Can a case be made for 'unlearning' in the study of religions? Applying the concept to the journeys of religious leavers

Abstract

The concept of 'unlearning' has been positively endorsed in both self-help literature and organisational research, but has yet to be discussed in the study of religions. Is there room for it in the conceptual space of religious socialisation, pedagogy and spiritual seeking? Where does it occur in the spiritual journey, and what is its purpose? From the perspective of social learning, and drawing on a definition and model from organisational studies, the case for 'unlearning' is considered with reference to those leaving religion. Addressing research gaps identified by organisational studies scholars, I consider how leavers experience the process of freeing themselves from previously held beliefs, practices and commitments. What is revealed is an iterative and emotionally-fraught process in which even voluntary religious leavers struggle to move on, often feeling powerless, even coerced by others. Whilst there is a broad fit between the basic process model of unlearning and what leavers experience, that is not the full story. Furthermore, questions remain about whether 'unlearning' is a necessary or suitable concept, not least of all because it is rarely used by scholars of religion or practitioners themselves, all of whom prefer other terms.

This is an investigation of the viability of the concept of 'unlearning' in the study of religions. What does it mean, when might it apply and under what conditions? How is it related to other scholarly or vernacular concepts already in use? Is it useful for capturing a process experienced by religious or spiritual actors? Given its preliminary nature, this investigation draws on existing research and personal narratives; no ethnographic research has been conducted. Furthermore, as I will show, with so few existing references to 'unlearning' in study of religions, it has been necessary to turn for help to another discipline, organisational studies, in which unlearning has been a developing research field since the 1980s. From that discipline, as well as exporting a working definition and model, I

have identified problems or gaps which an examination of unlearning in religious and spiritual contexts might help to address. My aims then are both to examine the conceptual and practical potential for 'unlearning' in the study of religions, and to address organisational studies by showing what a preliminary examination of religious unlearning might add. Given that religious learning – and potentially unlearning – may occur at all stages of the life course and for groups as well as individuals, it has been necessary to restrict my focus. For reasons that will become clear later, 'leaving religion' has provided that focus.

After a preliminary discussion about my understanding of religious and spiritual learning, I consider the dearth of references to 'unlearning' in the study of religions before turning to organisational studies, from which I borrow a definition and process model, and note thematic areas in need of further research. I then explain my decision to concentrate on 'leaving religion'. With a warning that the term itself is used infrequently, I draw on academic studies, from the study of religions and beyond, as well as personal testimonies, including autobiographical accounts and secondary references to interviews, in order to explore the conceptual and practical viability of religious unlearning.

In the sections that follow, building on a model from organisational studies, I consider the nature of the unlearning process and how it is embodied, experienced and felt by religious leavers. I hear from a range of voices, including a 'deconvert' who offers a self-help guide to leaving and an autobiographer who states the importance of reflexivity and self-expression in the exit process. Finally, given my initial conception of learning as both social and embodied, I consider agency and consent with reference to examples of forced as well as voluntary religious unlearning. I conclude by returning to the aims outlined earlier, addressing the gaps identified by organisational studies scholars, and asking whether a sufficient case has been made for the concept of 'unlearning' in the study of religions, warranting further research.

Learning and unlearning in organisational studies and the study of religions

Despite the claim that unlearning is not straightforwardly an antonym of learning (Dunne 2016: 19), it is nevertheless important to ground a discussion of the former in a recognized body of theory about learning. Drawing on earlier work on ideological transmission and learning conducted with Lee (Lee & Knott 2016, 2018, 2021; Knott & Lee 2020), my understanding of learning – and as a consequence unlearning – is social and situated, following Bandura (1971), Lave and Wenger (1991) and Wenger (1998).[1] However, it is also informed by the work of scholars familiar with learning in religious and spiritual contexts, notably Berliner and Sarró (eds., 2007) on anthropological approaches to religious learning, Scourfield et al (2013) on embodied religious socialisation, Mellor and Shilling (2010), Beekers (2015) and Galonnier and Rios (2016) on religious habitus and embodied pedagogies, and Hundeide (2003), Kenney (2017) and Crone (2016) on ideological learning in extremist communities of practice.[2] None of these authors addresses the question of 'unlearning'. Rather they share an interest in embodied learning, whether in primary religious socialization, when children observe and imitate the practices of family members and acquire a sense of religious identity, or secondary socialization, when religious learning – about personhood, community, ethics and the world – may be acquired formally, from books, classes, sermons and so on, but also picked up informally through participation in ritual and other cultural practices, including online engagement. From the perspective of these authors, primary and secondary religious learning are not set apart from the dynamics of everyday social life. They are embroiled in broader issues of agency, power relations, persuasion and emotional investment. The same is true, I shall argue, for religious unlearning.

---

[1] As a sociologist of religion, I have adopted a social and situated conception of learning, and a definition and process model of unlearning from organisational studies. Although I am aware of psychological theories of both learning and religion, I have not focused on them here as they are beyond the scope of my expertise.

[2] There is a substantial literature on religious socialization, learning and nurture, some of which I have reviewed with Lee in our work on ideological transmission (Lee & Knott 2016: 13–18; Lee & Knott 2018: 29–37). For an anthropological summary of studies on learning religion, see Berliner & Sarró (2007: 1–19).

As a starting point for situating religious unlearning, I refer to Wenger's (1998: 5) four 'components' – of *meaning, practice, community* and *identity* – for constituting learning as experience, doing, belonging and becoming. Ahead of a more targeted analysis of the academic literature on 'unlearning', I suggest that, as part of a broader cycle of learning, unlearning and relearning (Toffler 1970: 415), religious unlearning may involve challenging and leaving behind previous beliefs and conceptions, erasing or revising earlier experiences and re-ordering one's worldview (*meaning*). It may involve desisting from existing behaviours and routines, and the adoption – in time – of others (*practice*). On a social level, encountering and being challenged by others, breaking bonds, even leaving a group (*community*) would all provide potential opportunities for unlearning. Whilst being an individual process, unlearning must surely also involve other individuals, communities and/or groups. Furthermore, religious unlearning would likely constitute a renegotiation of personal identity, rethinking who one has been and desires to become, and may involve deconstructing the self and trying out a new persona (*identity*). At this stage, however, these are merely suppositions, based on what we might expect from applying Wenger's four components to the idea of religious unlearning.

As I have suggested above, the study of religions offers compelling resources on the social and embodied nature and process of religious learning. But it does not provide definitions, theories or data on unlearning that might help us move forward in assessing the viability of the concept. In the majority of cases in which scholars of religion refer to 'unlearning', it is used tacitly with no attempt at definition or conceptual interrogation. Generally, as the following examples show, it is a term used to signal the idea that, as scholars, we must rethink or 'unlearn' our approach. Wilson (2022: 1), who takes a fresh look at religion in world politics, asks readers to 'Unlearn religion as (we think) we know it', and see it as dynamic and contextual; Robinson and Cush (2018), in an article entitled 'Learning and Unlearning', call for a feminist pedagogical rethinking of religious studies and religious education; and Urbaniak (2019) considers whether decolonisation in South

Africa constitutes a process of 'unlearning' Christianity. In none of these is the concept of unlearning defined or questioned. Its meaning is simply taken as read.

In two other works by scholars of religion, 'unlearning' is given a more prominent role. In 'Apprendre et désapprendre: quand la médiumnité croise l'anthropologie' (Learning and unlearning when mediumship and anthropology meet), Meintel (2011) discusses the process of learning to become a Spiritualist medium in Montreal. The journey into clairvoyance 'forces us to learn in ways other than through academic work. We must set aside any notion of "excellence", "competence" and "success". In the closed group, students "unlearn" the censorship of impressions that would normally go unnoticed' (Meintel 2011).[3] The concept of unlearning is understood to involve discarding the controlled approach that comes naturally to academics in favour of one based on faith and humility and thus more suited to understanding Spiritualism. As above, 'unlearning' is a process required of scholars of religion if they want to see things afresh and challenge their own methodological assumptions (cf. Dunne 2016, on pedagogics of unlearning).

Annunen (2022) comes closest to elaborating the concept of unlearning for the study of religion, utilising it not as a methodological by-word for rethinking how scholars should approach their subject matter, but as a key stage in the learning process of spiritual seekers.[4] Reflecting on unlearning as a pedagogical technique among Singing Bowl practitioners, Annunen refers to it as both a process and an end in itself. Referring to 'letting go' and the setting aside of destructive and undesirable habits during singing bowl relaxation, her interviewees stressed that unlearning required intentional, active work and not merely forgetting. For them, it was an embodied process of stopping thoughts, self-awareness and skillful listening with the aim of detaching oneself from a stressful lifestyle and attaining well-being.

---

[3] English translation from the original French, by online translation tool, DeepL.
[4] Annunen discussed unlearning in a panel on religious and spiritual learning at the conference of the European Association for the Study of Religions in Cork in 2022. The following year, unlearning was discussed by several contributors at the conference 'Religion and Spirituality as Sites of Learning', co-organised by the Donner Institute and Academy of Finland funded project, 'Learning from New Religion and Spirituality [LeNeRe]'. To the best of my knowledge, Annunen has yet to publish her material on unlearning.

Annunen's tantalizing choice of 'unlearning' to capture the aim and process of spiritual seekers is not yet reflected elsewhere in the study of religions literature. References to unlearning can certainly be found in the self-help and 'pop psych' literature, where they signal a desire to reflect on and reject old ways of being in order to move forward towards a more authentic self (e.g. Plata 2020; Michael & Wilson 2021), but they are largely absent in academic studies of religion. For this reason, it is necessary to look to another discipline where the concept has been discussed and debated, organisational studies. In a brief review of this material, I consider how 'unlearning' has been defined and applied, what problems and gaps have been identified, and how the study of religions might draw on work already done in this discipline.

From Hedberg's 1981 position paper, in which he imported the concept of unlearning from psychology, to a 2019 special journal issue (see Becker 2019) and beyond, organisational studies scholars have debated the concept of unlearning and its application. They have sought to understand its role for organisations in the development of new knowledge, skills, and innovation. Hedberg's (1981: 3) definition of unlearning as 'discarding obsolete and misleading knowledge' to make room for new learning, continues to be used by scholars as a starting point for research. How have organisational researchers approached unlearning, what themes have they addressed, and what problems or gaps have they identified? A systematic review by Klammer & Gueldenberg (2019), of sixty-three articles, offers a useful summary. The authors highlighted the following themes in the literature: the purpose and nature of unlearning for organisations, groups and individuals; differences between and consequences of both unlearning and forgetting; and the scope of unlearning, including cognitive and behavioural perspectives, and social and emotional factors.

Although a minority of authors in the field would like to do away with the idea of 'unlearning' altogether – notably Howells & Scholderer (2016), who see it as adding little to more rigorous concepts like 'learning' and 'theory-change' – most have preferred to elaborate and revise the concept. Oft-cited shortcomings of previous research on 'unlearning' – which are relevant when exporting the concept to other fields of study – have highlighted the blurring of the boundary

between 'forgetting' and 'unlearning' (Klammer & Gueldenberg 2019), the lack of empirical research and theory testing (Becker 2005, 2019), and a focus on knowledge and beliefs at the expense of practice (Fiol & O'Connor 2017). Insufficient consideration has been given to where unlearning sits within wider learning and management processes (Visser 2017; Vu & Nguyen 2022); with the different steps or stages of unlearning yet to be distinguished and analysed (Burton et al 2022; Fiol & O'Connor 2017). Models of unlearning have tended to be linear and sequential (Brooks et al 2022). Furthermore, the social nature and levels of unlearning have often been conflated, and their interrelationship insufficiently understood (Brooks et al 2022; Burton et al 2022; Klammer & Gueldenberg 2019). Power, agency, trust and consent need further research (Brooks et al 2022), as do the emotions accompanying unlearning, including stress and anxiety (Visser 2017).

Organisational studies scholars have, of course, sought to address some of these shortcomings whilst making their case for 'unlearning' as a process of strategic and practical value in the management of organisations, with several even considering the role of spiritual practices in organisational unlearning (e.g. Burton et al 2022; Vu & Nguyen 2022). It is important that new researchers entering the debate about unlearning – whatever their discipline – respond to the shortcomings already identified in organisational studies. No single study can address them all, but scholars of religion might usefully focus on where unlearning occurs in religious/spiritual life-cycles; on the behavioural and social as well as cognitive aspects of unlearning; on issues of power, agency and consent, and the emotional and experiential affects of unlearning. Religious and spiritual contexts differ from management and organisational settings, and it is likely that these will affect the nature and purpose of unlearning.

Unlearning in the context of leaving religion

If we accept Hedberg's (1981: 3) minimal definition, of unlearning as 'discarding obsolete and misleading knowledge' to make room for new learning, then three periods within the religious or spiritual life-cycle have potential relevance for an investigation of unlearning: the entry phase, during which individuals may reject the external world and prior norms and values, and explore a new set of beliefs and practices and a new community; the committed phase, when practitioners may see letting go or desisting from unhelpful thoughts and habits as a means of enhancing experience and making spiritual progress; and the exit phase, during which doubts and questions set in and leavers begin to unpick their cognitive, behavioural, and social ties as part of a process of disaffiliation and deidentification. My focus here will be on the last of these stages.

Despite an absence of specific references to unlearning in the study of religions, the extensive literature on 'leaving religion' provides an array of potentially relevant concepts.[5] These include deconversion (Streib 2021), apostasy (Cottee 2015), disaffiliation and disengagement (Van Tongeren & DeWall 2021), and role-exit (Ebaugh 1988), as well as leaving religion itself (Enstedt et al 2019).[6] Added to these are multiple gerunds: letting go, renouncing, erasing, setting aside, stopping, rejecting, all in order to transition, move on or make progress on a religious or spiritual journey. Arguably, this rich vocabulary threatens to overwhelm the fragile notion of 'unlearning' or make it redundant, but it is nevertheless helpful for providing grounds for the investigation of unlearning within this stage of the religious or spiritual journey.

The vocabulary around 'leaving religion' suggests a critical interruption in an individual's worldview, journey, circumstances or role: their situation has become untenable, unfulfilling or unhealthy; it is no longer deemed relevant, and there is a felt need for change. But is 'unlearning' a useful term for all or part of this interruption and the process that ensues? Unlearning is a significant and intentional stage in a cycle of learning-unlearning-relearning, involving distinctive

---

[5] The shorthand terms 'leaving religion' and 'religious leavers' should be taken to refer to the wider field of religion, spirituality and equivalent worldviews and ways of life.
[6] To avoid an unnecessarily long bibliography, I have included just one supporting reference for each of the relevant concepts. There are, of course, many others.

ends, means and experiences. As will be seen, the challenges of discarding beliefs, practices and other aspects of a life of commitment are very different to learning them in the first place or relearning others. It is important, moreover, to stress that 'unlearning' and 'leaving' are not synonymous. Leaving religion is marked by distinctive steps, including disaffiliation and role-exit, which may demand unlearning and new learning, but which typically involve other types of activity, such as cutting ties, moving home and giving up positions of trust.

As unlearning is examined in the context of leaving religion, some of the gaps identified within organisational research will be addressed. In the next section, stages in the process of religious and spiritual unlearning will be identified and illustrated with reference to leavers' experiences and feelings. In this, I will borrow a process model from organisational studies (Fiol & O'Connor 2017) and respond to the call for more research on the stages and related experiences of unlearning (Burton et al 2022; Visser 2017; Vu & Nguyen 2022). An important issue here concerns the place of accounts by unlearners themselves in describing and interpreting the process. Is the modelling of the process and its stages best left to academics? What place is there, if any, for the subjective testimonies of those who have experienced the process? Although no ethnographic fieldwork has been conducted in association with this preliminary investigation, I have drawn liberally on first-hand accounts, and am firmly of the view that, in their testimonies, religious and spiritual practitioners may offer relevant hints, examples, even full working models on the basis of their experiences. These may or may not mirror the observations and conclusions offered by researchers but, in the study of religions at least, they play a vital role as both evidence and vernacular theory-building (Valk 2022). Like academic resources, they should be open to testing and critique, and the source and context of such accounts should be interrogated but, with this proviso, there is no reason to exclude them from an investigation of religious unlearning. Indeed, they help build a picture of how individuals experience unlearning and are affected by related issues such as power, agency and consent.

The unlearning process among religious leavers: academic and vernacular models

In their work on unlearning established routines, organisational studies scholars Fiol & O'Connor (2017) offered a succinct process model. They identified an initial destabilizing 'trigger', followed by three interactive sub-processes: 'Destabilization is an initial process of questioning old routines. (2) Discarding is a process of letting go of them. (3) Experimenting is a process of learning new ones.' (Fiol & O'Connor 2017: 16) Their model posited a catalyst, followed by doubt and questioning, discarding or letting go, and then experimentation and new or re-learning. Is it possible to identify similar stages – whether linear or iterative – in accounts of leaving religion? If so, how are they elaborated, and do they differ from this academic process model? Before hearing from Muslim apostates (Cottee 2015) and an ex-Jehovah's Witness (Millar 2022) on their experiences of unlearning as part of an exit journey, I turn to a vernacular model of deconversion offered by David Ames, the 'Graceful Atheist' (2017). His 'ten easy steps' are intended as a guide to others on their journey out of Christianity.

In 2015, the 'Graceful Atheist' found his Christian faith faltering and finally 'deconverted' to atheism.[7] Since then, he has developed online resources to help others experiencing a loss of faith, including podcasts and a vernacular 'How to' guide on deconversion (Graceful Atheist 2017). In the latter, he identifies and describes ten stages, all of which he acknowledges are iterative, informal, and personal to individual 'deconverts'.

1)   Precipitating events

2)   Critical mass

3)   Permission to doubt

4)   Deconstruction

5)   Liminal

---

[7] In academic circles, the term 'deconversion' is not universally accepted. Bromley (2023: 22–23), for example, rejects the idea that conversion is reversed in a separation process of deconversion or apostasy.

6)   Crossing the Rubicon of faith and doubt

7)   All the feels

8)   Information gathering

9)   In and out of the closet

10)   Now what?

In his description of these stages, the Graceful Atheist offers 'proactive steps', suggestions of things to do and questions to ask. To take one example, at the point of 'Crossing the Rubicon', he advises 'deconverts' to begin making a plan and reading other people's deconversion stories so that they know they are not alone. He counsels against rash public announcements, reminding readers that their personal safety is paramount. He explains that people will still have doubts and will slip back into familiar habits even after this point in the journey. Identifying then letting go of beliefs and values, routines, relationships and personal goals, he writes, is an iterative and multifaceted process, one which impacts feelings and self-perceptions as well as the opinions of others.

If we now compare his account with the academic model offered by Fiol & O'Connor, we see that the deconversion process he describes begins with precipitating or trigger events, which build to a destabilizing mass of questions and doubts (Fiol & O'Connor's first sub-process). This is followed by a period of deconstruction, rejection and redefinition (Graceful Atheist, steps 4-6) until the point of no return has been reached (Fiol & O'Connor's second sub-process, of discarding the old). In his final three steps, he turns towards experimenting and rebuilding (Fiol & O'Connor's final stage). Step 7, 'All the feels', does not fit neatly into the academic model, but crosses several sub-processes, as a reminder that the process of unlearning may generate powerful emotional responses in 'deconverts' and those around them, an issue to which I will return later.

The Graceful Atheist has reflected on his own experiences and sought to model the process he went through for the benefit of others going through a similar ordeal. His account adds further detail to the basic three-stage unlearning model offered by Fiol & O'Connor, by differentiating

intermediate steps and episodes leavers might expect to go through, stressing the iterative nature of the process, and acknowledging a range of accompanying emotions.

Experiences and emotions in the unlearning process: Muslim apostates

With these two models in hand – one academic and designed for analysing unlearning in organisational behaviour, the other vernacular, constructed from personal experience and offered as a guide to fellow religious leavers – I turn to an ethnographic study on the stages undergone by Muslim apostates (Cottee 2015). With no primary material of my own, I benefit from Cottee's interviews with thirty-five respondents (from the US, Canada and the UK) who have left Islam. Cottee, whose focus is leaving religion rather than unlearning per se (though he is one of only a few scholars to use the term), does not refer explicitly to the sub-processes identified by Fiol & O'Connor, but his discussion nevertheless reflects their basic model of an initial trigger, destabilization (pre-apostasy), a period of letting go (apostasy), followed by a post-apostasy phase of experimental learning. What is evident from his interviewees is that the apostasy journey is not as tidy or linear as this process model would suggest, neither is it emotionally neutral.

Among Cottee's respondents, in the 'pre-apostasy' phase, early doubts were a key feature, whether epistemological, moral or instrumental. Most cited a trigger, such as scriptural discoveries, exposure to alternative viewpoints, a personal or political event or just weakening faith. They often mentioned loneliness: they rarely shared their thoughts and feelings and found other people were reluctant to discuss the subject. Such doubts often shifted to inner 'discord', an exhausting struggle between internal *halal* and *haram* voices (2015: 52), then to 'deliberation', when doubters came to the point of decision-making (2015: 55).[8]

---

[8] *Halal* and *haram* are Arabic Islamic terms meaning lawful and permitted, and unlawful and forbidden, respectively.

Cottee then asked, what did it feel like to have renounced Islam (2015: 66)? His respondents talked of relief and excitement once they had made their decision, but also guilt, anger, anxiety and confusion (2015: 72). During the pre-apostasy phase, they had begun to question some of the beliefs acquired in childhood and ingrained thereafter in the family, mosque, madrasa and other Islamic contexts. They had all 'unsaid' the *shahadah* privately, some publicly (2015: 73), a sign of having made a decision and crossed a line. For some, it was the self-revelatory moment of saying, perhaps to a family member or friend, 'I am not a Muslim' (2015: 74).

Other transgressions occurred in the next stage, of 'disavowal' and discarding. Cottee refers to it as 'Pigging Out' (2015: 74), as it often involved an excess of alcohol, sex or – crucially – pork. Pork proved to be the red line for many: after it had been eaten, there was no going back, the Rubicon had been crossed (cf. Graceful Atheist 2017). But it was also a moment of 'breaking free' of the shackles (2015: 76). Other important rituals were also discarded, but not without resistance from others: One respondent said, 'I stopped praying. I stopped going to the mosque. I stopped fasting,' but not without family arguments, fights, and yelling (2015: 77). This is a telling reminder that unlearning, when it involves the public cessation of previous behaviours, is a socially and emotionally charged process in which others may seek to intervene or even take back control.

Personal agency was limited and complicated. When apostates chose to come out publicly, their disclosures evoked a range of feelings in others, from shock and hurt to anger and shame, so strong that sometimes the apostates tried to take back what they had said. For some this disclosure led to family break up. For Cottee's other respondents, continuing to undo the ties that bind and to desist from previous Islamic routines was done quietly, beneath the public radar; it often involved the 'adoption of various personae or masks… [and] a lot of straight-up lying or covering' (2015: 131). It was a personal and voluntary choice, but not without the pressure of community and gender norms. Concealment of apostasy often involved pretending to pray or fast, and this evoked negative feelings: 'It felt horrible… it would feel very, very humiliating [donning a hijab when visiting

family]; 'I had, like, these two personalities… There was that feeling of being an actor and that feeling of being real somewhere else.' (2015: 148).

But whether they concealed or disclosed their exit, Cottee's respondents found themselves having to 'manage' a difficult 'post-apostasy' process. Whilst advocates of the benefits of unlearning (Graceful Atheist, 2017; Michael & Wilson 2021; Plata 2020) stressed the later experimental or relearning stage, when new ways of being are explored once prior knowledge and practices have been discarded, these Muslim apostates dwelt rather on the hard work of rebuilding and the pain of stripping away what was familiar and second nature: e.g. 'So I just had to rebuild everything, because my life-plan was set by my religion, and I had to now make my own plan.' (Cottee 2015: 170) For others, it was the shame and sadness of letting down family and friends: 'Do you know what I miss the most? It's my friendships and the community. And the sense of unity… The sense of belonging to something.' (Cottee 2015: 163)

The search for freedom was marked by increasing loneliness, and a reassessment of life's purpose. It represented a radical change, from dependence on Allah, Islam and the Muslim community to autonomy and self-reliance. Furthermore, the need to 'unlearn' (Cottee 2015: 175) tacit gestures, routines and ways of speaking required constant vigilance and self-awareness: 'I can't just switch that off.' (176) One male apostate cited the problem of resisting the 'inherent homophobia and misogyny' arising from his early 'Islamic programming' (Cottee 2015: 176); one young woman noted the difficulty of shaking off entrenched expressions like '*Bismillah*' and '*Inshallah*' (2015: 178). Even those who felt relatively secure in their new identities found these old habits frequently re-emerged.

'People may stop identifying as religious, but the deeply ingrained attitudes, values, and behaviors that encompass religious identity remain' (Van Tongeren et al 2021: 500), all the more so for those socialised into a religious community as children. Others have referred to this as the 'religious residue' (Davidman 2015; Ebaugh 1988). For some leavers, success in moving on is only

achieved once one's past had 'become incorporated in who I now am' (ex-nun, in Ebaugh 1988: 116), with one's prior identity acknowledged rather than denied. But the attempt to move on was not always greeted positively, with some 'formers' caught between their earlier attachments and the need to discard the past and look to the future (Baffelli 2022: 26). The 'Now What?' stage (Graceful Atheist 2017), in which new learning and experimentation become possible, inspired fear and anxiety as well as excitement: 'So where do I go from here? How do I live my life without a purpose?' (Cottee 2015: 170)

What have the experiences of these religious leavers added, in terms of understanding the unlearning process? Whilst leaving religion no doubt entails additional activities, such as relinquishing a position of trust or exiting a community, the basic unlearning model, of a trigger followed by periods of destabilisation, discarding and experimentation, nevertheless seems to apply. Useful though it may be as a basic blueprint, however, Fiol & O'Connor's model offers little insight into how the process of unlearning is actually experienced.[9] By using several examples from the 'leaving religion' literature, it has been possible to add further detail to the nature of unlearning, and the practical, social and emotional costs as well as the cognitive challenges arising from discarding one worldview and way of being in order to move on.

Unlearning, self-expression and finding a voice: memoir of a religious leaver

To add still further to an understanding of these stages, costs and challenges, I turn now to the in-depth testimony of one woman, Ali Millar, who underwent the painful process of leaving the Jehovah's Witnesses. Her autobiography, *The Last Days* (Millar 2022), describes in detail the experience of religious leaving, and – like memoirs by other leavers (e.g. Lax 2015; Phelps-Roper 2019; Westover 2022) – allows the author to reflect on the doubts, feelings, decisions and about-

---

[9] Some organisational studies scholars have begun to address the experiential aspect of unlearning (e.g. Brooks et al 2022; Burton et al 2022).

turns that preoccupied her. In the absence of ethnographic material collected explicitly with unlearning as its focus, autobiographies such as Millar's are invaluable as insider accounts into the process. In addition to providing further evidence of the stages and emotional impacts of unlearning identified above, Millar highlights the importance of writing as a medium for self-reflection on the learning/unlearning journey.

Millar sets her experience of leaving within an account of her earlier life as a child, adolescent and adult in the Jehovah's Witnesses (JWs) in Scotland, UK. Entering as a baby with her single-parent mother, she imbibed and embodied the beliefs and practices of the movement unquestioningly, including teachings about Armageddon and the 'last days', and the movement's understanding of gender roles, sexuality, the importance of proselytising above education, and the disfellowshipping of wrongdoers (Millar 2022: 3). These doctrines and values shaped her young self; these same doctrines and values had to be challenged and overcome as she grew away from the movement and sought to uncover and express a new self.

Like others writing about their journeys out of religion, Millar explored what first led her to doubt and question the movement and her place within it. Although her early adulthood was marked by a strong desire to conform, to be a good and godly married woman and Witness, her body told another story, one of anorexia and depression. Aware of her own unhappiness, she wanted,

> to keep walking, away from everything. I want to become someone new. But I never do.
> I do what I'm expected to, because that's all I've ever done… and sometimes I wonder,
> until it's all I'm ever wondering: why I don't just turn round and leave. (Millar 2022:
> 227)

No single trigger is identified (Fiol & O'Connor 2017: 16), rather a growing sense of emptiness which she continues to fight, believing she just needs to try harder to conform (Millar 2022: 322). Despite having a friend willing to discuss leaving the JWs, Ali continued to resist her growing doubts: 'We aren't to voice our doubts. If we did it would make room for Satan.' (Millar 2022: 243)

But global events including 9/11 and 7/7 lead her to question the movement's apocalyptic interpretation: 'I worry I won't be able to keep all these questions inside for much longer.' (Millar 2022: 255) Her ability to accept her role and the JW worldview was under threat (what Fiol & O'Connor refer to as destabilization).

Interestingly, Millar – like the Graceful Atheist cited above – recognises a moment when she crosses a line (cf. Phelps-Roper 2019: 222). For her, this was associated with a period of transgression during which she began to socialise and drink with other JWs on the margins of the movement and to think outside the box of her married life. She notes that,

> Without this maybe I could have gone back to being the dutiful wife; maybe I could have slowed my mind back down again and tried to unthink the things I'd begun to think about God and the religion, now my doubts are beginning to surface properly and become impossible to submerge. (Millar 2022: 280)

As this passage makes clear, by this time she was questioning previously held doctrines and attitudes to the JWs, and was finding it increasingly difficult to keep her doubts in check. Things once moored and secure began to seem provisional, including her role, membership and reputation. Yet relinquishing these left her with nowhere to stand; discarding her deeply-held beliefs left her with an impossible internal space to fill. Quitting the church would cut her off from her most important anchor, her mother.

Like other religious autobiographers, Millar conveys the uncertainty and challenge of trying to unlearn those teachings and rituals embodied since childhood and repeatedly endorsed by the institution, its leaders and her mother. It was not merely a question of making a decision to give things up or exchange them for alternatives, though she did throw out all her JW publications and modest clothes. Discarding or letting go of her past worldview meant rejecting her entire perspective on gender roles and behaviour, on right and wrong, and on the world, its last days and the hereafter. The difficulty of doing so was brought into focus when the Malaysia Airlines flight,

MH17, was shot down by Russian-controlled forces over Ukraine in 2014. Despite having left the JWs, divorced and then married an outsider, and outwardly rejected the movement's worldview, she nevertheless found herself inwardly believing that this catastrophe must be 'the beginning of the Great Tribulation' (Millar 2022: 345). The breakdown that followed is an example of the traumatic consequences of the 'religious residue' (Ebaugh 1988) that leavers find so hard to shake off.

In addition, leaving the JWs and unlearning everything it had represented meant stepping away from a known world into a new and strange one.

> Now I'm on my own, the outside gets scarier. I know it's somewhere I need to learn to live but I'm not the same as the people in the world. I'm scared of them all. I've been told they're sinful for so long that I find the thought of being friends with them impossible. Not because I don't want to be, but because I don't know how. (Millar 2022: 327; cf. Westover 2022; Phelps-Roper 2019)

Overcoming a chasm of this depth calls for both unlearning and new or re-learning (depending on the age of leaver when they first entered the movement). Undoubtedly, it requires a leaver to put themselves in a situation where they will meet outsiders, and be open to learning new ideas, activities and relationships. But this inevitably runs in parallel with continuing to challenge and let go of things that are no longer meaningful, practical or conducive to the leaver's journey. Many leavers, like Millar, find this a frightening prospect and one for which they feel unsupported and ill-equipped (e.g. Baffelli 2022, Cottee 2015: 170, Westover 2022: ch 28).

Despite some twenty per cent of Millar's memoir covering the period after she stopped participating or engaging with the JWs, she gives relatively little attention to what Fiol & O'Connor refer to as a third sub-process of experimenting and new learning. Rather than this being a positive period of new-found freedom, joy and opportunity, it was a time when she continued to be drawn back to the movement's worldview, subject to doubt and a sense of powerlessness, and fearful that she would lose her precious connection with her mother, who remained a JW. This reminds us that

the process of unlearning is not a linear one with a clear beginning and end (Brooks et al 2022); neither is it one in which the subject necessarily feels in control (Graceful Atheist 2016). Rather, it is an emotionally charged time when disentangling oneself from the social, behavioural and ideological ties that bind is fraught with difficulty, a time replete with missteps, trials and about-turns as well as brave decisions (Ebaugh 1988: 113–117).

There was one exception to Millar's long experience of struggle and that was her writing. In the period when she continued to attend JW meetings but was socially shunned, she made the decision to join a creative writing class. As she wrote, she found that, 'Everything makes sense on the page. Nothing makes sense outside of it' (Millar 2022: 324). Increasingly, despite being continually drawn back by the movement's ideology and her love for her mother, she felt freed by her writing (Millar 2022: 342; cf. Lax 2015: 283; Westover 2022). It still held secrets – it was a long time, for example, before she felt able to reveal to others that she had been a JW – but it connected her to outsiders and created a space for experimentation. Nevertheless, she saw that, 'My tongue is tied for as long as I can't face the past' (Millar 2022: 342; cf. Ebaugh 1988: 116). She could not fully move forward and realise a new self without opening up to herself and others about her earlier life, beliefs and identity. This led her to begin writing a blog, and then finally, her memoir.

Millar highlights reading and writing as important media for reflecting on unlearning and the things that helped or held her back. For her, and others who choose to write about leaving religion, they proved to be vital for finding a voice. For Millar (2022: 379), writing became a ritual for coping with the loss of a relationship with her mother and, ultimately, for leaving both her and the movement behind. For other memoirists, reading engaged them critically with other voices and experiences (Lax 2015: 256; Phelps-Roper 2019: 215), and writing became an opportunity to take ownership, to become an adult (Lax 2015: 283), or to revise one's history and narrate a new self (Westover 2022: 229, 315). Writing provided an opportunity for self-learning and unlearning.

Here I have taken Millar's memoir as just one example of a personal account of what it is like to leave a religion and a further opportunity to consider the models of unlearning discussed earlier. In common with other memoirists, Millar does not refer explicitly to 'unlearning', though she does consider the importance of learning and education more broadly. Whilst it is certainly possible to identify periods of destabilization, discarding and experimentation in her account, they are not as clear cut and linear as we might expect from the process model set out by Fiol & O'Connor (2017: 16). Instead, the process was iterative, with many about-turns. It was buffeted by self-doubt, anxiety and other emotions, and by the critical responses of others, including her mother and the movement's elders. Rather than being a process controlled by Millar, she often felt powerless. But writing, in particular, allowed her to explore her past journey, express herself and look forward.

The social nature of religious unlearning; agency and coercion

In the previous sections, in addition to considering the adequacy of a stage model from organisational studies (Fiol & O'Connor 2017), I drew on first-hand testimonies by religious leavers to develop the discussion of unlearning experiences and emotions, both areas identified as in need of further research (Klammer & Gueldenberg 2019; Visser 2017). Other areas included the social nature and levels of unlearning (Brooks et al 2022; Burton et al 2022; Klammer & Gueldenberg 2019), and power, agency and consent (Brooks et al 2022) – both of which are relevant to the case of leaving religion.

As the testimonies of religious leavers suggested earlier, unlearning is never solely an individual journey and is always a matter of struggle with others. Leaders, colleagues, family and friends all have a stake in both the decision to leave and the process of getting there, of doubting, questioning, letting go and rejecting things that were once embodied and self-defining. Cottee's respondents, for example, talked of family arguments when they stopped praying, fasting and

attending the mosque, and of the shame arising from lying and pretending to be a good Muslim. Several autobiographers revealed the extent to which family members and elders, perhaps understandably, sought to keep them within the fold by warning of the serious consequences of rejecting the theology or ceasing to uphold religious practices. Millar (2022: 316) worried about the stark choice facing her: 'I can't doubt the organisation and keep her [mother].' Phelps-Roper (2019: 160), raised at the heart of the Westboro Baptist Church, found herself painfully at odds with its elders and the Church's teachings: 'My heart hammered, full of terror at the seditious thought taking hold in my mind – would God snuff me out this very moment?' The emotional and ideological pressures brought to bear by others – but equally affirmed by leavers' own embodied religious socialisation – left them feeling 'unmoored' (Phelps-Roper 2019: 204) and unsure of how 'to build a bridge from one world to the next' (Millar 2022: 261). These pressures led to indecisiveness and repeated cycles of doubt, transgression, separation and return, before they finally left for good. Westover (2022: 298), who recounts a tortuous path towards selfhood which required her to challenge fundamentalist Mormon teachings on the apocalypse, a woman's place, and the evils of education and medical treatment, acknowledged that true freedom would only be possible if she were able to overcome her feelings of powerlessness, gain control of her own mind and rid herself of 'self-coercion' or 'mental slavery'.

The epitome of coercion in religious exit narratives is found not in accounts about leaving voluntarily but in those about the forcible removal of individuals from religious or spiritual groups. A key arena for considering this has been 'deprogramming' (Bromley 1988; Richardson 2011), a cold-war concept deriving from the idea that people could be 'brainwashed' or programmed by groups or states deemed dangerous by mainstream society (McCloud 2004). From the 1970s to the 1990s, especially in the US, deprogramming involved kidnapping or other methods of abduction of 'brainwashed' sons and daughters from 'cults', followed by a process of thought-reform or re-education. Thought-reform consultants, including Ted Patrick and Rick Alan Ross, systematically removed vulnerable individuals on behalf of their families, and employed various techniques to get

them to relinquish their religious beliefs and affiliation (Bromley 1988; Darnell & Shupe 2006; McCloud 2004). In an infamous 1990s case involving the Cult Awareness Network, Jason Scott – a member of Life Tabernacle Church – was abducted: 'He was told in the firmest words that he would not be set free until the deprogramming was concluded which, in practical terms, meant he had to renounce the Pentecostal faith and agree to leave the Life Tabernacle Church.' (Darnell & Shupe 2006: chapter 5) Renunciation and leaving were the goals, and the process – often violent, abusive and designed to break the spirit – was directed toward them. Scott experienced 'five days of personal criticisms, belittling of his beliefs and of Jason's girlfriend and his pastor, and diatribes … on the errors of conservative Protestantism and Christianity' (Darnell & Shupe 2006: chapter 5); he was made to watch videos on New Age religions and 'channeling', subjects that had nothing to do with Pentecostalism. He gained his freedom by pretending to acquiesce to his captors. Although Scott exercised personal agency after several days of deprogramming (and eventually brought a court case against the Cult Awareness Network), this was only after his deprogrammers had sought to destabilize him and persuade him to discard his prior beliefs, practices and attachments. Coerced unlearning, in this case, did not work, but it was certainly attempted.

A further case – this time of collective rather than individual unlearning – illustrates a similar process of failed coercion. Since 2013, the Chinese State has detained a large cohort of the Uighur population in north-west China, with the aim of 'de-extremification'. According to Zenz (2019: 124), this 'healthy heart campaign' of thought-reform has been 'a core instrument for achieving lasting social control' and 'arguably the country's most intense campaign of coercive social re-engineering since the Cultural Revolution'. One Uighur woman, Gulbahar Haitiwaji (2021), has testified to the enforced practices she experienced in the 'transformation-through-education' camps in Xinjiang. She described a process that was collective and coercive, and presented as educational. It involved physical training and classroom-based work in which,

> We were ordered to deny who we were. To spit on our own traditions, our beliefs. To criticise our language. To insult our own people... I was made to believe that my loved ones, my husband and my daughter, were terrorists. (Haitiwaji 2021)

This stripping away of personal identity and collective traditions was then followed by a lengthy 're-education' process, 'teaching us how to be Chinese' (Haitiwaji 2021; cf. Richardson 2011). In Haitiwaji's account, it is clear that open resistance was impossible as it could lead to intimidation or the arrest of family members as well as punishments of various kinds. The process was collective, but it was experienced individually as people could not open up to one another. Just as Scott feigned his acquiescence, Haitiwaji (2021) submitted and made false confessions: 'I didn't believe a word of what I was saying to them. I simply did my best to be a good actor.'

Whilst examples clearly exist of attempts to de-programme and re-educate individuals and even whole groups, what is less clear is whether it is actually possible to force people against their will to let go of or unlearn their previous religious commitments, practices and identities. These are just two examples, of course. Any conclusion on whether force works when it comes to unlearning needs more examples and a more thorough analysis.

Although individuals generally choose to discard redundant beliefs or practices, in a minority of cases they are forcibly coerced. However, even when they elect to do so, their unlearning is profoundly affected by others – those left behind, including leaders, family members and colleagues, and outsiders, including other formers who may offer support or sanctuary. Religious leavers' unlearning journeys are social experiences, that nearly always include some kind of ideological tug-of-war. As earlier examples have shown, 'unlearners' are rarely full agents of their own destinies: insiders may use teachings and techniques to keep members within the fold; and outsiders may apply pressure to make them relinquish previously held views and behaviours.

Unlearning: A viable concept for the study of religions?

I suggested earlier that unlearning is part of an intentional, dynamic and iterative learning cycle which may occur at any point in a religious/spiritual career or journey, not least of all whilst 'leaving'. As leavers make this journey, they face doubts and questions about previously held beliefs and practices, when and how to withdraw from social and ideological commitments, and how to reconfigure their identity and relationship with the world. This process is personal and informal; generally, individuals face it alone, with no formal or official resources to guide them on their unlearning journey. And, although the process outlined by Fiol & O'Connor (2017) – a trigger or catalyst, followed by stages of destabilisation, discarding and experimenting – could be seen in accounts by religious leavers, it was always entangled in a complex web of emotions, power relations, and self-reflection and criticism. It was further confounded by the presence of other experiences not obviously represented in the original model. Perhaps the most compelling of these was the sense voiced by many leavers of being confronted by a boundary or Rubicon that had to be crossed, sometimes repeatedly (Graceful Atheist, 2017; Millar 2022; Phelps-Roper 2019). Another – more an accompanying presence than a separate stage – was the recurrence of a 'religious residue' (Ebaugh 1988; Van Tongeren et al 2021) that could not be shaken off because it was so deeply socialised and embedded. Linked to this was the abiding sense that the process was never fully complete: it involved repeated about-turns, and made leavers question their decisions.

Examining 'unlearning' in the context of religious leaving, then, raised some issues about modelling the process and its stages, and about its order and circularity. Furthermore, looking closely at testimonies by religious leavers supported the claim by some organisational studies scholars that there were important matters related to unlearning that had yet to be fully addressed, including the experiences and feelings of unlearners, and issues of agency and consent. The subject of leaving religion proved to be fertile ground for doing so, but raised a further question. To what extent were leavers' challenging experiences and feelings a response to leaving as opposed to unlearning? This is hard to answer because, although the two are not identical, they are interwoven,

with the various activities of leaving offering opportunities for un/learning. Examining unlearning at a different point in the spiritual life-cycle might help to answer this question.

As Wenger (1998) argued, social learning activates and involves meaning, practice, community and identity. What is learned, especially in a religious or spiritual context, becomes deeply rooted in one's personhood, relationships and worldview. The leavers cited here expressed just how hard it was to separate themselves from or give up those things that had previously constituted their identities. These were lodged in their minds, bodies and on their tongues as gestures, memories, dispositions, routines, and as lenses for viewing and interpreting self, others and the world. Concepts such as 'letting go' (Annunen 2022), 'discarding' (Hedberg 1981), even 'unlearning' itself barely do justice to the experiences and associated emotions to which leavers testified. These terms, as well as etic terminology such as 'apostasy' or 'deconversion', were rarely used by the actors themselves. Rather, they referred to doubts and questions, suppressing or unthinking thoughts or beliefs, and stopping or giving things up. And, when it came to transitioning away from established beliefs, practices and relationships, they said they felt in-between, split, or torn, that they desired to run, walk away or break free, but found themselves going back or about-turning. Many referred to a moment or crisis when they crossed a line or Rubicon, and after which they struggled to find a new path, voice or self. The entire process was a cognitive and emotional roller-coaster, fraught with difficulty and a sense of being powerless, even coerced.

Whilst the academic researcher must take seriously the responsibility to organise and analyse what actors say about their experiences, and to build models and develop new concepts, the language actors use remains key to these tasks. It should not be forgotten that the religious leavers cited here, who often referred to earlier learning and the role of education, never used the term 'unlearning', but selected other ways of describing the process of moving away from previously held beliefs, practices and commitments. At the very least this raises a question for scholars of religion thinking of working with the concept of 'unlearning'. What is the significance, if any, of this verbal mismatch? 'Unlearning' may have its uses as a social scientific concept, but it is not an

emic one. The danger may be that what appears to be a verbal mismatch may in fact be a semantic one. For this point to be answered, further analysis – including ethnographic research – will be needed to establish whether 'unlearning' is an appropriate term for describing and analysing what happens when religious/spiritual actors reject or give up embodied commitments, or just an unnecessary or even unhelpful conceptual import from another discipline for which there might be better alternatives (Howells & Scholderer 2016: 459).

List of references

Annunen, Linda. 2022. 'Unlearning as a pedagogical technique.' Unpublished conference paper, European Association for the Study of Religions Conference, Cork, 27.6.2022.

Baffelli, Erica. 2022. 'Living Aum: austerities, emotion and the feeling community of former Aum Shinrikyo members', *Nova Religio: The Journal of Alternative and Emergent Religions*, 25(3): 7–31, doi: <https://doi.org/10.1525/nr.2022.25.3.7>.

Bandura, Albert. 1971. *Social Learning Theory* (New York: General Learning Press).

Becker, Karen. 2019. 'Organizational unlearning: the challenges of a developing phenomenon', *The Learning Organization*, 26(5): 534–541, doi: <https://doi.org/10.1108/TLO-05-2019-0082>.

Becker, Karen. 2005. 'Individual and organisational unlearning: directions for future research', *International Journal of Organisational Behaviour*, 9(7): 659–670. Individual and organisational unlearning: directions for future research | QUT ePrints.

Beekers, Daan. 2015. *Precarious Piety: Pursuits of Faith among Young Muslims and Christians in the Netherlands* (Amsterdam: Vrije Universiteit).

Berliner, David, and Ramon Sarró, eds. 2007. *Learning Religion: Anthropological Approaches* (New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books).

Brooks, James, Grugulis, Irena, and Hugh Cook. 2022. 'Unlearning and consent in the UK Fire and Rescue Service', *Human Relations*, 75(12): 2300–2317, doi: <https://doi.org/10.1177/00187267211031179>.

Bromley, David. G. 2023. 'Conversion' in *Contested Concepts in the Study of Religion: A Critical Exploration*, eds. George D. Chryssides and Amy R. Whitehead (London, New York: Bloomsbury), 21–25.

Bromley, David. G. 1988. 'Deprogramming as a mode of exit from new religious movements: the case of the Unificationist Movement', in *Falling From the Faith: Causes and Consequences*

of Religious Apostasy, ed. David G. Bromley (Newbury Park, Beverly Hills, London, New Delhi: Sage), 185–204.

Burton, Nicholas, Vu, Mai Chi, and Melissa Hawkins. 2022. 'Secular discernment: a process of individual unlearning and collective relearning', *Management Learning*, 1–25, doi: <https://doi.org/10.1177/13505076221100919>.

Cottee, Simon. 2015. *The Apostates: When Muslims Leave Islam* (London: C. Hurst & Co).

Crone, M. 2016. 'Radicalization revisited: violence, politics and the skills of the body', *International Affairs*, 92(3): 587–604, doi: <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-2346.12604>.

Darnell, Susan E., and Shupe, Anson. 2017 [2006]. *Agents of Discord: Deprogramming, Pseudo-Science, and the American Cult Movement* (Abingdon & New York: Routledge).

Davidman, Lynn. 2015. *Becoming Un-Orthodox: Stories of Ex-Hasidic Jews* (Oxford University Press).

Dunne, Éamonn. 2016. 'Learning to unlearn', in *The Pedagogics of Unlearning*, eds. Aidan Seery and Éamonn Dunne (Punctum Books), 13–24.

Ebaugh, Helen Rose Fuchs. 1988. 'Leaving Catholic convents: toward a theory of disengagement', in *Falling From the Faith: Causes and Consequences of Religious Apostasy*, ed. David G. Bromley (Newbury Park, Beverly Hills, London, New Delhi: Sage), 100–121.

Enstedt, Daniel, Larsson, Göran and Teemu T. Mantsinen, eds. 2019. *Handbook of Leaving Religion*. (Leiden: Brill).

Fiol, Marlena and Edward O'Connor. 2017. 'Unlearning established organizational routines – Part One', *The Learning Organization* 24(1): 13–29, doi: <https://doi.org/10.1108/TLO-09-2016-0056>.

Galonnier, Juliette, and Diego de los Rios. 2016. 'Teaching and learning to be religious: pedagogies of conversion to Islam and Christianity', *Sociology of Religion*, 77(1): 59–81, doi: <https://doi.org/10.1093/socrel/srv055>.

Graceful Atheist. 2017. <Deconversion How To (gracefulatheist.com)> (accessed 22.9.2023).

Haitiwaji, Gulbahar, with Rozenn Morgat. 2021. <'Our souls are dead': how I survived a Chinese 're-education' camp for Uyghurs | Uyghurs | The Guardian>, 12.1.2021 (accessed 13.9.2023).

Hedberg, Bo. 1981. 'How organisations learn and unlearn', in *Handbook of Organizational Design, eds.* P. C. Nystrom and W. H. Starbuck (Oxford University Press), 3–27.

Howells, John, and Joachim Scholderer. 2016. 'Forget unlearning? How an empirically unwarranted concept from psychology was imported to flourish in management and organisation studies', *Management Learning*, 47(4): 443–463, doi: <https://doi.org/10.1177/1350507615624079>.

Hundeide, Karsten. 2003. 'Becoming a committed insider', *Culture & Psychology,* 9(2): 107–127, doi: <https://doi.org/10.1177/1354067X0392001>.

Kenney, Michael. 2017. 'A community of true believers: learning as process among "The Emigrants"', *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 32(1): 57–76, doi: <https://doi.org/10.1080/09546553.2017.1346506>.

Klammer, Adrian, and Stefan Gueldenberg. 2019. 'Unlearning and forgetting in organizations: a systematic review of literature', *Journal of Knowledge Management*, 23(5): 860–888, doi: <https://doi.org/10.1108/JKM-05-2018-0277>.

Knott, Kim, and Benjamin J. Lee. 2020. 'Ideological transmission in extremist contexts: towards a framework of how ideas are shared', *Politics, Religion and Ideology*, 21(1): 1–23, doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/21567689.2020.1732938>.

Lave, Jean, and Etienne Wenger. 1991. *Situated Learning: Legitimate Peripheral Participation* (Cambridge University Press).

Lax, Leah. 2015. *Uncovered: How I Left Hasidic Life and Finally Came Home* (Berkeley CA: She Writes Press).

Lee, Benjamin J., and Kim Knott. 2021. 'Fascist aspirants: Fascist Forge and ideological learning in the extreme right online milieu', *Behavioral Sciences of Terrorism and Political Aggression*: 216–240, doi: <https://doi.org/10.1080/19434472.2020.1850842>.

Lee, Benjamin J., and Kim Knott. 2018. <Ideological Transmission: Political and Religious Organisations (crestresearch.ac.uk)>. Centre for Research and Evidence on Security Threats (accessed 13.9.2023).

Lee, Benjamin J., and Kim Knott. 2016. <Ideological Transmission: Families (crestresearch.ac.uk)>. Centre for Research and Evidence on Security Threats (accessed 13.9.2023).

McCloud, Sean. 2004. *Making the American Religious Fringe: Exotics, Subversives, and Journalists, 1955-1993* (University of North Carolina Press).

Meintel, Deirdre. 2011. 'Apprendre et desapprendre: quand la mediumnite croise l'anthropologie', *Anthropologie et Societés*, 35(3): 89+. Gale Academic OneFile, <https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/A276352952/AONE?u=unilanc&sid=bookmark-AONE&xid=84f7b0c5> (accessed 10.1.2024).

Mellor, Philip A., and Chris Shilling. 2010. 'Body pedagogics and the religious habitus: a new direction for the sociological study of religion', *Religion*, 40(1): 27–38, doi: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.religion.2009.07.001>.

Michael, Nancy, and Ben Wilson. 2021. <Unlearning Is the New Learning: A Neuroscientific and Theological Case for How and Why to See the World Differently | Church Life Journal | University of Notre Dame>, 26.3.2021 (accessed 13.9.2023).

Millar, Ali. 2022. *The Last Days: A Memoir of Faith, Desire and Freedom* (Ebury Press/Penguin Random House).

Plata, Marlana. 2020. <The Power of Unlearning | Psychology Today>, 25.4.2020 (accessed 13.9.2023).

Phelps-Roper, Megan. 2019. *Unfollow: A Journey from Hatred to Hope, leaving the Westboro Baptist Church* (London: Riverrun, Quercus Editions).

Richardson, James T. 2011. 'Deprogramming: from private self-help to governmental organized repression', *Crime Law and Social Change* 55: 321–336, doi: <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10611-011-9286-5>.

Robinson, Catherine, and Denise Cush. 2018. 'Learning and unlearning: some reflections on feminist praxis and pedagogic practice in Religious Studies and Religious Education', *Religions* 9(4): 98, doi: <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel9040098>.

Scourfield, Jonathan, Gilliat-Ray, Sophie, Khan, Asma, and Sameh Otri. 2013. *Muslim Childhood: Religious Nurture in a European Context* (Oxford University Press).

Streib, Heinz. 2021. 'Leaving religion: deconversion', *Current Opinion in Psychology*, 40: 139–144, doi: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.copsyc.2020.09.007>.

Toffler, Alvin. 1970. *Future Shock* (New York: Random House).

Urbaniak, Jakub. 2019. 'Decolonisation as unlearning Christianity: Fallism and African religiosity as case studies', *Black Theology*, 17(3): 223–240, doi: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14769948.2019.1688088>.

Valk, Ülo. 2022. 'An introduction to vernacular knowledge', in *Vernacular Knowledge: Contesting Authority, Expressing Beliefs*, eds. Ülo Valk and Marion Bowman (Sheffield, Bristol: Equinox), 1–21.

Van Tongeren, D. R., and C. N. DeWall. 2021. 'Disbelief, disengagement, discontinuance, and disaffiliation: an integrative framework for the study of religious deidentification', *Psychology of Religion and Spirituality.* Advance online publication, doi: <https://doi.org/10.1037/rel0000434>.

Van Tongeren, D. R., DeWall, C. N., Chen, Z., Sibley, C. G., and J. Bulbulia. 2021. 'Religious residue: cross-cultural evidence that religious psychology and behavior persist following deidentification', *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 120*(2): 484–503, doi: <https://doi.org/10.1037/pspp0000288>.

Visser, Max. 2017. 'Learning and unlearning: a conceptual note', *The Learning Organization*, 24(1): 49–57, doi: <https://doi.org/10.1108/TLO-10-2016-0070>.

Vu, Mai Chi, and Loi A. Nguyen. 2022. 'Mindful unlearning in unprecedented times: Implications for management and organizations', *Management Learning*, 53(5): 797–817, doi: <https://doi.org/10.1177/13505076211060433>.

Wenger, Etienne. 1998. *Communities of Practice: Learning, Meaning, Identity* (Cambridge University Press).

Westover, Tara. 2022 [2018]. *Educated* (London: Penguin Books).

Wilson, Erin K. 2022. *Religion and World Politics: Connecting Theory with Practice* (London and New York: Routledge), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003037057>.

Zenz, Adrian. 2019. '"Thoroughly reforming them towards a healthy heart attitude": China's political re-education campaign in Xinjiang', *Central Asian Survey*, 38(1), 102–128, doi: <https://doi.org/10.1080/02634937.2018.1507997>.