

Spiritual and Religious Transformations in America:  
The National Spiritual Transformation Study

Tom W. Smith

National Opinion Research Center/University of Chicago

Embargoed for release December 9, 2005

## Introduction

The social sciences have been interested in many facets of individual-level, religious change. First, there are studies of religious socialization, the processes within families and communities by which religious and spiritual beliefs and behaviors are passed from one generation to another (Wuthnow, 1999). Naturally, these studies tend to focus on the young and how they form religious beliefs and attachments (Kox, Meeus, and 't Hart, 1991; Sherkat, 1998; Sherkat and Wilson, 1995; Zinnbauer and Pargament, 1998).

Second, there is research that looks at religious mobility or the switching of religious preferences between different faiths (Cheshire, 2000; Kirkpatrick, 1997; Lawton and Bures, 2001; Musick and Wilson, 1995; Roof, 1989; Sherkat, 1991 and 2001; Warburg, 2001). Such religious change is quite common in American society, but often stems more from demographic shifts like marriages, divorces, and relocations, than from deep, spiritual causes (Musick and Wilson, 1995; Wright, 1991; Roof, 1989). Other research relates such changes to the characteristics of denominations (e.g. strictness), rather than to the attributes of individuals (Sherkat, 2001). Also, in recent years rational choice theory has increasingly been used to explain religious switching (Sherkat, 2001; Sherkat and Wilson, 1995).

Third, some attention has been given to losses of faith and apostasy (Bromley, 1998; Roof, 1997; Sherkat, 1991; Sherkat and Wilson, 1995; Wright, 1991). There are fewer general studies of what Barbour calls "deconversion" and such research tends to involve personal and case studies (Barbour, 1994; Shapiro, 1996).

Fourth, while there are many studies of evangelical, fundamentalist, or born-again Christians (most dealing with how their religious and social values differ from others), there have been surprisingly few studies of the born-again experience as individual religious change (Dixon, Lowery, and Jones, 1992; Jensen, 2001).

Fifth, there has been increased interest in the religious changes of the baby-boom generation (Roof, 1993 and 1999; Sherkat, 1998). Roof has characterized the baby boomers as a "generation of seekers" on "spiritual journeys."

Finally, social scientists have examined religious change from the perspective of the conversion experience itself (Barker and Currie, 1985; Gaynor, 1999; Gillespie, 1991; Hunt, 2000; Kahn, 2000; Malony and Southard, 1992; Meadows, 1990; Musgrave, 1997; Paloutzian, Richardson, and Rambo, 1999; Pitt, 1991; Rambo, 1993 and 1999; Suchman, 1992; Shaver, Lenauer, and Sadd, 1980). The key issues have been a) what led to or caused the transformation, b) what were the characteristics of the event itself, and c) what were its consequences.

Much interest has been in the psychological aspects of conversion, both what personality types are more likely to experience conversions and the impact of conversions on people's personalities and psychological well-being (Gaynor, 1999; Hunt, 2000; Kahn, 2000; Kirkpatrick, 1997; Malony and Southard, 1992; Meadows, 1990; Pitt, 1991; Shaver, Lenauer, and Sadd, 1980). Still others look at the effects of various other trigger events such as near-death experiences (Musgrave, 1997); cross-cultural contact (Malony and Southard, 1992); status and role conflicts (Bainbridge, 1992); and marginalization (Gillespie, 1991). In turn, attention is also directed on the lasting

nature of the change and how it alters people's lives religiously and otherwise (Hardy, 1979; Rambo, 1992; 1993).

### **The Study**

In the present study the interest is in examining individual experiences of spiritual/religious change, looking at how many people go through such a transformation, the characteristics of the changers, and process and nature of the change (i.e. what led to it, the occurrence of change itself, and the consequences of the change). With support from the Metanexus Institute at the University of Pennsylvania, the 2004 General Social Survey (GSS) added a module known as the National Spiritual Transformation Study (NSTS). The GSS is a full-probability sample of adults living in households in the United States conducted via in-person interviews. For full details on the GSS see Davis, Smith, and Marsden, 2005. The NSTS was administered to a random half of the GSS and 1328 people participated. As part of the GSS, the NSTS is available from the Roper Center at the University of Connecticut and the Interuniversity Consortium for Political and Social Research, University of Michigan.

### **Experiences of Religious/Spiritual Change**

People were asked three screening questions to determine whether they had ever experienced a spiritual/religious change or transformation: 1) having "a turning point in your life when you made a new and personal commitment to religion," 2) having "a religious

or spiritual experience that changed your life," and 3) having "been 'born again'" or having "a 'born-again' experience, that is a turning point in your life when you committed yourself to Christ." (See the Appendix 1 for complete question wordings.)

As Table 1 shows, the level for each of these experiences in 2004 is a little over a third and these levels have been basically the same over the last 6-16 years. Having a turning point involving a new and personal commitment to religion shows about a 10 percentage point decline, but the earlier readings were asked on a self-completion questionnaire near the end of a religion module and the figures are probably higher due to mode and context effects. The items on religious/spiritual life changes and born-again experiences show no statistically significant variation over time.

Table 2 show the mixture of these three types of experiences. Just under half (48.4%) report no experiences of spiritual/ religious change, half (50.4%) report such an experience, and information is missing or incomplete for 1.2%. Of the half with change experiences 11.7% report one type of experience, not including being born-again, 3.6% report just a born-again experience, 5.9% two experiences, but not born-again, 9.8% two experiences including being born-again, and 19.4% report all three experiences. Thus, 32.8% of all or 65.1% of those with a change experience report being born-again while 17.6% of all or 34.9% of those having undergone a religious change, but not having had a born-again experience as part of their spiritual/religious change.

Table 3 shows the frequencies of having had a spiritual/religious change by demographics. There are no meaningful differences by gender,

age, Hispanic ethnicity, marital status, or socio-economic status (education or household income). More Blacks have undergone spiritual/religious change than Whites or Others (mostly Asians and Hispanics) have. There are also large regional differences with experiences least common in New England (24.1%), most common in the South (59.7-61.2%), and intermediate in the Mid-Atlantic, Midwest, and West (39.8-53.9%). The main reason for the racial and regional differences relate to religious variables discussed next.

As Table 4 shows, there are large differences in experiences by all measures of religious background, behaviors, and beliefs. Basically, spiritual/religious changes are much more common among those actively engaged in religion and among those in fundamentalist and evangelical denominations.<sup>1</sup> Thus, experiences have been had by 90.2% of those attending several times a week vs. 26.2% of those never attending services and by 72.6% of those praying several times a day vs. only 14.7% of those never praying. Similarly, 72.1% of those in fundamentalist/evangelical denominations have such experiences as opposed 44.2% in moderate denominations, 45.0% in liberal churches, and 29.5% of those with no religious preference. A multiple regression analysis finds that the degree of engagement in religion and theological orientation are both independently related to having undergone a spiritual/religious change.

After determining the number and characteristics of people having spiritual/religious change, the NSTS focused on the experience itself.

---

<sup>1</sup>Denominations were classified in terms of theological orientation as fundamentalist/moderate/liberal. Non-Judeo-Christian religions were not scored on this variable (Smith, 1990).

While a majority of changers (53.6%) report only a single experience, 20.7% have had two, 12.3% three or four, 8.2% five or more, and 5.3% had one or more, but did not indicate how many. Having a spiritual/religious change is moderately related to switching denominations. About 39% of adult Americans currently have a different religious affiliation than they were raised in. Among the switchers 58.2% have had a spiritual/religious change, while of the non-switchers 45.1% had such an experience. Thus, spiritual/religious change is more common among switchers. But only 10.3% of those undergoing a spiritual/religious change said that they changed religions because of their experience. Thus, while there is some relationship between these two forms of religious change, they are separate and largely distinct from each other.

Spiritual/religious changes happen over a wide range of ages, but early adulthood seems to be the most auspicious period. 19.7% report that they were under 18 when it happened, 41.3% were 18-29, 14.3% were 30-39, 12.3% were 50-64, and 2.2% were 65+. The mean age is 30 and the median age is 26. Of course these figures are subject to several reporting effects. On the one hand, people with multiple experiences were to report on their most recent event and this would mean the experience at which they were oldest. On the other hand, people cannot report on experiences occurring at an age they have not reached yet and this means many people cannot report on what will ultimately be their final experience at their oldest age. These two factors have large and opposite impacts on reported ages of experiences. Mean age rises from 26.6 for those with one experience to 39.2 for those with seven or more experiences. Likewise, average age increases from 19.5

for those 18-29 to 25.4 for those 30-39, 31.0 for those 40-49, 39.2 for those 50-64, and 40.6 for those 65+. The leveling-off after age 49 may indicate that few first-time spiritual/religious changes occur in later life.

### **Open-Ended Reports of Spiritual/Religious Changes**

In a series of open-ended questions people who had undergone change described their experiences. Appendix 1 gives the wordings of these items and Appendix 2 indicates the variables and codes that were created.<sup>2</sup> Four types of information in 10 variables were coded from the open-ended accounts: 1) up to three mentions of what caused or led to the change, 2) up to three mentions to the change experience itself, 3) up to three mentions on the consequences of the change, and 4) whether a specific religious entity (e.g. God, Christ) was mentioned during any of the open-ended responses.

Table 5 shows how much information was collected in each of these ten, open-ended variables. 15.7% mentioned nothing about the causes of their change, 48.0% had one mention, 25.2% two mentions, 5.8% three mentions, and 4.4% replied they didn't know, refused, or were missing. On the occurrence of change itself 73.7% did not mention anything relevant, 18.0% made one mention, 2.5% two mentions, 0.3% three mentions, and 5.5% replied DK, refused, or were missing. On the consequences of the change 12.8% mentioned nothing relevant, 59.5% had one mention, 18.0% two mentions, 5.0% three mentions, and 4.7%

---

<sup>2</sup>Besides the coded values in the public GSS file, the verbatim text is available upon request from the GSS.



replied DK, refused, or were missing.

Table 6 shows the distribution of substantive responses about what led to the spiritual/religious experience, what occurred during the experience itself, and what were the consequences were.<sup>3</sup>

#### Cause/What Led to Spiritual/Religious Change

As Table 6A shows, there were two dominant factors preceding change. Half of changers mention some religious activity such attending services, a retreat, a prayer meeting, etc. In most cases no special seeking, praying, or striving is mentioned, mostly just participation in ordinary religious activities. Almost half (47%) mention a personal problem. Most frequently cited (28%) were an illness, accident, or death to themselves or someone close to them. Other problems often mentioned (19%) included divorces, break-ups, and marital/relations conflicts, financial and job difficulties, criminal victimizations, and drug/alcohol abuse. What does not appear too frequently are mentions of depression or existential despair that have been cited in some studies (Hardy, 1979). Next came changes relating to family and relationship matters (8%), mostly positive family changes such as a marriage, birth of a child, or collective familial action. Relatively infrequent triggers were events relating to the military or war (3%) (usually a loved one joining the military or being in combat),

---

<sup>3</sup>The descriptions in the NSTS are much briefer and less articulate than the usually extremely rich and introspective accounts of spiritual/religious changes that are often found in the conversion literature (Hardy, 1979; Rambo and Reh, 1992). This probably mostly reflects the differences between the typical responses of a representative sample of the population rather than the much more elaborate and well-formulated descriptions by self-selected and highly motivated people making a special effort to step forward and share their stories.

secular study (2%) (often in college), and other positive occurrences (2%) (such as improved material conditions, various types of non-religious personal development).

Often the religious activities and personal problems acted together as a cause. About a third of those mentioning a religious reason also cited a personal problem and vice versa. This is seen most dramatically in cases when an illness struck, people turned to prayer, and recovery ensued. For example, "Mother sick with aneurysm. People prayed for health. Uncle prayed for her to be at peace with God. Mother healed." However, direct and often self-described miraculous occurrences were less common than other connections between personal problems and religious activity, such as turning to religion in thanks for a recovery, to help get over a loss, or as a response to a loss. For example, "At a breaking point. I lost a close friend a few years ago. Thought I saw Jesus in the shower and reach[ed] out to him. Was baptized again. I was baptized as a child, but for the wrong reasons. It made me." and "I was in a bad place, when my aunt lost her husband and her son at the same time and her faith in getting through it made me realize that I was leaning on the wrong things for support and I changed my..."

#### **Occurrences during the Change Itself**

The vast majority of changers (79%) gave no meaningful description of their transformation (Table 6B). Most changers said something to the effect that X led to the change and as a result Y changed in their lives. That is, there was a before and then an after period between

which a spiritual/religious change happened, but no description of the moment or event of change itself. This indicates that most change occurs without a major, manifest experience like Saul being struck blind on the road to Damascus. Of the minority mentioning the transition itself, descriptions were quite varied and did not follow any standard pattern. Physical occurrences were common (11%) and included such varied things as being frozen/catatonic, floating/out-of-body experiences, crying, feeling warmth, seeing lights, and near-death experiences. Other occurrences were receiving signs, visions, and contact with the dead (3%), being "born-again" (3%), feeling a jolt like being electrified (2%), and being contacted by an angel or spirit (1%).

### **Consequences of Change**

The main difference that changers reported was in their spiritual or religious life (Table 6C). 38% reported such changes as being closer to God, more spiritual, dedicating their lives to God/Christ, and engaging or re-engaging with faith. For example, "Brought me closer to God..." and "Made me want to be an evangelist..." Second most common (17%) was becoming a better person by improving ones character and/or behavior. For example, "Made me compassionate and experience selflessness" and "Made me more aware of my actions and how my actions affected myself and other people and it gave me hope for the future and enabled me to give up bad habits." Third came gaining a greater appreciation of life (15%). For example, "Made me have a better outlook in a lot of things" and "Made me stop taking things for granted." Fourth

were positive family-related developments (6%) such as getting married and starting a family. Other consequences include ending bad behaviors (3%), gaining hope and/or love (3%), becoming open-minded/thinking more (3%), and gaining understanding of purpose/meaning (2%). Very few mentioned any material improvements or worldly successes. Most mentioning religious consequences did not cite any other consequences, but a third (33%) also cited an improvement in character, better behavior, or a gain in values like appreciation, love, hope, or purposefulness.

#### **Mentions of Religious Entities**

Less than a third (30%) of changers explicitly mentioned God, Christ, or any other religious entity in their descriptions of their spiritual/religious change. Most of them (19%) mentioned God, 8% Christ, 3% "the Lord," and less than 1% any other religious entity. This does not reflect any lack of belief as 92% currently follow some religion, 98% believe in God, and 97% feel at least somewhat close to God. Thus, explicitly mentioning a religious entity may be more a reflection of response style rather than a theological statement.

#### **Other Direct Measures of the Consequences of Spiritual/Religious Change**

Besides the open-ended inquiry about consequences, a series of

closed-ended items were also asked.<sup>4</sup> As Table 7 shows, many people report that their experience notably changed their life in various important ways. Over half (51.7%) reported "a great deal" of change (the top category) in regards to seeing one's life as "meaningful and significant". Nearly half (49.6%) said it altered their "outlook on life" a great deal, over two-fifths (43.2%) that it improved their interpersonal relations a great deal, more than two-fifths (42.0%) that it changed their life overall a great deal, more than a third (36.6%) that it changed their life goals a great deal, and more than a quarter (26.6%) had a great deal of change in their "day-to-day activities". Looking across these six changes shows that 15.6% of people underwent maximum change (i.e. "a great deal" in all six areas), 16.9% had a great deal of change in four or five areas, 31.3% in one to three areas, and 36.2% did not have a great deal of change in any area. Notable change (scores of 5+) was experienced by 40.4% of changers in all areas, by 28.5% in four or five areas, by 17.6% in one to three areas, and 13.4% had no notable change in any area. While notable change is reported by a majority of changers in all areas, the greatest change is found in existential and general areas (meaningfulness, outlook, overall) and the least change in mundane aspects of life (day-to-day activities).

### **Indirect Measures of the Consequences of Spiritual/Religious Change**

The impact of spiritual/religious change on ones religious and

---

<sup>4</sup>The six items were adapted from the 8-item, life transformation measurement used by Zinnbauer and Pargament (1998).

spiritual life is also shown by the enduring impact of such change on current beliefs and behaviors. First, a measure of years since most recent transition was calculated. Lapsed times averaged 13 years and ranged from 9% having the experience within the last year to 8% having it 40+ years ago. If spiritual/religious changes tend to "wear-off", then degree of religiousness should decline as the experience is more remote in time. However, this is not the case as there is no relationship between lapsed time and total magnitude of reported change (based on the six closed-ended items) ( $r=.008$ ,  $\text{prob}=.843$ ), level of attending religious services ( $r=0.000$ ,  $\text{prob}=.993$ ), or frequency of prayer ( $r=-.025$ ,  $\text{prob}=.534$ ).

Second, in a multiple regression model explaining belief in an afterlife, having had a change experience is a significant predictor of belief even with theological orientation and attending church services being controlled for.

Third, an analysis of the 15-item daily spiritual experience (DSE) scale showed that all of these experiences were more frequent for changers ( $\text{prob}=.0000$  for all) (Table 8). The differences were largest for those experiences mentioning God or religion/spirituality and smaller for those not explicitly dealing with faith (items b,l,m,n). While having the faith-infused DSEs many times a day were at least twice as likely among changers than non-changers (and often 2.5+ times as likely), the four not explicitly about faith were all less than twice as common among the changers than for the others. Several multiple regression models with either all DSEs or the 11 faith-explicit DSEs as the dependent variable always showed spiritual/religious change as a highly significant predictor with frequency of praying, level

of church attendance, and theological orientation as controls.

But despite the often profound and strong effects on ones religious life and on life in general indicated by the open-ended accounts, the closed-ended measures of impact, and the relationship between changes and religious beliefs and behaviors, changers and non-changers differ little in their physical and psychological well-being. As Table 9 shows, there is no difference in self-reported health, general happiness, or marital happiness. However, changers are more likely to report leading exciting lives (56.7%) than non-changers are (43.2%).<sup>5</sup> A multivariate analysis found that having has a spiritual/religious experience was a significant predictor of describing life as exciting even with controls for the DSE measures, theological orientation, praying, and attending religious services.

### **Summary and Conclusion**

Spiritual/religious change experiences are common with 50% of Americans having undergone one or more. Of these changers about 65% report being "born-again", while the remaining 35% have not had a born-again experience.

Changers and non-changers differ little in their demographics. In particular, there was no relationship with socio-economic status, counter to the expectations of some that spiritual/religious change would be higher among the economically disadvantaged as compensation for their material want and the less generally well-educated and

---

<sup>5</sup>For a study showing greater well-being among those having had religious experiences see Hardy (1979), p. 129.

especially those less scientifically informed. Also, there was also no relation with age despite the fact that older people would have had more years in which to experience such a change and were raised in cohorts with a greater level of religious involvement. The lack of an association with age may reflect the fact that most changes occur fairly early in life (61% by age 29) and relatively few first-time experiences apparently occur among those over 50. The two demographics that were related, the higher level of spiritual/religious changes among Blacks than among others and the low levels in New England and the high levels in the South, were largely a reflection of religious differences.

Religious beliefs and behaviors are strongly related to having had a spiritual/religious change. In particular, such change is independently associated with active participation in religion and identifying with an evangelical/fundamentalist Protestant denomination as opposed to a more liberal Protestant denomination or a non-Protestant faith.<sup>6</sup>

While switching denominations is somewhat greater among those having undergone a spiritual/religious change than among non-changers, the connection is not strong. Only 10% of changers switched religions because of their experience.

Initial, preliminary analysis of the open-ended reports of spiritual/religious changes indicates that two factors most frequently led to the change: 1) religious participation, but not usually explicit

---

<sup>6</sup>Likewise, countries with large evangelical/fundamentalist populations report more spiritual/religious change than countries with fewer members of this theological orientation (Smith, 2005).



searching for greater truth or new insight and 2) having had a personal problem, most frequently an illness, accident, or death involving oneself or a loved one.

Looking at the actual occurrence of change revealed first that most people reported nothing about the event. There was a before and an after, but apparently often little marking the transition between the two. Second, when the event itself was described, there was a wide range of elements mentioned. These included descriptions of all the classic aspects of spiritual/religious change (e.g. visions, visits from angels, near-death experiences, floating, talking to God, etc.), but the accounts were highly variable and few people cited any particular manifestation.

Most changers reported important, enduring, and wide-ranging developments emanating from their experience. First, on the open-ended item consequences were most commonly about a strengthening of spirituality/religiousness. Mentions of switching religions were fairly rare. Improvement in personal behavior and character were the next most frequent theme. Then came changes in values and outlooks such as greater appreciation of life and seeing more purpose/meaning in life. Second, the scale about how the spiritual/religious changes had altered people's lives showed most people reporting notable change in most areas. The alterations were greatest in terms of giving a greater sense of meaning and modifying ones "outlook on life," and least, but still notable, on changing "day-to-day activities." The magnitude of the alterations did not diminish as length of time since the experience increased, indicating an enduring effect. Finally, analysis of various religious beliefs and behaviors found that having undergone a

spiritual/religious change was a significant, independent predictor even with controls for other religious variables such as attending religious services, praying, and theological orientation. The DSE scale indicated that the impacts were greatest in faith-related areas and less strong (but still statistically significant) in areas not explicitly religious.

But despite these various indications of important changes, the impact of a spiritual/religious change does not appear to affect people's evaluations of their health and psychological well-being (beside saying life is more exciting).

Overall, spiritual/religious change is a common and powerful experience in America. Such change is strongly related to current religious beliefs and behaviors and a strengthening of faith is the most common consequence of this experience. Still important, but less central and sweeping, are changes in character and everyday actions. More detailed analysis of the open-ended materials and the correlates of having had a spiritual/religious change should further specify the nature and consequences of these important transformations.

Table 1

Trends in Religious/Spiritual Experiences

A. Turning Point,  
New/Personal Commitment

	1988	1991	1998	2004
% Ever Having	----	47.3 (1319)	45.7 (1241)	36.6 (1319)

B. Religious/Spiritual  
Change in Life

% Ever Having	----	----	39.6 (1442)	35.7 (1316)
---------------	------	------	----------------	----------------

C. Born-Again Experience

% Ever Having	36.6 (1463)	35.9 (1330)	37.4 (1440)	33.6 (1311)
---------------	----------------	----------------	----------------	----------------

Source: GSS, GSS/NSTS

Table 2

Religious/Spiritual Experiences Combined

No Experience	48.4%
One Experience; Not Born-Again	11.7
Only Born-Again	3.6
Two Experiences, Not Born-Again	5.9
Two Experiences, One is Born-Again	9.8
All Three Experiences	19.4
Missing, Misc.	1.2

(1328)

Source: 2004GSS/NSTS

Table 3

## Spiritual/Religious Changes by Demographics

% with Experience (missing excluded)

## Gender

Male	48.6
Female	52.6
Prob.	.183

## Age

18-29	51.2
30-39	54.7
40-49	47.7
50-64	49.9
65+	51.0
Prob.	.561

## Race

White	48.8
Black	64.3
Other	45.8
Prob.	.002

## Hispanics

Yes	46.5
No	50.6
Prob.	.376

## Marital Status

Married	51.5
Widowed	52.6
Divorced	46.6
Separated	54.0
Never Married	47.6
Prob.	.663

Table 3 (continued)

Education

Less than High School	50.0
High School Grad	50.7
Associate Degree	49.8
4-Year Degree	49.6
Graduate Degree	54.4
Prob.	.912

Household Income

Less than \$10,000	58.3
\$10,000-19,999	52.2
\$20,000-39,999	49.0
\$40,000-59,999	50.1
\$60,000-74,999	55.6
\$75,000-89,999	56.2
\$90,000-109,999	49.4
\$110,000+	42.1
Refused	46.1
Prob.	.262

Region

New England	24.1
Middle Atlantic	39.8
East North Central	42.5
West North Central	53.9
South Atlantic	59.7
South East Central	61.2
South West Central	59.9
Mountain	51.9
Pacific	49.6
Prob.	.0000

Source: GSS/NSTS

Table 4

## Spiritual/Religious Change by Religion Variables

% Having Experience

Religion <sup>a</sup>	
Protestant	61.8
Catholic	36.2
None	29.5
Prob.	.0000
Denominational Type	
Fundamentalist	72.1
Moderate	44.2
Liberal	45.0
None	29.5
Prob.	.0000
Church Attendance	
Never	26.2
Less than Yearly	40.1
Once/Twice a Year	34.2
Several Times a Year	40.6
Monthly	47.0
2-3 Times a Month	63.4
Nearly Weekly	60.7
Weekly	65.2
Several Times a Week	90.2
Prob.	.0000
Frequency of Praying	
Several Times a Day	72.6
Daily	49.4
Several Times a Week	49.1
Weekly	35.6
Less than Weekly	29.4
Never	14.7
Prob.	.0000

Table 4 (continued)

Attachment to Religion

Strong	69.0
Somewhat Strong	51.1
Not too Strong	39.5
No Religion	29.5
Prob.	.0000

Belief in Afterlife

Yes	57.4
No	31.5
Prob.	.0000

Source: GSS/NSTS

<sup>a</sup>Other religions omitted because of small sample size.



Table 5

## Presence of Information to Open-Ended Items

	Some Information	Nothing Mentioned	Don't Know	Missing
A. Cause of Change				
First	79.0	15.7	1.0	4.3
Second	31.1	64.6	0.0	4.3
Third	5.8	89.9	0.0	4.3
B. Aspect/Occur- rence of Change				
First	20.8	73.7	0.5	5.0
Second	2.7	92.3	0.0	5.0
Third	0.2	94.7	0.0	5.0
C. Consequences of Change				
First	82.6	12.8	0.1	4.5
Second	23.0	72.5	0.0	4.5
Third	5.0	90.5	0.0	4.5
D. Mentions Entity	29.8	65.9	0.0	4.3

Source: GSS/NSTS

Table 6  
Distributions on Open-ended Items

A. Causes of Spiritual/Religious Change

	First Mention	All Mentions <sup>a</sup>
Illness/Accident/ Death	24.3	27.9
Divorce/Break-Up	1.6	2.7
Other Problems	11.2	16.1
Religious	28.3	50.2
Family/Relationships	6.2	7.8
Military/War	1.8	2.5
Secular Study	1.7	2.2
Other Positive	1.2	2.3
Misc.	1.1	1.7
Minor	0.6	---
No Relevant Mention	15.7	---
DK/Missing	5.5	---

B. Occurrence of Spiritual/Religious Change

Sign/Vision/Contact with Dead	3.0	3.1
Angel, Spirit Contact	1.1	1.4
Physical Experience	10.3	11.4
Jolt/Light	1.8	2.0
Born-Again	2.4	2.8
Misc.	1.5	1.9
No Relevant Mention	73.7	---
DK/Missing	5.5	---

C. Consequences of Spiritual/Religious Change

Religious	30.2	37.6
Better Person	11.6	16.7
Positive Family-related	2.9	5.8
Appreciation of Life	12.3	15.2
End to Bad Behavior	1.7	2.7
Hope/Love	1.5	2.7
Open-Minded/Thinking	2.1	2.7
Purpose/Meaning	1.3	1.7
Misc. Positive	12.1	17.2
Negative Impacts	0.8	0.8
Misc.	1.5	1.6
Everything Changed	0.8	1.6
Some Change	0.3	0.3
Little Change	3.3	3.9
No Relevant Mention	12.8	---
DK/Missing	4.6	---

% of all cases mentioning among three mentions.  
Source: NSTS/GSS

Table 7  
Alterations due to Spiritual/Religious Change

	Not at All 1	2	3	4	5	6	A Great Deal 7	DK/MV 8
a. Altered your outlook on life	3.2	1.1	2.9	8.0	16.0	17.8	49.6	1.3
b. Gave you a greater sense that your life was meaningful and significant	3.0	1.4	3.1	8.5	11.3	19.7	51.7	1.3
c. Changed your goals in life	10.6	4.3	5.6	12.8	17.1	11.9	36.0	1.8
d. Positively affected your relations with other people	7.1	1.8	2.2	9.2	16.5	18.4	43.2	1.5
e. Changed your day-to-day activities	13.4	5.3	8.0	16.1	17.0	12.0	26.6	1.5
f. Changed your life overall	5.0	2.3	5.5	8.7	17.4	17.5	42.0	1.5

Source: NSTS/GSS

Table 8

Daily Spiritual Experiences (DSEs) by  
Having Undergone a Spiritual/Religious Change

(% having each DSE "many times a day")

	Had Change	No Change
a. God's Presence	31.8	13.3
b. All of Life	17.2	9.0
c. God/Joy	19.8	8.8
d. Rel./Spirit. Strength	27.1	10.5
e. Rel./Spirit. Comfort	28.6	10.5
f. Peace/Harmony	20.4	8.7
g. God's Help	32.1	12.1
h. Guided by God	25.1	9.1
i. God's Love Direct	29.2	12.2
j. God's Love Others	20.2	9.7
k. Beauty of Creation	27.1	13.5
l. Blessings	39.9	22.1
m. Selfless Caring	18.4	9.6
n. Accept Others	13.1	8.4
o. Closer to God	26.3	10.0

Source: NSTS/GSS

DSE Wording: The list that follows includes items you may or may not experience. Please consider if and how often you have these experiences and try to disregard whether you feel you should or should not have them. A number of items use the word "God." If this word is not a comfortable one, please substitute another idea to mean the divine or holy for you.

Many times a day/Every day/Most days/Some days/Once in a while/Never or almost never

- a. I feel God's presence.
- b. I experience a connection to all of life.
- c. During worship or at other times when connected to God I feel joy which lifts me out of my daily concerns.
- d. I find strength in by religion or spirituality.
- e. I find comfort in my religion or spirituality.
- f. I feel inner peace or harmony.
- g. I ask God's help in the midst of daily activities.
- h. I feel guided by God in the midst of daily activities.
- i. I feel God's love for me, directly.
- j. I feel God's love for me, through others.
- k. I am spiritually touched by the beauty of creation.
- l. I feel thankful for my blessings.
- m. I feel a selfless caring for others.
- n. I accept others even when they do things I think are wrong.
- o. I desire to be closer to God or in union with Him.

Table 9

Health and Well-being by Spiritual/Religious Change

	Experienced	Has Not Experienced	Prob.
% Excellent Health	30.6%	28.8%	.349
% Very Happy (General)	34.8%	32.3%	.619
% Very Happy (Marriage)	64.2%	59.6%	.410
% Life is Exciting	56.7%	43.2%	.0004

Source: GSS/NSTS

## Appendix 1: Spiritual Transformation Questions

### **A. Measures of Spiritual Experiences**

1. Has there been a turning point in your life when you made a new and personal commitment to religion?
2. Did you ever have a religious or spiritual experience that changed your life?
3. Would you say you have been "born again" or have had a "born-again" experience, that is, a turning point in your life when you committed yourself to Christ?

### **B. Number of Spiritual Experiences:**

Asked of all responding "Yes" to at least one of the general measures of spiritual experiences (Qs. 1-2)

4. Thinking of "the turning point in your life when you made a new and personal commitment to religion"/"the religious or spiritual experience that changed your life"/"the turning point in your life when you made a new and personal commitment to religion and the religious or spiritual experience that changed your life," how many such experiences have you had? READ IF NEEDED: THAT IS ON HOW MANY DIFFERENT OCCASIONS DID THIS OCCUR?

### **C. Descriptions of Spiritual Experiences**

5. Please tell me about that experience/your most recent experience, what happened? PROBE FOR FULL DESCRIPTION OF EXPERIENCE.
6. ASK UNLESS FULLY ANSWERED ALREADY: What caused or led to this experience?
7. How old were you when this occurred?
8. Did you change religions because of this experience?
9. How did this experience change your life?

### **D. Number of "Born-Again" Experiences:**

Asked of those with "Yes" to Q.3 and "No" to Qs. 1-2.

10. How many "born-again" experiences have you had?

### **E. Descriptions of "Born-Again" Experiences**

11. Please tell me about that experience/your most recent experience, what happened? PROBE FOR FULL DESCRIPTION OF EXPERIENCE.
12. ASK UNLESS FULLY ANSWERED ALREADY: What caused or led to this experience?

13. How old were you when this occurred?
14. Did you change religions because of this experience?
15. How did this experience change your life?

**F. Evaluation of Spiritual Experiences**

Asked of those saying "Yes" to Q. 1, 2, or 3.

16. To what extent did the religious/spiritual change you just told me about do the following:

- a. Altered your outlook on life
- b. Gave you a greater sense that your life was meaningful and significant
- c. Changed your goals in life
- d. Positively affected your relations with other people
- e. Changed your day-to-day activities
- f. Changed your life overall

Seven-point, response scale labeled 1=Not at All and 7=A Great Deal

**G. Change and God**

Asked of those saying "Yes" to Q. 1, 2, or 3.

17. Which of the following statements best describes your beliefs about God?

- I don't believe in God now and I never have
- I don't believe in God now, but I used to
- I believe in God now, but I didn't used to
- I believe in God now and I always have
- Can't Choose

## Appendix 2: Open-ended Codes

The open-ended questions (See Qs. 5,6,9,11,12,15) were coded into 10 variables. Information from any of the open-ended items were used to code each of the variables

A. Up to three mentions of what led to, caused, or triggered the religious/spiritual change

WHYCHNG1  
WHYCHNG2  
WHYCHNG3

B. Up to three mentions of occurrence or aspects of the religious/spiritual change itself (not cause, not consequences)

EXPCHNG1  
EXPCHNG2  
EXPCHNG3

C. Up to three mentions of the consequences of the religious/spiritual change, what was different about the person's life, attitude, beliefs, etc.

CHANGED1  
CHANGED2  
CHANGED3

D. One variable on specific religious figures mentioned  
ENTITY



## Specific Codes

### A. WHYCHNG1, 2, 3

- 1 - illness/hospitalization of R
- 2 - illness/hospitalization of other close to R
- 3 - accident of R
- 4 - accident of other close to R
- 5 - death of other close to R
- 6 - large-scale death, war, terrorism
- 7 - divorce
- 8 - break-up in relationship
- 9 - bad relationship with other, being let down by others
- 12 - other material, financial problems, poverty, job loss
- 13 - drug/alcohol recovery/rehab
- 14 - moving away
- 15 - drug/alcohol recovery/rehab of someone close to R
- 16 - loss of pet
- 17 - criminal victim
- 25 - reform in life needed
- 28 - other specific problems
- 29 - unspecified problems (e.g. bad times, troubled, lack of peace in one's life)
- 30 - religious contact (church, minister, retreat, prayer group, Bible study group, revival)
- 31 - prayers answered, power of prayers
- 32 - faith, religious influence of others (not formal church activities, sermons, or organized religious actions - see code 30)
- 33 - asked God/Christ/Other for help, guidance, forgiveness
- 34 - Bible reading/study, religious readings on own (not as part of religious services or organized religion - see code 30)
- 35 - switched religions
- 37 - negative religious examples of others, experiences
- 38 - other positive religious influences (includes God helping R without R asking for it)
- 39 - fasting
- 40 - met someone (boy/girlfriend, etc.)
- 41 - married
- 42 - pregnancy
- 43 - birth of child, grandchild
- 44 - having, raising children, being a parent/grandparent (not birth see code 43)
- 45 - positive example of others (non-religious)
- 46 - person close to R in military
- 47 - R in military
- 48 - spent time with family
- 50 - study (not formal religious)
- 51 - reading
- 52 - thinking about life, meaning, purpose, afterlife, etc.
- 53 - related to schooling, formal education
- 54 - sought help (not religious, not drug/alcohol)
- 60 - material gain

- 61 - volunteering
- 68 - other specified positive developments
- 69 - unspecified positive developments
- 70 - wanted God in life, made decision to trust God (no mention of church, see code 30)
- 72 - just my time, had to happen
- 73 - personal awakening, discovery
- 74 - matured, got older
- 94 - can't describe
- 95 - nothing in particular, no single thing
- 96 - nothing relevant mentioned
- 97 - no crisis, nothing special or dramatic
- 98 - don't know, can't remember
- 99 - no answer

B. EXPCHNG1, 2, 3

- 1 - vision
- 2 - dream
- 3 - "sign"
- 4 - event in nature (e.g. rainbow, snowstorm, lighting)
- 5 - contact with dead
- 10 - frozen, catatonic
- 11 - left body, floated, falling away of mind/body
- 12 - near death experience
- 13 - crying
- 14 - felt warmth
- 15 - a feeling that went all over, encompassed R
- 20 - God told, talked to R, message from God - directly
- 21 - God talked to R through preacher, not a normal general sermon
- 22 - God talked to R through other (not preacher)
- 23 - God turned on the lights, pieces fell together
- 24 - healed by God supernaturally
- 25 - aware of presence of the Holy Spirit, led by the Lord, Holy Spirit came into me, touched by Christ/God
- 26 - voice from altar
- 27 - saved
- 28 - explicit contact with angel
- 29 - experience that may have involved angel
- 30 - shook up, shocked
- 31 - felt burst of life, energized
- 32 - moving experience
- 33 - tunnel of light
- 34 - more than words can express, can't really say
- 35 - supernatural, electrifying experience or connection
- 36 - glorious transformation
- 40 - born again
- 41 - caught the spirit, flipped by spirit
- 44 - emotional trauma
- 46 - awkward feeling, uneasy, lack of comfort, distress
- 48 - life flashed in front of R
- 49 - felt like someone touched R
- 52 - miracle
- 54 - epiphany
- 55 - prayed over and R fell
- 56 - other positive experiences, NEC
- 60 - glorious transformation
- 96 - nothing relevant mentioned
- 97 - nothing special happened
- 98 - don't know, don't remember
- 99 - no answer

C. CHANGED1, 2, 3

- 1 - more religious, greater faith, closer to Christ, more committed to God
- 2 - religious view changed (not specified)
- 3 - belief in miracles
- 4 - thanked God for life, grateful to God
- 6 - God will take care of R, solve problems, look out for R, will depend on God, God there for R
- 8 - changed churches/religions, converted
- 9 - prayed more
- 10 - bring God to others, being evangelical
- 11 - released from sin
- 12 - live life following God's rule, Christian way, walk with the Lord, follow Christ's teachings
- 13 - baptized
- 14 - church seen as family
- 15 - became more aware of power of prayer
- 18 - more spiritual, not more religious
- 19 - loss of religion, loss of faith
- 20 - realized limited time, life is short, live every day as last
- 21 - live life to the fullest, get most out of life
- 22 - peace (internal)
- 23 - calmer
- 24 - better, nicer, kinder, more humble person
- 25 - helped others, gave to others, selflessness, compassion, empathized
- 26 - spend more time with people, cared more for others, more caring
- 27 - got married
- 28 - closer to spouse
- 29 - closer to children, dedicated to children, better parent
- 30 - closer to family (spouse/children not specified)
- 31 - volunteered more
- 32 - raised children in faith, religion
- 33 - specific positive changes
- 34 - happier, more satisfied with life, feel better
- 35 - stronger
- 40 - changed directions, redirected life (not specified)
- 41 - think about, look at life differently (not specified)
- 45 - didn't take things for granted, appreciate things more, saw life as more valuable, saw every day as important
- 46 - re-evaluated what R believed
- 49 - gave up drinking, drugs
- 50 - avoided nightclubs, bars, wild parties, dancing
- 51 - better lifestyle, cleaner life (not specific)
- 52 - settled down, slowed down, more careful
- 53 - more mature
- 54 - second chance, new chance, chance to start over
- 55 - gained hope
- 56 - beloved, gained love
- 57 - found unconditional, unlimited love
- 58 - found value of forgiving

- 59 - think about R's actions, behaviors, sins
- 60 - life better, better off, enriched life
- 61 - felt needed
- 62 - more self-confident, felt better about self, more aware of self
- 63 - more aware of self beliefs
- 70 - life has purpose, meaning, makes sense, existential meaning gained, aware of ultimate truths/reality
- 71 - more alive, aware, engaged; not bored, in rut, passive
- 72 - treat all the same, treated all mankind equally
- 73 - be more careful
- 74 - felt refreshed, renewed
- 75 - more open to new things and new ideas
- 76 - to think more
- 77 - knew there was a heaven, eternity
- 78 - made R aware of what R should be doing or should be like
- 80 - negative changes
- 82 - more in touch with mortality and those who have died
- 83 - upset with judgmental attitudes
- 84 - more conscious of church, religion; more aware of God
- 85 - more responsible, accepts responsibility
- 87 - feeling changed
- 88 - realized that no matter how bad things are, someone else has it worse
- 89 - moved away from church, religion
- 90 - everything changed, complete change, dramatic change, new person
- 92 - realized there was real adversary (like Devil, evil)
- 94 - some change, unclear if positive/negative, NOT as major as code 90
- 95 - no change, little change, temporary change, see codes 90, 94
- 96 - nothing relevant mentioned
- 98 - can't remember

D. ENTITY

- 1 - God
- 2 - Christ, Jesus
- 3 - God and Christ/Jesus (both mentioned)
- 4 - Lord (for mentions like "Lord God" just code "God")
- 5 - other major religious figures like Buddha, Mohammed, Mary, specific saints, does NOT include ministers or other contemporary religious leaders
- 6 - no mention of religious entity

## References

- Bainbridge, William Sims, "The Sociology of Conversion," in Malony, H. Newton and Southard, Samuel, eds., Handbook of Religious Conversion. Birmingham: Religious Education Press, 1992.
- Barbour, John D., Versions of Deconversion: Autobiography and the Loss of Faith. Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 1994.
- Barker, Irwin R. and Currie, Raymond F., "Do Converts Always Make the Most Committed Christians?" Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion, 24 (1985), 305-313.
- Bromley, David G., ed., The Politics of Religious Apostasy in the Transformation of Religious Movements. Westport, CT: Praeger, 1998.
- Cheshire, Coye, "Changing Faith: A Study of Racial Dissimilarity and Religious Switching," Paper presented to the American Sociological Association, Washington, DC, August, 2000.
- Dixon, Richard D.; Lowery, Roger C.; and Jones, Lloyd P., "The Fact and Form of Born-Again Religious Conversions and Sociopolitical Conservatism," Review of Religious Research, 34 (1992), 117-131.
- Gaynor, Dana Robin, "Changes in Cognitive Structure Associated with Experiences of Spiritual Transformation," Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Institute of Transpersonal Psychology, 1999.
- Gibbs, Eddie, "Conversion in Evangelistic Practice," in Malony, H. Newton and Southard, Samuel, eds., Handbook of Religious Conversion. Birmingham: Religious Education Press, 1992.
- Gillespie, V. Bailey, The Dynamics of Religious Conversion. Birmingham: Religious Education Press, 1991.
- Hardy, Alister Clavering, The Spiritual Nature of Man: A Study of Contemporary Religious Experience. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979.
- Hill, Peter C. and Hood, Ralph W., Measures of Religiosity. Birmingham: Religious Education Press, 1999.
- Hood, Ralph W., Handbook of Religious Experience. Birmingham: Religious Education Press, 1995.
- Hunt, Harry T., "Experiences of Radical Personal Transformation in Mysticism, Religious Conversion, and Psychosis," Journal of Mind and Behavior, 21 (2000), 353-397.

- Jensen, Lori Jolene, "(Re)discovering Fundamentalism in the Cultural Margins: Calvary Chapel Congregations as Sites of Cultural Resistance and Religious Transformation," Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Southern California, 2001.
- Kahn, Peter J., "Modeling Religious Conversion in Adulthood," Unpublished Ph.d. dissertation, Pacific Graduate School of Psychology, 2000.
- Kirkpatrick, Lee A., "A Longitudinal Study of Changes in Religious Belief and Behavior as a Function of Individual Differences in Adult Attachment Style," Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion, 36 (1997), 207-217.
- Kox, Willem; Meeus, Wim; and 't Hart, Harm. Religious Conversion of Adolescents: Testing the Lofland and Stark Model of Religious Conversion," Sociological Analysis, 52 (1991), 227-240.
- Lawton, Leora E. and Bures, Regina, "Parental Divorce and the 'Switching' of Religious Identity," Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion, 40 (2001), 99-111.
- Malony, H. Newton and Southard, Samuel, eds., Handbook of Religious Conversion. Birmingham: Religious Education Press, 1992.
- Meadows, Mark, "Transcendental Experiences: A Phenomenological Inquiry into Their Commonality and Relationship with Moral Development," Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Akron, 1990.
- Musick, Marc and Wilson, John, "Religious Switching for Marriage Reasons," Sociology of Religion, 56 (Fall, 1995), 257-270.
- Musgrave, Cassandra, "The Near-Death Experience: A Study of Spiritual Transformation," Journal of Near-Death Studies, 15 (1997), 187-201.
- Paloutzian, Raymond F.; Richardson, James T.; and Rambo, Lewis R., "Religious Conversion and Personality Change," Journal of Personality, 67 (1999), 1047-1079.
- Pargament, Kenneth I., The Psychology of Religion and Coping: Theory, Research, Practice. New York: Guilford Press, 1997.
- Pitt, John E., "Why People Convert: A Balance Theoretical Approach to Religious Conversion," Pastoral Psychology, 39 (Jan., 1991), 171-183.
- Rambo, Lewis R., "The Psychology of Conversion," in Malony, H. Newton and Southard, Samuel, eds., Handbook of Religious Conversion. Birmingham: Religious Education Press, 1992.



- Rambo, Lewis R., "Theories of Conversion: Understanding and Interpreting Religious Change," Social Compass, 46 (1999), 259-271.
- Rambo, Lewis R., Understanding Religious Conversion. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993.
- Rambo, Lewis R. and Reh, Lawrence A., "The Phenomenology of Conversion," in Malony, H. Newton and Southard, Samuel, eds., Handbook of Religious Conversion. Birmingham: Religious Education Press, 1992.
- Roof, Wade Clark, A Generation of Seekers: The Spiritual Journeys of the Baby Boom Generation. San Francisco: Harper, 1993.
- Roof, Wade Clark, "Multiple Religious Switching," Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion, 28 (1989), 530-535.
- Roof, Wade Clark, Spiritual Marketplace: Baby Boomers and the Remaking of American Religion. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999.
- Roof, Wade Clark, "Defection, Disengagement, and Dissent: The Dynamics of Religious Change in the United States," Religion and the Social Order, 7 (1997), 77-95.
- Shapiro, Ivor, What God Allows: The Crisis of Faith and Conscience in One Catholic Church. New York: Doubleday, 1996.
- Shaver, P.; Lenauer, M.; and Sadd, S., "Religiousness, Conversion, and Subjective Well-being," American Journal of Psychiatry, 137 (1980), 1563-1568.
- Sherkat, Darren E., "Counterculture or Continuity? Competing Influences on Baby Boomers' Religious Orientations and Participation," Social Forces, 76 (1998), 1087-1114.
- Sherkat, Darren E., "Leaving the Faith: Testing Theories of Religious Switching Using Survival Models," Social Science Research, 20 (1991), 171-187.
- Sherkat, Darren E., "Tracking the Restructuring of American Religion: Religious Affiliation and Patterns of Religious Mobility," Social Forces, 79 (June, 2001), 1459-1493.
- Sherkat, Darren E. and Wilson, John, "Preferences, Constraints, and Choices in Religious Markets: An Examination of Religious Switching and Apostasy," Social Forces, 73 (1995), 993-1026.
- Smith, Tom W., "Classifying Protestant Denominations," Review of Religious Research, 31 (1990), 225-245.

- Smith, Tom W., "Turning Points: Spiritual Transformations Around the World," Public Opinion Pros, 1 (2005) at [www.publicopinionpros.com](http://www.publicopinionpros.com)
- Suchman, Mark C., "Analyzing the Determinants of Everyday Conversion," Sociological Analysis, 53 (1992), S13-S33.
- Warburg, Margit, "Seeking the Seekers in the Sociology of Religion," Social Compass, 48 (March, 2001), 91-101.
- Wright, Stuart A., "Reconceptualizing Cult Coercion and Withdrawal: A Comparative Analysis of Divorce and Apostasy," Social Forces, 70 (1991), 125-145.
- Wuthnow, Robert, Growing Up Religious: Christians and Jews and their Journeys of Faith. Boston: Beacon Press, 1999.
- Zinnbauer, Brian J. and Pargament, Kenneth I., "Spiritual Conversion: A Study of Religious Change Among College Students," Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion, 37 (1998), 161-180.