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VOICES OF DEPARTURE: A COGNITIVE DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF CATHOLIC EXIT STORIES

ABSTRACT. Ewelina Berdowicz, *Voices of Departure: A Cognitive Discourse Analysis of Catholic Exit Stories*, edited by Sławomir Sztajer, Ewelina Berdowicz, „Człowiek i Społeczeństwo" vol. LX: *Religion and Culture Beyond Tradition: Contemporary Perspectives*, Poznań 2025, pp. 47–65, Adam Mickiewicz University. ISSN 0239-3271, https://doi.org/10.14746/cis.2025.60.3.

This paper explores the narratives of former Polish Catholics through the lens of Cognitive Discourse Analysis (CODA), focusing on how individuals linguistically reconstruct their exit from the Church. Based on in-depth, unstructured interviews, the study investigates how deconverts conceptualize their religious past, moments of disillusionment, and post-religious identity. Particular attention is paid to metaphor, evaluative language, and conceptual oppositions which serve as discursive tools for expressing rupture, resistance, and recovery. Rather than reducing disaffiliation to doctrinal disagreement, the study examines how shifts in personal meaning-making are shaped by emotional, cognitive, and cultural factors. The analysis reveals that language not only reflects but also performs the act of deconversion, allowing individuals to reframe past experiences and reclaim interpretive authority. These "voices of departure" illuminate both individual trajectories and broader trends of religious disengagement in contemporary Poland.

Keywords: Catholic deconversion, disaffiliation, Cognitive Discourse Analysis, religious identity, exit narratives

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Introduction

Growing up as a member of a particular faith often shapes one's worldview and moral outlook. Children exposed on a regular basis to the content spread by preachers tend to absorb it uncritically. They do so mostly because they fully trust their parents. Problems start to emerge as soon as the once unaware come across some inconvenient facts and, as a result, become increasingly independent in their thinking. In households with strict religious norms, young people who challenge doctrinal truths may face significant consequences, which often have lasting psychological impact. Insufficient theological training and burnout among priests which affects the quality of their service (Beebe, 2007; Rossetti & Rhoades, 2013), the disregard for victims of clerical sexual abuse (Kobyliński, 2016; 2017; 2022), and recurring financial scandals within the Vatican (Lewin, 1983) are commonly mentioned as key factors behind disaffiliation from the Roman Catholic Church. Poland is no exception, now undergoing what scholars (Barbour, 1994; Streib, 2014) term *deconversion*.

This publication rests on Heinz Streib's definition, according to which deconversion features five essential characteristics including "(1) loss of specific religious experiences; (2) intellectual doubt, denial, or disagreement with specific beliefs; (3) moral criticism; (4) emotional suffering; and (5) disaffiliation from the community" (Streib, 2014: 272). These are core issues to be discussed here. In certain cases, the decision to leave is prompted by traumatic memories associated with the community setting. In the literature, this form of violence is described as *spiritual abuse* (Oakley & Kinmond, 2013). It should be clearly emphasized that this does not refer solely to physical mistreatment, but also to the improper use of leader's authority, which ultimately transforms a confessional group into a hierarchical structure resembling the ruler–subject relationship (Fernández, 2022; O'Sullivan, 2022; Ramírez Mota Velasco, 2011). Streib (2014: 272) outlines six distinct deconversion trajectories as part of his broader analysis of the phenomenon, namely: (1) secularizing exit; (2) oppositional exit; (3) religious switching; (4) integrating exit; (5) privatizing exit; and (6) heretical exit.

The secularizing exit denotes a withdrawal from both religious faith and ritual observance as well as a formal or informal separation from institutionalized religion. Apostasy – often at the center of heated public debate – falls within this category. Interestingly, studies indicate that in Poland, apostasy entails not only substantial bureaucratic hurdles but also clerical hostility

toward those considering it. For this reason, many Catholics eventually choose not to pursue the procedure (Wenz, 2010; Dettlaff, 2016). In an oppositional exit, individuals abandon their former faith in favor of a new doctrinal framework and practices, aligning themselves with a more demanding and countercultural religious organization. A good example in this context would be the transition from Catholicism to Islam, as shown in Krotofil et al.'s paper (2021). With regard to religious switching, the transition typically preserves ritual and theological continuity, with minimal changes in how worshippers integrate into the new community. A person raised in the Roman Catholic household who then joins the Evangelical-Augsburg Church serves as best instance. When subjects undergo an integrating exit, they move away from one religious system toward another which, while doctrinally distinct, is more attuned to the cultural mainstream. Such a departure tends to minimize tensions with the surrounding social environment and enables individuals to redefine their spiritual outlook within a group perceived as culturally valid. Ulf Ekman – a Swedish missionary who once led and founded the Neo-Pentecostal Church Livets Ord – provides a telling illustration of this form of trajectory. In his book, he reflects on the factors that made him and his wife embrace the Roman Catholic tradition (Ekman & Ekman, 2018). What distinguishes privatizing exit is the coexistence of formal disaffiliation with an ongoing commitment to spiritual or religious meaning, maintained outside a hierarchical domain. Many respondents, also those who participated in the present research, frequently point to clerical misconduct as the main cause of ceasing to attend Mass. When it comes to heretical exit, it involves the rejection of institutional ties which is followed by the personal investigation of alternative paths (Streib, 2014: 272). A significant example might be a devout Christian who, after experiencing an internal conflict, immerses into energy healing, astrology, or esoteric mysticism. Taking the above into consideration, deconversion may be understood as an intense biographical shift that encompasses both subjective and societal spheres. On the one hand, it concerns experiential, motivational, ideological, and moral-critical elements that merit psychological inquiry, whereas on the other, it includes the abandonment or reconfiguration of religious membership and different kinds of migration within and beyond the religious field, which virtually call for sociological attention.

Despite the growing body of scholarship on religious exit, several notable gaps remain. First, existing research tends to concentrate on motivational typologies, institutional factors, or patterns of group switching (Bromley, 1998; Streib & Keller, 2004) while offering limited insight into the

fine-grained linguistic and cognitive mechanisms through which individuals process, represent, and recount their deconversion. For example, LeCount's (2017) qualitative analysis sheds light on the contextual triggers of exit but stops short of examining how linguistic strategies such as metaphor, appraisal, and conceptual opposition contribute to the discursive reshaping of faith loss. Similarly, Jindra et al. (2024) provide a robust sociological account of exiting high-cost religious groups, yet do not investigate how meaning is reconstructed through language after institutional detachment. Second, although recent investigations have begun to explore how digital environments facilitate narrative identity renegotiation (Starr et al., 2019), there is lack of cognitive-linguistic research that would examine how ex-believers frame their disaffiliation experiences in both online and offline settings. Third, few studies have attended to the embodied, sensory, and ritual memories involved in deconversion narratives. While autobiographical accounts of faith transition often mention emotionally charged recollections of religious rites, sacraments, or prayer practices (Wright et al., 2011; Fenelon & Danielsen, 2016), the role of discourse in reconfiguring these memories remains largely undertheorized. Metaphor analysis, mental space theory, or conceptual blending are rarely employed to unpack how former adherents mentally reframe the sensory dimensions of their past religiosity.

The overarching aim of this research is to gain an in-depth understanding of how former Polish Catholics construct, verbalize, and conceptualize their journeys of religious disaffiliation. By applying the methodological tools of Cognitive Discourse Analysis (CODA), the study explores the interplay between linguistic variety and mental representation in autobiographical accounts of deconversion. It pays particular attention to how people make sense of their spiritual disillusionment, negotiate their departure from a powerful institutional framework, and reframe their sense of identity and belonging. In the Polish context, where Catholicism functions not only as a religious system but also as a cultural norm and social expectation, rejecting the Church often involves profound cognitive restructuring and discursive realignment. The objective is not merely to document what people say about leaving the Church, but to reveal the deeper cognitive and emotional mechanisms that shape how they remember, evaluate, and narrate their past religious experiences in relation to their present non-religious lives.

In pursuit of this goal, the study examines five interrelated yet distinct aspects of deconversion, captured by the following research questions: RQ1. What cognitive and discursive strategies do former Polish Catholics employ to narrate their deconversion stories? RQ2. How do respondents discursively

position themselves in relation to the Catholic Church, its doctrines, and their former faith commitments? RQ3. How are memories of ritual, embodiment, and sensory interactions reinterpreted through discourse in the context of disaffiliation? RQ4. What conceptual oppositions emerge across narratives and how do they structure the logic of deconversion? RQ5. How do individuals reconstruct a coherent non-religious identity through the retelling of their deconversion trajectories?

The study ultimately contributes to broader conversations at the intersection of discourse, cognition, and secularization. It offers original insights into how linguistic resources are deployed to navigate identity transitions, articulate spiritual rupture, and resist dominant religious narratives. By foregrounding the role of autobiographical storytelling in reshaping worldview, the research highlights how deeply personal, embodied experiences are transformed into meaningful accounts that challenge the taken-for-granted authority of religious institutions. The findings add to the emerging field of deconversion studies by focusing on a culturally specific, under-researched context where non-belief is still socially marked and discursively negotiated.

Methods

This research adopts a qualitative design grounded in the already-mentioned CODA to trace how ex-Catholics in Poland give form and coherence to their disengagement from the Church through narrative practices. The CODA framework rests on the premise that being physically embedded in the world fundamentally conditions the way humans think, including the structures and patterns of language. One's linguistic choices are closely tied to how one mentally conceptualizes the topics one addresses (Evans, 2019; Tenbrink, 2020). Consistent with a story-centered approach, the core data collection method consisted of in-depth interviews held online in 2025. The remote format was chosen to facilitate participation and provide a confidential setting for subjects to speak openly about the challenges of leaving their faith community.

A total of 15 individuals took part in the project: 10 women and 5 men. They were carefully selected based on specific requirements. To ensure both relevance and heterogeneity, purposive and snowball sampling methods were applied. Subjects were recruited through social media platforms, discussion groups, and informal peer referrals, with an emphasis on locating those who were willing and able to articulate their experiences in detail. Participants

ranged in age, encompassing a cross-generational spectrum, namely early adulthood, midlife, and late adulthood. All respondents self-identified as members of the Roman Catholic Church in Poland and reported a conscious and reflective process of disaffiliation. Crucially, their detachment was not limited to withdrawal from religious observance but also manifested a stance rooted in personal conviction rather than mere lifestyle adjustment. They were eligible for inclusion if they met the following criteria: (1) aged between 18 and 60 years; (2) raised in the Polish Catholic tradition and no longer affiliated with the Church; (3) at least one year of temporal distance from the moment of disaffiliation to elicit meaningful and introspective accounts; (4) fluency in Polish sufficient to share the complexity of one's lived past; and (5) not currently undergoing psychiatric treatment or taking medications that could interfere with emotional regulation or memory recall during the interview. The study also outlined conditions under which prospective participants would not be enrolled, including: (1) diagnosed cognitive impairments that may significantly diminish autobiographical memory retrieval; (2) simultaneous involvement in multiple related research studies on religious disaffiliation, which may lead to narrative fatigue or influence the authenticity of responses; (3) strongly adversarial intent such as engagement in anti-religious activism with the explicit goal of public denunciation or scandal rather than reflective self-exploration – potentially compromising the study's interpretative neutrality; (4) refusal to accept ethical terms; (5) monologic or scripted communication styles, noted in pre-interview interactions (e.g., extreme verbosity or rehearsed speech), which might obstruct open-ended and dialogic data collection typical of narrative inquiry.

Although not governed by a fixed structure, the interviews were oriented around a set of recurring motifs meant to stimulate comprehensive self-examination. Respondents were encouraged to share their stories spontaneously, with minimal interviewer interruption. When appropriate, follow-up questions were posed to delve into areas such as early religious socialization, moments of doubt and rupture, emotional and cognitive transitions, and the formation of a post-religious identity. All conversations were conducted in Polish and subsequently transcribed verbatim for analysis. To protect participants' identities, full anonymization was implemented. The subjects were referred to only through descriptive labels indicating gender, age range, and current self-identification (e.g., "F, 18–30, atheist"). All identifying information was removed in accordance with GDPR standards. Informed consent was obtained prior to the sessions, and respondents were notified about their right to withdraw at any stage without justification.

The analytical process proceeded in an inductive and reflexive manner, in line with the principles of CODA. Rather than imposing rigid categories from the outset, the approach prioritized close attention to how participants conveyed meaning through lexical selection, syntactic shaping, evaluative language, and shifts in narrative stance. Focus was placed on how speakers foregrounded or downplayed particular experiences, how they navigated emotionally charged recollections, and how they signaled epistemic certainty or doubt. The analysis aimed to uncover characteristic interpretive pathways via which respondents made sense of their religious disaffiliation, highlighting not only what was said, but also how and why it was said. This included tracing implicit contrasts, conceptual oppositions, and discursive devices that allowed speakers to reposition themselves in relation to their past beliefs. The inquiry unfolded iteratively with each round of interpretation informed by insights that surfaced during previous stages.

Results

In relation to RQ1, the findings reveal that respondents draw upon a diverse set of linguistic and cognitive strategies to transform their personal disengagement from Catholicism into coherent, meaningful stories. One dominant pattern involved the use of metaphorical mappings which helped individuals reframe their religious past and articulate moments of rupture.

Conceptual metaphors such as (1) *religion is violence*: "My mother was – and still is – extremely fanatical. I remember that when I was a child, she would drag me to church by force. During Corpus Cristi processions in my childhood years, it was unbearably hot, and I would feel faint. For me, those processions were sheer torment. She did not understand it. I was so rebellious that at the age of 15 I even wanted to work on Sundays just to spite her. I tried to hang a poster on my door, and she started yelling at me, saying that it is forbidden to use tools on Sundays. Then she came over and slapped me so hard in the ear that my eardrum burst. Even when I was already 30, she would still call me to ask if I had gone to church that day. It was a nightmare" (F, 46–60, agnostic); "I had always been told that a priest was someone above everything – an unquestionable authority – and that even if he slipped up, he was still a holy man. I was not allowed to say anything negative. I would immediately be reprimanded. The truth is that I was molested by a church official. My mother did not believe me. After that conversation she told me to go there as I was supposed to deliver something to the priest who had

hurt me" (F, 31–45, atheist), (2) *religion is performance*: "My grandmother was the family matriarch. She ruled with an iron fist. For her, it was simply unthinkable that any of her grandchildren would go without the Sacrament of Baptism or First Communion. The only thing I remember fondly was that I was free to choose my Communion dress. It had to be totally over the top – something that would make an impression, something lavish. The love of excess was everywhere. It was not about knowing what you had but about showing that you had it" (F, 31–45, pagan), (3) *religion is machinery*: "We are born and somehow pulled into these gears. It is a kind obviousness that surrounds us" (F, 31–45, atheist), (4) *self is an odd piece*: "I remember participating in a worship service, feeling like an odd piece that did not fit anywhere" (F, 31–45, atheist), (5) *religion is a spider's web*: "When I was pregnant I realized I want my child to be born outside that spider's web" (F, 31–45, atheist), (6) *faith is a gift*: "For a long time, I carried the belief that I was unworthy because the grace of faith had not been granted to me" (F, 46–60, agnostic), (7) *God is an incompetent designer*: "Once I went to church because my mother told me to and the priest said: *I need money for gliding chalices and paintings*. Suddenly, a thought struck me: If God created the world and is so powerful, then surely, He could produce as much gold as He wants. So why are we the ones who have to take care of it?" (M, 46–60, atheist); "I believe that a person with God can feel even more lost […]. The Bible says there are things that are allowed while the criminal law says they are not" (M, 31– 45, atheist), (8) *Church is a relational partner*: "I separated from my wife and at that point I was almost automatically excluded from the community. I realized that it was not me who left the Church but rather the Church left me" (M, 46–60, agnostic), (9) *Church is a battlefield*: "I have told my mother recently that what I dislike about the Church is the practice of creating camps: If you are not with us you are against us" (F, 31–45, atheist), and (10) *deconversion is a snowball*: "Year by year I kept learning more about how public money flows into the Church. Now we see that millions have been funneled to Rydzyk. Equally important are the Church's moral failings – beyond the pedophilia scandals, there were earlier controversies, for instance *The Godfather* case which exposed financial ties between the Italian mafia and the Vatican" (F, 46–60, freethinker) – were recurrent across narratives. These metaphors provided a cognitive scaffold for transforming affective confusion into structured understanding.

Another prominent strategy was the use of chronotopic anchoring – locating shifts in belief within specific temporal and spatial coordinates. Respondents often referenced distinct turning points, for example: (1) kneel-rise

moment during the Mass: "The congregation was going through the kneeling and rising sequence. I looked around and thought: Come on – this is ridiculous. I clearly do not belong here. I went home and never set foot in church again" (F, 31–45, atheist), (2) questions posed as a child: "I must have been 4 years old when asked my mother about the story of Abraham – how it was possible that God would demand such a sacrifice from him? Of course, she was not able to give an answer" (F, 46–60, agnostic), (3) relocation during adolescence, (4) the experience of reading *The God Delusion*, (5) the period of writing the bachelor's thesis, (6) philosophical studies, (7) mother's death, (8) divorce, (9) an accident: "At the age of 13, I hurt my leg on the way back home from church. I fell after stepping on the mud. After that, I stopped serving as an altar boy. I was angry at God for not protecting me – I felt that, as such a devout Catholic, I had been unjustly afflicted by the Almighty" (M, 31–45, agnostic), and (10) involvement in university pastoral group. Those turning points marked the beginning of their doubt. Anchoring created narrative cohesion and legitimized the trajectory as part of a rational, evolving identity rather than as sudden or erratic behavior.

Respondents also employed hedging and intensification selectively. Hedges often signaled epistemic uncertainty or emotional ambivalence, as in statements like: "It seems to me that I went to church not because I believed in some guy on a cloud but in some idea. Maybe in human goodness rather than supernatural force" (F, 31–45, atheist). In contrasts, some moments were marked by strong affective expressions underscoring the psychological toll of religious engagement: "I had to sing psalms in church although I did not particularly enjoy it. My mother did not force us directly, but I knew that if I said I did not want to, she would be disappointed. I was afraid something might happen to her – that she might even have a heart attack" (F, 31–45, atheist). These rhetorical moves allowed them to modulate their accounts, emphasizing how their perspective developed over time.

Beyond merely describing their spiritual journeys, several interviewees demonstrated a striking reflexivity toward the storytelling process itself. They paused to comment on the nature and limits of their own narratives – revealing an awareness of how memory, emotion, and moral positioning intersect in moments of self-presentation. Their testimonies featured a desire to avoid overgeneralization. This layer of self-consciousness surfaced most clearly in framing strategies and disclaimers that positioned the speaker as both witness and interpreter. Phrases like: "Perhaps it is not fair to those who find peace in the Church – something akin to therapy. For many women marked by hardship, God becomes a source of peace" (F, 31–45, atheist)

and "I have learned that there are so many religions in the world – so why would I consider only Catholicism to be stupid? If I keep telling people that their religion makes no sense, I will not get very far in this world because most individuals do feel the need to believe in something. I do not think my lack of faith makes me morally superior. I now choose to stay quiet rather than force my perspective on anyone else" (F, 18–30, atheist), did more than indicate caution – they conveyed a deliberate orientation toward constructing meaning in a discursive environment where strong conviction tends to be valorized, and hesitation may be viewed as weakness or inconsistency.

When it comes to RQ2, participants positioned themselves in relation to the Catholic Church not through abstract rejection but via situated acts of distance and redefinition. One respondent recalled being condemned by a priest during a religion class: "I am a homosexual person. I knew this already at the age of 13 but kept repressing it. At school, a priest made it clear to me that I was not normal. His words were even aggressive. I feel like an inferior citizen. The Church openly stands against me. I feel excluded from this community" (M, 31–45, agnostic), highlighting a perceived institutional expulsion instead of personal renunciation. Others shifted focus from ritual engagement to critical evaluation: "At some point I started to notice that it was all just an empty ritual. I used to go to church up to 5 times per week, and there came a time when I began observing the people around me. I realized that no one seemed particularly concentrated on the prayer, and even the sermons were not especially insightful. Everything seemed rehearsed and formulaic. I found it hard to accept" (M, 31–45, atheist). Such narratives revealed a need to differentiate between a local religious culture and universal doctrine: "I am convinced that the Polish Church does not fully represent the Catholic Church as a whole. My brother lives in France. Reports in the French media would typically begin with statements such as: *The entire Church except for the Church in Poland and Africa*" (M, 46–60, agnostic). These utterances show that interviewees no longer saw themselves within the Church, not fully outside of it but rather in reflective tension with it, as commentators, or partially engaged former members.

With regard to RQ3, memories of ritual and sensory experiences frequently served as flashpoints in respondents' reconsideration of their previous religiosity. Participants retrieved tactile and embodied episodes which, though once charged with sacred meaning, were reinterpreted as scripted performances or mechanisms of control: "I remember attending the May devotions. We would get a potato stamp for each day, and we would collect them throughout the whole month. I also remember the Stations of the Cross

in the church. It was something I experienced very intensely. At my confirmation I chose the name Veronica since it somehow impressed me that she was so brave, for example wiping Jesus' face. The older you get, the more those religion classes turned into social gatherings. As a teenager, I stopped going to Sunday Mass. A growing body of evidence emerged pointed to the Church as a breeding ground of evil covered up by marketing. Christianity is a huge lie. If you read the Old and New Testaments, it is all about killing people of other faiths. Greater awareness leads to stronger feelings of hostility toward the organization" (F, 46–60, freethinker), "I had a youth-oriented priest in high school. I remember he took us on a pilgrimage to Jasna Góra. I recall sitting in the chapel with the Black Madonna. My eyes were closed but it resembled meditation more than prayer. I was clearing my mind rather than pleading for help. It was more of a comforting setting for inner stillness […]. If I believe in anything, it is that religion was invented to impose some kind of structure or set of rules […], but I do wonder – how can it still be effective after all these years?" (F, 31–45, atheist). Such recollections were often reframed with irony or critical distance, suggesting a change in conceptual anchoring.

Turning to RQ4, the narratives drew on salient binary oppositions – truth vs. illusion, freedom vs. submission, authenticity vs. hypocrisy, love vs. hatred – that structured the logic of disaffiliation. These oppositions were not merely descriptive but served to morally frame the act of exiting as a necessary realignment of values. One interviewee remarked: "We were taught to treat the Church as the ultimate source of guidance. Over time, I started to recognize its weaknesses and work on myself. I delved deeper into the psychological view of the human being. The way this institution shapes individuals and tells them how to think and behave has little to do with what is developmentally healthy" (F, 31–45, atheist). The subject highlighted the contrast between imposed norms and personal growth, presenting the decision to leave as a move in the direction of greater inner consistency. Respondents' accounts also revealed that particularly striking was the gap separating what was publicly declared from how things were truly lived. A female interviewee mentioned a conversation with her devout mother during which she confronted the latter about insincerity toward their acquaintances. She asked her a question: "How can you speak ill of others and still consider yourself religious? That is hypocrisy" (F, 46–60, agnostic). The mother's response – "I am not gossiping. I am telling the truth. It is not a sin" – illustrated a justification strategy that clashed with the daughter's ethical position.

Additionally, in many cases, disaffiliation resulted more from frustration with the transmission of spiritual content than from doctrinal uncertainty: "I remember that when I was in high school, the level of religious education was still the same as in earlier grades: draw a picture for All Saints' Day, draw an angel. Some priests did things they should not have done, for instance, one of them advised us to check our parents' wedding date and compare it to our own date of birth […]. Right before final exams, we were led by a priest whose classes lasted maybe 5 or 10 minutes. It did not foster reflection. Once he brought up euthanasia and said: *To kill or not to kill? It is very complicated. Well, I think we should stop here. Go have lunch*" (F, 46–60, atheist). This example shows not only a perceived trivialization of complex moral issues but also a rupture between the expected seriousness of religious instruction and the superficial, at times even absurd, manner in which it was delivered. In such instances, respondents' disengagement from the Church did not necessarily stem from open defiance but appeared instead as a response to cognitive and moral dissonance where profound existential themes were met with banality or indifference. Another interviewee explained: "I decided to read the Bible […]. The Old Testament is filled with violence. I did not feel as if it had been written by God but rather by a ruler who liked to boast" (M, 31–45, agnostic). In this context, the conceptual polarity of love and hatred cast the decision to leave not as a theological disagreement but as a reaction to unresolved moral tensions within sacred scripture. Faith, in such narratives, faded as a result of deep emotional and ethical unease caused by the incongruity between divine compassion and biblical depictions of cruelty. Considered collectively, these testimonies suggest that departure was frequently prompted by lived contradictions rather than abstract disbelief. Trajectories of disaffiliation unfolded gradually and were rooted in prolonged discomfort together with a desire for stronger self-understanding.

In response to RQ5, interviewees did not define their post-Catholic identities solely in terms of disengagement but articulated them through acts of reinterpretation and continuity. Instead of treating their former affiliation as a void to be erased, many wove elements of their religious past into dynamic modes of self-conception, translating prior beliefs and practices into alternative outlooks grounded in practical wisdom and social awareness. This transition did not require wholesale rejection; rather it involved selective reevaluation – certain prayers, gestures, or symbols persisted as aesthetic or emotional resources, detached from doctrinal authority. Importantly, these identity shifts were not linear. Respondents described recursive

phases of exploration, ranging from distancing and ambivalence to renewed curiosity or even partial reintegration:

> *There came a moment when I began to believe in God. My PhD supervisor was my mentor and a role model. I aligned myself with her convictions. She was ardently religious. We would often meet at her home. At one point she fell ill with cancer. We all prayed for her recovery, and she got better. In the room where she used to receive me, there was a huge crucifix with Jesus. Her husband taught religion. I started thinking that something must be wrong with me if such an intellectual elite believes* […]. *And so it happened that I got drawn into religion* […]. *Not long after, I fell ill with COVID. The complications I faced affect only about 60,000 people worldwide. My husband's family claimed I was faking it. At first, I was the one putting rosaries into their hands. Roughly 1,5 year later, I concluded that nothing was happening, that there was no God because it was impossible that someone who supposedly loves me could allow such suffering. I stopped believing in the Creator. The thoughts I had years ago came back. I once again came to the realization that religion is built on human fabrications and fantasies.* (F, 46–60, agnostic)

In some narratives, spirituality was reframed as a personal mode of attunement – intuitive, introspective, and context-sensitive – contrasted with externally imposed codes. In other cases, respondents oriented their lives around secular principles which served as a moral guide in their day-to-day existence. Identity reconstruction also operated on the level of language, as speakers reformulated inherited expressions to reflect their current worldview, or playfully subverted liturgical phrases once taken for granted. What stands out across these accounts is not only what was relinquished, but what was resignified. Agency was exercised in curating which aspects of the religious past remained usable, meaningful, or translatable into a non-religious register. Identity was framed as a flexible process of orientation, navigated through accumulated life experience and interpersonal dialogues that questioned and eventually transcended traditional boundaries.

Discussion

The present study sought to examine how former Polish Catholics narrate their experiences of religious disaffiliation, focusing on the interplay between discourse, cognition, and identity renegotiation. The findings reveal that deconversion is not merely a shift in beliefs, but a complex biographical

transformation mediated through language. Respondents did not simply recount a departure from doctrine but engaged in a multifaceted process of reinterpreting past experiences, reframing spiritual practices, and constructing alternative modes of belonging. These observations align with existing scholarship that positions religious exit as a gradual, emotionally, and cognitively layered event (Streib, 2014; LeCount, 2017), while also offering new insights by foregrounding the cognitive-linguistic architecture of this radical change.

One of the most salient contributions of this study lies in the demonstration that language is not a neutral vessel for reporting religious disaffiliation, but rather a site of active meaning-making. The use of conceptual metaphors served to cognitively anchor feelings of entrapment, moral injury, and loss of agency. These metaphorical constructs not only enabled respondents to articulate the affective intensity of exit situations but also positioned their narratives within broader societal and political discourses. Whereas previous research has touched upon metaphor use in deconversion stories (Wright et al., 2011), the current findings suggest that metaphor functions not just as a rhetorical device but as a fundamental cognitive mechanism through which narrators structure their lived reality.

Another noteworthy insight involves the temporal and spatial anchoring of doubt. Participants often pinpointed specific turning points – emotional ruptures, moments of contradiction, embodied experiences – that disrupted their religious schemas. These chronotopic anchors provided narrative coherence and legitimized disaffiliation as a rational process rather than an impulsive rejection. In doing so, interviewees resisted prevailing discourses that pathologize religious exit as a symptom of individual failure, trauma, or moral deviation (Bromley, 1998). Instead, they reclaimed epistemic authority by embedding their choices in coherent life trajectories. This discursive move corresponds with recent work on narrative identity and secularization (Starr et al., 2019), but extends it by illuminating the embodied, spatial, and affective dimensions of meaning reconfiguration.

Significantly, the analysis also underscores the role of evaluative stance and meta-reflection. Respondents frequently engaged in hedging, disclaimers, and epistemic modulation, not as markers of uncertainty but as tools for managing their position in a morally saturated narrative field. The presence of disclaimers suggests a high degree of discursive self-awareness. These features reflect not only sensitivity to the sociocultural stigma surrounding religious exit in Poland, but also a broader narrative ethics wherein speakers balance critique with empathy. As such, they challenge reductive binaries

between belief and non-belief, instead presenting identity as dialogically constructed and continuously negotiated.

While much of the literature on deconversion tends to emphasize doctrinal disagreements or institutional failure (e.g., Kobyliński, 2016; Dettlaff, 2016), this study highlights how the affective content of ritual, embodiment, and sensory memory plays a key role in reshaping spiritual orientation. For many, emotionally charged recollections – be they of sacred spaces, devotional gestures, or community dynamics – were reframed through irony, skepticism, or detached reflection. The reinterpretation of such experiences marks a shift in conceptual anchoring: what was once sacralized is now cast as performative, theatrical, or even oppressive. These transformations do not merely indicate loss of faith but reveal a deep hermeneutic reworking of the self in relation to religious scripts. Here, the study contributes to a relatively underdeveloped area in the literature – the discursive treatment of embodied religiosity and its emotional residues.

Conceptual oppositions emerged not only as narrative motifs but also as ethical scaffolds that structured the logic of disaffiliation. These binary frames enabled respondents to reposition themselves vis-à-vis the Church, drawing moral boundaries that justified their departure. Importantly, such oppositions were rarely static; they functioned as interpretive tools that evolved or were subverted depending on the speaker's reflexive stance. Theological disillusionment often coexisted with personal attachments to cultural Catholicism, underscoring the complexity of identity work in post-religious contexts.

In terms of post-disaffiliation identity, the study reveals that many respondents did not conceive of their current non-religious stance as a void, but rather as a space of reinterpretation, continuity, and deliberate curation. Even while rejecting doctrinal authority, participants retained symbolic fragments – certain prayers, phrases, or moral values – which they recoded into new existential frameworks. This finding echoes Barbour's (1994) view of deconversion as "reframing rather than erasing," and it aligns with broader trends in late modern religiosity, where individuals mix secular and spiritual elements to craft personalized outlooks. In this light, identity was not described as rupture but as ongoing semantic and affective realignment, rooted in interpersonal experiences and evolving worldviews.

Finally, the Polish context adds a culturally specific layer to the findings. In a country where Catholicism is both historically embedded and institutionally powerful, departing from the Church often entails not just spiritual reorientation but navigating social expectations, familial pressures, and collective memory. Respondents' narratives reflect the tension

between private belief and public belonging, between cognitive autonomy and cultural conformity. This study offers a rare glimpse into how Polish ex-Catholics mobilize language to traverse this tension – not merely as individuals rejecting religion, but as meaning-makers reconfiguring identity in a highly normative landscape.

The findings have broader implications for research on secularization, language, and identity. By revealing how metaphor, framing, and evaluative stance function as cognitive and moral tools, this study demonstrates that disaffiliation is not reducible to a sociological phenomenon of institutional decline but should also be seen as a discursive practice of self-construction. The Polish data suggest that linguistic creativity – expressed through irony, conceptual opposition, or narrative layering – serves as a coping and sense-making mechanism in contexts of cultural constraint. Moreover, these observations invite a reconsideration of secularization not as a linear withdrawal from the sacred, but as a reorganization of meaning across new symbolic domains. From a societal standpoint, the analysis underscores the emotional labor involved in leaving a hegemonic faith system. In environments where Catholic identity remains intertwined with national identity, the act of disaffiliation can carry social costs, including ostracism, guilt, or familial rupture. Yet, as these narratives reveal, such departures also foster new forms of ethical reflection and interpersonal solidarity. Understanding these dynamics may inform not only academic debates but also pastoral and therapeutic approaches to those navigating post-religious transitions.

Several limitations should be acknowledged. The study's qualitative design and small sample size do not allow for generalization, though the richness of the material offers depth of insight. Participants were predominantly urban and educated, which may have shaped their linguistic repertoires and access to interpretive frameworks. Further research could extend this work to other demographic groups, especially those from rural or lower socio-economic backgrounds. Comparative analyses with ex-believers from different denominations or national contexts could further clarify how cultural environments mediate cognitive and discursive trajectories of deconversion. Longitudinal studies could also trace how these narrative strategies evolve over time, particularly as secular identities gain greater social visibility.

The narratives explored here show that deconversion is neither a simple loss of belief nor a sudden rupture with tradition. It is a gradual process of cognitive and linguistic realignment – a renegotiation of selfhood through story, metaphor, and reflection. Language, in this sense, becomes both evidence and instrument of transformation: it allows individuals to distance

themselves from inherited structures while simultaneously building new interpretive frameworks. These "voices of departure" highlight the enduring interplay between faith, language, and identity, reminding us that even in the act of leaving, religion continues to shape the contours of meaning and belonging.

The observed outcomes carry significant implications not only for the sociology of religion but also for cross-disciplinary inquiry that intersects religious studies, discourse analysis, and narrative psychology. By emphasizing the role of language as both a vehicle and a site of transformation, the research sheds light on disaffiliation as a meaning-making process embedded in social, cultural, and psychological contexts. It reveals that interpretive work is not confined to the internal sphere but shaped within wider semiotic environments, influenced by shared memory, symbolic conventions, and positionality within discourse. On a practical level, this perspective can enhance pastoral formation by fostering greater sensitivity to the linguistic and emotional nuances present in stories of religious departure. Awareness of stylistic devices such as metaphor, irony, and epistemic caution may support more compassionate engagement with individuals navigating belief transitions. In therapeutic domains – particularly narrative therapy and exit support – this understanding of discursive strategies can facilitate more resonant and personalized interventions. Moreover, in educational settings, the research invites critical reflection on how theological language is used, underscoring the value of inclusive communication and the risks of alienation when spiritual vocabulary fails to accommodate plural perspectives.

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