

Why Do Young People with Higher Education Deconvert from Religion More Often?
Essay for the course "Introduction to Analytical Sociology" Nikita Obratsov, European University at St. Petersburg, 2025

Introduction

The relationship between educational attainment and religious affiliation remains one of the most debated topics in the sociology of religion. A large body of research documents a persistent correlation between higher education and lower religiosity, as well as a higher probability of religious deconversion. The mechanisms behind this pattern, however, have not been satisfactorily explained at the causal level — this remains an open research problem.

The aim of this essay is to propose an explanation of the link between higher education and religious deconversion, drawing on the principles of social explanation developed in the analytical sociology tradition — particularly the approaches of Jon Elster and Peter Hedström. The focus is on reconstructing the plausible causal mechanisms that produce the observed empirical pattern, and on examining the limitations of the proposed model.

The empirical picture is as follows. In a number of countries, having a university degree correlates with lower religiosity. According to recent Pew Research Center data, in 12 out of 36 countries there is a statistically significant difference in religious involvement between people with and without higher education. Similar results have been obtained from natural experiments: a study of Chinese provinces showed that the introduction of compulsory nine-year education in the 1980s reduced the probability of religious affiliation by 1.5 percentage points for each additional year of schooling.

That said, the correlation itself does not explain its origins. Several studies show that the pattern is not universal: in some Muslim communities, including in China, the effect of education on religiosity is minimal or absent. Some cross-cultural studies even find a positive association between education and religiosity. This raises the key question: through what social mechanisms does higher education produce religious deconversion, and what is the micro-level structure of those mechanisms?

Classical sociology of religion has typically offered a structural-functionalist explanation: education promotes secularisation because it develops rational modes of thinking incompatible with dogmatic belief. This explanation suffers from reductionism and fails to specify the micro-mechanisms through which the educational environment actually affects individual beliefs and practices.

More productive in the analytical sociology framework are approaches that focus on actions, expectations, and social interaction. In particular, mechanisms of social contagion allow us to treat religious deconversion not as a direct consequence of education, but as the result of social processes taking place within the university environment.

The Proposed Model

In the model presented here, religious deconversion is understood as the outcome of two interconnected mechanisms: a mechanism of social integration and imitation (social contagion), and a mechanism of cognitive dissonance and rationalisation.

At the first level, a student entering university encounters a social norm of non-religiosity, which is perceived as an element of prestigious or "scientifically rational" behaviour. In the academic environment, religious indifference is often a socially approved pattern, set against traditional forms of religiosity. An individual seeking to integrate into the student community begins to adjust their behaviour to fit these norms.

At the second level, a mechanism of cognitive dissonance is activated: the discrepancy between prior religious dispositions and new practices produces internal tension, which is resolved through a revision of beliefs. Religious deconversion can thus be a consequence of an individual's adaptation to a new social environment.

The central element of this model is social contagion: in a significant proportion of cases, the university environment is non-religious and promotes non-religious patterns of behaviour. It should be noted, however, that there are many exceptions — theology faculties, explicitly religious universities such as Brigham Young University or Berkeley Divinity School. In such academic communities, social contagion can work in precisely the opposite direction, and studying the mechanisms of conversion in such institutions would be an equally interesting research problem.

A further point: deconversion may be connected to higher education only indirectly, through the fact that students typically live in large cities or on campuses that are themselves secular environments.

In an earlier version of this argument, I described the process as "self-reinforcing" — a collective expectation of non-religiosity that reproduces itself. On reflection, this term better describes the dynamics of the phenomenon than its causal structure. Similarly, Merton's mechanism of the self-fulfilling prophecy does not apply here, because there is no initial false belief that subsequently produces real consequences reinforcing that belief. A more accurate framing is positive feedback: non-religious behavioural patterns that are socially approved in the academic environment reinforce their own spread through social contagion and normalisation.

Critique and Revision of the Mechanism

Discussion of the model at the final seminar of the course identified several problems.

First, there is a chicken-and-egg problem: it is unclear whether the university environment causes non-religiosity, or whether already less religious individuals are more likely to attend university in the first place. One possible answer lies in the mechanism of social reproduction: most university students come from families with lower levels of religious involvement. Deconversion at university may therefore reflect not a causal effect of education, but the transmission of values from the previous generation.

Second, the original motivation I proposed, a "drive toward scientific rational thinking", is idealistic. A more realistic assumption is that the driving motive is the need for social integration and recognition within the student community. As an individual adapts to group norms, they also adopt the symbolic behaviours associated with secularity. The mechanism of social contagion is central here.

Third, the model initially underweighted the feedback loop between behaviour and beliefs. The process may in fact be bidirectional: a student first begins to exhibit non-religious behaviour (for instance, stops attending religious services), and then rationalises this new behaviour by revising their beliefs accordingly. This sequence is consistent with Elster's principle of rationalisation, in which beliefs adapt post hoc to already-changed practices.

A more complete explanation should therefore include: a mechanism of adaptation and rationalisation (the individual pursues social integration by changing both behaviour and beliefs); a mechanism of social reinforcement (non-religious behaviour receives positive reinforcement from the group); and the structural context of social reproduction (students entering university are already less religious, having come from families with lower religiosity to begin with).

Conclusion

This essay examined one of the empirically documented patterns linking religiosity and education. From the perspective of analytical sociology, this pattern requires the reconstruction of a complex chain of mechanisms through which the educational environment affects individual beliefs.

The proposed model combines cognitive and social components: the process of deconversion may begin as adaptation to group norms and conclude with a change in beliefs through rationalisation. The phenomenon is sustained by a feedback mechanism: non-religiosity, socially approved in the academic context, reproduces itself and stabilises as a norm.

What remains deeply problematic is the question of which specific causal mechanisms drive the observed pattern, and whether it would be possible in a controlled setting to isolate the key factor.

References

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