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Amazing Conversions: Why Some Turn To Faith & Others Abandon Religion



Synopsis

This groundbreaking study uncovers fascinating new data on sudden shifts in religious and nonreligious belief. *Amazing Conversions* explores, for the first time ever, the reasons why converts join, and apostates go. The focus of this absorbing study is on some amazing people, with unique stories to tell those who join a religious group in spite of being raised in nonreligious (or even antireligious) families, and those who, at great personal cost, choose to leave religion in spite of having a deeply religious background. Why would an atheist's son become a Christian fundamentalist? Why would a "good Catholic girl" decide that she really is an atheist? The authors of *Amazing Conversions*, both social psychologists, surveyed thousands of young adults to find that small number who were "amazing believers" or "amazing apostates." These rare individuals tell their stories, which are supplemented by their responses to a detailed questionnaire. The resulting picture shows that amazing believers and amazing apostates are dramatically different groups of people, in spite of the fact that their lives now stand in opposition to previous (non)religious training. You, too, can complete the same questionnaire to learn more about yourself and your beliefs. Have you experienced an amazing conversion?

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Customer Reviews

Christians looking for astounding stories of towering faith, or Atheists looking for the exact moment when all the illusions faded, will be deeply disappointed. That's not the sort of "Amazing" that's involved here. The sort of amazing involved is the degree of transition; those who are raised in one extreme quartile of religiosity, yet who end up in the opposite quartile. The more common case in society is when, as Proverbs 22:6 puts it, parents "Train up a child in the way he should go: and when he is old, he will not depart from it." The 1% or so discussed are the exception to that rule - and thus, interesting, in that they may indicate a more general principle. The degree of religiosity or irreligiosity that results is not always that amazing relative to the norm for society; some of the AA "Amazing Atheists" identified are more theist than atheist, and some of the AB "Amazing Believers" are merely non-denominational Christians who seldom pray or attend services. It is where they end relative to the norm for their upbringings that makes the conversions amazing. The methodology is outlined: the surveys used to identify their targets, and the general interview style used. A summary is given of the interview with each of the students (although some personal details are changed for privacy reasons), followed by observing some patterns and some absences. The two groups are also compared, with commonalities and differences highlighted. The book does not and cannot give a final answer. To study a representative sample for a phenomenon that is only happens one percent of the time requires an enormous sample to turn up any candidates at all; and would require even larger samples (well beyond that obtained) to reach statistically high-confidence conclusions. There's also the usual cautions about extrapolating from the WEIRD (Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic) implicit in samplings of college students to the wider population. Naturally, data from a few dozen cases will not sustain even remotely definitive conclusions. However, Altemeyer and Hunsberger indicate patterns in the data - some of which are reminiscent of patterns long noted in the psychology literature, others more surprising. The book is not excessively technical in presentation; the reading level is probably high-school. It's definitely a worthwhile addition to the literature of the psychologies of religion, irreligion, and conversion. It would seem likely to interest anyone whose attention has been drawn by the recent media attention to the "New Atheism", despite pre-dating the furor. However, the tentative conclusions seem less likely to endear the work to those who deeply disapprove of that social trend.

I loved this book. Unlike most studies which only summarize their data, these authors give you a

detailed description of each of their interviewees responses. After reading the rich details of the apostate stories and the believer stories, it was hard to argue with the analysis. For example, I was a little critical of the amazing believer stories to begin with but found my views softening and expanding as I read story after story that showed the same pattern of finding happiness and meaning through their turn to religion. It is clear that the apostates were more fully represented and that the believers were more scant. Of the 24 believers interviewed, only 10 were what I had expected (more fundamentalistic and committed), but the authors recognized this and described the subsample of "real converts". As others have intimated, this is not a book for people who want to be reaffirmed in their faith or lack of faith, but rather a book for someone who is more neutral and wants to understand the dynamic processes that pushed people in both directions. Thanks Altemeyer & Hunsberger for a stimulating read!

The Independent Publisher and Jennifer Smith both appear to have little information about Altemeyer and Hunsberger's backgrounds as research psychologists, or with the research that they are doing. The purpose of this book is not entertain the reader with gripping tales of religious turmoil. It is to examine the process in the subject pool that they have available to them - Canadian college students. Within this pool, they have conducted scientific research for over 30 years, with tens of thousands of college students and adults. Their research findings have been replicated across the globe (including South Africa, Israel, and the former USSR) with faiths including Christians, Hindus, Jews and Muslims. That the 'Publisher' feels that religion is 'not susceptible to a statistical survey approach' demonstrates their lack of familiarity with the field of religious research in general and with the work of both authors in particular. I suggest that they consult a research library and learn something about the field before making such sweeping pronouncements. Those who don't have a serious interest in research on religion should steer clear of this book. Those who do will enjoy it and their other books and research.

I've learned quite a bit from this. I like that they take what could be very complicated material and reduce it to easy to understand information about a large amount of case studies.

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