

Book Review

***Atheists Finding God: Unlikely Stories of Conversions to Christianity in the Contemporary West.* Jana S. Harmon. New York: Lexington Books, 2023. xv+240pp. \$100.00 (hardback). \$45 (e-book) ISBN: 9781793641328.**



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Upon learning the title of this book, my first reaction—and possibly yours—was: “Really? Could she have found enough atheists who converted to Christianity to study them?” In fact, Jana S. Harmon has found some fifty atheists who converted, enough to write her dissertation for the University of Birmingham,¹ turn it into a book, and get it published. Since, for years, I have immersed myself in the narratives of “spiritual but not religious” (SBNR) people, including Protestant clergy who have moved in the “none” direction, I was intrigued to encounter stories from the other side.² In fact, soon after starting this book, my initial cynicism turned into respectful appreciation as this project—so against the trend of the myriad books on the growth of “nones” and concomitant church decline—delivered on its promise.

Harmon reports that the interviewees came from a variety of Western countries, including the United States, Canada, United Kingdom, Australia, New Zealand, and France. She recounts that, between 2013 and 2019, she administered a survey and then conducted a lengthy interview with each one. She clearly demonstrates profound respect for and careful listening to these fifty, each of whom experienced a life-changing, dramatic, and philosophically engaged transformation of their entire perspective and behavior.

She summarizes them this way: “Whether they did not believe that God existed or simply lacked a belief in God, all the former atheists in this research held to a positive belief in naturalistic atheism, the belief that only the natural or material world exists” (xiii). These were not unlearned types, either. “Not uncommon in the atheist population, the education of those in the study was high, 43% holding advanced degrees, seven of whom hold PhDs” (xiii). She explains the paths they took to atheism. Some simply assumed their familial or community bias against religion. Some departed their religious background. Some just went with contemporary trends that considered religion an unthinking refuge for the weak, the unintelligent, or the prejudiced. She refutes the common assumption that “someone ‘becomes an atheist’ when they go to university, [seeks] freedom from authority, and [is] encouraged by secular-minded culture.

¹ Jana S. Harmon, “Religious Conversion of Educated Atheists to Christianity in Six Contemporary Western Countries,” Ph.D. Dissertation: University of Birmingham, 2019.

² Linda Mercadante, *Belief without Borders: Inside the Minds of the Spiritual but not Religious* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).

But according to this research, it happens earlier than that, predominantly during adolescence” (61).

All given pseudonyms, the converts’ stories and various quotes are interspersed as Harmon discusses how they initially felt about religion and their conflicting worldviews. But at some point, they experienced “disruptive” challenges, longings, and experiences that opened their minds toward religion. She explains how they sought after truth, not being content with merely finding a comforting path, acceptance in a group, like-minded companions, other lesser goals. She explains that conversion is not simplistic, a one or two factor event, but is a complex and comprehensive process, which usually involves a crucial spiritual element, experiencing God. But conversion does not happen simply from this or other “originating event” (5).

For most, religious conversion is a process of change over time—time to develop and experience a pre-conversion perspective of what beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors are rejected and affirmed, time to become open to another point of view, time to become convinced of and embrace another view of reality, and time to change and embody a new reality. Although some religious conversions can and do happen immediately, akin to the apostle Paul’s Damascus Road experience, even those dramatic episodes occur within pre-conversion ways of thinking and living (5).

Harmon emphasizes that conversion is especially hard these days since Christianity in the West is no longer widely popular or considered admirable. Thus, “When cultural plausibility of religious belief is low, particularly conservative forms of Christian belief, this lack of credibility or desirability often causes enough resistance to reject even the possibility of belief, disallowing a fair consideration” (40). In addition, the role of transcendence, whether in the contemporary mind or in conversion research, is often considered unbelievable. In enumerating all this, her goal seems to be seriously challenging more sociological or this-worldly views of conversion which limit the reasons that would make someone convert. Thus, she explains:

A functional approach to religious conversion dominates conversion literature although some acknowledge it as a dynamic, multi-dimensional, integrated phenomenon. This research concurred with voices in the social sciences revealing particular aspects of human nature (psycho-emotional), and human experience (cultural, social, experiential), human intellect, and spiritual experience all contribute towards religious conversion. However, this research differs from their emphases of these components in their isolated roles and calls for a comprehensive conception of religious conversion with each variable as part of a whole, integrated conversion process (153).

Harmon comes up with—and richly describes—a very cogent breakdown of the “catalysts” which the atheists experienced in their often-lengthy conversion process. These catalysts neither follow in a regular order, nor have a similar emphases for each person, nor are the main impetus for conversion. Instead, catalysts are merely a “door opener towards another view of reality, not what is ultimately convincing toward conversion” (76). It is important to note that these converts were not initially “seekers”—which, from my own experience with churches, is a common assumption about nones or SBNRs. Instead, most had a very negative view of organized religion, including its adherents, and often a closed mind toward considering its worldview.

Catalysts can include intellectual challenges to existing belief systems. It can be a longing for intellectual credibility when a person realizes they have adhered to atheism without fully considering its implication for life meaning or purpose. Or, catalysts can be an existential longing for meaning, an experiential or social-relational crisis (like meeting actual Christians who turn out *not* to confirm atheistic stereotypes), having unexpected spiritual experiences, and something else.

What is significant about Harmon's theory of conversion is how important belief is. While it alone is not enough to prompt conversion, it seems an integral aspect for these former atheists. I discovered, too, in speaking with nones and SBNRs that belief is often the main reason people leave religion. Thus, Harmon's work shows the other side. The people I interviewed and those of Harmon's all had rather stilted, undeveloped, or stereotyped impressions of Christian belief. While many are not motivated to explore further, Harmon discovered that there are some atheists who, when exploring the implications of their worldview, find that they are not intellectually satisfied and—even against their long-held predilections—become more open to religious claims. It is relevant that many of the converts Harmon interviewed went on to more study, higher degrees in theology or related subjects, and often some form of ministry, whether evangelistic, preaching, or otherwise. Thus, the common observation, viz., that converts are often more devout and dedicated than life-long practitioners, seems true in the cases Harmon explores. Harmon's book also offers an indirect challenge to churches and seminaries to present a credible theology, focus on living the faith rather than teaching rules, and to suggest practical ways to recognize God.

The strength of the book is in its copious quotes which well illustrate Harmon's points about the conversion process. However, there are aspects of the book which will make it less useful for pastors, evangelists, or teachers. For one thing, while many of the interviewee snippets are very moving, the interviewees' words are sprinkled throughout, making it hard to follow specific individuals and their processes. There are a few more cohesive stories in the Appendix, but these do not clearly link up with the earlier quotes. At times, the wording is clunky and unclear. Thus, this book would not be a likely source to hand to atheist friends.

From a more technical perspective, this book does not review the literature on conversion theory, even though Harmon clearly is addressing the pitfalls in what she considers limited explanations for conversion. In addition, readers do not learn exactly where or how Harmon found these fifty. Nor is her method of analysis clear, since there is no methodology appendix which could inform the reader of how the interviewees were selected, the numbers she initially contacted, the response rate she achieved, whether these interviews were recorded and transcribed, and if software was used for coding. Neither the survey questions nor interview topics are given in the text. It is possible that these elements may be included in the actual dissertation.³ An avid researcher can go there. However, for the regular reader, this is a definite deficit, especially if one cares about narrative and qualitative analysis.

In the end, however, Harmon presents an important contribution to studies on conversion. Her book is a useful counterweight to the millions of words today written on church

³ *Atheists Finding God*, https://etheses/bham.ac.uk/id/eprint/9490/7/Harmon2019PhD_Redacted.pdf

decline, the rise of the nones and SBNRs, and the general discouragement within Western Christianity.

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