

DECONVERSION AND NON-NORMATIVE CATHOLICISMS—INVITED
SESSION

Topic:	Deconversion and Non-normative Catholicisms
Convener:	Tom Beaudoin, Fordham University
Moderator:	Natalie Kertes Weaver, Ursuline College
Presenter:	Tom Beaudoin, Fordham University
Respondent:	William Dinges, Catholic University of America

This session introduced and explored the concept of deconversion as a potential way of making theological sense of the tens of millions of baptized Catholics who have left Catholicism or who have substantially rejected or reworked “normative” Catholicism in the reworking of their Catholic identity. It sought to underscore the theological significance of deconversion and to outline some of the deep questions for Catholic theology raised by deconversion research.

Tom Beaudoin’s paper, “Help My Unbelief: Deconversion in Roman Catholicism,” began by introducing some recent research in social science, and some critical observations by ecclesial and cultural commentators, indicating deep changes in attitudes toward Roman Catholicism in the United States. It is now well-established in social science that the Catholic Church in the United States is undergoing a crisis of credibility, relevance, adherence, and affiliation. Tens of millions of baptized Catholics hold significant disagreements with positions defended by the hierarchy or have left the church altogether.

In statements of many Catholic leaders and also often in theological work, the experiences of Catholics who become thus “non-normative” are dealt with as unusual, unorthodox cases or are characterized in negative terms, and their faith-negotiations are placed rhetorically in contrast to a stable tradition of faith and morals. Beaudoin argued that the concept of “deconversion,” as it has emerged in theological literature, provides a useful way of comprehending emerging non-normative Catholicisms or post-Catholicisms in a way that remains curious about what they might communicate of theological substance. Deconversion research, he emphasized, which finds the ways that people “exit” the expectations of their religion or their religious belief/practice altogether, is as important for generating theological material and for comprehending the character of a religion as are the ways that people convert to or maintain their identity within a religion.

Beaudoin presented a brief history of deconversion research, tracing its path from social scientists’ curiosity about people who left “new religious movements” in the 1970s and 1980s to the relatively recent migration of the term into theological discourse and its application to the study of “mainline” religions. He then discussed the research study he has been undertaking since 2011 with Dr. Patrick Hornbeck of the Theology Department at Fordham University, titled “Varieties of Deconversion in Roman Catholicism.” Their study, still in initial stages, has thus far reviewed deconversion literature for its significance for Roman Catholicism and for Catholic theology, carried out an initial survey of over 600 Catholics, and conducted two dozen individual interviews.

After sharing some preliminary observations about what their study is yielding, Beaudoin argued that the theological material within deconversion research consisted most importantly in the theory and practice of religious subjectivity arising from the study of deconverting persons. Such study allows fresh and grounded thinking about how religious subjectivity works today and can inform and challenge the construals of religious subjectivity operative in contemporary theology, especially where those construals do not allow for “religious exits.”

In his response, William Dinges observed that Beaudoin and Hornbeck’s research is timely because the present challenges to Catholic adherence are the most serious since the Reformation. He agreed, moreover, that deconversion is a matter of deep theological significance because it raises the question of the truth and credibility of Catholic Church teachings, and the theological question of the nature of Catholic identity itself. Dinges then emphasized the need for clearly demarcating Beaudoin and Hornbeck’s research relative to the limits of their sample and with reference to large-scale survey data. Further, in raising the issue of the reliability of after-the-fact narratives about why people leave Catholicism, he argued that the most pressing theological and pastoral challenge, in his reading of the literature, is indifference toward the Church by Catholics. For many baptized Catholics, there is no single compelling grievance underlying their deconversion; the Church is simply irrelevant to their real lives. This is a profound challenge for theology and the Church. He suggested that the essential content of Catholic identity is now in question with a particular urgency.

The lively discussion focused on: whether “affections” or “heart” were more fitting terms than “mind,” “belief,” or “practice” for how people decide to change their adherence; how this research might be used for the New Evangelization; the importance of paying much closer attention to ethnic-racial particularities in deconversion; and what theologians can learn from parents about how they make sense of their children decelerating their involvement in, or leaving, the Church.

TOM BEAUDOIN
Fordham University
New York