Losing My Religion:

Storying Atheist Deconversion & Religious Exit Narratives in the Maltese Context

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Abstract

This qualitative study focuses on the stories of Maltese and Gozitan atheists and non-religious adults, and how they narrate their religious exit within a religiously-saturated social and familial context. It is a systemic exploration of atheism, atheist identities, and the process of deconversion from a strength-based position. 5 semi-structured interviews were carried out and a Critical Narrative Analysis approach was adopted, incorporating elements from Discourse Analytic approaches as well as Narrative inquiry as the main tools for interpreting the results. Findings include notions of the ever-changing nature of participants' atheist identity, ethical incongruencies, disclosure of their deconverted selves to others, and negotiating the overlapping value systems adopted post-religion. Their stories have narrative arcs relating to the struggle to fit in as well as the rebellion against religious hegemony, blending bildungsroman, tragic, and heroic plots. This study critically highlights the ingrained religiosity in Maltese language and the absence of secular linguistic tools for local atheists, as well as the circularity inherent in deconversion events and juxtaposes notions of 'de-converting from' with 'converting to'. It is also a contribution to the therapeutic field, especially for practitioners interested in issues of spirituality, role exit, and transitioning beyond religious territories.

Key Words: Deconversion; Religious Exit; Atheism; Atheist Identity; Spirituality; Moral Transitions; Deconversion Stories

1. Introduction

"The great theistic religions of the world have ascribed many sorts of mentality to the highest gods, but almost invariably their characteristics have been derived from human models."

- Gregory Bateson (1987)

"Isn't it enough to see that a garden is beautiful without having to believe that there are fairies at the bottom of it too?"

- Douglas Adams (1995)

Although the phenomenon and function of religion has been studied in the past from a plethora of divergent schools of thought (Durkheim, 1921; James, 1902; Harris et al., 2009; Swaab, 2015; Hardy, 1965; Bateson & Bateson, 1987; Luhmann, 2013), the subject of religious deconversion is a relatively recent interest in the research spheres. In fact, prior to everyone's fascination with *de*conversion, "conversion has been a prominent focus of theorizing and research in the psychology of religion from its early days on" (Streib & Keller, 2004).

In this study, I delve deeper into the topic of deconversion and view it from a qualitative perspective – from the eyes of the *deconvert*. Unlike trends in research focusing on this phenomenon from a positivist stance (Hood et al., 2009; Streib, 2020; Streib & Klein, 2013), attempting to explain it down to a nice scientific package, I am taking the lesser-travelled narrative route and exploring the subjective 'fall from grace' into atheism.

1.1 Researcher Self-Disclosure, Self-Reflexivity, and 'Neutrality'

"Qualitative writing by its nature involves the Self too intimately to ignore wounds, scars, and hard-won understandings that are to some degree part of our baggage."

- Ely et al. (1997)

Researchers have sometimes had to defend themselves from accusations of self-indulgence when using their own stories for research purposes (Mykhalovskiy, 1997), and traditional academic, positivist discourse has a tendency of silencing the 'I', believing that subjectivity 'contaminates' research (Etherington, 2001). Stromberg (2020) states that "since none of us has the option of adopting a neutral point of view, every position in the world entails a set of assumptions about the nature of reality" (p.327), hence the importance of accounting for my own self-disclosure and researcher bias.

Reflecting this post-modern rationale, my work is not intended to be a beacon of neutrality, impartiality, or 'bracketing' as some phenomenological researchers dictate (Hansen, 2017; Wertz, 2005). Throughout my dissertation my own self-reflexive voice will be echoed, simultaneously embracing and asserting my non-neutral position on religion.

1.2 A Personal Exodus: My Own Religious Exit

"Since it is obviously inconceivable that all religions can be right, the most reasonable conclusion is that they are all wrong."

- Christopher Hitchens (2008)

The main impetus for this research is my own religious deconversion journey from Christianity towards Atheism in my late teens/early twenties. The culmination into my own religious exit came about through an accumulation of factors – but mainly through further

scientific understanding of the human brain's role in creating religious, spiritual, and paranormal experiences and exclusively believing its own generated reality.

This 'awakening' was accelerated by my studies in philosophy & psychology, ushering me in exploring and unveiling so-called 'mystical' phenomena and instead viewing them through the demystifying eye of the critic, appreciating the trick, without the magic – acknowledging their meaning yet substituting the supernatural forces seemingly operating underneath them with psychological (Bering, 2013; French & Stone, 2014; Shermer, 2011), evolutionary (Dawkins, 1989; 2006; 2009; Thomson & Aukofer; 2011) and neuroscientific evidence (Foster, 2010; Harris et al., 2009; Sacks, 2013; Swaab, 2015). This sort of *behind-the-scenes-effect* was pivotal in my religious exit.

1.2.1 On Contexts, Systems and Origins

"Without context, words and actions have no meaning at all"

- Gregory Bateson (1972)

For context, I come from a Gozitan Catholic family, was a devout 'true believer' since childhood and prided myself in having a good relationship and an open dialogue with God. Yet, whilst I frequently dialogued with Him, God never replied back, resembling more of a monologue, and as Bakhtin (1986) aptly says, "there is nothing more terrible than a lack of response" (p. 127). In these years, I was lucky to have met helpful clerical church members whose liberal views of Catholic teachings, their open manner of guidance, and permissive attitude towards asking difficult questions, paradoxically continued to water my seeds of curiosity.

It is interesting to reflect on the duality of religio-spiritual dilemmas happening on the micro-level of my mind, versus the wider-scale system of my home village. Family members and friends were not always understanding and/or accepting of my deconversion, including

the local Archpriest and his home-interventions, warning me not to “stray away”. In Batesonian (1972) fashion, my little existential perturbations created complex ecological ripple effects in the quiet village of Żebbuġ, Gozo.

With my eventual professional experience working in the mental health field, I also came face to face with themes of religious nature from a pathological perspective, such as when I worked with clients suffering from severe psychosis and OCD. This constantly made me question and ponder on Szasz’s (1973) quote, “If you talk to God, you are praying; if God talks to you, you have schizophrenia”. What this inadvertently did was dethrone religion from the *unmocked* position it occupied in my head where it conveniently escaped the scrutiny of scientific rules (Bateson & Bateson, 1987), furthering my deconversion process.

1.3 My Research Rationale

Atheism is stigmatised, under-represented and without a voice (Krueger, 2013) both socially and academically (Streib, 2014), especially in the Maltese local context. My research on religious deconverts can provide buoyancy to subjugated narratives in a sea of dominant discourses about religion, spirituality, morality and the choice to disaffiliate from these pre-determined and default socio-cultural affiliations. It also addresses a lacuna in both local and international research on the topic (Ebaugh, 1998), especially from a systemic lens.

1.3.1 Research Aim and Question(s)

“Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find.”

Matthew 7:7

What I ultimately aim to explore are the stories of people who identify as non-religious/atheist within the Maltese context, what contributed to their exodus from religious faith, and how they narrate their pilgrimage within their idiosyncratic contexts. My goal is

not to produce a one-size-fits-all hypothesis about *the* universal trajectory of deconversion, but extracting the unique, narratively diverse textures every participant owns.

My study follows these Research Question and sub-questions:

- ***How do Maltese atheists narrate their journey from faith to secularism? How did they live their personal narrative of deconversion and religious exit whilst living in a religious socio-cultural context?***
    - *How do Maltese atheists negotiate their shifting identities and spiritual dilemmas, if any, in a post-religious life?*
    - *How do they learn to live as non-religious in a religion-saturated context?*
    - *What contributed to their religious exit/disaffiliation and how does the deconversion process fit in the atheist's life-story?*

1.4 Languaging Deconversion: My Socio-Constructionist Research stance

"In the beginning, was the Word"

- John 1:1

"The limits of my language mean the limits of my world"

- Ludwig Wittgenstein (1922)

Throughout this research I adopt a systemic, post-modernist, socio-constructionist epistemological stance (Dallos & Draper, 2015; Gehart, 2014; McNamee, 2010; McNamee & Gergen, 1992), also utilising Narrative Theory (Clandinin & Connelly, 2004; Kim, 2016; Reissman, 2008) as my Conceptual Framework, which is further expounded in the Methodology Chapter.

Although the concept of deconversion can be seen as a linear, finite process with a 'completion stage', this can shift depending on how it is defined and *languaged*. 'Deconversion' is always a process of Becoming (or Un-Becoming, depending on your vantage point), yet the terminology used here (*atheist*, *deconvert*) implies a sort of finality (Bakhtin, 1981). In order not to stifle the multitude of fluid atheistic variations, I provide a comprehensive list of non-religious definitions in the Literature Review Chapter.

2. Literature Review

This chapter is subdivided into compartments to provide a coherent train of thought about my construction of deconversion and atheism in both an academic and reflexive manner, and all studies cited are seen through a systemic and socio-constructionist critical lens. I also privilege religious ideas as part of the discussion, hence my inclusion of personal communication with Fr. Eric Cachia sdb. Given my close relationships to religious people and clergy throughout my early life, even now through my employment within a religious organisation, I acknowledge the validity of their contribution to the religion/non-religion debate.

2.1 Definition of Terms of Non-Religious Typologies

Attempts to formalise the 'main types' of atheism (or that which is not religious) is a philosophic-academic quest undertaken by many, yet not all attempts are equally satisfying, and in my critical opinion, some authors (Thomson, 2022; Big Think & Templeton Foundation, 2022) do not merit neither the nuanced intricacies nor rigour to the complex spectrum of non-religious denominations.

The 'classification' approaches I subscribe to are mostly based on Cragun's (2016) and Pérez & Vallières's (2019) works, yet these are by no means a distilled list of all terms available, and may be used by various populations in different contexts to convey meanings different from what is ascribed to them in the academic sphere, or in this dissertation.

2.1.1 Religion

Defining Religion is vital in the context of and juxtaposition with non-religion – yet it "has proven to be a hard concept to define" (Pérez & Vallières, 2019, p.2). Durkheim (1912) proposed that religion is that which is sacred in society. "However, there are many other aspects of society that are considered sacred that are not typically considered religious, such

as flags, families, and […] sports teams" (Cragun, 2016, p.1), making Durkheim's (1912) overly-broad definition problematic.

The definition by Argyle & Beit-Hallahmi (1975) accounts for the gaps in Durkheim's (1912) proposal, defining *Religion* as "a system of beliefs in a divine or superhuman power, and practices of worship or other rituals directed towards such a power" (Argyle & Beit-Hallahmi, 1975, p.1). This definition covers what Argyle & Beit-Hallahmi (2014) observe as the common denominators of religions worldwide: "the presence of a supernatural being/force, and the relationship that human beings have with such entity" (Pérez & Vallières, 2019, p.2) The inclusion of *religion-making features* makes this definition of religion a complex one, while not constricted only to 'God of the Bible', but transferable to any religious faith (Pérez & Vallières, 2019).

2.1.2 Secularism & Deconversion

The term *secular* was introduced by Christian theologians as reference to any activity which is not religious in orientation. With the *-ism* suffix, *secularism* becomes a political philosophy rooted in the notion of separation between church and state (Cragun, 2016). In Malta, Church and State were officially separated in 2016 with the abolishment of blasphemy laws and decriminalisation of vilification of religion (Times of Malta, 2016).

Apart from a macro, institutional level, *secularisation* can also take place at the micro, individual level, "as people who are raised religious move toward lower levels of religiosity" (Cragun, 2016, p.6). Resonant examples of stories aiding my own personal secularisation include the Pastor who experimented living a year without God, eventually deconverting to atheism (Bell, 2014; Lodge, 2015); and the Fundamental Christian radio host turned Atheist activist, now host of The Thinking Atheist podcast, and writer (Andrews, 2012). The terms *secularisation* and *deconversion* are overlapping and interchangeable, as I discuss below.

Pérez & Vallières (2019, p.5) define *Deconversion* as a "process by which an initially religious person abandons his/her beliefs over time and adopts a non-religious identity (in the form of atheism or, at the very least, agnosticism)". Since deconversion implies the diminution of religiosity over time it may also be defined as a process of individual secularisation and religious disenchantment (Cragun, 2016).

In systemic fashion, secularisation processes on an individual level run in parallel to the secularisation of society, or the "disenchantment of the world" (Weber, 1905), where modern understandings of the world are explained less via supernatural and/or religious means and increasingly though scientific discourse. As naturalistic forms of understandings replace religious ones, people become less religious and further disenchanted from the supernatural worldview (Cragun, 2016).

2.1.3 Agnosticism, Apostacy & Exit

Before the term atheism, there came *agnosticism*, first coined by Huxley (1869) literally "without knowledge of a god or gods" (Cragun, 2016, p.8), referring to the difficulty in obtaining knowledge about any god whatsoever. This bears the precursory roots of critical and socio-constructionist thinking in matters of gods and religions. According to Huxley (1869, p.768), "Agnosticism, in fact, is not a creed, but a method, the essence of which lies in the rigorous application of a single principle… do not pretend that conclusions are certain which are not demonstrated or demonstrable". Agnostics are those who adopt an 'unsure' position of 'not knowing' (Anderson & Goolishan, 1992) on the spectrum of theistic probability (Dawkins, 2006).

A divergently related term is *Apostacy*. The meaning of Apostacy depends much on who says it and towards whom (Cragun, 2016). Caplovitz & Sherrow (1977) argue that apostasy indicates more than the mere loss of religious faith, and widens the definition to a rejection of a particular community as a basis for self-identification. Yet, as Cragun &

Hammer (2011) argue, apostasy is a term used pejoratively and judgmentally by those who remain religious. Cragun (2016, pp. 11,12) offers a more neutral term: "*religious exiter* as it reflects only the fact that someone left a religion and implies nothing else about where that person went".

2.1.4 Atheism & New Atheism

Atheism is the lack of belief in god/s, where "the *a* prefix means 'without' or 'lacking', [and] the root of the rest of the word, *-theism*, is the Greek term, 'theos' (θєός), which means God or a god" (Cragun, 2016, p.6). From this perspective, Atheism can be an 'empty signifier', since it "indicates that the individual may belong to a certain category or group of people, but precisely what is meant by membership in that category is not perfectly clear." (Cragun, 2016, p.8).

Cragun (2016) further argues for an extended definition of Atheism, and considers *Religious people as atheists in other religions*. This is known as Positive vs. Negative atheism. *Positive Atheism* is when "the individual is making a positive assertion about the nonexistence of a deity" (e.g., "I know Zeus is just a myth/non-existent"), whilst *Negative Atheism* "is being without belief in a god or gods because of no prior knowledge of the claimed existence of that god/s" (Cragun, 2016, p.7). Negative Atheism sheds a critical light on statistical numbers about atheists – when researching how many atheists exist in any society, one needs to further clarify which god/s are they *not* believing in? Some may be Christians, but simultaneously they are atheists towards Thor, Shiva, Quetzalcoatl, Amun-Ra and the millions of other gods claimed by other religions and civilisations, past and present. In social constructionist terms, embracing one religious belief system means rejecting an infinitude of others.

Since the early-2000's commercialisation of Atheist literature by scathing authors such as Richard Dawkins (2006), Christopher Hitchens (2007), and Sam Harris (2004) there

has been a so-called *New Atheism* wave. New Atheists have suggested that what makes them unique from ‘old’ atheists is “the combination of three key characteristics: the rejection of all supernatural beliefs, advocacy for science, and their open criticism of religion.” (Cragun, 2016, p.15).

The above definitions all relate to the topic of *Deconversion*, further explored below.

2.2 Deconversion as a Systemic Concept

“The more things change, the more they remain the same”.

- Watzlawick et al., 1974, p.23

sWhilst relatively scarce in the camps of qualitative research domains, the notion of religious exit has gained some traction within positivist and scientific research fields (Bullivant & Ruse, 2013; Streib & Klein, 2013), where the predominant effort is to capture deconversion and seek causal, statistical regularities in the psychosocial factors that underpin it, to crystallize it under different ‘models’ – including Ebaugh’s (1988) *4 Stages Model of Role-Exit,* Streib et al.’s (2009) *Categories of Deconversion,* Gooren’s (2010) *Conversion Career Model*, and Krueger’s (2013) *Five Phases of the De-conversion process*.

Stromberg’s (2020) and Gooren’s (2011) critique of the current deconversion literature trends considers the historical context of religious pluralism in the early 1970’s and the sociological study of new religious movements. Although today the purview of the topic has expanded considerably, the paradigm established by these early studies is inescapable, with research on the topic oriented around questions about the “religious marketplace”, (Stromberg, 2020, p.324).

To view deconversion from a systemic lens it is useful to explore where the term originates from because “etymologically, the term 'to convert' is pregnant with meaning, namely, from the Latin: *'con-versare', to speak to*, in faith-journey terms”, (E. Cachia, personal communication, 2021). Hence, de-conversion is “possibly, a contradiction in terms,

given the fact that a person who decides to distance her/himself from an established, institutionalised religion is, perhaps, [acting on] a free decision based on opposing or conflictual views", (E. Cachia, personal communication, 2021).

Streib (2014) echoes this notion by stating that "the portrait of deconversion, […] is that of an active deconvert resembling the 'active convert'" (p.16), which brings the question, is the deconvert 'losing' religion, or 'gaining' another? This dual-notion of the term implies a systemic, circular, if not paradoxical understanding of the de-conversion process. As Cachia (personal communication, 2021) stated, the term 'deconversion' implies a residual connection with the term 'conversion', hence a power issue is created between the two roles/terms, mainly that 'deconversion' is always happening in reference to 'conversion', further accentuating its dialogical soul.

In fact, Krueger (2013) mentions how the term "de-conversion [is] often applied to individuals involved in the role-exit process who abandon the role of theist in favour of adopting the role of an atheist", (p.2). Ebaugh (1988, p.238) further defines role-exit as "the process of disengagement from a role that is central to one's self-identity and the reestablishment of an identity in a new role that takes into account one's ex-role". Barbour (1994) further develops the understanding of the term 'deconvert' to suggest conversion *from* and conversion *toward* as alternative perspectives on the same process. Hence, "every deconversion is a conversion as well as its reverse", (Nagle, 2017, p.256). This encompasses the need for a systemic, integrative 'both/and' perspective, rather than a linear, divisive 'either/or' mindset.

2.3 Atheism as a Religion?

While for some Atheism is "extremely simple to define" (Baggini, 2003, p.3), others argue that "rather, it is increasingly difficult to say, with any sort of consensus, exactly what

it is" (Quillen, 2015, p.1). Due to this conceptual ambiguity lacking clear distinctions between conversion and other types of radical change, the 'deconverted' position might bring with it discussions around whether atheism is another religion – rendering deconversion a misnomer (Fazzino, 2014).

Fazzino (2014) defines *Deconversion* as a "dynamic multi-stage experience of transformative change marked by both liberation from and opposition against religion" (p.250). Through this understanding, I do not subscribe with the 'Atheism as a religion' claim. To call atheism a religion is tantamount to saying 'not collecting stamps' is a hobby, or abstinence is a sex-position (Dawkins, 2006). A secular exit is but one option in a spectrum of deconversion trajectories (Streib, 2020; Streib & Keller, 2004), and not every religious exit is a conversion to another religious belief system. This does not automatically mean that the atheist deconvert does not hold a particular worldview – it only highlights that sometimes deconverts choose to opt out of the religious marketplace and stop playing the 'god(s) game' altogether, an exit characterized by disaffiliation (atheism) without re-affiliation (Streib, 2014), as shown in Figure 1.

On the other hand, Scheidt, (2018) argues that "becoming atheist also entails a turning *toward,* and there are new values and structures that support atheist identity and the process of deconversion" (p.35). Stromberg (2020) further emphasizes that "one can only move by going somewhere else and hence leaving will inevitably entail taking up a new set of images, ideas and beliefs" (p.332). Although the term deconversion and discourse around it usually tend to convey the metaphorical "stripping" of religion, one analysis shows that for many atheists it also entailed the "donning" of new clothes (Scheidt, 2018), but to claim this as a 'religion', I believe, is premature and overly-simplistic, because while the processes of conversion and deconversion might be palindromic, the narratives of converts and deconverts are not (Barbour, 1994).

Contrary to popular misunderstanding, as atheists exit from religion, they are not void of beliefs or philosophical ideas. They do not become *tabula rasa*. Research consistently shows that the contribution of many (often conflicting) ideas/beliefs about morality, ethics, scientific worldviews and rationality provide the necessary catalysis for loss of faith (Pérez & Vallières, 2019). Atheists hold beliefs independent from God, and by subscribing to a set of values does not automatically mean they are 'religious' or have converted to a religion/faith. As the website for American Atheists (2021) state, atheists have no common belief system, rituals, or 'atheist creed' to adhere to, there are no sacred atheist scriptures, no atheist Pope, "the only common thread that ties all atheists together is a lack of belief in gods" (American Atheists, 2021). This subtlety can give rise to confusion and may explain oxymorons like 'religious atheist' or 'Atheist faith' used still in social discourse today.

The term 'deconvert' itself can be enough to highlight and distinguish between the two positions, since by "calling the transition from religion to atheism '*de*conversion', atheists aim to create distance between the two" (Scheidt, 2018, p.62). The *languaging* of the term becomes a power-laden message, emphasising the *difference* between becoming atheist vs. becoming religious, since "overwhelmingly in atheist communities, one 'deconverts' rather than 'converts to atheism'", (Scheidt, 2018, p.62).

2.4 Statistical Data on Religious Exit

Statistically, there are emerging trends in various lines of research (Kosmin et al., 2009; Cragun et al., 2013; Baker & Smith, 2015) showing the considerable growth and increasing visibility of non-religious populations in contemporary Western society (Sumerau & Cragun, 2016). This is evidenced by the growing portions of individuals with no religious affiliation (religious 'nones'), atheists, and agnostics, with 31% religious nones in the USA (Pew Research Centre, 2022), and 40% in Germany (Streib et al., 2009). The slide into

secularism in society is also reflected locally as evidenced by the State of the Nation Poll (Marmarà, 2021a; 2021b; 2022; 2023)

In Malta, the 2021 State of the Nation poll (*n*=1,064) carried out by statistician Dr. Vincent Marmarà has shown that 3% of all respondents (16 years and over) do not believe in God. This was also the case for 8% of 16- to 25-year-olds, whilst overall, 3.5% said they 'did not know'. 10.8% reported that religion is not important in their lives at all (Marmarà, 2021a; Aquilina, 2021; Farrugia, 2021). The majority of the population (93.5%) believes in God. Interestingly, Gozo scored lower than the National average when it came to the impact of religion on personal decisions. In fact, 20.5% of Gozitans regarded religion as not important in their lives at all (Marmarà, 2021b).

The same survey was repeated in 2022 and 2023 with the previous years' exact sample size (*n*=1,064). The data extracted is mostly similar and, when compared to 2021, the results pertaining to belief in God are reported to only have moved marginally. 90.5% still reported belief in God in 2021, decreasing to 88.5% in 2023, yet 5% of the Maltese population in 2022 and 6.6% in 2023 reported they don't believe in God, while 4.5% of the population in 2022 and 4.9% in 2023 'don't know'. This means that at least ~3% of the Maltese population has undergone or is undergoing through some form of secularisation, mainly in the younger population, with a quarter (25%) of 16–25-year-olds reporting no belief in God (Marmarà, 2023).

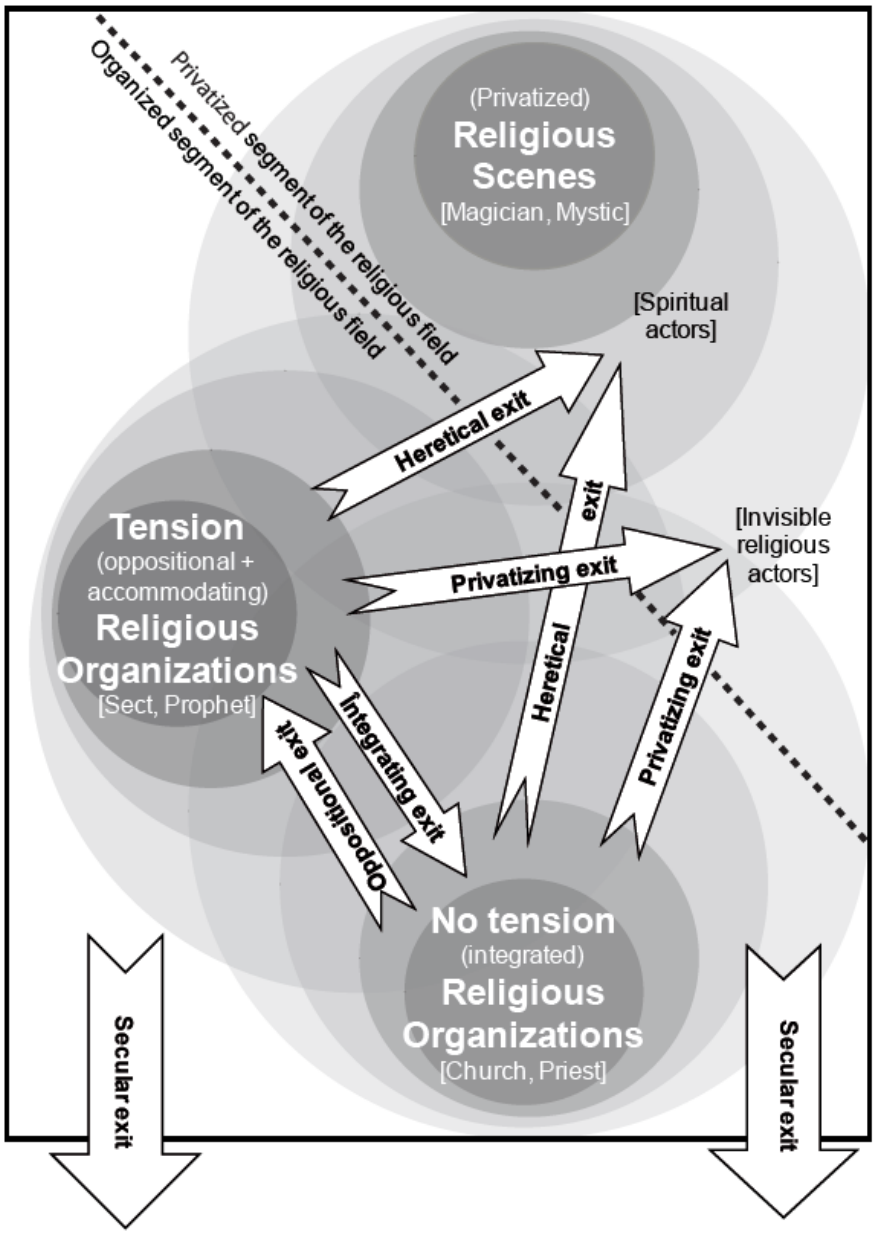


Figure 1. The complexity of Deconversion trajectories as migration movements within and out of the religious field. (Streib, 2014, p. 3).

3. Methodology

"Stories always refer to the past; they never can reach the very present moment, since when the word is formulated, and when it becomes heard, the situation in which it was formulated has already passed."

- Jaakko Seikkula (2011)

3.1 A Post-Modern Qualitative Methodology

The qualitative methodological framework adopted is aimed at an in-depth and insightful understanding into the *how*, rather than the *why* of participants' patterns and processes (Mason, 2002; Sprenkle & Piercy, 2005; Denzin & Lincoln, 2017). A qualitative methodology allows the exploration of delicate, unique, deeply personal, and fleeting accounts of a process or event, unlike positivist, modernist definitions of 'events' as external, permanent phenomena.

Rather, in my post-modern, socio-constructionist research, I operate under the assumption that both researcher and participant are embedded in social contexts, biases, and discourses. Hence, narratives provide a wealth of storied experiences which represent people's stories as told by them (Kim, 2016; Riessman, 2008) and "seeks to illuminate how believers use narratives to fashion a context of meaning" (Gooren, 2010, as cited in Stromberg, 2020, p.328). I thus acknowledge that the research process is inductive in nature and allows the emergence of participants' co-constructed narratives (Dallos & Vetere, 2005; Gergen & McNamee, 2000).

3.2 The Narrative Research Method Rationale

"Narrative is not only a research method, it is a cultural mechanism whereby persons make sense of their lives […] in narratives, participants build a world."

- Stromberg (2020, p.331)

"Narrative is the primary scheme by which human existence is rendered meaningful."

- Polkinghorne (1988)

The overarching framework adopted in my research is that of Narrative Analysis (Riessman, 1993; Kim, 2016) since it "focuses on the way individuals present their accounts of themselves" (Burck, 2005, p.252) and "how they accomplish a sense of self when they engage in story-telling talk" (Bamberg, 2006, p.142). According to Georgakopoulou (2006) "the study of narrative is by now a well-established area" and is in line with my research aims and rationale, since it "can afford to reach out to under-represented stories as well as viewing all stories as social practices" (p.129).

This method emphasises individuals' story-telling and meaning-making, encapsulated through language, personal and relational experiences over time, as constructed within a specific context (Clandinin & Connelly, 2004). According to Frank (2010) narrative approaches are best used when studying one or more individuals on topics lending themselves to "narrativizing" of some kind (Clandinin & Connelly, 2004), such as deconversion.

Because narratives neither speak for themselves nor have unanalysed merit (Riessman, 2005), narrative research is "always interpretive at every stage" (Josselson, 2006) and thus, core narratives will always require interpretation when used as data in social research (Riessman, 2005). Given the systemic-narrative nature of the study, I am aware that the excavated themes, patterns, and how I make sense of texts is a fruit of personal bias and

pre-knowledge. Thus, the data presented should be interpreted as subjective discursive constructions, not as empirical facts (Fazzino, 2014).

3.3 The Self of the Researcher

The co-construction of deconversion harks Bakhtin's (1981) notion of *polyphony* as "a plurality of independent, unmerged voices and consciousnesses" (p. 6), where no voice enjoys an absolute privilege. In my research, I vocalise both the multiplicity of voices that inhabit me, as the author, and the multitude of voices of my participants without exercising monologic control (Kim, 2016).

Since none of us hears a story exactly as it is told, "we fill in the gaps as we imagine they are intended and, [thus], we construct the story for ourselves about what we think the narrator tells us" (Etherington, 2001). Thus, I juxtaposed my participants' stories to my own, positioning myself as a *heuristic researcher* (Etherington, 2001; Moustakas, 1990). As a heuristic researcher I become a responsive audience to my participants' stories, and albeit in a selective manner, "those responses include the impact of their stories on the researcher" and where it connects with my story (Etherington, 2001, p.123).

By adopting the less-privileged position of a co-researcher rather than the 'expert interviewer' I mitigated power-imbalances within the researcher-participant relationship. Care was also taken during analysis to remain cognizant of my biased self as a deconvert, and my gendered, relational, and culture-bound positions of power as a co-researcher and co-participant (Davies & Harre´, 1990), hence enacting more like a "fellow traveller" (Weingarden, 1998, p.2) in my participants' narrative journey. Research is a process of "mutual shaping in which researchers and co-researchers are changed by each other" (Simon, 2014, p.5) and the researcher's voice should be posited as one which neither valorises one

particular point of view (Kim, 2016; Seikkula, 2011), nor "gives them second-hand and finalizing definitions" (Bakhtin, 1981, pp.67-68).

3.4 Research design

3.4.1 Participant Selection & Recruitment Criteria

Due to similarities to my own dissertation and owing to the lack of local research studies on the topic, I based my participant eligibility criteria on Wagstaff's (2015) and Hansen's (2017) research, whereby participants need to:

(a) be a Maltese National,
(b) be eighteen (18) years of age or older,
(c) have considered themselves believers/religious at one point,
(d) no longer believing in a deity and/or identify as agnostic, atheist, non-theist or 'spiritual but not religious',
(e) have lived in the Maltese islands during their deconversion process.

In line with Hood & Chen's (2013) definition, my focus is upon *atheistically motivated deconversion* and deconverts who no longer believe in God but once did. This bracketing is not inclusive of all positions on the deconversion spectrum, but will focus on those who currently situate themselves in the later stages of their religious exit rather than attempting to pinpoint any particular stage, which can be very elusive (Bullivant & Ruse, 2013).

3.4.2 Data Collection & Sampling

I conducted five (5) face-to-face, semi-structured in-depth interviews of 1 hour average duration with adults (18+ years) who satisfied the recruitment criteria mentioned above. A small sample size is compatible with the aims of my study, privileging depth over

generalisability, allowing an in-depth, qualitative understanding of participants' experiences to emerge (Creswell, 2014). The interviews were recorded, transcribed, and analysed with participants' consent. Semi-structured in-depth interviews are "widely used by researchers to co-create meaning with interviewees by reconstructing perceptions of events and experiences" (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006, p.2). My semi-structured interviews were organised around a set of predetermined open-ended questions, with other questions emerging from the conversation (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006), changing organically to fit the dialogue that arises within the interview (Hansen, 2017; Hays & Singh, 2012). A sample of the Interview Questions can be found in Appendix B.

A snowball sampling method was utilised (Creswell, 2014; Fazzino, 2014; Patton, 2002), through which I circulated the information of the research through various methods including social media, online fora, and networks of local non-religious/atheist communities (such as the Malta Humanist Association). In this way, only those who were interested and willing to participate established contact with me (Parker et al., 2019).

3.4.3 Data Analysis

Although the methods of analysis I prefer all stem from the post-modern, narrative slant, I zoomed in on the one which could represent my participants' data in the most relevant ways. Since several typologies of narrative analysis exist (Riessman, 2005), I "flirted" (Kim, 2016) with different methods of narrative analyses. In the end, I chose Critical Narrative Analysis.

3.5 Critical Narrative Analysis

Critical Narrative Analysis is the method of analysis I adhered to. Critical Narrative Analysis (CNA) as posited by Souto-Manning (2005; 2014) is a method wedding the worlds

of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and Narrative Analysis (NA), and was born out of the unmet epistemological needs of both.

Discourse Analysis was a method I had considered, as it involves the study of language beyond the sentence (Ashworth, 2021; Miles, 2010), as well as Thematic Narrative Analysis with its marriage of both Thematic and Narrative Analysis, but both were discarded due to conceptual and epistemological discrepancies. The inclusion of Discourse Analytic elements in CNA offers "a balanced focus on social issues as well as linguistic (textual) analysis, considering the complex ways in which language and the social world are intertwined" (Souto-Manning, 2014, p.163), locating it within a social constructionist paradigm, fitting "well with systemic psychotherapists' interest in language and dominant and subjugated meanings" (Burck, 2005, p.249; White & Epston, 1990).

Souto-Manning (2014) argues that while personal narratives are always assumed to be socially-constructed, "yet by and large, they are analyzed apart from issues of power and/or institutional discourses. CNA proposes that when individuals make sense of their experiences through narratives, they bring together the micro (personal) and the macro (social or institutional)" (Souto-Manning, 2014, p.163).

This conveniently solves any theoretical and methodological dilemmas associated with critical approaches to language research at both the macro and micro levels. According to Souto-Manning (2014, p.161), NA "focuses on how people make sense of their experiences in society through language; CDA is concerned with power and language in society. [CNA] take[s] a closer look at how these two discourse-analytic approaches can inform one another as a means to seek a more complete analysis." In this way, CNA becomes a hybrid analytic approach which adopts a *both/and* systemic framework, shining a unique light onto individuals' conversational narratives whilst "identifying the socio-ideological

influence of systemic and institutional discourses on their beliefs and practices" (Souto-Manning, 2014, p. 161).

Recycled institutional discourses, such as religious ones, effectively infiltrate and assert themselves as colonising power discourses through every day, colloquial narratives (Souto-Manning, 2014). "Thus, CNA allows us to learn how people create their selves in constant social interactions at both personal and institutional levels, and how institutional discourses influence and are influenced by personal everyday narratives" (Forgas, 2002; Souto-Manning, 2014, p.162). This embedded circularity in CNA is one of the strongest reasons for subscribing to this method of analysis, because the mutually beneficial partnership of NA with CDA can help me "assess and understand institutional and power discourses in society in more concrete ways" (Souto-Manning, 2014, p.162).

3.6 Transcription, Analysis & Presentation of Findings

The interviews were meticulously transcribed a verbatim to mirror the researcher's and co-researchers' verbal, paraverbal, and non-verbal utterances into text format as best as possible. Once the interviews were fully transcribed and checked with the audio for accuracy, the analysis commenced.

The way the deconversion narratives were told was usually in sporadic bursts of *small stories* (Bamberg, 2006; Georgakopoulou, 2006) or what I termed *micro-stories*, scattered throughout the interview. Hence, I underwent through a process of chronological stitching of narratives into a coherent plot of temporal unity via *restorying* (Polkinghorne, 1995), "a process of reorganizing and analyzing the key elements of a story and rewriting it within a chronological order" (Nasheeda et al., 2019, p.2).

According to Polkinghorne (1995, p.14), "the process of narrative analysis is actually a synthesizing of the data rather than a separation of it into its constituent parts." By not

doing a Thematic Analysis I "produce stories as the outcome of the research" (Polkinghorne, 1995, p.15) "rather than decontextualize them into bits and pieces that we see in qualitative research in general" (Kim, 2016, p.179).

Throughout the data analysis, I used a multi-method approach to narrative analysis (Nasheeda et al., 2019) to extract the essence of the participants' lived experiences whilst maintaining *a sense of the whole*, which is "an important goal of restorying in narrative analysis" (Nasheeda et al., 2019, p.3). I also included notions of *holistic life stories* (Gibbs, 2015) with narrative roots of Greek literature/drama (e.g., genres such as comedy, romance, satire, tragedy). These narrative devices were used to give a plot or *narrative flavour* to the participants' deconversion stories.

3.7 Ethical Considerations

This research proposal was submitted to the IFT-Malta Ethics Committee which is in line with both the British Psychological Society and the European Family Therapy Association. All participants received a consent form and a detailed information sheet (see Appendix A) overviewing the research purpose in both Maltese and English languages. These imparted the research aims and process, data collection methods, analysis and how anonymity and confidentiality would be ensured through GDPR measures, such as assigning pseudonyms for privacy.

Creswell (2014) also details robust safeguards for participants' rights as a research subject, especially those pertaining to refusal to be in the study at all, stopping participating at any time after study commences, and to research-related injury. Due to the sensitive-nature of the topic, participants were informed about non-research support facilities as necessary (Corbin & Morse, 2003).

4. Results

I love a good story. In this chapter, I present the selected stories deemed relevant and significant enough to be picked amongst the richness of narrative data my co-researchers kindly provided me. I also introduce my participants/co-researchers with some brief demographic data (see Table in point 4.1) to give some context to their stories. I divide this chapter into sub-sections, one for each deconversion narrative, each named in the title of the co-researcher's creative choosing during interview stage.

Each story includes direct quotes from the interviews. These are kept in Maltese, with translations found in Appendix C. In line with Critical Narrative Analysis, each sub-section also includes highlights of discourse which caught my attention. Throughout this process, I found it more parsimonious to incorporate some analytic reflections directly into the results because it provides more narrative coherence. A separate, extended Discussion section will follow, where I expound on the Results in comparison to literature.

4.1 Table of Participants/Co-researchers

Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Education	Employment	Marital Status	Spiritual Trajectory
Holly	30	Female	Tertiary – B.Psy	Job Coach	Cohabitating	Roman Catholic to *Pantheist Agnostic*
Jack	24	Male	Tertiary – B.Psy	Student Services Coordinator	Same-sex cohabitating relationship	Roman Catholic to *Non-Conforming*
Kate	29	Female	Masters – PGCE	Part-Time Educator	Married (Church)	Roman Catholic to *Spiritual not Religious*
Roma	28	Female	Tertiary – B.Psy	Youth Worker	In a relationship	Roman Catholic to *Atheist*
Hal	42	Male	Post-Grad – B.Psy	Senior Manager	Single	Roman Catholic to *Atheist, Existentialist/ Humanist*

4.2 Holly – The Development of an Ethical Life

"Darba minnhom mort insaqsih lil dan [il-qassis], jekk jemminx fl-eżorċiżmu, qalli 'le, jiena ma nemminx fl-eżorċiżmu', u da' qassis!... qalli, 'jiena għalija dawk kollha ċuċati!'... (laughs) vera bqajt iċċassata dak il-ħin!"

- Holly (lines 582-584; 596, 597)[1]

The first person I interviewed was Holly. She starts her deconversion narrative by setting the context of her younger self – the primary character, and immediately introduced her family of origin (FOO) - the first of many secondary characters which feature in her story. Holly comes from a moderately religious family, and emphasised the non-extremism of her FOO's Catholic beliefs, which is a narrative set-up for later episodes in her deconversion story where she crosses paths with other characters of contrasting levels of religious zealousness. Holly remained actively religious until she stopped going to MUSEUM, aged 11 or 12. Her devotion towards the organised portion of religion started declining from there onwards, yet she remained a believer in God.

"Kont nemmen, imma kont niddejjaq immur il-knisja" (lines 44, 45)[2]

This introduces another chapter in her story, that of the **Questioning phase**. For Holly, this was mainly during a past relationship her mid-teens:

"meta kelli 15 jew 16… kont noħroġ ma' xi ħadd għamilt ħames snin miegħu u kellu ommu u missieru li kienu like, reliġjużi to an extreme… iġifieri li għarukaża jekk ma tmurx il-quddies il-Ħadd u jriduna mmorru bilfors, u ma jriduniex norqdu flimkien" (lines 47-52)[3]

In her FOO, Holly has the freedom to reject attending religious rituals, whereas this was not an option in her ex-boyfriend's family. Experiencing this invasively authoritative version of religion, her Questioning phase transitioned into **Rebellion phase**.

"qisu min hemmhekk umbagħad, so 15, 16… li bdejt nirribella kontra r-reliġjon." (lines 65, 66)[4]

This micro-story serves both as justification for her transition into rebellion against religious extremism and the start of her fight against the suffocating lack of choice in spiritual expression. Initially, this rebellion was not externalised. Holly kept going to church in a cosmetic sense, keeping up with her FOO's social expectations and ex-boyfriend's parents' demands. Simultaneously, Holly still engaged in subtle micro-actions (or non-actions) of rebellious defiance:

"…pereżempju ma kontx irrodd is-salib, iġifieri kont immur [il-knisja] u just, I wouldn't pay attention" (lines 531, 532)[5]

When the relationship with her ex-boyfriend ended, in hindsight Holly attributed that episode to a ***quest of freedom*** – a significant metaphor for the freedom espoused by her deconversion process:

"meta ma bqajtx ma' dal-bniedem, umbagħad qisu I was free, għax umbagħad stajt ma mmurx, stajt ma nismax iktar qrid… u iktar qisha dik kompliet issammar fija li l'hemmhekk [il-knisja] jiena ma rridx nersaq" (lines 76-78)[6]

She also looks back at this self-contained micro-story and re-stories it as a lesson about her own deconversion process. She highlights how her ex-boyfriend's FOO co-created a ***reinforcing feedback loop***, a ***demand-withdraw cycle*** – the more they pushed their religious agenda in a dogmatic way, the more she rebelled. **Paradoxically, they helped her become non-religious.** These significant characters in her deconversion story are pivotal to the protagonist's non-religious identity development and, in fact, Holly refers to them as being nails in the coffin for religion:

"Il-kunjati li kelli dak iż-żmien, dawk kienu the nail in the coffin! (Laughs) […] qisu iktar ġagħluni nirribella… [Għinuni] b'mod ieħor…" (lines 543-549)[7]

It is interesting to note in the last 2 quotes the repetitive word usage and linguistic referencing to *"issammar"/"hammering", "nails", "coffin"*, which are very resonant with stereotypical Christ-like features. The Biblical narration of Jesus' death by his nailing to the cross thus bears a powerful linguistic parallelism to the metaphorical *nailing* of religion's coffin for Holly.

This catapulted Holly into the next phase of her deconversion narrative, the rejection of the classical monotheistic god and loss of religion, simultaneously married with the gain of something else – the Pantheistic idea of god. As Holly matured and found her own epistemology of thought, she changed her relationship to god by changing her idea of god altogether.

"U qisni ġejt b'din l-idea li jiena fl-opinjoni tiegħi… (exhales) Alla huwa n-natura. Iġifieri, jiena nemmen ħafna li… l-univers huwa Alla, basically, iġifieri mhux Alla dak li nimmaġinaw fil-Kristjaneżmu" (lines 90-94)[8]

Holly's new, divergent idea of god and her spiritual relationship with nature stems far off from the local dominant traditional notions of the Christian God, enabling her to take a more agentic role on who god is, a powerful twist on the dominant religious script whereby *'God creates man'*, not *'Man creates God'*. This concept of 'god as nature' makes god more 'real', or accessible for Holly, like a symbiotic relationship because nature is both interactive and interacted-with. Holly stopped believing in the Christian God and through her deconversion moved towards another 'god', the Universe/Nature, which is also perplexing for myself and challenges my own preconceived ideas about the atheist spectrum and popular definitions of Atheism (i.e.: denial of all gods). Holly narrates this Pantheistic worldview as

having real-life impact and brought significant changes in her lifestyle (e.g., becoming vegetarian).

Yet, Holly emphasised that she did not merely reject her previous Christian values to replace them with Pantheistic ones. For her, it was more of an interwoven *both/and* situation of borrowed and overlapping ethical values, even if stemming from different ideological roots. This "journey" / *"vjaġġ"*, as she calls it, drove her to exit from a monothetic, faith-based perspective of the world, and adapt a wider, secular definition of spirituality inclusive of a more respectful, ethical, and benevolent attitude. Simultaneously, the language used here implies a sort of internal struggle with fully letting go of her familiar beliefs even though in disagreement with them – a grieving process for her loss of faith. This dialogical conflict might have been resolved by the seaming of her original Christian spiritual seeds in the new, fertile ground of Pantheism.

"Jiena ma narahiex li tlaqtha [ir-reliġjon]... as in tlaqtha, <u>tlaqtha</u>." (line 164)[9]

Holly further explores other secondary characters figural in her deconversion transition and shifts to the academic sphere, telling a micro-story about a character who defies all the usual stereotypical presuppositions. She sets up the scene for a narrative twist.

"darba minnhom partikolari kelli psychology of religious experience… U l-lecturer kien qassis… għalkemm kien qassis, kien vera open imma. Iġifieri anke jekk ħa tmur u tgħidlu 'isma jien ma naqbilx miegħek u naħseb illi qiegħed tgħid huwa bullshit'… kien ħa jiddiskuti miegħek… u mhux xi ħadd ħa jgħidlek 'le mur il-quddies!'" (lines 555-565; 572-576)[10]

I call this character the *rebel priest,* since he defies expectations of his role as a 'shepherd for religious conversion' and instead stayed with Holly, catalysing her deconversion, further facilitating her religious exit, as opposed to other religious/clerical people who would push a different agenda. Through her discourse I could sense the

juxtaposition of this lecturer's liberal worldview, language, and permissiveness to *plurality of ideas,* vs. the censorship and suffocation of her ex-boyfriend's FOO. This openness to discussion and critique of religious ideas in a safe environment was key to Holly's exit, also similar to my own experience with the very liberal and academically-minded MSSP priests.

The next phase of her narrative takes me to her romantic relationship because another central character to her deconversion process and maintenance is her long-term boyfriend. Holly narrates that just like her, he also came from a religious FOO background, yet states a major difference – he was baptised with the River of Love, a local extreme Evangelical Christian group, famous for controversial homophobic practices. Holly states that although he has roots in River of Love, he no longer affiliates with them and is now atheist. In a way, they both share a deconversion narrative, albeit from different departures.

At this point, Holly presents a striking temporal juxtaposition of how 16-year-old Holly vs. 30-year-old Holly react in significantly different ways when protecting their identity boundaries:

"Hi (ommu) qatt ma qaltli pereżempju 'isma, ejjew magħna River of Love'… One, kieku kont ħa ngħidilha 'le' square and plain …ma kontx ħa nagħmel kif kont għamilt meta kelli 16 u noqgħod immur biex noqgħod nagħlqilha ħalqha… (smiles)" (lines 658-660)[11]

Throughout her deconversion journey Holly moved from a position of passivity to **Assertiveness**, which ties up to another sub-plot running through her narrative, that of **Authenticity**:

"li tkun assertiva f'kollox hu mportanti fil-ħajja… u fuq reliġjon speċjalment, għax qisu biex toqgħod tmur il-quddies biex issaħħan is-siġġu… jew biex jarawk il-ġirien, ma mmur imkien, taf kif?... X'inhi r-raġuni li għandi ngħid it-talba ta' qabel l-ikel just biex inkun għidtha jekk jien mhux qed nemmen f'dak li qed ngħid?" (lines 801-812)[12]

This quote shows the break-away from engaging in socio-religious rituals for others' sake (very prevalent in our local context), and towards a more irreverent attitude and authenticity to herself. The culmination of Holly's story includes her development of an ethical lifestyle, revolving around respecting difference and her appreciation of nature. This is also an interesting point, especially the discourse she uses to express this spiritual connection and her trajectory towards Pantheism:

Holly: "Jiena n-natura għalija, like, naduraha… as in mhux naduraha fis-sens…

Kristjan, imma nieħu ħsieb ħafna. Iġifieri, nemmen ħafna-"

Researcher: "Qisu you honour it."

Holly: "I honour it, eżatt!" (lines 715-722)[13]

She had to resort to borrowing directly from religious jargon in order to describe her spiritual relationship with nature, and I felt I had to interject to assist her in finding secular language (even if in English) to re-story it as part of her deconversion narrative. This is a deeper implication on the nature of the Maltese language and its inherently coded religiosity, by default disallowing the option to speak (and therefore, think) non-religiously. Moreover, from a discourse analysis perspective, it seems that the choosing of the term 'worship' signifies the depth of her new belief system, carried from her experience as a Christian and shifted onto her Pantheistic worship of nature. Although Holly changed the meaning of the concept, it seems that her need for worship is still present.

To conclude, the plot of Holly's story is a *bildungsroman* where the hero (Holly) has risen from a submissive position to one of dominance over her life and ethical choices, evolving and changing her moral identity in the process. The story includes the *protagonist*, the *villains* (oppressive church members, a religious socio-linguistic context), the *anti-heroes*

(rebellious priests) and the *allies* (boyfriend, family members, academia). Running sub-plots identified are **Authenticity, Assertiveness, Irreverence, and the Quest for Freedom**.

4.3 Jack – Coming Out of Religion

The second person I interviewed was Jack. He starts by setting the atmosphere regarding his turbulent relationship with religion, fashioning his story's main antagonist:

> *"Mill-bidu ta' ħajti minn dejjem… ħassejt qisu, qatt ma kelli dik is-stable relazzjoni mar-reliġjon"* (lines 13, 14)[14]

Jack comes from a family of varying levels of religious commitments. At home with his parents, religion was not given much weight. His maternal FOO are very much non-religious and non-conformist, whereas his paternal grandparents are quite religious, yet not much so his father. Despite having these extremes, he was a believer, mentions prayer and ritual, and narrates how they still attended Sunday mass, Xmas & Easter mass throughout the years as a family.

Jack's parents are un-married and since they were cohabitating, the Church disallowed his baptism as an infant, until 8 years of age. This systemic failure contributed to a domino effect of misalignment in Jack's chronology of socio-religious milestones (e.g., sacraments), which left him out of sync with his peers.

> *"minħabba f'hekk imbagħad lanqas il-Praċett ma' stajt nagħmel ma' sħabi, so għamiltu sena wara"* (lines 44, 45)[15]

His childhood was filled with disappointment, stemming from ***the unacceptance of his diverse FOO by religious authorities***. This sense of *not-belonging* followed Jack throughout his life, and his relationship to his socio-cultural territory has always been mired in incongruence. In the many micro-stories characterising his religious exit, it seems that Jack was consistently being ushered out by the Church itself.

"naħseb dik kienet il-feeling tagħha kollha, eħe, qisu I was feeling left out from the religious world…" (lines 94-96)[16]

These experiences play a significant part in fuelling Jack's deconversion, and he mentions how his **Questioning phase** had started very early on, in Primary school and getting more permanent in Forms 1 and 2 (ages 11 & 12). His questions in religion class were less about the nature of God's existence but rather targeted the unjust treatment of others by the Church itself:

"niftakar kont insaqsi mistoqsijiet fuq- pereżempju għalfejn jiena kont, like, shunned mill-Knisja peress li ommi u missieri ma kienux miżżewġin? U I never really got a good enough answer to me…" (lines 61-63)[17]

Jack here uses very powerful discourse. Never getting a 'good-enough' answer to his very personal and familial struggles in relation to the Church accelerated his deconversion process. The term *"shunned"* has a lot of weight since it implies how he was feeling rejected by religion, and by proxy, God Himself. In fact, his questions were not only left unanswered at school, but also during his direct pleading with God:

"kont nagħmel prayer u waħda mill-affarijiet li kont nitlob għaliha (laughs) u it's a bit depressing, huwa l-fatt li vera kont nitlob u nixtieq li ommi u missieri jerġgħu jħobbu 'l xulxin (smiles) […] U niftakarni iġifieri ngħid, [Alla] jagħmel dawn l-affarijiet kollha imma dil-ħaġa li hija daqshekk sempliċi qisu kienet… it just seemed unreachable." (lines 68-70, 76-78)[18]

This piece of narration is imbued with a sense of shame, disappointment, and embarrassment, and the term "a bit depressing" in hindsight may be the protagonist's assertion to his younger, more naïve self, that prayer is futile. Jack's sense of dissatisfaction with religious faith was further accentuated, eventually losing trust in God's omnipotence

when his "simple" request remained unfulfilled. This sense of unfairness also became a catalyst for deconversion and by age 12 Jack says that he was in **Advanced stages of Deconversion**:

"all in all nista ngħid li kompletament I lost my faith probabli around Form 2, actually so niftakarni anke meta kont għamilt il-[Griżma], dak iż-żmien kont diġa… it all seemed a bit unbelievable" (lines 65-67)[19]

Although he participated in the expected sacramental rituals, Jack still felt mismatched with his peers – both in age and in faith. Another shocking micro-story which further filled up Jack's 'bag of proofs' against the church and clergy was when a priest humiliated and chastised his mother during confession:

Jack: "niftakar li l-padre actually beda jgħajjat magħha-"

Researcher: (shocked look)

Jack: "-waqt iċ-ċeremonja u jirrabja magħha, għaliex somehow the conversation came up u qaltlu li m'hix miżżewġa ma' missieri, u… ommi, jiġifieri, spiċċat litteralment tibki f'nofs ta' knisja…" (lines 115-121)[20]

This micro-story is very symbolic of the blatant rejection by the church, even when members of his family were attempting to approach the church for forgiveness (literally) and instead getting shamed and judged. This form of **Religious Double-Bind** is what further catalysed Jack's anti-religious stance. Narratively, this follows the Church's own plot as a separate secondary protagonist in Jack's deconversion story, mainly the development of the *antagonist story-arch* – Clergy devolved from revered *heroes/saviours* (as society holds them to be) to *villains* (as in Jack's experience).

Throughout his narration Jack repeats how much he always felt *different* to others, and this matches both with his deconverted self as well as other aspects of his identity. Jack's story is unique from all the other participants also because his deconversion process coincides with his coming-out process as a member of the LGBTIQ+ community. His deconversion story follows the interweaving similarities of both his subjugated identities (gay and non-religious) in the local religious and heteronormative context.

Jack's sexual orientation impacts also his relationship with religion, mainly because he feels that the Church is mostly against difference or anything other than the traditional nuclear family, further playing into his perceived, pre-determined destiny to never be welcomed by the Church.

"inħoss li it was never really in my books to <u>be</u> religious" (line 174)[21]

Apart from that, Jack feels that religion can be harmful to "people like himself" – implying both gay people as well as other minorities – characters I shall narratively call the *non-typicals*. For him, being religious feels like a sign of betrayal to the gay community and other non-typicals due to the damage they incurred in the name of religion.

"Infatti vera naraha xi ħaġa stramba meta xi ħadd ikun gay pereżempju u jkunu reliġjużi… Hija xi ħaġa li vera ma tagħmilx sens għalija li you're believing in an institution that doesn't believe in you" (lines 324-328)[22]

This quote highlights the incongruence Jack feels when it comes to being religious and gay simultaneously. One such character in his story is his boyfriend, who still adheres to certain religious rituals like making the sign of the cross when driving past a religious icon/'niċċa'. Jack finds this absurd, moreover since his boyfriend is not typically religious either, and recounts micro-stories of confusion stemming from those negotiating their gay

identity with residual aspects of religion different to his expectations. He narrates this with a sarcastic, comical twist:

"Għax jien għalija qisu jekk irodd is-salib mela jemmen fiha l-ħaġa, fis-sens… Otherwise, it's literally just like, qisek qed tagħmel il-YMCA… (smiling)" (lines 376-379)[23]

For Jack, his deconversion process runs in parallel to his coming-out process, and thus, for his narrative to bear some form of congruence and meaning, both subjugated identities need to be simultaneously co-occurring in some form of unholy marriage. Having said this, Jack makes it clear that he is unbothered and unsure how to label his non-religious identity:

"I don't- mhux I don't relate with the word 'Atheist'… qisu għalija li tgħajjat lilek innifsek 'Ateu' huwa… it's like giving power to the religion… in my perspective il-fatt li tgħajjat lilek innifsek 'atheist' it's like you're segregating yourself from the world of religion, meta fil-verita` jien ma nemminx li hemm dinja tar-reliġjon. Nemmen li hemm dinja, u r-reliġjon hija parti minnha… maybe it's a stupid example, imma ma noqgħodx immur fuq in-nies u ngħidilhom 'jiena m'inhiex Taljan'... Fhimt? Għax fis-sens, it doesn't really relate to my life." (lines 220-224, 235-241)[24]

The above quote is a great commentary on hegemonic religious discourse and how non-religious discourse can fit or not into it. Jack alludes to language of power – by not using the term 'atheist' he is freeing himself from the omnipresent religious default. Disclosing it gives religion more power, because the term 'atheist' as a *negative referent* is always in relation and reference to religion. His choice of language and, thus, meaning-making tools help him narrate a different story than the dominant religious one. It bears signs of socio-constructionist and pluralistic discourse – religion is not the totality of what is out there, but

quite the other way round. Religion is one out of *many other modalities* available and he is partaking in that modality no more.

The culmination of all the sub-plots of **Rejection**, **Disappointment,** and the **Odd One Out/Ugly Duckling effect** all come together in this narrative mix – a twist of a classic epic genre of *Good vs. Evil*, where the main plot of Jack's deconversion arch is **less about religious/spiritual confusion, and more about injustices on Earth and clerical paradoxes.** These incongruences and uncertainties are based on the circular feedback loop the Church (*antagonist/villain*) co-created with the Protagonist from his birth – the shunning of his FOO and other allies (*non-typicals*) by the Church/clergy is now being reciprocated by his rejection of religion (protagonist as the *hero*) and his subsequent indifference towards it.

4.4 Kate – Awakening

Kate was the third participant I interviewed. Her story has particular resonance with mine, mainly because she hails from Gozo, my birthplace, sharing similar contextual tropes to my deconversion narrative. Having said that, I am aware that although our trajectories towards religious exit have similitudes, they are not identical, due to gender, age, family background, and a multitude of other factors.

Kate comes from a religious family who followed the usual religious rituals, both for communal purposes and as family tradition. She used to attend mass daily, and her young village life was so religion-centred that she considered becoming a nun. This wish became ingrained in her at a young age:

"darba kont mort kunvent tas-sorijiet u qisni rajt- ħassejt il-paċi, hekk tagħhom… U, hekk, qisni xtaqtha imma mbagħad x'ħin tibda tikber naħseb l-affarijiet jibdew jinbidlu" (lines 23-27)[25]

In the same micro-story about sisterhood and her **quest for peace**, Kate also alludes to the first *seeds of change* and cites **age** as the primary catalyst in her deconversion process.

"imbagħad x'ħin tibda tikber u tgħix għalik, tibda tgħix waħdek, u tmur Malta, l-Universita'... ma tibqax daqshekk...hekk, tal-Knisja..." (lines 30-32)[26]

She expounds on this notion of *change through time* by adding other contextual factors like change in setting, independent living, and academic pursuit. For context, these are rites of passage common for the majority of Gozitan young adults who choose to further their careers in Malta, and are the exact same deconversion-catalysts I also experienced. Through her quote Kate implies that *when her context changed, her beliefs started to shift also*, which brought a change in her previous religious identity ("*ma tibqax tal-Knisja*"). The religiously-saturated Gozitan village life became non-existent in cosmopolitan Msida, encouraging her loss of interest in religious pursuit as well as independence of thought:

"qisek imbagħad... qisha ma tibqax tħoss il-bżonn, qisu sa ċertu punt." (line 37)[27]

"qisek x'ħin tibda toqgħod waħdek l-ideat tiegħek jibdew jiffurmaw iktar..." (line 872)[28]

This precipitated Kate's **Questioning phase** and shifts the story to a new chapter. Her questioning stems from 2 streams of thought: firstly, on a theological level she questioned the unquestionable dogmatic tenets of religion, citing *The Problem of Evil* argument:

"qisek tibda tgħid 'imma, eħe, jeżistu ċertu affarijiet?'[...] tiqquestionja 'kif jista jkun il-Madonna baqgħet verġni u kellha 'l Kristu?'" (lines 45, 560-561)[29]

"pereżempju meta jmut xi tifel żgħir, għall-argument, jew tifel żgħir jimrad b'xi cancer... jekk ngħidu li Ġesu` qiegħed hemm biex jgħinna, u jrid il-ġid 'il-kulħadd, mela għax lil dan tah il-mard, fhimt? Qisek tibda you question a lot of things." (lines 47-52)[30]

Secondly, Kate questioned the gullibility of her younger self and how/why she passively believed what she was told. She reflects on how maturity and life experience gave her a different perspective, helping her **outgrow religion** through questioning:

"meta tkun żgħira qisek tibla dak li tisma'... X'ħin tibda tikber qisek tibda tirrifletti waħdek u ċertu esperjenzi li tgħaddi minnhom" (lines 42-45)[31]

Kate: "'[il-fidi] għixha bħalissa jekk tħoss li għandek tgħixha, pero question things, għax- eħe, it will help you grow' naħseb jien…when you question things…"

Researcher: "Mmm, so ***'questioning helps you grow'****…"* (530-534)[32]

From a language perspective, it is interesting to note the repetition of the term "questioning" in the above quotes, with the juxtapositioning of the term "tibla"/ "swallow", implying that she now metaphorically chews ideas rather than passively swallows them. The second quote uses the literary tool of the 'flashback', since Kate was addressing her younger religious self, the protagonist in a different time and space. In her retrospective time-travelling message, she encourages her younger self that she can only grow through questioning religion, yet acknowledges the need for that religiosity at that time (*"għalissa"*) implying religion's function as temporary and utilitarian.

This ties in to the experiences of parental addiction issues Kate endured in her FOO. She narrates this part of her deconversion narrative to position religion's significance as a necessary coping mechanism:

"billi d-dar kellna naqra issues familjari tipo… kont immur il-knisja tipo biex ħriġt u naħrab. Għal dawk il-ftit mumenti… u naħseb tant kemm kelli chaos dak iż-żmien meta kont iżgħar- għax tipo, ommi bl-addictions tagħha, missieri kien bl-addictions tiegħu, allura qisu… ma kellix fuq min inserraħ tipo… Ma kienx hemm trust-person, dak it-tip. Forsi kont

insib it-"trust", tipo indirectly bħala knisja, reliġjon, whatever. Forsi kont ngħid li rrid nidħol soru għas-sens ta' peacefulness li ħassejt… compared mad-dar" (lines 502-513)[33]

The notion of religion as a crutch is very prevalent here, it being a source of safety and respite, circling back to the nun episode and her quest for peace. This was first experienced through religious means/clergy, yet when she moved away from home and experienced growth through deconversion, Kate shed away her religious comfort-blanket and created her own secular spiritual meaning. Simultaneously, Kate does not feel certain if she should identify as 'atheist', although narrates alternative ways of fulfilling her spiritual needs and finding her *inner peace* through the rejection of traditional religious rituals:

"ma nafx nistax nuża l-kelma 'ateist' to be fair. Għax qisni xorta nħoss li hemm xi ħaġa, pero ma nsejħiliex 'Alla' jew 'Ġesu'… iktar ngħix l-ispiritual aspect tal-ħaġa, fis-sens li m'hemmx bżonn immur ġo knisja biex inħossni fil-paċi, just immur barra fin-natura pereżempju u noqogħod nirrifletti u meditation" (lines 58-61)[34]

"Qisni iktar inħossni jagħmel sens għalija dak l-insib l-inner peace tiegħi nnifsi tipo …Iktar milli reliġjon jew trid tmur, sorry l-kelma… imma irrid immur nibla l-ostja biex inħossni sewwa miegħi nnifsi." (lines 63-68)[35]

Her hesitant usage of *"nibla l-ostja"* (literally "swallowing the holy wafer") stems from the derogatory nature of the phrase in local context, and is a reference to those believers who go through the motions of religious ritual, yet contradict their religious values in daily life. This incongruence and inauthenticity elicit **anger** in Kate. She holds the value of ***congruence between actions and beliefs*** in high esteem, bringing the Sub-plot of **Authenticity** to the fore. Kate seams Authenticity with **Hypocrisy** as another sub-plot in her deconversion story and narrates one such contradiction in a micro-story of an episode where she encountered a vulnerable person lying in the middle of the road in Gozo, and how she

gave him First Aid. She highlights how despite this person being visibly unwell, no one stopped to help him:

"Nannti…li tmur il-knisja kuljum u taf int, tal-knisja, 'għatti għajnejk u ibqa għaddejja, tatix kas!' qaltli…jien ma ħassejtx il-ħaġa li rrid nibqa għaddejja, ma ħassejtnix sewwa. Issa jien ma mmurx knisja kuljum, imma nħoss li 'isma… dil-persuna għandha bżonn l-għajnuna', so waqaft insomma u għint lil dil-persuna billi ċempilt l-ambulanza" (lines 81-88)[36]

This story harks similarities to the Biblical narration of The Good Samaritan, and juxtaposes her devout grandma's Christian beliefs (to be kind to others, etc) versus her advice ("don't help him"/ "look the other way"). Kate's actions went against such religio-cultural pressures and acted as the Samaritan, or as the 'good Christian', in an ironic twist of roles. This hints at the sub-plot of ***practical morality*** – that people can be *good* without going to church, and Kate's development of a **Humanistic epistemology** – helping others for the sake of helping them. Encountering such events legitimises Kate's deconversion.

Being judged because one is different is very prevalent in Gozo, and Kate mentions how she tries to blend in as much as she can, and seldom discloses her secularism or critique of religion to other people, fearing they are not ready to handle difference:

"jiena fil-verita`- ħa nkun onesta, ma nħossnix komda ngħid 'isma, jien ma nemminx'… ma ngħidx li nemmen aqqas, just ma ngħid xejn fuq dawn l-affarijiet! (laughing)… ma' nies speċjalment li naf li huma closed-minded… Fis-sens li- M'humiex open li jisimgħu ideat oħra" (117-126)[37]

The phrase *"just ma ngħid xejn"* feeds directly into the protagonist's Gozitan identity, enshrining **censorship** and **restraint** when it comes to sharing ideas different from dominant

religious social discourse. In the Gozitan context, Kate learned that questioning was no longer a vehicle for growth, but a challenge inviting conflict. The position of caution she adopts helps her stay within the socially-acceptable norms, and not say anything 'too controversial', the very Gozitan idea of ***'do not rock the boat'***. Kate's FOO also carry this cultural token and with it marry the ***anxiety of being different***, and of ***'being noticed by the other'***, hence her mother's incessant pressure to attend Mass with the family:

"Tibqa' tissukkani u tissukkani 'u ejja'- għax aħna dik il-ħaġa wkoll, dejjem 'min jaf x'ħa jgħidu n-nies, min jaf x'ħa jgħidu n-nies!'... Dik kienet tkun presenti ħafna, x'ħa jgħidu n-nies" (lines 817-823)[38]

Kate switches to another significant secondary character, her husband – who confidently identifies as atheist, even though he's Gozitan. Her husband has a highly religious FOO, and she narrates how he was still a believer when she met him, yet the tragic death of his uncle during Xmas time triggered his own deconversion process. Kate mentions that during this time she was also in her questioning phase, and thus, their relationship nurtured the symbiotic space for a *dual deconversion process*. Although she locates her deconversion onset earlier than her relationship with her future-husband, she admits that *his deconversion supported hers*.

"nista ngħid li forsi [d-deconversion tiegħu] kkonfermatli ftit dak li kont qed naħseb, iwa." (lines 881, 882)[39]

Kate narrates that her husband is the only person she feels safe with to bounce her atheistic and controversial opinions without being judged/misunderstood thus serving also as a means of connection in their couple relationship.

"Allura nħobbu nargumentaw ġieli fuq dawn l-affarijiet qisna biex- ma nafx, sense ta' communication, argument… fis-sens to question iżjed naħseb…" (lines 903, 904)[40]

This secondary character functions as a helpful deconversion resource for the protagonist. Her choice of phrase "to question more" implies the unfinished nature of her religious exit, giving Kate's deconversion a Bakhtinian quality: it is not an end-state, but perpetually unfinalized. Kate's deconversion narrative is characterised by the sub-plots of **Moral/Ethical Growth**, **Authenticity**, **Hypocrisy**, and a **Quest for Peace**, whilst following her spiritual journey towards *difference* in a context which values *sameness*.

4.5 Roma – Il-Miġja għall-Verita`

"Il-verita` hu, għax hekk naħseb, li dik il-verita`, li ma jeżisti xejn.

Dik il-verita` tiegħi, wara kollox."

- Roma (line 289)[41]

The fourth participant is Roma and her deconversion story embodies a sharp critique of religious doctrine. She was brought up in a religious family following typical religious rituals (Sunday Mass, solo praying before bedtime, etc). Her story follows the classical trajectory of the *tragic hero drama* – the protagonist's fall from grace from believer to atheist.

Roma's FOO are an important secondary character in her deconversion narrative, and mentions how in her early teen years her mother would push for her to attend church, unlike her father, who did not really give this much importance. This was happening when Roma was in her early teens, exploring social life with her horizontal family, her peers. This pressure led to Roma's **Rebellion phase** as narrated in the micro-story below:

"Ommi dejjem teqridli biex immur il-quddies fil-weekend, 'ġifieri bdejt noħroġ mal-ħbieb u l-outings taf kif? Taż-żogħożija…U dejjem 'ara li trid tiġi l-quddies magħna!', umbagħad bdejt nivvendika- immur mal-ħbieb biex qisu ma mmurx…Imma naqra naqra bdejt innaqqas, minflok immur il-quddies, immur il-bandli (smirks)…U nara kif ħa nevitaha. Niftakar darba staħbejt taħt it-taraġ id-dar stess biex ma mmurx! (laughs)" (lines 25-33)[42]

Her usage of the term *"bdejt nivvendika"* is a clear implication of the start of this rebellion against religious ritual and her FOO's pressures to conform. Roma's rebellion co-occurred with her **Questioning phase**:

"Niftakarni nsaqsi ħafna mistoqsijiet, speċi, 'għalxiex li kieku Alla jeżisti kif hawn dit-tbatija?' u nipprova qisu nirraġuna, 'għalxiex għandu jkun hemm il-fidi?' U 'għalxiex għandi nimxi ma' li jgħidulna l-Knisja?'" (lines 38-40)[43]

"qatt ma ridt inkun dik il-persuna li nemmen mingħajr mistoqsijiet għax bit-tama, bil-fidi- il-fidi! Dik li nistaqsi! Il-fidi... X'inhi l-fidi? Għax jien illum il-ġurnata naraha bħala xi ħaga li żżomm in-nies milli forsi jkollhom daqxejn ta' breakdown… Qisu jkollhom l-iskuża tar-reliġjon" (lines 89-94)[44]

Analysing the discourse used here, Roma emphasises "asking a lot of question", bringing queries pertaining to *The Problem of Evil* and the linguistic juxtapositioning of "nirraġuna" (*reason*) and "fidi" (*faith*), a popular atheistic argument, further implying her internal struggle between these two often polarised ideological states, ending with the questioning of religious authority itself – "why should I follow what the Church says?". The language used implies that Roma sees *blind faith* as fickle, unvirtuous, and delusional, implying a false sense of hope.

The sub-plot of **questioning of authority** is tied in with the sub-plot of **active rebellion** in the next transition of her story, where Roma offers a change in setting, narrating how she continued to flex her critical thinking skills at school:

"l-iskola kont ribelli ħafna fir-reliġion. Kont insaqsi ħafna mistoqsijiet li t-teacher ma tafx kif ħa taqbad tirrispondi" (lines 41-44)[45]

Roma's challenging of the teacher's authority also meshed with the challenging of core Biblical teachings:

"niftakar waħda 'jekk ituk daqqa… u ddawwar wiċċek biex ituk oħra' pereżempju… Dik kienet xi ħaga li konna nippruvaw nicchalengjaw. Iġifieri inti għandek toqgħod għal vjolenza?" (lines 48-51)[46]

The above quote is rife with avenues of analysis. It offers a blatant critique and challenge to one of Christ's most beloved teachings, and the context of challenging this in class adds another layer to the rebellion it espouses. Moreover, Roma bridges the metaphorical narratives of the Bible into the modern-day context by highlighting implications of **submissiveness to abuse imbued in Christ's teaching, criticising it also from a female & feminist perspective.**

Another secondary character introduced in Roma's deconversion story is Music, which she has great passion for. She brings an interesting parallelism between the musical world she inhabits and her religious exit, overlapping the communal aspects of religion with the music scene, which both bring people together:

"qisu [il-mużika] dejjem kienet il-passjoni tiegħi, iġifieri jista' jkun illi l-mużika ġiet flok ir-reliġjon għalija- Għax qisu, niffolowja ħafna idoli fil-mużika, u mhux biss kif jiktbu imma kif jgħixu, il-ħajja tagħhom, qisu- tista tiġi bħala reliġjon dik, ukoll…" (lines 119-124)[47]

In her deconversion narrative, Roma identifies music as a valid replacement for religion, including also musical figures/idols and their life philosophy and values – in a similar way believers would follow Jesus's ideas. She adopted the music scene as a blueprint for her life like a 'religion'. When invited to deconstruct the term, Roma defined religion as a "belief which conditions your life": a lens through which she experiences her reality. This is very **socio-constructivist in nature, since different lenses result in different realities** – through her agentic choice of 'lens', Roma co-created her own preferred secular reality and meaning.

This meaning-making process cannot occur without the implication of language, and Roma narrates how her deconverted position no longer matched the local context's language:

"għax meta tara n-nies illi jirraġunaw 'u għax Alla hekk irid!', 'Għax dak imn'Alla ġara hekk'... 'Għax Ġesu` għandu xi ħaġa aħjar għalik'- dawn li jemmnu dawn l-affarijiet, qisu, ħeq, mod ta' kif tgħix." (lines 130-133)[48]

"'Għax Ġesu` jrid hekk', 'Għax Alla jrid hekk'. Jekk għamilt żball trid- you have to own up for it ukoll, fis-sens. Tieħu responsabbilta'. Mhux nagħtu responsabbilta' lil ħaddieħor, hu!" (lines 656-658)[49]

Roma delves into the linguistic aspects of colloquial sayings, implying both the ingrained passivity in terms of owning up to responsibility for mistakes by scapegoating the divine (*the convenient "other"*); as well as the reality-creating qualities of language, which locally is dominantly coloured by religion. Hence, employing an atheist *map* to navigate a religious *territory* positions the protagonist in an incongruent shape where she struggles to find the subjugated language to support her non-religious reality-building.

Part of reclaiming and asserting her atheist identity is through her activism and her choice of employment. Roma works in the helping profession and has also been part of local

movements and NGO's who fight against social injustices and for fundamental human rights. These activities fight away the existential dread which atheism may bring, instead giving Roma purpose, or what the Japanese call *ikigai*, a reason to wake up in the morning.

"meta tidħol existentialism iktar ikollok mistoqsijiet u iktar ikollok kriżijiet… 'X'jien nagħmel b'ħajti?' U naħseb illi lili għinitni l-fatt li dejjem xtaqt naħdem fis-social helping sector- qisu dik hija l-purpose ta' ħajti… Dejjem qisu ħassejt in-need of belonging" (lines 171-174, 205)[50]

Roma's purpose is her *Pragmatic Humanistic tendency to help*, bringing out her **ethic of care**, and satisfying her **need to belong**. Simultaneously, this set of beliefs include Roma's core script of *believing in love*, which she adopted from a band member she knows:

"[il-lead singer] kien qal li jemmen fl-imħabba, ma jemminx f'Alla. U dik kienet vera baqgħet miegħi, għax irreżonat ħafna miegħi… li għandek qisu tħobb unconditionally in-nies ta' madwarek" (lines 265-267, 270)[51]

This tenet of 'believing in love' is also one which highlights a major incongruence in her FOO, especially with her maternal side. Roma hones in on her mother, who is a significant secondary character holding dual roles in her story. The first role is that of an *antagonist*. Roma narrates that her mother was the most impacted by her religious exit. An emotionally painful micro-story involves what Roma calls a 'backlash' from her mother when Roma was in a relationship with a man who had children from a previous marriage. Her mother's judgemental disapproval of her relationship is connected to her ***shame*** and ***preoccupation*** with their family image, and branded Roma as no longer being congruent with her family's values:

"meta kont ma' xi ħadd li kien separat u b'tifel, il-mummy qaltli 'inti m'għandekx valuri bħal tagħna'…" (lines 428, 429)[52]

This taps back into Roma's need for **belonging/acceptance** and recalls the sub-plot of **incongruence** once more: this time within her own FOO because of a shift in values. Roma expresses shock and disappointment at the fact that her mother's conservative religious values took precedence over her daughter's happiness. Circularly, this episode of **betrayal** was further amplified because her mother's actions were also incongruent to Roma's central *belief in love,* bringing to the fore the systemic nature of the conflicts Roma had to navigate in achieving her deconverted identity:

"verament ma kontx qed nistenniha dik ir-reaction [tal-mummy]… għaliha ma kienx 'l-ewwel jiena għax jien kuntenta'… L-ewwel il-valuri tagħna, tal-familja, u kif ħa nidhru aħna bħala familja… jiena ma stajtx nifhima, li jien tant nemmen bl-imħabba, ma stajtx nifhem kif it-tifla li suppost verament tħobb tiġi wara t-twemmin tiegħek!" (lines 463-470, 475-478)[53]

This chasm in values between Roma and her mother has been partially restored more recently. Moving forward in her deconversion timeline, Roma narrates that her mother shares similar attitudes regarding the currently hot topic of the legalisation of abortion in Malta.

"…fuq hekk il-mummy, li l-mara tkun ħa tmut jew il-mara tkun fil-periklu, taqbel [mal-abort]. 'Ġifieri mbagħad nara ċertu humanism f'ommi wkoll… li dik qisu tagħtik daqxejn kuraġġ li tgħid 'eh! il-aħwa, orrajt! Mela hawn xi ħadd…!'" (lines 526-530)[54]

It is interesting that Roma uses the term "humanism" when referring to her mother's values, bringing her closer to the protagonist's position. It is this Humanistic thinking by her religious mother which contributed to Roma's restored hope and sense of acceptance by her family. Due to this ideological common ground, familiarity, and congruence to Roma's values, the mother's role shifts from *antagonist* to *ally*.

Roma's story bears similarities to the Tragedy genre, yet follows a strength-based 'hero path' towards forging her own life and atheist identity against all the odds a religious family and society throws at her. Her determination to follow what she believes is right shines throughout her deconversion narrative, and is characterised by sub-plots of **Rebellion**, **Incongruence**, **Betrayal**, **Pragmatic Humanism**, and a **Quest for Belonging**.

4.6 Hal – In His Own Image

"There is no purpose in life outside of me, I create my own purpose…

I am now in control! And that is the humanism part of it,

tipo, the <u>human</u> is the centre of my life, not <u>God</u>."

- Hal (lines 556, 585, 586)[55]

The final participant I interviewed is Hal. Hal is the oldest of all five co-researchers and the first thing he asserts is that although his religious exit spans across a longer time period due to his age, he still believes that it is not complete yet, giving it a Bakhtinian spin by implying it's a **never-ending story of constant becoming**:

"huwa proċess, huwa journey li naħseb ma jispiċċa qatt, fl-aħħar mill-aħħar." (lines 27, 28)[56]

Hal's story takes place in a religious setting of many local Christian communities, from his FOO, to school, to voluntary organisations, all serving as important secondary characters accompanying the protagonist's deconversion arch. Hal emphasises how deeply involved he was in these religious communities and that his religious identity was dependent on the religious circle he was embedded in. This religious activism and participation was unhindered until his late teens when he entered University and started adopting certain critical thinking skills. This was the beginning of his **Questioning phase**:

*"With hindsight ngħid dejjem kien hemm dik ix-xi ħaġa li ngħid 'imma, does this really make sense? Is it għax dejjem hekk ġejt imrobbi? Dejjem hekk ġejt mgħallem?' u dejjem qisni [kien hemm] dik l-i**splinter in your mind**, hekk… dak id-dubju"* (lines 45-49)[57]

Hal mentions very clearly the "doubt" that started to infiltrate his as-of-yet unquestioned religious identity, mainly by doubting the origin of his devotion. From a discourse analysis perspective, the parallelism between "doubt" and the "splinter in [my] mind" is very powerful, since it implies a subtle, yet present itch for questioning the fundamentals of his faith.

Hal narrates how at first he denied he had such doubts, but through his studies in psychology and other self-reflexive practices he adopted a meta-position to his own thoughts and faced his own denial:

"dak id-dubju dejjem kont ngħid, 'u lee! Le, dak just normali' tipo, 'tatix kasu!' Eventwalment, meta kont qed l-universita', qisu bdejt ngħid lili nnifsi 'isma, you are in denial!'…'You are not really a believer, inti just għalik hija iktar faċli għax dejjem hekk ġejt mrobbi, għandek il-ħbieb kollha reliġjużi'… allura bħal speċi għidt, kienet my comfort zone, jekk jiena ħa ngħid 'isma, I'm not a believer anymore', emm, prattikament jien ħa nispiċċa eskluż waħdi" (lines 50-59)[58]

Given his context was so religious, Hal also understood that he could not come out as atheist immediately since this disclosure was akin to social-suicide. Although he had undergone an intense *internal deconversion event*, Hal held himself back from showing this spiritual achievement to his peers, due to the frightening probability of exclusion.

Hal sets up the next phase of his story in a 3-part act. Act 1 carries a Sub-plot of **Acceptance/Tolerance**. The set-up includes the direct disclosure of his atheistic position

within a religious context, his community's acceptance and welcoming of the co-habitation of ideological polarities:

"Eventually I came out with my friends u anka ma' spiritual [leader] u bħal speċi għidtlu, 'isma, this is my position'… Għidtlu 'il-volontarjat xorta għadu għall-qalbi, bħal speċi, pero I mean, I am not religious anymore' and he was very accepting..." (lines 91-108)[59]

I note Hal's use of language in this quote, describing his atheist disclosure as "coming out", harking similarities to the coming out of other subjugated and minority identities (usually sexual/orientation/gender-related) and the risk it may entail. This narrative-discourse tool is imperative in setting up the next bit of Hal's story.

Act 2 is characterised by the Sub-plot of **Betrayal & Shunning**. After some time, Hal's community experienced some changes, the spiritual director was replaced by another, and he came out to him as well:

"erġajt għamilt l-istess tipo, qrara miegħu. Qalli l-istess affarijiet, pero għal xi sena, sena u nofs wara reġa bdielu…U da' deherlu li jiena mhux posti iktar hemm… u bħal speċi qalli 'ma rridekx tibqa iktar tattendi'" (lines 140-145)[60]

Hal's rejection is made to feel even more impactful given the religious language he uses to narrate it. His borrowing of "qrara" / "confession" to refer to his deconversion disclosure to the priest implies secrecy, guilt, and shame – branding atheism as 'sinful'. Confession also implies forgiveness, mercy, and acceptance, yet Hal was discarded and discriminated based on his belief/lack thereof.

Hal embellishes aspects of Act 2 by adding some more context. The religious group were hard at work organising a music concert, and Hal's dumping came the day after this project was finished:

"[l-ispiritual director] ħalla dal-kunċert isir… u bagħat għalija biex jgħidli… the very next day wara l-għeluq tal-proġett… 'please tiġix iktar, is-servizzi tiegħek ma rridhomx iktar'… u qisni bħal speċi ħassejtni użat u mormi." (lines 178, 179, 189-191, 205)[61]

Hal's emphasises on the broken promise and the injustice incurred from religious authority highlights the betrayal aspect furthermore. This locks up the narrative in a cliffhanger, imminent for a satisfying resolution in the final Act.

Act 3 involves a *Plot Twist*. Hal narrates how during his ousting from the religious community, many other members of the same group unexpectedly exited the community with him in solidarity and as a protest against the spiritual leader's decision:

"Kien hemm grupp mhux ħazin ta' nies li actually bi protesta telqu wkoll…Iva. U konna ingħaqadna niftakar… ma' [grupp reliġjuż ieħor] (smiling). So xorta bqajt- dħalt in another religious group as an atheist!" (lines 148-155)[62]

This micro-story demonstrates the protagonist's symbolic victory over religious bigotry in clerical authority. Through this plot twist, the protagonist also stirred an **intra-rebellion** within the religious community, together with his own personal rebellion against the Church. He inspired his religious peers to stay true to their Christian values by, ironically, moving away from a religious group, like a *reverse-Messiah*.

Hal's deconversion process towards an atheist identity had many turning-points across time, and I resonate a lot with his trajectory due to its similarity to mine. After the initial Questioning phase and self-admission of denial, he then started gradually *cherry-picking* Christian beliefs. The first casualty was the sacrament of the Eucharist:

"Xorta bqajt nemmen- kont għadni nemmen f'Alla… Pero` ma bqajtx nemmen fl-Ewkaristija. Għalija l-Ewkaristija kienet bullshit. Mhux vera l-ostja ssir il-veru ġisem ta' Ġesu` u l-inbid il-veru demm ta' Ġesu`." (lines 335-339)[63]

The phrase "Eucharist was bullshit" is a very strong use of words, blasphemous in nature. This implies Hal's strong revulsion and detachment from that core Christian belief. Through his scientific/logical critique of his beliefs, the Eucharist it had lost its magic, it was no longer Holy or revered. This ties into the Sub-Plot of **Irreverence**.

This position of a *Critical Christian* led him to a gradual chipping away of his faith, until the 'final' chip that broke everything came along. This revelation of deconversion came in two overlapping stages: a sudden-realisation event, and a longer, gradual simmering process.

"The final one kienet… kind of umbagħad overnight fejn ngħid 'isma', għidt, 'Hal ħi, inti ilek dejjem denying it…You are in denial, tibqax titmejjel bik innifsek u ma tarax l'għandek id-dubju'" (lines 345, 346, 353)[64]

The 'over-night' *finale* was not the philosophical and critical analysis of religion itself (that is the long, evolutionary process), but the moment Hal gave himself the permission to embrace that process and its result. The latent questioning process was emptying him of faith yet the external 'believer' façade remained, fulfilling its 'camouflage' function. Once he came to terms with the process, the protagonist had to face himself in third-person, almost as another character – a cloned secondary protagonist facing his own demise. In this dialogical confrontation Hal discovered that the loss of his religious self also left him a **new self**, his atheist self/identity.

Hal stays with the sub-plot of **Loss** through deconversion and narrates the grieving process of a major secondary character present in his story: God.

"Iftimni, ħajtek kollha tmur il-quddies, temmen f'Alla, titlob… titkellem u għandek relazzjoni m'Alla… it's a grieving process… Qisu miet ħabib tiegħek, fl-aħħar mill-aħħar… għax your purpose in life was given to you by God. When God isn't in the equation, you lost

purpose… tispiċċa. Ma baqalekx iktar skop għal ħajja. And that can turn suicidal!" (lines 543-550, 567-573)[65]

Hal says that what supported him through this existential despair and grief was the creation and discovery of a new person-centred value system which helped him to find purpose without God – the original 'purpose-provider'. Now he no longer had to subscribe to pre-packaged ideas of what his life's purpose *should* be:

"Għax fl-aħħar mill-aħħar, I found my own purpose… Għax minflok jiena ġejt fid-dinja, prattikament I don't have a free will, and there's God's plan li lili ħalaqni biex nagħmel… il-pjan li għandu għalija, issa dak il-pjan spiċċa… issa l-pjan ta' x'irrid nagħmel f'ħajti, issa ħa nagħmlu jiena!" (lines 577-583)[66]

From a discourse analysis perspective, the phrase "fl-aħħar mill-aħħar" / "all in all" implies that for Hal, his deconversion narrative is reconciled and coherent enough. It is a story of brute-force individuation to painfully find his own purpose without God's help and a blatant rejection of His plan. The above quote frames the protagonist at the 'Eureka' point where he takes control over his life and its meaning, as well as finding his place in his old context/setting, yet with a new identity.

Hal's story follows the over-arching plot of the subservient protagonist turned *Rebel* turned *Hero* as he rose over adversity, whilst providing an incredible chronological timeline of a richly detailed, complex, and nuanced deconversion process in the Maltese context. His story features many side characters including his religious alter-ego, God Himself (and his death) and His Earthly clergy, some of whom turned to *antagonists*, and others remained as *allies*. The main Sub-plots include **Independence**, **Irreverence towards the Holy**, **Rebellion against Authority**, **Loss & Betrayal**, and **Acceptance & Reconciliation**.

5. Discussion

I shall utilise this final section to reflect systemically on my findings and to highlight both similarities and divergences of my results to relevant literature. Given the word-count limitations, some frameworks are consciously left out of the discussion.

5.1 Social Constructionism and Atheism: Deconversion as a Not-Knowing Stance

> *"In the 'both–and' reality […] many simultaneous descriptions are possible […] without considering one point of view to be right and another wrong"*
>
> - Seikkula (2011, p.185)

My epistemological inclination towards Social Constructionist theory stems out of resonance with atheism and religious agnosticism – no one's *truth* is absolute, not even so-called 'religious truth' and its claims of exclusivity over a 'One *True* God'. Social Constructionism (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Gergen, 1999; 2009) is not only relevant to my own researcher-position when discussing/analysing the results, but directly features in all my participants' narration of deconversion. They asserted their position as atheist/non-religious in a tentative, uncertain nature, accepting "life's ambiguity and of the non-exclusiveness of any so-called truth" (Skonovd, 1981, p.182), acknowledging their perspective as one subjective variation out of an infinity of other possible constructs. To deconvert means constantly residing in a position of *not-knowing* (Anderson & Goolishan, 1992), or a stance of *knowing not to know* (Larner, 1994; 2000) tolerating polarities, as reflected in Holly, Kate and Hal's simultaneous referencing to their religious selves as they explored their non-religious ones.

5.2 Identity Issues: Deconversion & Identity Co-Construction

"I am who I am"

- Exodus 3:14

"In a world that is existentially uncertain, we all create stories to keep us moving, and faith and religion are one such story. We live the stories we tell."

- Saliha Bava (2016)

The mere existence of phrases such as "Christian man", "Muslim family" or "Hindu country" in our socio-cultural lexicon is evidence enough of religion's weight in forming personal, familial, even national identities. Just as religious belief as an item of identification can be assimilated into the multiplicity of selves (Gergen, 2008), "deconversion narratives [also] offer rich insights into aspects and understandings of atheist identity" (Scheidt, 2018, p.32).

In my participants' stories, it clearly emerged that the transition towards atheism proved to be more than just a move of spiritual, cognitive, and moral significance, but also an assertion of 'personal identity' in its wider, systemic sense. Studies also show that the *atheist identity* is built on the available "cultural tool kits" (Swidler, 1986) of both secular and religious cultures in order to draw from legitimised elements of established, creditable individual and collective identities (Sumerau & Cragun, 2016), what is described as an *achieved identity* (Smith, 2011; Pérez & Vallières, 2019). A 'moral' atheist identity can include both religious and secular artifacts in it as was reflected in my results, since all participants share elements of religious values in their eclectic secular value system.

Cragun (2014) also states that adopting a 'good' atheist identity is a preoccupation faced by many in their deconversion identity work, yet this was not reflected in my participants' stories. Their preoccupation was more on how their immediate familial, professional, and relational contexts would react to their shifting spiritual identity. In fact,

deconversion and the quest for an alternative spiritual lifestyle can be a socially-expensive journey (Hookway & Habibis, 2015; Scharp & Beck, 2017), as was the case for Hal. Leaving religion is not merely an organisational exit (Hinderaker & O'Connor, 2015), and existing research shows it "can pervasively disrupt a person's sense of self" (Scharp and Beck, 2017, p.133). For Roma, Jack, and Hal this disruption was reflected in their narrative sub-plots of confusion and incongruency. This rationale can be adopted to the local, tightly-knit community where religion is intertwined with everything else in a person's immediate context, maybe even more so in the island of Gozo, where for Kate (and myself) refusing or abandoning religious activities (considered compulsory life-transition rituals and social obligations) can have a weightier currency than simply leaving a club – it's almost as if you're leaving reality itself (Lee & Gubi, 2019).

Scharp & Beck (2017, p.135) argue that "narratives constitute our way of being in the world" which overlaps with the function of "identity (re)construction" (Scharp & Beck, 2017) – in instances of *identity disruption* (Fisher, 1987), or *biographical disruptions* (Riessman, 2008), my participants' expectations for continuity were raptured. They all made sense of events through story-telling (Reissman, 2008), narrating how they relate to the world differently now. In my research I viewed identity as a socially-constructed, systemic concept, or "identity as performed" (Lövheim, 2013), opening avenues to conceptualise the atheist identity formation in a richer, context-bound sense (Tomlins & Beamon, 2015). 'Identity' is a conglomerate of stories capable of *re-authoring* and *re-storying* (White & Epston, 1990), enabling people to create, destroy, or repair identities (Bamberg, 2011). Therefore, the performance of stories functions as a negotiator to stabilise identity (Linde, 1993).

I find this line of reasoning too linear. Research surrounding 'identity' used to focus on the modernistic approach of a fixed, unwavering identity, and the quest to "stabilise" it (Linde, 1993). Why must identity be 'stable'? If we take into consideration Davies & Harre's

(1990) *Positioning Theory* or Moghaddam & Tan's (1995) notion of *Reflexive Positioning*, isn't identity always in a state of flux? If we continuously evolve, there should be no end state of a 'perfectly' evolved identity, without need of revisions or adjustments, also because from an ecological perspective (Bateson, 1972) our context is constantly shifting and changing – adapting to us, and us to the environment. I believe that my participants' stories are clear testament of this fluid "performance… which is necessarily relational" (Scheidt, 2018, p.35).

5.3 Language of the Godless: Atheism & Deconversion in the Maltese Context

> *"Just as with religion, precisely what any given individual means by atheist would have to be situated in that person's context."*
>
> - Cragun (2016, p.8).

In adopting a *deconversion perspective* (Fazzino, 2014; Pérez & Vallières, 2019), I am particularly sensitive about my participants' "reaction against the hegemony of religious worldview that is often taken as the default ideology" (Pérez & Vallières, 2019, p.3). This is highlighted mostly in Jack's story and his refusal to identify with the term 'atheist' due to its one-down position to 'theism'. Thus, "because privileging religion necessarily subordinates that which is other to religion, those who leave religions should not be labelled using the terminology of the religious. They should be allowed to self-identify and self-label." (Cragun, 2016, p.11) as Jack, Holly, and Kate did.

Literature also shows that the term 'atheist' can be something "individuals either avoid using […] or [else] refer to themselves as something less 'risqué'" (Quillen, 2015, p.1) such as Jack's *Non-Conforming*, Kate's *Spiritual not Religious*, and Holly's *Pantheist Agnostic* titles. It is important to highlight these less-than-popular-identities because as Sumerau & Cragun (2016, p.1) state, "openly nonreligious—and especially atheist identified—people face considerable harassment, marginalization, and discrimination" in contemporary society, as reported mainly by Hal, and all other participants in varying

degrees. To the contrary of research, Hal and Roma brandished their atheist-identity proudly and irreverently, purposefully to differentiate and dissociate themselves from theism.

Traditionally, Atheism has been seen both as a *negative* and a *positive referent*, meaning: describing on one hand only what someone *does not* believe in, versus indicating also what other things the person *believes in*, e.g., critical thinking, humanism, plurality, and advocacy for generally progressive ideas (Cragun, 2016). Holly and Roma, for example, challenge dominant *negative referent* definitions of atheism. Their narrative is "related to atheism that indicates more of what those who use the label *do* believe rather than what they don't" (Cragun, 2016, p.15), e.g., new-found respect for nature; believing in 'love'. While atheism and deconversion are usually used synonymously, my results clearly show that not all deconverts identify as atheist.

The process of coming out as atheist is also acknowledged in research, and "is a powerful way for individuals to disclose, constitute, and perform membership in stigmatized identity categories" (Cloud, 2017, p.1). For Hal, coming out was a risky experience, for Jack it was double-fold (as non-religious and gay), whilst in Kate's case, atheist disclosure is repressed in her Gozitan context, only allowed to come out in the safety of her husband's presence. The fear of being 'found out' is not insignificant, especially in a religiously-saturated context, where religion is granted the privilege of serving as a moral yardstick whereby people may interpret the character of others regardless of their actions (Barton, 2012) as was in Hal's story and his eventual shunning from his community. In the wake of momentous scandals of systemic sexual abuse within the Catholic Church (Haines-Eitzen, 2021; Mancini, 2022), religious identity has become "*de*moralised" (Sumerau & Cragun, 2016, p.2), hence in contemporary secular society it is the *absence* of religion that suddenly facilitates the formation of valuable selves (Guenther, 2014).

5.4 A Recipe for Making Atheists?

Deconversion is synonymous with individuation. According to Brewster (2014, as cited in Pérez & Vallières, 2019, p.4) "deconversion in the United States, where the majority is religious, is related to a process of individualization such as leaving the family home to attend college". This is similar to my own process of individuation from my Gozitan context when I travelled to live independently whilst studying at the University of Malta, providing a context of exploration for my bubbling atheistic curiosities. This mirrors Kate's narrative too.

This process featured in all of my participants' stories in some form of another, especially when they studied subjects like philosophy and psychology – encouraging critical thinking and reflexive introspection, coupled with living independently. These major life transitions coupled with openness to new ideas can contribute to lessened religious commitment (Pérez & Vallières, 2019).

Others think that deconversion into atheism comes out of misfortune or extreme hardship. Cachia (personal communication, 2021) claims "the term 'deconvert' is […] a denial of one's [spiritual] needs who, precisely because s/he may have not found this innate need, still yearns for something more meaningful". This exposes how oftentimes, even in academia, the deconversion perspective relies on *crisis rhetoric*, situating spiritual struggle at the narrative core (Cragun & Hammer, 2011; Fazzino, 2014), which clearly is not always the case (Streib & Keller, 2004), e.g., my participants did not always depart from a point of crisis in their lives. My results also challenge notions about *who is the Atheist supposed to be* and believe/not believe in. Therefore, as far as 'recipes' go, there are none for baking a batch of consecutively identical atheists.

5.5 My Research as a Transformative Deconversion Tool

In my research I moved away from 'deconversion' as a phenomenon *out there*, and towards deconversion as a *live*-concept, because "the storyteller […] constructs and tells his or her story with an audience in mind. The audience co-constructs the story in both content and form" (Rober, 2005, p.480). Thus "all accounts are simultaneously descriptions of events *and* part of the event itself" (McNamee, 2014, p.93), hence my participants' narration not only recounts but actually constitutes the deconversion (Avance, 2013; Stromberg, 1993).

Self-narrations serve both as constructions and claims of identity (Burck, 2005), and sometimes its imbued co-creativity gives rise to *transformative moments* such as during Roma's interview. According to Roma, she never saw her exposure to both religious and non-religious FOO members as a central plot in her deconversion story, until she disclosed it out loud during the research interview. Hence, the interview itself functioned as a tool for Roma's coherence of her own deconversion narrative, admitting that this was a **transformational experience** for her:

"Iva, iva, iva, issa ġejt fiha ta! Għax 'qas'biss kont ħsibtha qabel, to be honest din [li kont exposed għaż-żewġ options]… Issa qed niġi fiha…" (lines 311-313)[67]

This shows that when the participants narrated their deconversion processes, this was not a mere re-enactment of past events but an *in vivo* process of active co-construction. Hence, "the plot does not recount a separate level of events, rather the writer understands the plot as the deconversion itself" (Stromberg, 2020, p.329), were both parties emerge changed by the story-telling encounter (Simon, 2014), something which changed my perspective on the impact of my research as a deconversion tool as well as my position as an *active audience* (Rober, 2005).

6. Limitations, Recommendations & Clinical Relevance

Keeping in mind the qualitative nature of the study, my results cannot be generalised for the whole population, since here I privileged depth over breadth. Moreover, given the lack of research on the topic locally, most of the studies cited are from other countries with varying degrees of social, religious, and cultural differences which might not be resonant with the local scene. On this line, and against any intention, all my participants came from a Roman Catholic background pre-deconversion. It would be interesting to replicate such a study with atheists hailing from other religions in Malta, e.g., Ex-Muslims.

This study is pertinent to any clinician in the psychotherapeutic field since approximately 10% of clinical clients report that they do not believe in God (Weisman et al., 2006), particularly for the Family Therapist given the systemic nature of deconversion processes. Knowing how uncomfortably unprepared therapists might be to address issues of religion and spirituality (Errington, 2017) such studies are therefore significant to the family therapy field.

The study of deconversion might seem narrow and overly-specific, yet “it is a general process not specific to religious roles” (Krueger, 2013, p.2) and parallels can be drawn from it to therapeutic themes of role-exit and disaffiliation. This can be helpful in supporting clients/families transitioning between roles (professionally, or from a family-life-cycle perspective), helping them understand other processes they (or others) may be undergoing (sexual orientation/gender transitions, spiritual/existential crises), or in dealing with clients with stigmatized identities.

7. Conclusion

"…and thank you to God for making me an atheist."

- Ricky Gervais (2011)

My research took a strength and resilience-based perspective on local atheists and non-religious people, in contrast to discriminatory stereotypes and discourse also cited in literature (Cragun & Hammer, 2011; Fazzino, 2014), with atheists and non-believers labelled the "most hated minority in America" (Foust, 2009). By shedding light on the sensitive and complex process of atheist deconversion, I empowered and elicited acknowledgement towards the ever-growing (Smith, 2011; Zuckerman, 2009; Marmara`, 2023) minority of people who choose to defy our *de facto* socio-religious standards and expectations. My research challenged this marginalization, also evidenced in our homeostatic social discourse (Foucault, 1991; Rabinow, 1991) promoting the powerful hegemonic idea that religion is a privileged position and nonreligion is not (Cragun & Hammer, 2011).

Finally, this dissertation helped transforming my own personal meaning-making of my deconversion narrative through the careful deployment of language – I did not *convert to* Atheism, I *deconverted from* Christianity; and with that, took on board other universal, humanistic, and yet, secular values to live a 'good/moral' life, without the need of invoking god/s or other divine middlemen (e.g., Jesus). Values and principles such as honesty, equality, tolerance, love, humility, autonomy, scientific curiosity, empathic benevolence, and social justice, amongst others, all form part of my, and my co-researchers' ever-evolving moral identity (Sumerau & Cragun, 2016). This work serves as a declaration of my nonconformist, post-modern stance, and a continuation of my irreverence (Cecchin et al., 1993) towards tightly-held, 'holy' traditions; my assertion that no idea is above criticism or scrutiny (Nawaz & Harris, 2015).

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Appendix A

Letter of Invitation

Losing My Religion: Storying Atheist Deconversion & Religious Exit Narratives in the Maltese Context.

Dear Participant,

I am currently reading for a Masters in Systemic Family Psychotherapy with the Institute of Family Therapy, Malta (IFT-Malta). I am working on my final Thesis, under the guidance of my research supervisor, Ms. Yanica Richards Chircop.

I would like to invite you to participate in my research process exploring the Atheist Deconversion Narratives of adults in Malta. I am interested to bring to light the unique stories of people who identify as non-religious/atheist within the Maltese context, and to understand better what contributed to their exodus from religious faith, and how they narrate their deconversion journey within their idiosyncratic contexts, from their own point of view, in relation to their personal, familial, and socio-cultural relationships.

The research will be carried out through semi-structured interviews which will take approximately one and a half hours. Interviews can be carried out face-to-face or online as necessary. The information will be digitally recorded and transcribed. I will be treating your stories and experiences with respect, ensure confidentiality and anonymity in the write up of my thesis and any identifiable information will be changed or omitted if necessary. I will only have access to this information and recordings. Only if needed and necessary this information can also be accessed by my research supervisor Ms. Yanica Richards Chircop, who is also bound by confidentiality. I will ensure that all the recordings and audio files will be deleted permanently after the research is completed in 2023.

I will provide you with a copy of the findings after the finalisation of the work, upon request. A copy of this thesis will also be available at IFT-Malta. I wish to ensure that this research may not cause any distress during the interviewing process and thereafter. Thus, I may ask you to withdraw from the study at any point in time, should I notice that the research is not safeguarding your psychological and emotional well-being. I will further suggest the adequate support if deemed necessary.

A debriefing time will also be dedicated, following the interview, so that you have space to express the research experience and any positive or negative emotions, which may have arisen. I will provide the necessary interventions and support or refer you to the adequate services, should this be required.

Your involvement in this study is strictly voluntary and no compensation for participation will be given. I am open and available to discuss any queries you may have, including fears, doubts, areas of discomfort, prior to the interview for further clarification about your decision to participate or not in this study. You may choose not to participate or withdraw from participation at any point in time, during and after the interview process.

May you wish to participate, kindly sign the attached consent form. This research proposal has been reviewed and approved by the IFT Research Ethics Committee.

Your contribution in this area will be very helpful.

Thank you very much in advance.

Yours truly,

Melvin Calleja – Masters in Systemic Family Psychotherapy Student

Mobile Number: 79325812

Email: melvincalleja7@gmail.com

Ittra ta' Stedina

Losing My Religion: Storying Atheist Deconversion & Religious Exit Narratives in the Maltese Context.

Għażiż Parteċipant,

Bħalissa qed naqra' għal Masters f'Systemic Family Psychotherapy mal-Istitut tat-Terapija tal-Familja, Malta (IFT-Malta). Qed naħdem fuq it-Teżi tiegħi, taħt il-gwida tas-superviżur tar-riċerka tiegħi, Ms. Yanica Richards Chircop.

Nixtieq nistiednek tipparteċipa fil-proċess ta' riċerka tiegħi li tesplora n-narrattivi ta' Dikonverżjoni Atea f'adulti f'Malta. Jien interessat li nitfa' dawl fuq l-istejjer uniċi ta' nies li jidentifikaw bħala irreliġjużi/atei fi ħdan il-kuntest lokali, u biex nifhem aħjar x'ikkontribwixxa għall-eżodu tagħhom mill-fidi reliġjuża, u kif jinnarraw il-vjaġġ ta' dikonverżjoni fil-kuntest idjosinkratiku tagħhom, mill-perspettiva tagħhom, fir-rigward tar-relazzjonijiet personali, familjari, u soċjo-kulturali tagħhom.

Ir-riċerka se ssir permezz ta' intervisti semi-strutturati li se jieħdu madwar siegħa u nofs. L-informazzjoni tkun irreġistrata u traskritta b'mod diġitali. L-intervisti jistgħu jsiru wiċċ imb'wiċċ jew b'mod virtwali onlajn skond l-eżiġenzi. Se nkun qed nittratta n-narrattivi u l-esperjenzi tiegħek b'rispett u nassigura l-kunfidenzjalità u l-anonimità fil-kitba tat-teżi tiegħi u kwalunkwe informazzjoni identifikabbli tinbidel jew titħalla barra jekk meħtieġ. Jiena biss ser ikolli aċċess għal din l-informazzjoni u r-recordings. Jekk ikun neċessarju biss, din l-informazzjoni tista wkoll tkun aċċessata mis-superviżur tar-riċerka tiegħi Ms. Yanica Richards Chircop, li wkoll hi marbuta bl-istess kunfidenzjalità. Se niżgura li r-rikordji u l-awdjo files kollha jintremew b'mod permanenti wara li r-riċerka titlesta fl-2023.

Jien ser nipprovdi tas-sejbiet wara l-finalizzazzjoni tax-xogħol, jekk dan jintalab. Kopja ta' din it-teżi se tkun disponibbli wkoll fl-IFT-Malta. Nixtieq niżgura li din ir-riċerka ma' tikkawża l-ebda tbatija matul il-proċess tal-intervisti u wara. B'hekk, nista' nitlobkom tirtiraw mill-istudju fi kwalunkwe ħin, jekk ninnota li r-riċerka mhix qed tissalvagwardja l-benessri psikoloġiku u emozzjonali tiegħek kif ukoll nissuġġerixxi l-appoġġ ta' servizzi adegwati jekk ikun meħtieġ.

Se jkun iddedikat ukoll ħin ta' debriefing, wara l-intervista, sabiex ikollok spazju biex tesprimi l-esperjenza tar-riċerka u kull emozzjoni pożittiva jew negattiva, li setgħet inqalgħet.

Jiena nipprovdi l-interventi u l-appoġġ meħtieġa jew nirreferik għas-servizzi adegwati, jekk dan ikun meħtieġ.

L-involviment tiegħek f'dan l-istudju huwa dejjem volontarju u l-ebda kumpens għall-parteċipazzjoni m'hu ser jingħata. Jien miftuħ u disponibbli biex niddiskuti kwalunkwe mistoqsija li jista' jkollok, inklużi biżgħat, dubji, oqsma ta' skumditàà, qabel l-intervista għal aktar kjarifika dwar id-deċiżjoni tiegħek li tipparteċipa jew le f'dan l-istudju. Tista' tagħżel li ma tipparteċipax jew li tieqaf tipparteċipa f'kwalunkwe punt u ħin, kemm matul u kif ukoll wara l-proċess tal-intervista.

Jekk tixtieq tipparteċipa, jekk jogħġbok iffirma l-formola tal-kunsens mehmuża. Din il-proposta ta' riċerka ġiet riveduta u approvata mill-Kumitat tal-Etika tar-Riċerka tal-IFT.

Il-kontribut tiegħek f'dan il-qasam se jkun ta' għajnuna kbira.

Grazzi ħafna bil-quddiem.

Dejjem tiegħek,

Melvin Calleja– Student tal-Masters in Systemic Family Psychotherapy

Numru tal-Mobile: 79325812

Email: melvincalleja7@gmail.com

Consent Form

Losing My Religion: Storying Atheist Deconversion & Religious Exit Narratives in the Maltese Context.

I, undersigned, hereby agree to voluntarily participate in the study carried out by Mr. Melvin Calleja entitled: "*Losing My Religion: Storying Atheist Deconversion & Religious Exit Narratives in the Maltese Context."* submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement of the Masters in Systemic Family Psychotherapy with the Institute of Family Therapy, Malta.
I have read the letter of invitation with all the information about the above-entitled research. I have had the opportunity to consider the information and clarify all my concerns about my participation in the research. All my questions have been answered to my satisfaction.

- I understand that all data will be kept confidential and my anonymity will be respected.
- I also understand that the researcher and his supervisor Ms. Yanica Richards Chircop will use the information obtained for the sole purposes of this research.
- I also understand that the following research may be published and I will be consulted before any publication.
- I understand that audio files and transcripts will be destroyed after the completion of the thesis. All the information will be treated according to the Maltese Data Protection Act (Cap 586) and the General Data Protection Regulation (EU) 2016/679 (GDPR).
- I also understand that my participation is voluntary and that I can refrain from the research at any point in time or be guided by the researcher to refrain from the research if he may deem necessary for my well-being.
- I also understand that the researcher will refer me to the appropriate support/services as necessary.

I therefore agree to take part in the above-mentioned study.

_____ _____

Participant's Signature

Melvin Calleja
Masters in Systemic Family
Psychotherapy Student

Date: _____

Formola ta' Kunsens

Losing My Religion: Storying Atheist Deconversion & Religious Exit Narratives in the Maltese Context.

Jien, hawn taħt iffirmat, b'dan naqbel li nipparteċipa volontarjament fl-istudju li sar mis-Sinjur Melvin Calleja bl-isem: "*Losing My Religion: Storying Atheist Deconversion & Religious Exit Narratives in the Maltese Context*." sottomess bi twettiq parzjali tar-rekwiżit tal-Masters in Systemic Family Psychotherapy mal-Istitut tat-Terapija tal-Familja, Malta.

Qrajt l-ittra ta' stedina bl-informazzjoni kollha dwar ir-riċerka hawn fuq. Kelli l-opportunità li nikkunsidra l-informazzjoni u niċċara t-tħassib kollu tiegħi dwar il-parteċipazzjoni tiegħi fir-riċerka. Il-mistoqsijiet kollha tiegħi ġew imwieġba għas-sodisfazzjon tiegħi.

- Nifhem li d-data kollha ser tinżamm kunfidenzjali u l-anonimità tiegħi se tkun rispettata.
- Nifhem ukoll li r-riċerkatur u s-supervizur tar-ricerka tiegħu Ms. Yanica Richards Chircop se jużaw l-informazzjoni miksuba għall-iskopijiet uniċi ta' din ir-riċerka. Nifhem ukoll li r-riċerka tista' tiġi ppubblikata fil-futur u ser niġi kkonsultat/a qabel kwalunkwe pubblikazzjoni.
- Nifhem li l-audio files u traskrizzjonijiet se jinqerdu wara t-tlestija tat-teżi. L-informazzjoni kollha tiġi ttrattata skont l-Att Malti dwar il-Protezzjoni tad-Data (Kap 586) u r-Regolament Ġenerali dwar il-Protezzjoni tad-Data (GDPR) (EU) 2016/679.
- Nifhem ukoll li l-parteċipazzjoni tiegħi hija volontarja u li nista' nwaqqaf il-parteċipazzjoni tiegħi mir-riċerka f'kwalunkwe ħin jew inkun iggwidat mir-riċerkatur biex noqgħod lura mir-riċerka jekk ikun hemm riskju għall-benesseri tiegħi.
- Nifhem ukoll li r-riċerkatur se jirreferini għall-għajnuna/servizzi xierqa kif meħtieġ.

Għalhekk naqbel li nieħu sehem fl-istudju msemmi hawn fuq.

_____ _____

Firma tal-Parteċipant

Melvin Calleja
Student tal-Masters f'Systemic Family Psychotherapy

Data: _____

Appendix B

Main Interview Questions

- ***Take me through your journey from religious belief towards atheism/deconversion. / What is your story of the journey from religion to non-belief?***
- ***Are there any prominent stories from your deconversion journey that are significant to you?***

Narrative follow-up Questions

- *If you had to narrate your deconversion story as a novel/script, what genre would it be? (tragedy? Heroic? Bildungsroman? comedy?). What title would you give it?*
- *Who, if any, would be the secondary characters in this story? Are there any significant others who contributed and participated in your deconversion journey/process?*
- *What differences were observed in yourself and others, in your relationships?*
- *How did your relationship with spirituality/existentialism evolve?*
- *During your deconversion process, how did you adjust your atheist identity to the local religious context?*
- *How do you negotiate living as an atheist in a strong religious Maltese context? How are you marrying the two?*
- *How do you think your religious exit impacted your family and relationships? How do you think your family and those around you lived your deconversion process? Are there any stories you can share?*

- *If your 'religious self' was here with us today, what conversation would they have with you? What would they think/say/feel? What would your 'deconverted self' reply back? How do you reconcile these 2 selves? (eg: iz-zewg melvins)*
- *Take me back before your deconversion – what values and beliefs did your 'religious self' hold close? How do you see the world differently now? How did you change or stay the same through your deconversion journey?*

Basic Demographic Questions:

- *Age,*
- *Gender,*
- *Education,*
- *Employment,*
- *Marital status (church or state),*
- *Spiritual identification (if any),*
- *Pseudonym of choice.*

Appendix C

English Translation of Interview Quotes

Holly

1. "Once I asked this priest whether he believes in exorcism, and he told me 'no, I don't believe in such fairytales', and he's a priest!... he said, 'for me those are all silly things!'…(laughs) I was left aghast at that time!"
2. "I used to believe, but no longer liked going to church"
3. "When I was 15 or 16… I used to date someone for five years and he had, like, very religious parents, to an extreme… meaning that it's blasphemous to not go to church on Sundays and wanting us to go by force, and not wanting us sleeping together"
4. "So it's like from there, so when I was 15/16, was when I started rebelling against religion"
5. "…for example I wouldn't make the sign of the cross, so I would go to church and just, I wouldn't pay attention"
6. "when I no longer was with this person, then it was like I was free, because then I could choose to not go, no longer listen to the moaning… and that kept hammering in me that I no longer want to frequent church"
7. "the in-laws I had at the time; those were like the nail in the coffin! (laughs) it's like pushed me to rebel even more…[they helped me] in other ways…"
8. "And it's like I came up with this idea which in my opinion… (exhales) God is nature. Meaning, I very much believe that… the universe is God, basically, not God who we imagine in Christianity"
9. "I don't view it as if I left religion… as in left it, completely left it."
10. "one particular time I had psychology of religious experience… and the lecturer was a priest… although he was a priest, he was very open though. Like, even if you go and

tell him ‘look I don’t agree with you and I think that what you’re saying is bullshit’… he would discuss with you… you’d explain why you hold such beliefs, and no one was going to tell you ‘no, go to church!’”

11. “His mother never told me, for example ‘come with us to River of Love’… One, I would have told her ‘no’, square and plain… I wouldn’t have done as I did when I was 16 and attending church just to please her… (smiles)”
12. “being assertive is important in life for everything… and especially on religion, because to stay going to church just to warm the seat… or so that your neighbours see you, I would just not go, you know?... what’s the use of praying just for the sake of praying if I’m not believing what I’m saying?”
13. Holly: “For me nature, like, I worship it… as in not worship it in the Christian sense, but I do take care. I mean, I believe a lot”

    Researcher: “it’s like you honour it”

    Holly: “I honour it, exactly!”

Jack

14. “From the beginning of my life… I felt, like I never had that stable relationship with religion”
15. “because of this I couldn’t even do the Holy Communion with my friends, so I did it a year after”
16. “I think that was the whole feeling of it all, yeah, it’s like I was feeling left out from the religious world…”
17. “I remember asking questions about- for example why was I like, shunned from the Church because my parents weren’t married? And I never really got a good enough answer to me…”

18. “I used to do a prayer and one of the things I used to pray for (laughs) and it’s a bit depressing, is the fact that I truly used to pray and wish that my mother and father would love each other again (smiles) […] And I remember thinking, [God] does all these things but this one simple thing it’s like it was… it just seemed unreachable”
19. “all in all I can say that I completely lost my faith probably around Form 2, actually so I remember even when I did my Holy Confirmation, at that time I was already… it all seemed a bit unbelievable”
20. Jack: “I remember that the priest actually started shouting at her-”

    Researcher: (shocked look)

    Jack: “-during the ceremony and getting angry at her, because somehow the conversation came up and she told him that she’s not married to my father, and… my mum ended up literally crying in the middle of the church…”
21. “I feel that it was never really in my books to <u>be</u> religious”
22. “As a matter of fact I see it very strange when someone if gay, for example, and they’re religious… it’s something which truly doesn’t make sense for me, that you’re believing in an institution that doesn’t believe in you”
23. “because for me, it’s like if he does the sign of the cross then he believes in it, in the sense… otherwise, it’s literally just like doing the YMCA symbol… (smiling)”
24. “I don’t- not that I don’t relate to the word ‘Atheist’… it’s like for me to call yourself ‘Atheist’ is… it’s like giving power to religion… in my perspective the fact that you call yourself ‘atheist’ it’s like you’re segregating yourself from the world of religion, when in truth I don’t believe that the is a world of religion. I believe that there’s a world, and religion is only part of it… maybe it’s a stupid example, but I don’t go over to people and tell them ‘I’m not Italian’… you get me? Because in the sense, it doesn’t really relate to my life”

Kate

25. “Once I visited a nun’s convent and it’s like I saw- felt their peace… and sort of, I wished for that, but then when you start growing up things start to change”
26. “then when you start growing up and living independently, and go to Malta, University… you’re no longer devout…”
27. “it’s like then… you no longer feel the need, to a certain extent.”
28. “it’s like when you start living on your own your ideas begin to take shape further…”
29. “you start saying ‘but, yeah, do certain things actually exist?’ […] questioning 2how can it be that the Madonna remained a virgin and birthed Christ?’”
30. “for example when a small child dies, for argument’s sake, or a small child is sick with cancer… if we say that Jesus is there to help us, and wants what’s best for everyone, then why did He give him sickness, you understand? It’s like you start to question a lot of things”
31. “when you’re little it’s like you swallow everything you hear… when you start growing up it’s like you start reflecting on your own and through certain experiences you go through”
32. Kate: “‘live in faith for now if you feel that you have to, but always question things, because- yeah, it will help you grow’ I think… when you question things…” Researcher: “mhm, so ‘questioning helps you grow’…”
33. “because at home we had some family issues… I used to go to church sort of to go out and escape. For those few moments… and I think that I had so much chaos at that time when I was younger- because my mother had her addictions, my father with his own addictions, so it’s like… I had no one to fall onto… there was no trust-person. Maybe I used to find that “trust”, sort of indirectly in the Church, religion, whatever.

Maybe that's why I used to say that I wanted to become a nun for the sense of peacefulness that I had felt… compared with home"

34. "I don't know if I can use the term 'atheist' to be fair. Because it's like I still feel that there is something, but I don't call it 'God' or 'Jesus'… it's more that I live the spiritual aspect of things, in the sense that there's no need to go inside a church to feel at peace, I just go outside in nature for example and reflect and meditate"
35. "it's like I feel that it makes much more sense for me to find my inner peace… rather than religion or, excuse the word… but having to go swallowing the holy wafer in order to feel good about myself"
36. "my grandma… who goes to church everyday, and you know, is devout, told me 'close your eyes, keep walking, don't mind it!'… I didn't feel that I had to keep walking, it didn't feel right. Now I don't go to church every day, but I feel that, look… this person needs help, so I stopped anyways and helped this person by calling them an ambulance"
37. "in truth- I'm going to be honest, I don't feel comfortable saying 'look, I don't believe'… I don't say that I believe, either, I just don't say anything about these things! (laughing)… especially with people who I know are closed-minded… in the sense that- they're not open to listen to other ideas"
38. "she keeps pressuring and pressuring me 'oh, come on'- because for us that's also important, 'who knows what people might say, who knows what people might say!'… that used to be very present, what the other people would say"
39. "I could say that maybe [his deconversion] confirmed a bit what I was thinking, yes"
40. "so we love arguing sometimes about these things sort of to- I don't know, sense of communication, argument… in the sense, to question more I think…"

Roma

41. “the truth right, because that’s what I think, that that’s the truth, that nothing exists. That’s my truth, after all”
42. “my mother always complaining so I go to mass on the weekend, meaning I had started going out with friends on outings, you know? In my youth… and always ‘make sure you come to church with us!’, then I started becoming vengeful- I go with my friends so that I don’t go to church… but little by little I started decreasing, instead of going to church, I go to the playing fields (smirks)… and seeing how I can avoid it. I remember once I hid under the stairwell of our own home in order not to go! (laughs)”
43. “I remember asking a lot of questions, sort of, ‘if God exists how come there’s all this suffering?’ and trying to reason it out, ‘why should there be faith?’ and ‘why should I follow what the Church says?’
44. “I never wanted to be the person who believes without question, because of hope, with faith- <u>faith</u>, that’s what I question! Faith…<u>what is</u> faith? Because nowadays I see it as something which keeps people from maybe having a bit of a breakdown… it’s like having the excuse of religion”
45. “at school I used to rebel a lot during religion class. I used to ask a lot of questions which not even the teacher would know how to start answering”
46. “I remember one ‘if they hit you… you turn the other cheek so they give you another’ for example… that was something which we tried to challenge. So does that mean that you have to stay submissive to violence?”
47. “it’s like [music] was always my passion, meaning it could be that music came instead of religion for me- because it’s like, I follow many idols in music, and not only how they compose but also how they live their lives, like- that could be like a religion as well…”

48. “because when you see people reasoning with ‘because that’s what God’s wanted’, ‘that’s because God willed it’… ‘because Jesus has something better for you’- those who believe these things, it’s like, well, a way of life”
49. “‘because that’s what Jesus wants’, ‘because God wills it’. If you made a mistake you have to own up for it as well, in the sense. You take responsibility. Not give responsibility to someone else, right!”
50. “when you go into existentialism you’ll get more questions and more crises… ‘what am I doing with my life?’ and I think that what helped me was the fact that I always wanted to work in the social helping sector- it’s like that’s my life’s purpose… I always felt this need of belonging”
51. “the lead singer had said that he believes in love, not in God. And that really stayed with me, because it resonated with me a lot… that you have to love people unconditionally”
52. “when I was in a relationship with someone who was separated and with a child, my mother told me ‘you don’t have values like us’…”
53. “I truly was not expecteing that reaction from mum… for her it wasn’t ‘I’m first because I am happy’… family values came first, and how we’ll be seen as a family… I, who believe so much in love, couldn’t understand how the daughter who you’re supposed to truly love comes after your own beliefs!”
54. “…my mother agrees with abortion when a woman is in danger of dying. So there I see a certain humanism in my mum as well… and that gives you a bit of courage in saying ‘oh! Wow, alright! So there is someone…!’”

Hal

55. ““There is no purpose in life outside of me, I create my own purpose… I am now in control! And that is the humanism part of it, sort of, the human is the centre of my life, not God.”
56. “it’s a process, it’s a journey which I think never ends, at the end of the day”
57. “with hindsight I say that there was always that something which tells me ‘but, does this really make sense? Is it because I was always brought up like this? I was always taught like this?’ and it’s like there was always that splinter in your mind… that doubt”
58. “that doubt I always used to dismiss, ‘noo! That’s just normal’, kind of, ‘don’t mind it!’ Eventually, when I was at university, I started telling myself, ‘look, you’re in denial!’… ‘You are not really a believer, for you it’s just easier because that’s how you were always brought up, all your friends are religious’… so, I kind of said, it was my comfort zone, if I was to say ‘look, I’m not a believer anymore’, emm, practically I’ll end up excluded and alone”
59. “eventually I came out with my friends and even with my spiritual leader and sort of told him, ‘look, this is my position’… I told him ‘voluntary work is still my passion, sort of, but I mean, I am not religious anymore’ and he was very accepting”
60. “I did the same, sort of, confession with him. He told me the same things, but after a year, year and a half he had second thoughts… and he decided that I no longer fit in there… and sort of told me ‘I don’t want you to attend anymore’”
61. “the spiritual director waited for the concert to happen… and sent for me to tell me… the very next day after the project’s closure… ‘please don’t come anymore, your services are no longer required’… and it’s like I felt used and discarded”

62. “there was a group of people who actually left as well in protest… yes. And I remember joining forces… with another religious group (smiling). So I still remained- joined another religious group as an atheist!”
63. “I remained a believer- I used to believe in God still… but I no longer believed in the Eucharist. For me the Eucharist was bullshit. It’s not true that the holy wafer transforms into the real body of Christ and the wine into the real blood of Christ”
64. “The final one was… kind of then overnight where I said ‘look, Hal, mate, you’ve always been denying it… you are in denial, stop kidding yourself and not seeing your doubts”
65. “look, all your life attending mass, believing in God, praying… talking and having a relationship with God… it’s a grieving process… it’s like your friend died, at the end of the day… because your purpose in life was given to you by God. When God isn’t in the equation, you lost purpose… you’re finished. There’s no more purpose in life. And that can turn suicidal!”
66. “Because at the end of the day, I found my own purpose… because instead of me coming into this world, practically I don’t have a free will, and there’s God’s plan who created me to follow… this plan he has for me, now that plan is finished… now the plan of what I want to do with my life, now I’ll do it myself!”
67. **Roma**: “yes, yes, yes, now I’m realising! ‘Cos I never thought of it like this before, [the fact that I was exposed to both options]!... Only now I’m seeing it…”

*