Disbelief, Disengagement, Discontinuance, and Disaffiliation:
An Integrative Framework for the Study of Religious Deidentification

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Abstract

Religion offers a powerful social identity. However, religious change is common across the lifespan, including some who leave religion altogether. Research on leaving religion has mostly been fragmented and failed to embrace a unified theory that captures the breadth of the extant research and appreciates the crucial nuances revealed by empirical findings. Toward that end, we adopt Saroglou's (2011) classification of four dimensions of religiousness to introduce a conceptual model to explain the varieties of different research strands that have examined those leaving religion and integrate them into a unified theory of religious change. We explain how religious deidentification describes how one no longer identifies as religious, and this process can occur via *disbelief*, *disengagement*, *discontinuance*, and *disaffiliation*. We contend that religious and spiritual struggles are potential pathways by which deidentification may occur. Finally, we situate the work on religious deidentification among other related constructs and provide a brief framework for future research on the nonreligious experience.

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Leaving Religion:

An Integrative Framework for the Study of Religious Deidentification

In 1902, William James published *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. As the earliest compendium of the psychology of religion, it detailed ways in which individuals may engage with religion and perceive spiritual experiences. While the scientific study of religion has embraced the diversity of the religious experience, research on irreligiousness stagnated for more than a century. More than 1 billion people in the world report no religious affiliation, with religious “nones” currently comprising the third largest religious group in the United States (CNN, 2019; Gallup, n.d.). Although research on nonreligion and the irreligious has started accelerating, two trends have dominated this research.

First, most of this work has focused on atheism and cognitive disbelief (Baker & Smith, 2015; Norenzayan & Gervais, 2013; Zuckerman, Galen, & Pasquale, 2016), though some deconversion research has provided a richer context for leaving religion (Streib, 2020). Because religion is a multidimensional construct consisting of more than belief, this has left a gap in the research. Second, most research has treated nonreligious individuals as a monolithic, homogenous group. More recent work has worked to parse apart religious “dones” (i.e., those who were formerly religious but no longer identify as religious) from other religious “nones” (i.e., those who never identified as religious), revealing that 1 in 5 individuals report being a religious done (Van Tongeren et al., 2021). These two gaps in the research obfuscate research on individuals leaving religion.

An integrative framework for studying religious deidentification is needed. Toward that end, this paper provides a theoretical approach to studying those leaving religion that more fully captures the rich diversity and critical nuance of a multidimensional religious deconstruction process. Specifically, we outline a model of religious leaving, suggest antecedents that predict religious deidentification, and propose areas for future inquiry to catalyze work on the process of leaving religion.

The Universal Multidimensionality of Religion

Saroglou (2011) has posited that there are four universal dimensions of religion expressed differently across cultures. Presenting a “Big Four” of religion, Saroglou argues that the scientific study of religion can be unified around this multidimensional view of religion that balances the universality of common features of religion with their culturally bound expression. First, *believing* refers to what people believe about the supernatural and their relation to it, including how people make meaning. Individuals may vary in the cognitive representations they hold about gods or the supernatural, including if any such supernatural agents exist. This dimension is primarily cognitive, and like other features of religion, may be multiply manifested; beliefs are often embodied and direct a wide variety of psychological and behavioral processes.¹ Second, *bonding* indicates ritualized practices with emotional consequences, such as self-transcendent awe, that facilitate connection with the transcendent. Individuals can engage in individual, private bonding (e.g., prayer, meditation) or communal, public bonding (e.g., singing, chanting). These practices facilitate a perceived emotional connection with the supernatural and are deeply affectively-laden. Bonding refers mainly to the emotional dimension of one’s relationship with the perceived sacred or divine. Third, *behaving* constitutes the specific actions governed by values and morality regarding how people should act. This refers to the moral dimension of religion. Religious traditions have long prescribed certain behaviors (e.g., lauding particular virtues, instructing adherents to follow the Eightfold Path in Buddhism, imploring followers to adopt the Fruits of the Spirit in the Christian tradition) and proscribed other behaviors (e.g., the avoidance of sin, strict rules governing the body and sexuality). Finally, *belonging* captures the social dimension of religion, such as how religion is often embedded in a community and offers individuals with strong

¹ Saroglou (2011) suggested that atheists are probably low on all four dimensions. Though that may be true, there are certainly other ways of being nonreligious—and leaving religion—than atheism. Moreover, it is likely that there are individuals who are publicly religious though they privately disbelieve, in which case such individuals would indicate moderate to high levels on other dimensions of religiousness.

social connections. Religion is drawn from the root word *religio*, which means (among other things) “to bind.” Indeed, religion is a social enterprise that often fulfills fundamental belonging needs. Moreover, religious beliefs, practices, and expressions are also affected by one’s social setting and other individuals.

Saroglou (2011) contends that these dimensions are universal, but their expression, importance, and salience vary across cultures. Recently, Saroglou and colleagues (2020) examined this four-dimensional model of religion across 14 different countries. Testing a newly developed scale to assess these features of religion revealed a pattern of universality across those cultures tested: these four dimensions were interrelated, though to different degrees depending on the culture. So, in addition to offering evidence for universality, this research emphasized the complexity of these processes across cultures and revealed the contextually-specific heterogeneity of religious deidentification. This empirical, cross-cultural validation of the theoretical assertions of the four domains of religion suggest that not only might such an approach help frame how people are religious, but it may also provide a fruitful framework for research examining how people leave their religion. Moreover, it demonstrated the need for broad (and cross-cultural) research on religious donees.

The Four Dimensions of Leaving Religion

As an extension and elaboration of Saroglou’s (2011) theorizing, and recent work by Saroglou and colleagues (2020), we posit that the process of leaving religion might map onto these four domains. That is, as individuals no longer identify as religious, they may cease one or more of these four core features of religion. Indeed, prior work by Barbour (1994) identify four characteristics of religious deconversion that map nicely onto the four dimensions of religiousness (as we note parenthetically): (a) intellectual doubt or denial (related to the cognitive feature of beliefs); (b) emotional suffering (related to the emotional feature of bonding); (c) moral criticism (related to the moral feature of behaviors), and (d) disaffiliation from the religious community (related to the social feature of bonding). Streib and Keller

(2004) add a fifth dimension that includes the loss of meaning and purpose in life, which relates to the notion of religion as a meaning system (Newton & McIntosh, 2013). Building on such work, and newer religious deconversion research (Streib, 2020), we explore how different expressions of irreligiousness are situated within the context of these four dimensions of religion. Our goal is to provide a rich theoretical model to organize current research, guide future work, and where possible, we provide empirical evidence for these dimensions.

However, before explicating how leaving religion might vary across these four dimensions, we clarify some key terms and situate our analysis within a broader social psychological theory. To do so, we draw from work on social identity theory (Abrams & Hogg, 1990). Religion is often viewed as a powerful social identity (Ysseldyk, Matheson, & Anisman, 2010). People may hold various identities (e.g., cultural, gender, parental, religious), and some of these identities are more malleable than others. Religious identity may be more unstable than others, with research in the United States suggesting that nearly 1 in 3 people switch religious identifications throughout their life (Loveland, 2003; Suh & Russell, 2015). We use the term *religious deidentification* to refer to any change in which an individual may shift from identifying as religious to nonreligious. No longer self-identifying as religious can be viewed as the higher-order, broader term representing a host of religious shifts, depending on the specific dimension to which person may refer when thinking about what it means to be religious.

We prefer the term *deidentification* to *deconversion* because deconversion suggests a wholesale abandonment of one's "faith," although (a) previous research has found evidence for vestiges of prior religious or spiritual beliefs, practices, or behaviors after deidentification, called *religious residue* (see Van Tongeren et al., in press), and (b) deconversion fails to consider those who may leave one aspect of their religion (e.g., no longer attending church) but retain other parts (maintain a belief in a supernatural agent). More specifically, it important to fractionate deidentification into its various components for two primary reasons.

First, research on religious residue suggests that following deidentification, formerly religious individuals (i.e., religious “dones”) continue to demonstrate religion-related psychological processes and behavior that more closely resembles religious individuals than never religious individuals do (Van Tongeren et al., in press). That is, even though they no longer identify as religious, religious dones occupy a middle group between those who were never religious and those who are currently religious. These differences were found for cognitive, emotional, behavioral, and social features of religion. Because a *religious residue* persists (i.e., an active remnant or remainder of religion), it is important to understand the process of leaving religion as a shift that occurs along a continuum in which remnants of prior religious beliefs and practices remain and that might have differential effects across different features of religion, depending on the individual.

Second, religious dones are a diverse group. Some formerly religious individuals have stopped practicing their religion altogether, whereas others still continue to engage consistently in some religious behaviors (McLaughlin et al., in press). Leaving religion is not as concrete as being fully “deconverted.” And even though such individuals self-reported having left religion, there are features of their religion that they maintain. It is important to understand which features and why. Thus, though we see many parallels of the earlier term of deconversion with our preferred term of deidentification, focusing on when people make a shift to no longer identify as religious—and fully fractionating the aspects of religiousness that one is leaving—may be particularly fruitful. We now turn to outline how religious deidentification may include four interrelated yet distinct trajectories of “leaving religion” that correspond with the four dimensions of religion

Disbelief from Belief

Disbelief refers to no longer believing in god(s) or other supernatural agents. Individuals who are disbelievers have abandoned the core beliefs associated with their religious tradition (see Altemeyer & Hunsberger, 1997). Disbelief is mainly cognitive. Recent research suggests

that in a small sample of religious “dones” (i.e., those who were at one time religious but no longer identify as religious), more than half of the individuals reported intellectual reasons or merely outgrowing their beliefs as the primary reason for leaving religion (McLaughlin et al., in press). Although this process is largely cognitive (i.e., no longer ascribing to a particular set of propositions about the god[s] or supernatural agents), we suspect that it, much like the other dimensions, affects other features of religion. For example, if people no longer believe in a god, they may neither feel close to the deity nor would they pray or sacrifice to that god. Given the cascading effects of jettisoning beliefs on religious life, some may argue that disbelief may be either the primary domain or the most central, depending on whether religion is primarily conceptualized as a worldview or meaning system. However, even devoutly religious individuals may experience doubt at various times and to differing degrees, and may turn toward ritualistic bonding practices or engage with their religious communities as ways to stay committed to their religious faith during times when cognitive belief may seem difficult to maintain. Thus, we are hesitant to contend that disbelief (or any dimension) would be primary.

Disengagement from Bonding

Disengagement refers to an intentional cessation of bonding rituals aimed at generating relational closeness with the transcendent. Largely an emotional shift, disengagement is when individuals no longer engage with the divine or sacred through ritualistic practices.

Individuals may stop praying, meditating, singing religious music, reciting scripture, participating in religious ceremonies, or attending worship services. Their perceptions of awe and closeness may wane, and may in fact be replaced with anger or resentment toward God (if they still believe in God’s existence; Exline, Park, Smyth, & Carey, 2011). We distinguish this simply from a lack of perceived closeness or connection with God/gods. It is entirely possible, and highly likely at certain times, that even devoutly religious individuals may experience emotional disengagement from the Sacred even while continuing other ritualistic practices.

For example, some people may continue to attend church or pray while privately experiencing

an absence of emotional connection with the Divine, despite their efforts to connect (e.g., *spiritual dryness*; Büssing et al., 2013). Rather than a typical waxing and waning of perceived closeness with God/gods, disengagement is meant to capture an intentional or deliberate termination of ritualistic practices intended to generate an emotional connection with the transcendent.

Discontinuance from Behaviors

Discontinuance refers to no longer following the moral norms of or engaging in the moralistic behaviors associated with religion. Religion is intricately related to morality (McKay & Whitehouse, 2015). For some, especially those dealing with a particular type of religious and spiritual struggle (Exline et al., 2014), the moral values of religion might feel constraining or even oppressive. Research has found that religiousness is related to greater self-reported morality (Shariff et al., 2016; though perhaps not necessarily associated with actual prosociality in the lab; Shariff, 2015), whereas other longitudinal research has found a dynamic temporal relationship between religious deidentification and moral relativism (Van Tongeren, DeWall, Hardy et al., in press). People's changing moral beliefs precede religious deidentification and are a consequence of leaving religion. Discontinuance is a behavioral change. When individuals no longer abide by or adhere to the moral dictates of their religion, they are discontinuing religion—that is, they cease the moral behaviors prescribed, and perhaps engage in actions proscribed, by religion. Discontinuance refers to the conscious choice to abandon behavioral intentions toward upholding religion's moral values. That is, one willingly and knowingly ceases to morally regulate one's behavior in such ways as mandated by the norms of religion. This is distinct from disengagement, which is when individuals stop efforts to connect with the transcendent and differs from following the moral norms of religion.

Disaffiliation from Belonging

Disaffiliation refers to no longer embedding oneself within a religious group or community. Many religions situated themselves within social communities, and people draw

strong social support from their coreligionists. Disaffiliation involves creating distance from other religious adherents, perhaps by no longer engaging in religion in corporate or public expressions (i.e., making religion a private, individual matter) or by shifting one's social group away from religious individuals toward more nonreligious individuals. Disaffiliates may also find their source of belonging in other arenas outside of religion or religious groups. Within this dimension, it is possible that individuals no longer attend gatherings or services with large religious groups (e.g., temple, mosque, church) but may still privately believe in or bond with the Sacred. Disaffiliation is quite public-facing, especially relative to the other dimensions. The disaffiliation process may be either a conscious and effortful decision to no longer interact or affiliate with co-religionists or it may be a result of subtly shifting one's relational attention and efforts to other groups. It is worth noting that disaffiliation resulting in separation from one's religious family or community is often quite distressing or traumatic (e.g., Fazzino, 2014).

The Interactive Nature of the Four Dimensions of (Ir)Religiousness

Thus far, we have explained four domains in which people may deidentify from religion. However, we do not suspect that these domains operate in isolation, nor that each person who leaves religion will simply abandon only one dimension of their religiousness; rather, it is entirely likely, and perhaps probably, that leaving religion involves a modification of multiple dimensions of religiousness. Indeed, previous work on the four dimensions of religion highlights their interactive nature (Saroglou, 2014). To illustrate our point, a disengaged disaffiliate may still believe in an abstract god. That is, a physicist may not attend church or feel personally connected to any personal version of God but believe that there is a higher power underlying the ordering of the universe. Alternatively, a person may continue to attend church and interact with coreligionists in a religious community while privately disbelieving and no longer feeling connected to the transcendent. In short, we postulate that the four dimensions are interrelated, and the constellation of what it looks like to leave

religion is at least as rich as the combination of different expressions of deidentification (see Figure 1).

We posit that the richness and complexity of our model in conceptualizing how people leave religion is found in the nuance provided in these interdependent associations. Rather than contending that deconversion require an abandonment of all four—which would be too stringent and would not account for the heterogeneity in religious deidentification—or suggesting that all individuals follow a similar linear path of leaving the faith, our model posits that individuals may stop identifying as religious because they modify any combination of four different dimensions of religiousness (for a discussion on heterogeneity of belief, see Beit-Hallahmi, 2015; Chaves, 2010). It possible that there are more dimensions as well, but these four domains of the religious experience appear to be well-validated across various cultures (Saroglou et al., 2020).

Potential Pathways to Leaving Religion

A second key contribution of our model is elaborating on potential reasons why people leave various aspects of their religious experience behind. Here, we integrate research on religious and spiritual struggles to help answer: what might lead people to deidentify from religion? That is, who leaves and why? An initial exploration of religious donees (McLaughlin et al., in press) has highlighted several reasons people left the faith that map onto the four domains: intellectual reasons (e.g., had significant religious doubts and simply outgrew their faith; related to *disbelief*), disillusionment from religious trauma (e.g., observing hypocrisy in the church, such as the Catholic sex abuse scandal, led them to being unable to morally support religion; related to *discontinuance*), personal adversity reasons (e.g., unexplained tragedy or suffering that created distance from God; related to *disengagement*), and social reasons (e.g., a religious community being unwelcoming; related to *disaffiliation*). These events or processes were precipitated by, or occurred alongside, religious or spiritual struggles.

Religious and spiritual struggles refer to situations in which one's religion or spirituality becomes a negative feature of their life, either through cognitive, emotional, or social factors (Exline, 2013; Exline, Pargament, Grubbs, & Yali, 2014). Exline and colleagues identify six domains of such struggles that are categorized into three broader groups. First, struggles with supernatural agents can involve *divine struggle* and *demonic struggle*. In the former, individuals experience negative emotions or perceive a conflict with a benevolent supernatural deity. In the latter, individuals are concerned that they are under attack from evil or malevolent supernatural forces. Second, individuals may experience *interpersonal struggle* when they experience conflict or perceive rejection from religious individuals or institutions. Third, people may report intrapersonal struggle in one of three domains: *moral struggle* is common when people fail to live up to the moral codes (of religion) and feel subsequent guilt and shame; *doubt related struggle* is when people doubt the veracity of their religious or spiritual beliefs, and; *ultimate meaning struggle* is when people question or do not perceive a sense of meaning or significance in life (in their own life or in life in general). Thus, individuals may experience religious or spiritual struggles across various aspects of the religious experience (see Lukoff et al., 1992, 1995, for important clinical and cultural considerations of such struggles).

We posit that religious and spiritual struggles may motivate people to leave religion. Support for this claim has been substantiated by recent research that examined the types of struggles reported by college students who were pulling away from religion (Exline et al., in press). They elaborated several ways in which each type of struggle might relate to becoming less religious. Examining both life struggles (i.e., looking back over one's life) and current struggles (i.e., within the past several months), the results revealed that those who were actively pulling away from religion—the *disengaged but religious* and *disengaged but spiritual* groups—reported higher levels of current religious/spiritual struggles. Lifetime struggles were among the highest for the religious “donees,” or those who had completely left religion (i.e., no longer identified as religious), suggesting that an accumulation of religious or spiritual struggle might

lead one to leave religion. The authors conclude that either pulling away from religion or religious deidentification is related to many religious and spiritual struggles. This suggests that religious and spiritual struggles might lead an individual to leave religion.

We are quick to mention two caveats. First, because these data are cross-sectional, it is also possible that people experience struggle because they are leaving religion (or perhaps a third variable is causing both associations). So, we are hesitant to make conclusive claims about the causal direction of the relationships. Second, many people who experience religious and spiritual struggles remain engaged in religion. Not everyone leaves. It is reasonable that religious individuals have a greater frequency of such struggles because they believe in, and perceive a relationship with, a supernatural agent (see Exline et al., 2014). Religious individuals, who perceive a relationship with the divine, would likely also perceive more struggle. In fact, many people consider religious and spiritual struggles a central (and positive) feature of their relationship with the divine (e.g., mystics) that may lead to more growth or maturation. Thus, such struggles do not always lead to leaving religion—but in some cases, they might. Toward that end, we briefly explore the four pathways of religious and spiritual struggles related to the four dimensions of deidentification and review evidence for each (see Figure 1).

Doubt to Disbelief

Intellectual doubt can give way to disbelief. Prior work has suggested that people experience religious and spiritual struggles surrounding doubt (Exline et al., 2014), largely around the legitimacy of their beliefs (e.g., does God exist?) and can start as early as adolescence (Saroglou, 2012). Longitudinal work suggests that doubt-related religious and spiritual struggles predict changes in people's cognitive representations of God one year later (Van Tongeren et al., 2019). In a study of religious college undergraduates, those who reported greater struggle surrounding doubt, reported fewer benevolent experiences of God six months later, which was related to altered views about God's benevolence. That is, doubt can change

what people believe about God. Other research has found that people report leaving their faith due to intellectual reasons or because they outgrew their faith (McLaughlin et al., in press). Other theoretical work has argued that doubt is one direct pathway toward deconversion or opposition to religion (Fisher, 2017).

Doubt likely arises when individuals (a) experience a discrepancy between the reality of a situation, such as personal or existential suffering, and their existing religious schema, which can create cognitive dissonance and may require religious accommodation (e.g., Hecht, 2003; Van Tongeren, Davis et al., in press), (b) have persistent and unresolved questions related to one's religious worldview that go unanswered (Hood, Hill, & Spilka, 2018), or (c) undergo small shifts in their worldview (i.e., cognitive schema) until their view of the world is no longer consistent with religious frameworks (e.g., questioning the benevolence or omnipotence of a deity). Indeed, some of the earliest research on cognitive dissonance focused on religious dissonance (Festinger et al., 1956). The mismatch between how individuals make sense of the world and the religious assertion of the existence of a supernatural agent can give way to doubt-related dissonance, in which one way to reduce such dissonance is to disbelieve in the supernatural agent.² Thus, doubt is one potential avenue toward disbelief.

Supernatural (Divine and Demonic) Struggle to Disengagement

When people perceive conflict with God or experience what they classify as oppressive involvement from evil supernatural forces (e.g., demons, the devil, evil spirits), they may feel distant from God. The process of perceiving supernatural struggle and emotional disengagement may take various routes, such as anger toward God. Anger toward God may arise when people perceive that God is responsible for causing them or their family members harm (e.g., Exline, Prince-Paul, Root, & Peereboom, 2013). This anger likely creates an emotional distance that makes it difficult to engage in bonding with the transcendent; indeed,

² We also realize that other features of religious leaving, such as negative interactions with co-religionists, may be associated with doubt (Krause & Ellison, 2009).

research has found that anger at God is associated with disengagement from God (Exline, Krause, & Broer, 2016) and is inversely related to closeness with God and well-being (Yali, Glazer, & Exline, 2019). Thus, in response to this anger, individuals may perceive God as more distant. Also, some individuals experiencing divine struggle may sense that God is punishing them (Pargament, Smith, Koenig, & Perez, 1998), which may initiate fear and elicit avoidance related behaviors (Bradley, Exline, & Uzdavines, 2017). Both processes suggest that these struggles impede relational closeness with the Sacred and are associated with disengagement.

Supernatural struggles also include demonic struggles, or the belief that malevolent supernatural forces interfere in one's daily life or affairs. Such perceived attacks may be a barrier to engaging with God, especially if individuals feel as though their own personal or moral choices are the reason for the demonic interference (e.g., breaking a religious moral code that is causing this supernatural interference). However, it is also possible that for some, the perceived "attack from the enemy" might drive them into closer union with the sacred as they seek emotional comfort and reassurance following perceived supernatural interference from opposing forces. That is, some might turn toward the divine for coping in the wake of demonic struggle. Still, we suspect that demonic struggles, like divine struggles, likely impair one's bonding experiences and can lead to (some degree of) disengagement. Among a sample of college students who reported that they pulling away from religion, those who were disengaged reported the greatest divine and demonic struggles (Exline et al., in press). Taken together, the extant research appears to support the connection between experiencing supernatural struggle and disengaging from the divine.

Moral Struggle to Discontinuance

When individuals feel that their moral behaviors do not align with the religious teachings of their worldview, they are likely to experience moral struggles. These struggles can generate feelings of guilt and shame resulting from not living up the cultural standards of a

religious tradition. For example, experimental work has revealed that cognitively activating religion can intensify negative feelings and impair relational satisfaction for religious individuals following a sexual values violation (Van Tongeren, Newbound, & Johnson, 2016). This dissonance may create two distinct reduction attempts: whereas some individuals may harbor these negative emotions and attempt to alter their behavior to align with such standards (i.e., change one's behavior), others may stop endorsing and adhering to such standards (i.e., change one's attitude). Moreover, link between moral struggle and discontinuance may either be conscious or unconscious. For example, an individual may discontinue religious practices because she wants to engage in behaviors forbidden by that religious teaching. In contrast, another individual may pull back from religious practices because of having engaged in "sinful" activities that elicit guilt and shame. Thus, moral struggle may prompt religious discontinuance.

Some evidence for the link between moral struggle and religious discontinuance has been marshaled by research on moral injury (Koenig et al., 2017). A moral injury, such as a military-related trauma, may lead survivors to pull away from religion, especially among those whose moral injury was related to spirituality (Currier, Foster, & Isaac, 2019). That is, military veterans whose actions may have violated religious teachings (e.g., commandments about murder) may feel as though they have desecrated the sacred requirements of their religious tradition and experience guilt and shame, compelling them to pull back from religion. In addition, these moral injuries can cause religious and spiritual struggles that are responsible for (i.e., mediate) the deleterious effects on mental health and well-being (Evans et al., 2018). Regardless of the source of moral struggle, to the degree that there is a mismatch between one's morality and the moral teachings of a religion, dissonance may motivate discontinuance (see Matthews & Mazzocco, 2017).

Interpersonal Struggle to Disaffiliation

Interpersonal struggles with co-religionists, religious leaders, or religious institutions may motivate disaffiliation. That is, some struggles arise from feeling judged by others within a particular religion, such as when one does not fit into the norms of a group or possesses an identity that is purportedly at odds with a set of religious teaching. This may cause individuals to create distance from their religious community and cause them to no longer wish to affiliate with the social group (e.g., Engelman, Milstein, Schonfeld, & Grubbs, 2020). When there is a strong disagreement between an individual and a religious community, that individual may sever those social ties to reduce conflict and regain psychological equanimity.

Just as a mismatch between one's morality and religious teachings may cause moral struggles that lead to discontinuance, a mismatch between attitudes and behaviors that originates from perceived hypocrisy in the teachings and actions of religious leaders or institutions (rather than from the individual deidentifying as religious) can create interpersonal struggles (cf. Festinger, 1956). Hypocrisy can be powerfully undermining for religious coherence and allegiance, which may explain why religious institutions deny or justify immoral behavior from leaders until it becomes impossible to conceal misdeeds. Surviving religious abuse or religion-wide moral failures may also generate interpersonal struggles that can lead people to leave religion. Thus, the pathway from interpersonal struggle to disaffiliation may run from the individual or the institution.

Ultimate Meaning Struggles May Pressure all Domains

Religion is often considered a meaning system (Park, 2013) that helps individuals find a sense of coherence, significance, and coherence (George & Park, 2016). Because religious meaning is often unique and particularly potent (Newton & McIntosh, 2013), meaning likely saturates that whole religious experience (but see also Saroglou 2011, 2014; Saroglou et al., 2020 for arguments that meaning is not primary and resides on the believing dimension). As individuals experience questions regarding whether or not life has any ultimate or existential

meaning, it is possible that they may experience changes in any, or all, of the four dimensions of religious deidentification. Indeed, Streib and Keller (2004) contend questions surrounding meaning in life are a central part of leaving religion. To the degree that they question whether life has any overarching meaning, they may begin to *disbelieve* that any god or higher power exists; they may *disengage* from attempted connection with the transcendent, viewing themselves as insignificant and any such an activity as purposeless; they might *discontinue* adherence to any religious moral norms or code, finding them to be trivial or pointless if life lacks any real meaning; and, they might *disaffiliate* from their religious community because they are in the stressful process of deconstructing their worldview and do not wish to be judged by others for whom religion is still a credible source of meaning. In short, meaning may be a central component to each of these dimensions, and wrestling with ultimate meaning strains one's well-being (Wilt et al., 2018); and a significant enough violation to one's worldview may prompt religious change.

In many ways, meaning may reside at the core of religion. Smaller cracks to one's sense of meaning may be integrated into one's existing religious framework through assimilation processes, whereas significant violations may be too incongruent to one's religious worldview, prompting an accommodation that requires religious change. Indeed, research has found that those with a more integrated religious orientation (i.e., those high in intrinsic religiousness) report less religious cognitive dissonance following existentially threatening stimuli (Van Tongeren, Davis, Hook, Davis, & Aten, in press). Those who are unable to integrate religion and metabolize suffering and struggle may abandon aspects of religion. The function of religion in existential contexts—namely through the promise of literal immortality, which is a unique contribution of religion relative to nonreligious worldviews—may rely on its ability to provide a sense of meaning in life (Van Tongeren et al., 2017). Because religion can offer meaning that extends beyond this life, it is often a particular effective terror management

mechanism (Vail et al., 2010; Van Tongeren & Green, 2018). Struggles around meaning may be an understudied key to religious deidentification that deserves significant attention.

Important Caveats

We hasten to point out several caveats regarding religious and spiritual struggles. First, we do not wish to imply that every religious or spiritual struggle will necessarily lead to religious deidentification across the various domains of religion. Religious individuals experience religious and spiritual struggles at a higher rate than nonreligious individuals (Exline et al., 2011, 2013; but see also Ellison, Fang, Flannelly, & Steckler, 2013), and not all of them leave religion, suggesting that multiple factors contribute to whether people stay or leave religion. However, research points toward the possibility that certain struggles are associated with particular domains of the (ir)religious experience, and we see a future work in the intersection of religious/spiritual struggle and dimensions of religious change.

Second, we suspect there are additional influences related to religious deidentification, such as personality and socialization (Saroglou, Karim, & Day, 2020; Streib, 2020; Van Tongeren et al., in press). As with any complex process, variables across psychological, biological, cultural, and social dimensions likely contribute to the multifarious components of religious deidentification. However, to substantively advance work that could accommodate the myriad antecedents of religious identification, it requires properly fractionating the dimensions of religion into more nuanced features to better understand the dynamic nature of the religious experience and the various ways one might leave. Additional research from differing subdisciplines of psychological science may advance a better understanding of this phenomenon.

Finally, our theoretical model is based on existing research, drawing from both direct and indirect tests of these predicted associations. More work is needed to provide strong empirical support for our model of religious deidentification. Toward that end, we turn toward

offering a brief framework for future research and offer some potentially fruitful hypotheses that could catalyze research in this exciting area.

Advancing Future Research

We see several areas for future research that would advance an understanding of religious deidentification and the complex process of leaving religion. First, we situate religious deidentification among other related constructions; then, we explore the religious residue effect, and; finally, we offer several suggestions for lines of research that might help guide future work.

Situating Deidentification Among Related Constructs

One contribution of our work is to help define and properly situation religious deidentification among other related constructs. As the psychology of religion continues to advance research on irreligious individuals, researchers must use a shared lexicon of terms and definitions that capture the unique nuance of individualized experiences. As previously mentioned, we define *religious deidentification* as an umbrella term in which an individual who once identified as religious no longer identifies as religious. We distinguish this from: *deconversion*, which has largely either focused on matters of disbelief, or the wholesale abandonment of a religious tradition—both of which may be overly general and insufficient to capture important nuance in the religious change process; *atheism*, which is defined as the cognitive disbelief in god(s) (related to *disbelief* in our model); *agnosticism*, which is defined as the uncertainty or unknowability of whether god(s) exist(s) and whether a personal relationship with such entities is possible (related to *disbelief* or *disengagement* in our model). We believe our model allows the flexibility to offer more precision about one's religious deconstruction. Once researchers use a common set of terms, they can communicate their findings with a shared understanding of their meaning.

The Religious Residue Effect

Conceptualizing religion as a social identity that individuals may transition in and out provides a useful organizing framework. Toward this end, recent research has found support for the *religious residue hypothesis*, which states that remnants of previous religious psychological and behavioral processes will continue to persist even after people stop identifying as religious (Van Tongeren et al., in press). Across four countries (i.e., Hong Kong, Netherlands, New Zealand, United States), results revealed that those who were once religious but no longer identify as religious (i.e., religious *dones*) continue to express religious *beliefs* and attitudes, engage in religious *bonding* rituals, perform religiously-motivated moral *behaviors*, and interact with religious communities for *belonging* to a higher degree than other nonreligious individuals who were never religious. That is, a religious residue remains.

Drawing from this research, we see future work better disambiguating the different aspects of the religious experience that persist—and for whom—following deidentification. What predicts which residual effects will remain, how long these different associations will linger, and for whom these relationships are the strongest? Moreover, are there certain features of religion where residue is absent? The identification of antecedents and predictors of religious residue could help researchers better understand the consequences of leaving religion and the mechanisms involved that may be implicated when religious cognitions, emotions, and behaviors persist.

Unanswered Questions and Future Research

Dimensional Primacy. Although we think it is unlikely that one dimension of (non)religiousness more primary than others, and previous work on the features of religion suggest their interactive nature (Saroglou, 2014), empirical work may add to this discussion. Although it seems that each dimension of religion is equally important, and interdependent, it remains an empirical question of whether the abandonment of one domain has cascading effects on other domains, suggesting a latent ordering of these dimensions. Related to this, the

nature of aspects of religious leaving (e.g., forced disaffiliation) may affect the other interrelated features; similarly, some people may leave without struggles (e.g., spiritual but not religious individuals may have just stopped identifying as religious). Such differences might be nuanced as a function of personality (Saroglou, 2014). Another question regarding the interplay of the dimensions is that it is possible that ultimate meaning may be affected by these four domains, in addition to affecting them (i.e., the causal arrow might be reversed or there might be a reciprocal relationship). Future research could explore the relationship between (ultimate) meaning and these dimensions.

The Temporal Unfolding of Religious Deidentification. It is likely that religious change takes time and is a process that unfolds over time. However, little research has focused on the longitudinal nature of these changes. For example, some research has found a dynamic temporal relationship between religious deidentification and moral relativism (Van Tongeren, DeWall, Hardy et al., in press). Not only does this work suggest that shifting moral standards—perhaps discontinuance—predict future, and a result of, religious deidentification, this work revealed that religious residue decays (i.e., weakens) over time. Toward that end, and consistent with recommendations from Streib (2020), we see future efforts that capture the temporal unfolding of leaving religion to be particularly important. For example, people may first disengage, then disbelieve, and then finally disaffiliate in their process of deidentification (Wink et al., 2019). Moreover, developmental differences in religious deidentification may emerge, such variation in whether emotionally-laden god-images or cognitively-based god-concepts persist in similar magnitude among adolescents, middle aged adults, and older adults (Rizzutto, 1979). Data that can speak to these issues would be valuable.

Cross-Cultural and Personality Differences. Our model is based on four dimensions that are posited to be universal aspects of religion, expressed uniquely based on culture (Saroglou, 2011). Indeed, recent research has found evidence for these dimensions across 14 cultures, though it has also highlighted ways in which culture varies the primary dimensions

of individual religious expressions in each country or culture (Saroglou et al., 2020). For example, in secular Western societies, there is a strong cognitive and emotional emphasis of religion (i.e., believing and bonding), whereas in religious Eastern societies, there is a strong moral and social emphasis of religion (i.e., behaving and belonging). Might these be the domains in which people initially start pulling away from religion? Or do cultural pressures to believe and bond in the West, and behave and belong in the East, make it harder to abandon those aspects of the religious experience? Although the religious residue effect was found robustly across four disparate countries, might future work find stronger residual remnants of religion in some dimensions more than others, depending on culture? In a similar vein, features of personality may moderate these dimensions of leaving religion (see Saroglou, 2014), given that most behavior is a function of personality and environment. We await future work that engages these questions.

Concluding Remarks

The nonreligious experience is as varied as the religious one. Just as multiple dimensions frame religion and ways of being religious, there are multiple aspects of irreligiousness and ways in which people can religiously deidentify. Adapting a cross-culturally valid model of religion (Saroglou, 2011; Saroglou et al., 2020), we conceptually highlight the variety of nonreligious experiences, posit pathways toward leaving religion that are embedded in religious and spiritual struggles, and pose potential questions for future inquiry that can be validated by empirical endeavors. As the number of nonreligious individuals grow—and may indeed be comprised increasingly of formerly religious ones—psychological science needs a richer, more complete model of understanding how and why people leave their faith, as well as the psychological consequences of religious deidentification, to capture a fuller picture of the varieties of the nonreligious experience.

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Figure 1. A Model of Religious Leaving: Proposed interrelationship (solid lines) between the four dimensions of (non)religiousness and the potential relationships (dotted lines) with various religious and spiritual struggles.