

# **Reviewed Articles**

## **Apostasy: Exploring Resistance and Transformation**

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Apostasy as an object of sociological inquiry has traditionally been marginalised and under-theorised. Within the sociology of religion, apostasy is often treated as an area of sub-specialisation under the umbrella of empirical religious investigation. Research is often approached in a topical and discrete manner with minimal theoretical underpinnings. While secularisation theory may be called upon as an explanation for recent increases in rates of disaffiliation, apostasy is still perceived and examined as a social-psychological phenomenon, unable to contribute to fundamental macro knowledges of religion and society. It is thus a topic of investigation not well pursued or informed by social theory. Further, I argue that apostasy is often premised on a set of uncritically reflected modernist assumptions that leave the construct marginalised and outside current theoretical discourses of the postmodern.

I believe that this marginalisation is problematic. Apostasy, understood and examined solely as an individual's experience of religious disaffiliation, does not allow the construct to be used as a tool capable of asking and answering fundamental sociological questions. It does not allow apostasy to be a window that can shed light on processes and techniques of socialisation that shape and form the individual. It does not attempt to understand the agency of the individual in negotiating the constructed self. Nor do these bounded approaches allow for a fresh examination of religion and religiosity, as both understandings of these constructs, and the constructs themselves evolve and reflect a postmodern world.

In a suitable analytical framework, however, I argue that the construct of apostasy can act as a vital signifier of the ever shifting relationship between the self, religiosity and societal structures. I believe that apostasy can signify the ability of, and need for, understandings of both the self and society to restructure and transform themselves in times of societal transformation. Further, I believe apostatic research conducted in a period of transition can point to the fluid nature of religion, as it evolves to reflect the developing social arena and the predominant discourses of knowledge. I believe apostasy can be instrumental in illuminating a potential epistemic shift occurring commensurate with the emergence of a postmodern world.

## The Durkheimian Influence on Apostasy Research

Durkheim's contribution to contemporary understandings of religion has been highly influential for apostatic research. Durkheim viewed religion as '...a body of collective beliefs and practices endowed with a certain authority...(1973:51). Durkheim saw religion, not as a transcendent force, but as a cultural phenomenon; one embedded within, created by, and essential to society. He saw religion as instrumental to mechanical solidarity, and as perhaps the most fundamental element of a collective conscious. For Durkheim, religion is both functional and necessary. The maintenance of the society and the well being of the individual both rely on the solidarity built on the rites and rituals of religion. He states:

By the mere fact that their (religions') apparent function is to strengthen the bonds attaching the believer to his God, they at the same time really strengthen the bonds attaching the individual to the society of which he is a member, since the God is only a figurative expression of the society. (1965:257)

Religion in fact, can be seen as a reflection of the utter dependence of the individual on society. There is acceptance of symbiotic relationships between religion and society/ religiosity and the individual.

These Durkheimian understandings of religion as necessary and utilitarian, are particularly influential in shaping apostasy knowledges. Accordingly, the literature proceeds from a premise of religion as essential and functional, and apostasy as dysfunctional and aberration. Thus, quite consistently, and often without explicit recognition, the underlying assumption of disaffiliation research is that apostasy is detrimental. In fact, a review of the literature claims that apostasy is, a 'falling from faith' (Brinkerhoff and Burke, 1980); a manifestation of 'guilt and shame' (Mauss, 1969); a product of 'maladjustment or neurosis' (Caplovitz and Sherrow, 1977); a 'disenchantment' (Roof, 1978); a 'failure' of socialisation and inter-generational transmission (Hunsberger, 1983); and a 'detrimental rejection' (Condran and Tamney, 1985). More than objective findings, however, I argue that these negative orientations exist as an implicit operating paradigm which biases the work. This can be clearly evidenced by Robert Heiner's 1992 article. His study of the attitudes of the members of the Freedom from Religion Foundation is entitled, 'Evangelical Heathens: The Status of Freethinkers in Southland'. It is published in the journal, *Deviant Behaviour*. This quite obviously points to negative subjectivities surrounding issues of non-belief. Durkheim's work on anomie has also contributed to negatively biased knowledges of apostasy. Durkheim claimed that anomie is likely to develop when '...individual passions (are left) without a curb to regulate them' (1993:287). For Durkheim, religion was one means for keeping such 'individual passions' in check. This belief can be evidenced in the operating paradigms of contemporary religious research in which a negative correlation between religious disaffiliation and anomie is taken for granted. McGuire presents this assumed relationship well:

Religion's capability of providing meaning and order suggest that religion functions as a protection from anomie in two ways: A firm religious basis of order is a buffer against the occurrence of anomie in the first place; and if the group does experience an anomic situation, religion can potently respond to the crisis of moral meanings (1987, 30).

Accordingly, research hypotheses that use anomie as a theoretical construct centre on the negative correlation of anomie and the strength of one's religious affiliation. Many researchers have in fact, found some support for this claim. Lee and Clyde (1974:35) find that: 1) religion has an immediate negative impact on anomie; and that 2) religiosity can inhibit the effects of alternate factors which could otherwise produce anomie. Lee (1981) found that while religious consciousness is not found to be significantly correlated, church attendance does have a weak negative correlation to anomie. More recently, Heiner (1992) found that 'freethinkers' or atheists are more likely than theists to experience alienation and anomie, and feel less connected to society at large.

Equally interesting, however, is the plethora of research, still premised on the negative correlation of anomie and religiosity, which does not bear out this hypothesis. For example, Fay (1978), contrary to hypothesis, found that within a religious community anomie was more likely to be concentrated among those most orthodox in their religiosity, specifically amongst those who are authoritarian, traditionalistic and nonrational. Seubert (1985), again contrary to hypothesis, found no significant relationship between anomie and orthodox religious belief. Seubert goes on to describe the problems this causes for interpretation. Christiano (1986) hypothesised that those individuals with incomplete family ties resort to religious participation as a means of relieving anomie. Support for this hypothesis was not found. Willits and Funk's research (1989) actually went on to find a correlation between the acceptance of non-traditional beliefs about God and lower expressions of anomie. Finally, Kanga, Willits and Cruder (1990), found that the more traditional the religious beliefs, the greater the expressed anomie.

The relationship of anomie to religiosity is thus shown to be complex, and can not be handled linearly. Anomie needs to be seen as having a rich nexus of relationships to both religious socialisation and religious disaffiliation. Studies of anomie, however, which are premised upon un-critically engaged Durkheimian notions of religion, have difficulty capturing the complexity of the situation for both individuals and society, as they negotiate an emerging postmodern world; a world not imagined or predicted by Durkheim.

As we move from a modern to a postmodern condition it becomes essential to historically situate the operating paradigms central to apostatic research. Durkheim needs to be reflected-upon as a modernists theorist who was interested in the rupture of traditional social ties by industrialisation, the Enlightenment and individualism. Rather than the death of religion, Durkheim was concerned with the demise of the beliefs and practices of premodern forms of religion as they had their authority

threatened in modernity. Durkheim's concern was over the alienating effects of transitions through modernity in which he sees the collective conscious in an unresolved state of flux. He was concerned with the '...incertitude and confused agitation...' (1965: 474) he sees as a potential of high modernity. His theorisations, however, did not reach in to a postmodern world. Thus, when Durkheim speaks of the plight of religion and the impact of change he is referring to a time when,

...societies become more voluminous and expand over vaster territories, traditions and practices, in order to accommodate themselves to the diversity of situations and to the mobility of circumstances, are obliged to maintain themselves in a state of plasticity and inconstancy which no longer offers enough resistance to individual variations. These variations, being less well restrained, are produced more freely and multiply; that is to say everyone tends to go off in his own direction. At the same time, as a result of a more developed division of labour, each mind finds itself oriented to a different point of the horizon, reflecting a different aspect of the world, and consequently the contents of consciousness (conscience) differs from one person to the other. Thus we make our way, little by little to a state, nearly achieved as of now, where the members of a single social group will have nothing in common among themselves except their humanity (1973: 51).

In other words, Durkheim is referring to a conception of the future which he sees offered by capitalism and industrialisation; the projected site of high modernity. Durkheim's theories, however, have been taken from their historical setting of modernity and non-critically applied to a world emerging on a postmodern age. The possibilities and complexities of renegotiating faith in a postmodern world are generally not taken into account by theorists who uncritically rely on modern understandings of religion. Thus for theorists who continue to uncritically apply the work of Durkheim to contemporary knowledges of apostasy, the complexities of understanding the significance of re-negotiating faith are not drawn out.

As we negotiate the passage from a modern to postmodern world, the applicability of Durkheim's theorisations must be put under examination. Certainly, I believe that many of Durkheim's conceptions reflect important and fundamental aspects of our contemporary situation. Societies have expanded, mechanical solidarity has given way to organic solidarity, and there has been a weakening of the collective conscious. I would thus argue that many of the alienating aspects of modernity described by Durkheim still impact on the individual. Durkheim's insights on the emotive toll, or the anomie and egoism associated with modernity are still instrumental for understanding aspects of the contemporary individual, hence contemporary apostate. This thesis, in fact, is premised on the viability of these Durkheimian conceptions of anomie and egoism as developed in his work *Suicide* (1993).

In *Suicide*, Durkheim proposed that the breakdown of a traditionally based collective conscious will cause great and overriding feelings of angst. This can lead

to a state of anomie which ‘...begets a state of exasperated and irritated weariness...’ (1993:375). He goes on to say that anomie, ‘...is anger and all the emotions customarily associated with disappointment’ (1993:284), and that ‘(t)he dominating tone is more or less irritated disgust with life (1993:286).

Where the angst of modernity manifests itself as egoism, it is likely to show itself as

‘...a condition of melancholic languor which relaxes all the springs of action (and) inspires the person only with indifference and aversion... what is lost in activity is made up for in thought and inner life. In revulsion from its surroundings consciousness becomes self occupied (1993: 278-9).

In other words, egoism and anomie will be a consequence of modern society, wherein individuals are left with the ‘infinity of dreams’ and/or the ‘infinity of desires’(287), that may lead to suicide. I believe this is analogous for the case of apostasy. Modernity, and its impact on traditional structures of religiosity, have created anomic and egoistic forms of apostasy. Individuals do not feel connected to traditional familial faith, reacting with either confused agitation or melancholic introspection.

In contrast, however, applying altruistic suicide, a traditional or pre-modern form of suicide based on obligation to the contemporary situation of apostasy is more difficult. ‘...(S)erene conviction derived from the feeling of duty’ (283), does little to explain the foregoing of faith in a world where the ties to religion are no longer central to the infrastructure of society. In a ‘secularised’ modern world, moving towards a postmodern condition, apostasy is not generally a ‘cause’. Altruistic resistance does not find applicability to the current situation.

As we move from the site of high modernity as predicted by Durkheim, to that of a postmodern world, we find that our understandings of religion, hence apostasy need to shift accordingly. Durkheim, for example, firmly believed that religion as the misplaced worship of society, must necessarily continue. He theorised that a religion of humanity must eventuate:

‘...[a] day will come when our societies will know again those hours of creative effervescence, in the course of which new ideas and new formulae are found which serve for a while as a guide to humanity’ (1965:475).

These understandings of religion, however, are based on predicted sites of high modernity. Durkheim’s narrative regarding civil religion and an eventuating religion of humanity may hint at one possibility for re-imagining religion in a postmodern world. I argue, however, that these Durkheimian conceptions do not allow for significant meaning and protection from anomie and egoism to be derived from a plethora of sources, both religious and secular, in postmodernity.

I further argue that his thesis also constrains the agency of the individual. There is little room for the active negotiation of faith. For Durkheim, religiosity will be likely to be directed by a national level of symbolism until a religion of humanity

is attained. The Durkheimian school of thought does not allow for religiosity in a world where individuals can negotiate meaning at diverse and varied sites. It does not allow for the possibility for the development of more than one collective conscious, as might be possible in a postmodern world. Nor does it allow for negotiated and reformulated religiosity to operate in a society devoid of a unified mechanical solidarity. Thus, as we shift along the time line, there is a need to recognise the limitations of Durkheimian conceptions of religion.

Accordingly, I argue that in addition to anomic and egoistic apostates, there is the need to create a new category of apostate; the postmodern apostate. This class of apostate is one who better reflects the postmodern condition. This apostate type is open to the possibilities and potentialities of the postmodern world, and is not subject to angst produced by a society devoid of a singular source of solidarity. These apostates are able to negotiate a societal condition, where unlike the one predicted by Durkheim, there are options for faith, meaning and solidarity. Religion and religiosity are open for negotiation, in a world where meaning need not be located globally, and apostasy is not axiomatically seen as aberrant.

Assuming that pluralism, privatisation, rationalism and breaking away from the 'collective conscious' of our immediate socialising influences are negative properties, does not allow for recognition of the positive or emancipatory capabilities of the process. Nor does it allow for a possible state of society in which breaks with tradition are not necessarily indicative of social breakdown; it does not allow for a society in which breaks with tradition are indicative of new and evolving epistemological orientations to knowledge. Choice, freedom, and the positive aspects of the ability to choose one's own destiny, are all down played, due to operating paradigms not reflective of the contemporary situation.

The contemporary situation needs to be seen as one of transition. With this recognition apostasy can be used to reflect a variety of responses to this level of societal change. Whether apostasy is a response to secularisation in a modern world that leaves individuals without faith, or whether it is a rejection of modernity's construction of religion, may be dependent upon the individual's relationship to a postmodern world. Apostasy needs to be seen as having a complex set of relationships to both religiosity and the self. The is particularly relevant as societies begin to negotiate a world no longer embedded in the discursive processes of modernity.

## **Towards a Foucauldian Approach to Apostasy Research**

The question then, becomes how apostasy can be re-imagined and re-theorised so that it represents the complexity of the current situation. To answer this question, I'd like to turn to Michel Foucault. Foucault did not specifically address apostasy, or even secularisation and religion. Nonetheless, I believe that his studies of the subject can be highly insightful for apostatic research.

### The Modern

Foucault was a post-structuralist whose investigations can be seen as a critical reflection on the difference between pre-modern and modern cultural forms. Thus, as was the case for Durkheim, modernity is a central focus of his work. Rather than simply describing the effects of modernity, however, Foucault's interest was in the historical conditions which made possible the modern subject. For Foucault, one central and defining aspect of modernity is the power relations or techniques of power which create and constrain the modern individual. He is interested in how the modern subject is made, and how the making of the subject is linked to power. Foucault states:

...in a society such as ours... there are manifold relations of power which permeate, characterise and constitute the social body,... there can be no possible exercise of power without a certain economy of discourses of truth which operate through and on the basis of association. We are subjected to the production of truth through power and we cannot exercise power except through the production of truth (1980:93).

Foucault's analysis of the power relations operating in modernity can thus be seen as instrumental for understanding the techniques of socialisation which created the modern religious self. Truth and power conspire to create an undeniable reality for the individual which can be highly constraining. This would be particularly true when the 'religious' is embedded within power relations. As Foucault states:

...a system of constraint becomes truly intolerable when the individuals who are affected by it don't have the means for modifying it. This can happen when such a system becomes intangible as a result of its being considered a moral or religious imperative... (1989:21).

Nevertheless, Foucault recognises that even this particular landscape can be resisted; '... in the relations of power, there is necessarily the possibility of resistance' (1990:12). There are always ways to redefine power relationships and to resist domination, even if the cost is high. Thus, Foucault's theories can be useful for understanding the emotive toll of certain forms of apostasy. In fact, I would argue that in a Foucauldian framework, anomie and egoism might be seen as natural by-products of resistance to dominating power relations which define religion in modernity.

Apostasy can thus be understood as a site of resistance to the 'grid of material coercions' (1980:104), and the dominating power relations endemic to religion in modernity. The nature of these dominating relationships, however, may constrain the individual from negotiating belief. Religious abandonment through the anomic response of anger, or through egoistic examination of religion, society and the self, may leave the individual without faith. Vann makes the point: 'Lacking an adequate analysis and critique of modernity, worshippers' discontent in response to oppression

becomes focused on worship itself' (1994:1). Foucault is explicit his recognition of hidden frameworks. He states that the creation of the subject is embedded within particular historical parameters:

It is one of my targets to show people that a lot of things that are a part of their landscape - that people think are universal - are the result of some very precise historical changes, all my analyses are against the idea of universal necessities in human existence (1988:11).

### The Postmodern

In the Foucauldian tradition then, traditional understandings of religion and apostasy would be recognised as constructs of modernity, which can, in fact be deconstructed and re-imagined. Modernity is recognised as a point in a never-ending historical change, one in which 'technologies of the self' (1988:18), used to control and shape the subject can be transformed into more productive means for negotiating the self. These conceptions allow for both transforming individuals and the possibility of a new form of society in which 'technologies of the self' (1988:18) no longer need to be punitive and restrictive. Rather, in a society such as the one offered by postmodernity, there may exist new means for changing the self. Foucault's analysis is therefore helpful for understanding the agency of the individual in initiating change, and for understanding a potential form of society which allows for the exploration of new orientations to knowledge.

Following this argument, Foucault's analysis would allow for a new breed of apostate free from modernity's angst. Foucault's recognition of shifting and evolving historical periods allows for subjects whose relationships to religion and spirituality need no longer be based on the dominating power relations of the modern era. This new breed of apostate may reflect a societal condition in which complete and punitive domination no longer defines 'power'. Foucault's theories are thus important for understanding the development of the postmodern apostate and the significance of this new category for illuminating epistemic change.

## **Where to from here**

This paper argues that all definitions and understandings of religion, hence apostasy, are embedded in historical conditions and party to discursive processes. Based on a set of now untenable presuppositions, these discursive processes have shaped apostasy literature. From broad 'universal' knowledges of religion accepted as given, to conceptions of society which are historically stagnant, to subjective positioning which prioritises the functional aspects of religiosity, understandings of apostasy must be seen as the product of discursive processes; processes which have not allowed for: 1) the emotive complexity of disaffiliation in a period of transition; 2) the agency of the individual for negotiating and creating new postmodern forms of religiosity and 3) a postmodern condition which redefines relationships between

the self and religiosity. With the shift from modernity to postmodernity, it is necessary that our thinking and knowledges allow for and reflect continued transformations on the part of religion, society and the individual.

The traditional emphasis on what religion is, may thus be substantially augmented by postmodernist examinations of how it is that religion evolves and reflects, and is reflected by the social situation. I argue that a site capable of being, but not yet employed as, a signifier of both the shifting nature of society and the ability of the individual to negotiate the religious is a postmodernist examination of the processes of apostasy. I believe it is a site that allows us to:

... ask instead, how things work at the level of those continuous and uninterrupted processes... we should try to discover how it is that subjects are gradually, progressively, really and materially constituted through a multiplicity of organisms, forces, energies, materials, desires, thoughts, etc. We should try to grasp subjection in its material instance as a constitution of subjects. (Foucault, 1980:97).

Apostasy can be used as a window to such processes. Rather than limiting examinations of apostates to description and correlation, we can begin to explore how it is that religious subjects are constituted by modern society, and how this constitution may be resisted. We can also begin to explore postmodernity and the impact this new form of society has on the constitution of the postmodern subject. Apostasy under these circumstances can now be explored as representative of new epistemological approaches to knowledge, no longer a process of resistance, but perhaps processes of reflection and transformation of the self, now possible in postmodernity.

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