit about His creation. I am quite sure it is the first one though!”

Muttayab referred to the famous Hadees that Allah’s love for us is seventy times more than mother’s love. “I am unable to grasp this. If a child is getting raped or murdered, a mother can never sit quietly and watch. How can a Powerful God watch all this and do nothing?”

2. Intellectual Doubt, Denial or Disagreement with Specific Beliefs:

This seems to be an essential occurrence in the story of almost every deconvert. One of the participants, Mani said at the beginning of the interview, “Any human being who can think, has doubts in his mind. It’s impossible not to have them.”

Usually, the journey towards deconversion starts with questions. These questions, when remain unanswered or insufficiently answered, first give rise to doubts and denials of certain religious doctrines and then total rejection of religion or theism. The bases of these doubts can be scientific, social, historical or/and moral issues. It can be incomplete knowledge, wrong guidance, not knowing the correct historical and contextual background or a combination of some or all of them.

One of the frequently mentioned factors that triggered the intellectual doubt of these deconverts is “the problem of human rights in Islam”. For some of them, history (world history and Islamic history) played an important role in sowing the seeds of doubt. The clash between modern scientific knowledge and Islamic philosophy is also a source of intellectual doubts. Many of the participants reported their confusion and frustrations on not being able to align scientific knowledge with Islamic teachings, especially the scientific claim about the theory of evolution. Muddasir declared that the two fields of sciences which played the most significant role in his becoming an atheist are the ‘theory of evolution’ and ‘astronomy’. Tallal confidently declares that there is such strong evidence in favour of the theory of evolution that you can’t deny it. Munnawar explained that his journey towards atheism started with his curiosity about the origin of life on earth. “The story of Adam and Eve was different from what I had read in archaeology and genetics, so it confused me.”

Many interviewees reported that they had doubts about the Quran and *Hadith* and these doubts ultimately led them to deconvert. According to Muddasir, Islamic history was written a long time after the death of the Prophet, and *Hadith* was written centuries after his death so how can we accept them as authentic? Muddasir claims that Islam has taken many of its ideas from other philosophies e.g., Persian religious philosophies of “Zoroastrianism” and “Manichaeism”. He referred to the book of Syed Amjad Hussain, “*Quran aur uss kay Musanifeen*” (Quran and its authors) to support his argument that the Quran is not a divine book but is copied

from various sources. He also raises a question about the language of the Quran, “If the language of the Quran really is so powerful and eloquent, as Muslims so proudly claim, how can be there multiple interpretations of the same verses?”

Many other participants also claim that the Quran is actually copied from various ancient sources. Malik reported that he found many stories of Islam similar to those found in Hindu mythologies and also found some similarities in Islamic teachings and the philosophy of the Greek philosopher, Socrates.

Participant, Sabeeha also claimed to have noticed many similarities between the Quran and Hindu scripture, “Geeta” which made her wonder about the divinity of the Quran.

The stance of the Quran and Hadees on the status of non-Muslims and sinners, and the status of women, also made some deconverts doubt their divinity. They consider these teachings as a violation of human rights and against the idea of the equality of all human beings. Hammad expressed his ‘disappointment’ after reading the translation of verses condemning non-believers. “The fact that I wasted my childhood chanting and reading Arabic words... just trash talk written in the holy book. The holy book which once I respected now had me absolutely shattered and disappointed.”

Muttayab reported that he always had doubts regarding the rights of women, homosexuals and minorities in Islam and these doubts ultimately led him to leave not only Islam but the idea of God altogether. Muttayab was particularly sceptical about the status of women in Islam. “Some people tell me that I am confused and unable to understand things properly. I say to them that it is very clearly stated in the Quran that women are inferior to men. So where is the confusion.” Asked Muttayab.

These questions and doubts that arose in the minds of young Muslims, did not instantly result in their deconversion. It is natural for the inquisitive minds to seek the answers to the questions and doubts. Raheel said that he shared his thoughts with some closest friends. “They either call me misguided or make fun of me.” Muttayab, who was basically concerned with human rights issues, discussed his thoughts with some of the “religious people” who would either tell him that his way

of understanding things was incorrect or told him to “just follow the teachings without questioning them”. Muttayab asks that if we are supposed to follow everything without asking any questions then, “why humans are given rational minds and the ability to think”? Khalid reported to have met some religious people to share his problems and ask for their guidance. He was told to have patience. They told him that his sufferings would earn him *Jannat* in the afterlife. He was not satisfied with these assurances.

Mani during his interview shared all the doubts and questions he used to have in his mind. And when he was asked if he ever tried to discuss these with any scholar, he responded: “I like to live. I don’t like the idea of people writing ‘late’ with my name”. Hammad reported that when the questions in his mind troubled him he never tried to share them or discuss them with anyone. “I knew that it would be a risk, raising such questions may reveal that I am losing faith, people would judge me, treat me differently and in worst case, a wrong person could accuse me of blasphemy or apostasy.”

3. Moral Criticism:

The moral system and philosophy of Islam are yet another target of the deconverts. They believe that religious people do good deeds for selfish reasons. As Hammad points out, the motive for good deeds should be only the betterment of society, but religion tells you to do good deeds for rewards only. According to him, “Since the motivation to adopt these good practices is greed, purity is lost in the cause, and it turns into just a basic trade and exchange”. Mani also has the same objection. He said that when an atheist helps someone, he does it because he knows that no one from “up there” is coming to help that poor person in need. According to Mani, the moral values of a religious person are shaped by his greed to get a reward from God. When he gives charity, he intends to get “*barakah*” in his wealth. “Unlike a religious person, an atheist is not greedy”, claimed Mani.

Muddasir declared that Islamic morality was one of the basic reasons for him to leave Islam. He questions Islamic morality with reference to the treatment of Muslims towards the Jews of Madina during the Prophet’s time. “Look how they treated Banu Quraizah, and then you talk about ‘sweet’ Islamic morality.” He

claimed that believing in “evolution” makes you a better person. He explained, “When you study evolution in depth with an open mind, it makes you humble. You start developing empathy for others and your ethics become stronger”. Malik while talking about the hypocrisies and narrow-mindedness of religious people, shared his observation: “Those people who strictly follow the moral teachings of Islam start hating those people who enjoy their lives. They desperately want to do what other people are doing, but they cannot because of their ‘moral values’. So, they become hateful and hypocrites”.

4. Emotional Suffering:

It has been described as “a loss of the sense of rootedness, support, stability and security stemming from religion.”²¹ This dimension covers the emotional experiences of a deconvert before, during and after his transformation into an atheist. The type and intensity of emotions vary according to the level of faith one had while he/she was a believer and also on the religious, social, and cultural background of a deconvert. In a highly religious society like Pakistan, leaving religion and becoming an atheist can result in many social and emotional problems, not only for the deconvert but also for the whole family.

One of the aspects of becoming an atheist from a theist is the change that occurs in one’s identity. According to Smith, for example, the process of deconversion can be regarded successfully completed only when the deconvert can claim the identity of an atheist in his social interactions as it becomes important for the deconvert to be able to vocal his new identity and use the label.²² As Pakistan is a highly religious society and being a Muslim is considered a foundation of one’s identity. Abandoning Islam is equivalent to dumping the very foundation of one’s “ascribed” identity and attempting to “achieve” a new one. This dimension of deconversion is laden with many emotional and psychological discomforts.

A Pakistani ex-Muslim, Dr. Ali Rizvi, who now lives in Canada, wrote his autobiography to narrate his journey towards atheism. While recounting the emotional experiences regarding identity issues of a deconvert he writes, “When beliefs are so deeply ingrained in one’s identity, a shattered faith almost inevitably results in a shattered identity__ one that must be rebuilt fragment by fragment.” At

another place, he writes: "...This integration makes leaving Islam not just an intellectual process, but also an emotionally fraught, full-blown identity crises"²³. This aspect becomes intensified when these deconverts must hide their atheist identities from their families and society because revealing their identities can result in severe consequences in the context of family ties and social stigmas.

The process of this transition is packed with different emotional and psychological experiences at different stages of deconversion. Usually, the doubting stage is marked by the emotions of fear, guilt and frustration. Muddasir says that when you have doubts you crave answers, "and this craving is like a fire, it burns." When a person finally makes up his/her mind and ultimately decides to reject the faith, it becomes like a complex roller coaster of positive and negative emotions. He feels excited about embarking on a new journey, relieved about finally being able to take the decision, and feels the freedom from the religious restrictions. The negative emotions are usually anger, frustration and fear. They are angry because they feel that they have been misguided by the family and society for so long, frustrated for not being able to disclose their atheism, and afraid because if their true identity is revealed, they and their families, might have to face criticism, harassment, social boycott and in worst cases it can be life-threatening.

Tallal remembers that it was "traumatizing" to raise questions and doubt the presence of the God who was his "best friend". He still remembers it with pain, "when my doubting phase was gone and I became convinced that there is no God, I just sat down and cried. I kept on crying for about an hour. Everything was shattered. I went into depression for three years." Mani's analogy can explain the extent of the pain when he said, "You know how hurtful it can be if you lose trust in some person that you always trusted. Well, imagine how devastating it would be if you lose trust in God."

5. Disaffiliation from the Community:

Strieb et al mention "disaffiliation from the community" as one of the five dimensions. In the Pakistani context, however, "disaffiliation" from the community is almost impossible. The family ties, social pressures and the need to keep one's atheism hidden from others prevent a deconvert from a complete "disaffiliation

from the community.” They often “blend in” their family and social environments as reasonably “liberal Muslims”. But many deconverts, while maintaining their Muslim identity in public, join different forums of atheists and deconverts to connect with like-minded people. There are numerous online groups and forums for atheists and deconverts from different religions. Usually, during the ‘transition process’, people connect with these groups or individuals to seek guidance and after their deconversion, they join these groups.

Leaving their religion is just one part of the problem. There are many challenges after that. Now they have to hide their lack of faith from their families and society. They feel alienated in a religious environment and need guidance and reassurance. According to the participant Muddasir, “When you make up your mind (to leave religion) the first thing you start doing is look for other like-minded fellows.” This act of ‘joining’ helps them to recover from the emotional and psychological shock as Hammad recounts his experience, “I am glad I found some like-minded people who helped me both psychologically and emotionally”. Tallal started to connect with other atheists and deconverts when he was in depression. “That’s how I came out of depression”, Tallal said. “It was during lockdown that I made friends with these people from America, Canada and Nederland. I created a messenger group of all these friends. Sometimes our conversations continued for 8-10 hours.” Tallal mentioned that they did not always discuss religion, rather it used to be a normal, casual conversation. “It helps you to connect with people” " he said.

The groups they join can be online groups and forums and there are also some ‘secret meeting places’ as mentioned in the BBC report. The report talks about secret meeting places in Lahore where these atheists and deconverts get together. BBC reports a deconvert explaining about such places, “It’s a bubble where we can talk. It’s not all about Richard Dawkins or Sam Harris. We may just talk about how things are going. It’s a place where you can let your hair down and truly be yourself.”²⁴

Conclusion:

The above mentioned five dimensions provide a glimpse into some of the reasons that resulted into the deconversion of these participants and also hint upon the

emotional and psychological experiences of this process of deconversion. The accounts of these participants indicate that religious deconversion is not something that happens suddenly, rather it is a process which involves many social, moral, emotional, spiritual and intellectual aspects. The benefit of placing the accounts and narrations of the deconverts under different dimensions is that this exercise can help us understand the experiences of these deconverts from different angles. The comprehension of all these dimensions and aspects of deconversion can provide an idea to the parents, teachers and Islamic leadership about the nature of the problem and this understanding is important to work out a solution to the problem.

The careful study of the accounts of these deconverts shows that they did not have any forum which could be consulted to clear their doubts and answer their questions. Raheel said that he shared his thoughts with some closest friends. “They either call me misguided or make fun of me.” Muttayyab, who was concerned with human rights issues, discussed his thoughts with some of the “religious people” who would either tell him that his way of understanding things was incorrect or told him to “just follow the teachings without questioning them”. Mutayyab asks that if we are supposed to follow everything without asking any questions then, “why humans are given rational minds and the ability to think”? Khalid reported to have met some religious people to share his problems and ask for their guidance. He was told to have patience. They told him that his sufferings would earn him *Jannat* in the afterlife. He was not satisfied with these assurances.

The elements of globalization and the developments in the fields of science and research have a direct influence on the personality developments and cognitive processes of contemporary man. The young generation, in particular, has been affected by the rapid changes and advancements in the world around them. The exposure to the variety of beliefs, value systems and the criticisms of different religious practices has resulted into doubts in their minds regarding the religious, social and cultural values which were upheld by their elders. They ask questions. And when they don't get satisfying answers, they start to disaffiliate themselves from the belief system or the religion they were born into. Fazzino, while explaining different elements involved in religious deconversion, writes, “Unanswered

questions devolve into spiritual crises which are only assuaged when re-constructed explanations, understandings and biographies create new secular paradigms that replace old religious paradigms that malfunctioned.”²⁵ Thus it is necessary to devise effective strategies as to how the doubts and questions in the minds of our young generation can be addressed.

As a starting point the unanswered questions which have led many youngsters to first doubt, then agnosticism, then atheism should be collected and presented to leading scholars of the concerned fields. This exercise can help the scholars to understand the nature of the doubts and questions in the minds of our youth. These scholars should be asked to provide comprehensive but easy to understand answers to these questions. Those answers should be made widely available e.g. in school and college textbooks, on the internet and social media, in different languages. To overcome inhibitions that the fear of being ostracized by family and community puts on youngsters, students could be allowed to fill in questionnaires without putting their names on them. That would make it more accurate in determining what proportion of students are experiencing doubts or have become agnostics or atheists and what were their reasons. A helpline could be established so that people thinking about abandoning their religion because of doubts could have someone qualified to speak to who can address their doubts.

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