

“One Person's Apostate is Another Person's Convert”:
What Terminology Tells Us About Pro-Religious Hegemony in
the Sociology of Religion

Ryan T. Cragun
University of Tampa
401 W Kennedy Blvd.
Tampa, FL 33606
813-434-1458
ryantcragun@gmail.com

Joseph H. Hammer
Iowa State University

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ABSTRACT:

This paper analyzes terminology in the sociology of religion to illustrate pro-religious hegemony and the construction of deviant identities for the non-religious. The paper begins by analyzing the current terminology used to refer to the non-religious and makes suggestions for less-biased terminology. The article then uses the “found” terminology to illustrate how language and definitions function to marginalize the non-religious and turn them into a deviant, denigrated category in the sociology of religion.

PERSONAL REFLEXIVE STATEMENTS:

Ryan T. Cragun was raised in a devout Mormon family in Morgan, UT. Most of his family remain devout Mormons. During graduate school he came to the conclusion that Mormonism was not the religion for him. After disassociating himself from Mormonism, he explored various religions, but eventually decided that no organized religion reflected his beliefs and is now a secular humanist. His perspective on the terminology employed to describe changes in religious affiliations changed during this transition. It was only once he became a secular humanist that he realized just how biased the terminology in the sociology of religion is. He wrote the original draft of this article to reflect that and to suggest much needed change.

Joseph H. Hammer was raised in the Lutheran tradition in Chicago, IL. He was exposed to Catholicism in high school, and sought to reconcile the differences of doctrine between the two traditions, which soon led to exploration of faiths beyond Christianity. This exploration continued in the form of coursework and independent study in philosophy, psychology, and religious studies at the

University of Illinois. By graduation, he realized that his worldview was best characterized by the tenets of freethought and secular humanism. In examining the research on Americans' widespread distrust of atheists, he came to realize how terminology describing secular individuals has the capacity to powerfully influence societal attitudes and action towards these individuals. He assisted in the revision of this article.

“ONE PERSON'S APOSTATE IS ANOTHER PERSON'S CONVERT”: REFLECTIONS ON PRO-RELIGIOUS HEGEMONY IN THE SOCIOLOGY OF RELIGION

INTRODUCTION

This paper has its origins in the background research conducted for a project examining religious exiting (Cragun 2007), that was attempting to discern what labels researchers use to refer to individuals who leave religions. Over a dozen labels were discovered with varying degrees of frequency of use. As these labels were discovered, it became apparent that the labels were not applied uniformly and often had conflicting and overlapping understandings. Additionally, wrestling with the terminology revealed an inherent bias in favor of religion that is widespread in the sociology of religion. The labels used in the social science of religion reflect a dominant or “hegemonic” position within the discipline that religion should be normative and that any actions that threaten religious fidelity are deviant.

The conflicting and overlapping terminology leads us to agree with the assessment of Bromley (1988) that the lack of agreement in religious exiting terminology is one of the factors hindering research in this area (Mauss 1969; Vernon 1968). As Bromley indicates, unclear terminology makes it difficult to build upon previous research as it is not always clear what is meant when terms are used. As a result, rather than an accumulation of knowledge over time on a given topic, research tends to be haphazard and, at best, only partially related to previous research. That is problematic if the goal is a coherent body of research on a topic.

As Chafetz (1978) notes in her work on theory development, “good theory depends on good definitions of the concepts involved.” Clarification of terminology in the sociology of religion is not without precedent; Sommerville (1998) attempted to facilitate discussions of secularization in the

sociology of religion in the late 1990s by clarifying how social scientists use the term. We agree that clarification of terminology is important, but we also examine the implications of terminology choice on the sociological study of religion and the biases inherent in this discipline.

As noted above, much of the terminology used in the sociology of religion frames religious association and high religious commitment as normative and exiting and non-religion as deviant. Later in this article we argue at length why we think this bias exists, suggesting it is likely due to the historical connections to religions (especially Roman Catholicism) of the main three professional organizations dedicated to studying religion and the religiosity of the members of those organizations. The size and power of Roman Catholicism and the Mainline Protestant churches have allowed these religions and adherents of them who are, themselves social scientists to dictate the state of the religious landscape, including labeling those who fall outside of religion or who leave it as “deviants,” resulting in inherently negative terminology.

The paper is organized as follows: We began by examine five groups of terms that refer primarily to the identification or “belonging” dimension of religiosity. The groups of terms we examine include: exiters, switchers, religious nones, converts, and identifiers/affiliates. There are, of course, other dimensions to religiosity (e.g., belief and behavior, among others; see Kosmin 2007), but in this paper we limit our scope just to the “belonging” dimension of religiosity. Thus, for instance, when discussing terminology to describe those who switch between religions, we do not have the expectation that our terminology will also account for deeper complexities, such as the possibility that some people continue to subscribe to practices or beliefs from their prior faith. In the process of examining these five groups of terms, we also make several recommendations as to why some terms should not be used and recommend some new terms that should be used instead of other, pejorative terms. Based on the examination of terminology, we then discuss the construction of deviance and the

implications of the terminology for pro-religious hegemony in the sociology of religion. We recognize that it may seem awkward to start with a review of the terms, then discuss the background. However, we believe a clear understanding of the terms to begin with will lay the foundation for the discussion of hegemony that follows.

METHODS

The discovery of terms and their analysis involved a two-stage approach. The initial development of the list of terms used to refer to changes in religiosity listed in Table 1 was derived from an extensive literature review for a doctoral dissertation (Cragun 2007). However, such a review is, of necessity, selective. In order to objectively illustrate the pervasiveness of these terms, we also analyze their frequency of use in two popular sociology of religion journals, the *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* (from 1961-2007) and *Sociology of Religion* (from 1961-2007), which is similar to the approach employed by Markle and Petersen (1981). This was done by obtaining copies of every article published in these journals in the periods noted, converting them to text using Optical Character Recognition (OCR) software, *Omnipage 16*, then running searches on the resulting text files for specific terms using search software called *dtSearch*. The frequencies we report combine the occurrences of these words in the two journals. We employed stem-searching, which allows for minor variants of terms in our searches (e.g., “apostate” and “apostates” or “none” and “nones”).ⁱ Stem searching was employed to maximize coverage of the terms in the literature.

“EXITER”

The broadest terms used in referring to people who exit religions are those that refer to anyone

who leaves a religion without taking into consideration where those individuals end up (see Bromley 1988; Wright 1987). We list these terms in the first section of Table 1.

[Insert Table 1 here]

“Apostate” is perhaps the most well-known of the terms used in this sense as it refers to the broad group of individuals who leave a religion without suggesting how or why they leave or where they end up (Hadaway 1989; Hadaway and Roof 1988; Hunsberger 1980, 1983; Hunsberger and Brown 1984). However, some researchers have used apostate to refer to individuals who leave a religion and also leave religion altogether (e.g., Caplovitz and Sherrow 1977 and McKnight and Ondrey 2008 use it this way). “Apostate” is the most frequently used term to describe leaving a religion, having been used 1,477 times in the journals we examined (see Figure 1).

[Insert Figure 1 here]

Bromley (1998) proposed an alternative understanding of the label “apostate.” This approach argues that “apostate” refers specifically to exiters of new religious movements or subversive groups. In this usage, Bromley defines “apostates” not just as anyone who leaves a religious group, but specifically as people who leave a subversive group and then work to undermine or even destroy the group they left. This definition excludes people who leave a mainline religion as well as people who leave a religion and do not actively act out in opposition to their former group (or ex-identity; see Ebaugh 1988). This perspective frames “apostate” as a political term with a hotly debated meaning.

Bromley's understanding of the term illustrates the tension this label conveys. Apostate comes from the Greek word “apostasia,” meaning “defection” or “revolt.” The term is often used as a pejorative by those who remain members of the religion to describe those they see as defectors (McKnight and Ondrey 2008; Wright 1987). Thus, apostate often means more than just someone who

leaves a religion. The term suggests that the people who leave religions are despised by those who remain members of the religion. It is not generally adopted by those who leave to describe themselves, as these people do not usually see themselves or their decision to leave as negative (Bromley 1998; Wright 1987).

Given the pejorative nature of the term apostate, we suggest a term that is less negative though not as widely used in the literature: “exitors.” “Exiting” aptly describes what is happening: people are exiting a religion. It does not suggest why nor how, just that they have decided to leave or cease their association with an organized religion. Considering sociologists of religion have generally stopped using the term “cult” to describe “New Religious Movements” (NRMs) because of the widespread negativity associated with that term (Olson 2006), sociologists of religion should also consider dropping the term “apostate” from their vocabulary in favor of the less pejorative “exiter.”

As Chafetz (1978) suggests in defining terms, we follow the Aristotelian form, using a *genus proximum* and a *genus specifica* (these are illustrated by the nesting in Table 1). The first indicates what the term has in common with the larger class of phenomena; the second indicates what makes it different.ⁱⁱ In the case of exitors, this is a broad category of individuals and is, in essence, the *genus proximum*, so it has no *genus specifica*. The subcategories of exitors we describe below each have a *genus specifica* to illustrate how they differ from the other phenomena in this *genus*. Formally, then:

- *exiter: any person who leaves a religion*

The terms under “exiter” in Table 1 are subcategories (*genera specifica*) of “exiter.” There are several ways to leave a religion. Two of the terms include a specific nuance that make the terms a better fit in describing certain exiting situations. For instance, “disaffiliation” generally refers to the formal ending of one's membership or affiliation with a religion, usually by requesting removal of one's

name from the membership lists of the religion (Te Grotenhuis and Scheepers 2001). Considering not all religions maintain formal membership rosters (Hoge 1988), someone who leaves a religion without a formal membership role cannot be a “disaffiliate.” Disaffiliate or disaffiliation is the second most frequently used term when it comes to leaving a religion, occurring 676 times in the journals examined.

An alternative label is “disidentifier,” which refers to someone who no longer self-identifies as a member of a religious group, regardless of their formal membership in the religion. This term is used infrequently (see Figure 1). The ARIS survey (Kosmin, Mayer, and Keysar 2001) offers a good illustration of a disidentification scenario. According to the LDS religion (i.e., Mormons), there were 5,410,544 members of the religion in the U.S. in 2002 (Deseret Morning News 2007). The ARIS survey found there to be about 2,787,000 members in 2001. Given the methods used in managing their membership lists,ⁱⁱⁱ the LDS religion overstated its membership in the U.S. by almost 3,000,000 in 2002. While still listed on the membership roles of the religion (i.e., they did not disaffiliate), these people disidentified from Mormonism. Formally, then:

- *disaffiliate: a person who leaves a religion by formally requesting their name be removed from the membership roles of the religion*
- *disidentifier: a person who leaves a religion by no longer self-identifying as a member of the religion*

Both disaffiliate and disidentifier include a prefix that is, of course, negative in connotation. The prefix “dis-” suggests the following: (1) to do the opposite of, (2) to deprive of, (3) to exclude or expel from, (3) the opposite or absence of, (4) not, (5) and to completely remove (Webster online). In no sense do these terms suggest a positive change, which is actually how most disaffiliates and disidentifiers think about the change they have experienced (Dan Barker 2006; Dennett 2006; McKnight and Ondrey 2008). However, the terms are still acceptable in the specific sense of identifying particular ways of no longer associating with religious groups, thus we can see utility in using them in

the specific contexts their definitions include.

Table 1 lists an additional term under “exiter” found in the literature (Wright 1987) that refers to those who leave a religion: “deserter.” This term refers to a religious exiter, but also has a clear connotation. “Deserter” suggests more than simply leaving a religion; deserters leave without the intention of ever returning to the religion, though it does not preclude them from joining a different religious group. This term is not frequently used in the sociology of religion, having occurred in various forms only 217 times in the journals examined. Formally:

- *deserter: a person who leaves a religion with no intention of returning*

In addition to the nuance of where a “deserter” ends up, there is an implicit negative connotation. The negative connotation likely carries over from the more common use of this term in reference to military personnel who leave without permission, which shows a lack of commitment to the cause. We find this term problematic for two reasons. First, it is often difficult to know what someone's motivations and intentions are when they leave a religious group. This label claims to know what those are. Second, the label is inherently negative and not likely to be used by the people leaving to describe themselves. The term is most likely used in a pejorative sense by people who remain loyal to the group. Given these problems, we recommend that sociologists not use this term to describe exiters, generally. While we do not think researchers should use this term to describe individuals who leave religions, religious individuals may use this term to describe exiters from their religious group in interviews or surveys. In that context, the label reflects the mindset of those employing it (Wright 1987) and may, therefore, be of some sociological value when describing how members of religions think of those who have left their religion.^{iv}

“SWITCHERS”

The above section describes general labels for religious exiters. Those terms do not indicate where such individuals end up. There are two possible paths exiters can take. One is to join another religion. This section describes labels for individuals who leave a religion and join another religion.

A well-known label exists for individuals who leave a religion and join another religion: “switchers” (Albrecht and Bahr 1983; Bibby and Brinkerhoff 1973, 1983; Hadaway and Marler 1993). This term is widely used in the sociological literature, having occurred in various forms 2,323 times in the journals examined (see Figure 1). Hadaway and Marler add a further specification to the label “switcher” by referring to “within” and “between” religious family^v switchers. “Within” family switchers remain within the broad religious family they started in, but move to a different denomination within that family (e.g., moving within Christianity from Episcopalianism to Presbyterianism). “Between” family switchers move from one broad religious family to another (e.g., Muslim to Jew). Formally:

- *switcher: a person who leaves a religion and joins another religion*
 - *within family switcher: someone who leaves a religion and joins a religion that belongs to the same broad religious family (e.g., Methodist to Baptist)*
 - *between family switcher: a person who leaves a religion and joins a religion that belongs to a different broad religious family (e.g., Catholic to Buddhist)*

Stark and Finke (2000) propose alternative labels for individuals who leave a religion and join another religion. According to their definitions, “reaffiliates” are individuals who leave a denomination within one religious family and join another denomination within that family, the equivalent of “within family switchers.” “Converts,” on the other hand, are individuals who leave a religious family to join another family, the equivalent of “between family switchers.” We believe the introduction of these terms and definitions unnecessarily complicates already existing terminology. Reaffiliate seems better suited to refer to someone who was a member of a religion, left for a time, then

returned, as the label basically indicates the repeating of affiliation (re-affiliation). Also, “conversion” has a long-standing tradition of referring to the process of adopting a religious identity, as we describe below, regardless of pre-existing religious identities (Johnstone 2007). Stark and Finke's use of “reaffiliate” and “convert” to specify religious switching co-opts pre-existing labels in a confusing way. We recommend not adopting their terminology.

Another subgroup in the switching category is a term introduced by Barker (1984) in her study of members of the Unification Church. Barker uses the term “tasters” to describe one category of members of the Unification Church: people who repetitively and rapidly join and leave religions. While also technically a subcategory of exiters, “tasters” are more closely related to switchers (which is, itself, a subcategory of exiters; see Figure 2). Thus, tasters are exiters and switchers, but exhibit unique behavior that distinguishes them from other exiters and switchers. Barker does not place strict time constraints on how long individuals must remain a member in order to be considered a taster as the amount of time can vary. The more important characteristic, of course, is the repetitive nature of the behavior – they join and leave over and over. This term has not caught on in the sociology of religion, having been used in various forms just 136 times over the last 40+ years. Formally, then,

- *taster: a person who repetitively joins and leaves religions*

A final term that came up in the literature on switching (Wright 1987) is a term similar to “deserter”: “defector.” “Defection” suggests that someone left a group to join another group. Thus, in a sense, labeling individuals as “defectors” goes beyond describing just the act of leaving a religion. It also implies that they join another group – generally a group that either rivals the previous group or opposes it in some fashion. This term has been used with a moderate degree of frequency, occurring 1,226 times in the journals and periods analyzed. This label, like “deserter,” carries with it a negative

connotation stemming from its more widespread use to refer to political defectors or people who distance themselves from one political entity and align themselves with another. Formally:

- *defector: a person who leaves a religion with the intent of joining a rival group*

For the same reasons we discouraged the use of “deserter” above, we discourage the use of the term defector for switchers: It is difficult to know someone's motivations and/or intentions when they leave a religion. This may be useful to recognize as a label applied by those who remain members of the religion as labels for exiters, but beyond that it should not be used.

Of note at the end of this section on switching is the fact that there is not a comparable term to switching for the non-religious. Because the terms we are examining deal exclusively with the realm of institutional association or non-association, individuals who are no longer associated with an institutional religion cannot experience switching and cannot be said to have “switched.” Thus, switching is a label that only applies to individuals who are associated with organized religious institutions and remain associated with organized religious institutions after making a change. One can switch religious associations, but one cannot switch non-religious associations as there is only one state of not associating with organized religion, which we describe below.

“CONVERTS”

While the goal of the original literature review was to disentangle the labels used to describe religious exiting, we realized that such a project necessarily required that we clarify other labels as well. One of those, with a long-standing place in the scientific study of religion, is the label “convert” (Altemeyer and Hunsberger 1997; Lofland and Skonovd 1981; Richardson 1985). Johnstone (2007), in his sociology of religion textbook, defines “conversion” as: experiencing a change in religious identity.

This is a rather broad definition as it encompasses all switchers and tasters. But, given the specific phrasing of the definition, this term also includes all the people who associate themselves with a religion and all exiters as well.

Not all scholars agree with this definition of conversion as some believe it should be reserved for instances when a substantial change in identity has taken place (Lofland and Skonovd 1981). But limiting conversion to “substantial” or “significant” changes in religious identity leaves minor changes in religious identity without a label. This would also require scholars to find a way to quantify religious change, distinguishing between minor and major changes. Such a system of quantification seems unnecessarily cumbersome and potentially judgmental as well, depending on the rationale behind quantifying such changes.^{vi} Thus, we believe using “conversion” to refer to any change in religious identity is adequate.

Another important point stems from this definition of “conversion.” Conversions from one religion to another (i.e., “switching”) are obvious changes in religious identity, as illustrated in the following logical statement in which religious identity A becomes religious identity B, resulting in a change in religious identity:

$$\textit{religiousidentityA} \rightarrow \textit{religiousidentityB} = \Delta [\textit{religiousidentity}]$$

Less obvious is the adoption of a religious identity for the first time, which all people who have a religious identity must undergo as all children start out a-religious:

$$\textit{noreligiousidentity} \rightarrow \textit{religiousidentity} = \Delta [\textit{religiousidentity}]$$

And if the previous statement is true, then the inverse must also be true:

$$\textit{religiousidentity} \rightarrow \textit{noreligiousidentity} = \Delta [\textit{religiousidentity}]$$

Ergo, everyone who adopts a religious identity, everyone who switches religions, and everyone who ends a religious identity is a convert. The only people who are not converts, by this definition, are those who have never identified with a religion. Formally, then:

- *convert: a person who experiences a change in religious identity*

Not surprisingly, convert is widely used in the sociological literature. The term has occurred 4,544 times in the two journals examined.

There is another term gaining currency in the sociology of religion literature that warrants discussion at this point: “deconversion” (Gooren 2006; Jacobs 1984). To date it has only been used 115 times, but many of these occurrences are recent (post 2000). The problem with this term is that it views “conversion” as a one-way religious change – the joining of a religion. That is not consistent with the definition illustrated above. Conversion is a change in religious identity, not simply the joining of a religion.

The only reason one might suggest that the term “deconversion” warrants use is if a compelling case can be made that the process of converting *between* religions (e.g., Pentecostal to Catholic) is fundamentally different from the process of converting *from* religion to non-religion (e.g., Muslim to none). The factors leading to those changes may differ (Cragun 2007), but the process of changing roles is the same (Ebaugh 1988; Rambo 1995). In both cases it is a change in religious identity and is therefore a “conversion.”

Intriguingly, it is quite common to see people consider someone who has never associated with

a religion but then joins a religion be called a “convert,” but we are unaware of any reference to someone who exited religion and became non-religious who was also considered a “convert.” Why are those who join religions “converts” but those who leave “apostates”? This suggests a pro-religion bias. For instance, McKnight and Ondray (2008), in their book *Finding Faith, Losing Faith*, apply Rambo's (1995) theoretical understanding of religious conversion to both switchers and exiters. They illustrate quite well that exiters follow the same steps in their “conversion” to no religion as do the switchers they examine. Yet, rather than call new nones “converts,” they opt to call them “apostates.” Calling these newly non-religious individuals “apostates” distinguishes them from other converts in a way that suggests they have done something deviant, despite the fact both have experienced a change in religious identity. Why is leaving religion deviant but joining religion not?

“NONES”

The first path we described for those who leave religions is to join another religion, or switching (a form of conversion; see Figure 2). The other path is to cease association with any religion. Most researchers agree on a term for individuals who do not associate with a religion: “religious none” or “none” (Hadaway and Roof 1979; Hale 1977; Hayes and Mcallister 1995; Kluegel 1980; Perry et al. 1980; Tamney, Powell, and Johnson 1989). “Religious none” refers to people who do not associate with a religion, but does not specify whether such a person previously associated with a religion or not. Additionally, the label “none” says nothing about the personal or private religiosity of those who fit the label. “Religious nones” could be highly orthodox in their religious beliefs but simply choose not to associate with a religious body. They could also fall into the “spiritual but not religious” category that is gaining popularity. In the sense that these individuals do not have a religious association, the label may make sense for those who fall into this group. This term is widely used in the sociology of

religion, occurring 3,640 times in the journals examined (see Figure 1).

“None” is widely used, but it is also a value-laden term. “None” is the absence of some. None seems to suggest these individuals are without something and, in this context, they are: institutional religious identification. As their lack of an association is part of their identity, this appears to be a situation where a seemingly pejorative term is, in fact, an acceptable term given the frame of reference. If the comparison between “nones” and “affiliates” or “identifiers” focused on something other than associating with a religious institution, like morals or values, the label “none” would be wholly inappropriate. But assuming the term “none” is limited strictly to the lack of an association with organized religion, it is accurate to say that people who have no religion are “nones.” However, this should not be taken to imply anything beyond their non-association with a religion. Again, our discussion of terminology is limited to the belonging or identification dimension of religiosity. That someone is a none says nothing about their moral or ethical worldview, which can, of course, be rooted in purely secular values (e.g., secular humanism). It also says nothing about whether they choose to associate with secular organizations reflecting their secular values (e.g., American Atheists, Center for Inquiry).

Given the limited scope implied by our usage here and the already widespread use of the term “none” in the sociological literature to refer to these individuals, this term is the one we recommend to refer to any individuals who do not identify with a religion, despite recognizing the negative connotation. Formally, then,

- *none: a person who does not associate with a religion*

One alternative label to “none” that initially seems appealing is “religious independent,” a label put forth by Glenn Vernon nearly 40 years ago (1968). However, this term is somewhat confusing in

this context as it does not necessarily suggest no religion but rather someone having religion that is independent from denominational groups (a.k.a. non-denominational), just like some people are engaged politically, but not involved with a particular religious party. Thus, we recommend against using the term “religious independent.” It appears others have arrived at a similar conclusion, giving how seldom the term has been used, just 124 times over the last 40+ years in the sociology of religion (see Figure 1).

A subcategory of religious nones are individuals who associate with a religion for a time then leave and cease to associate with any and all religions. There have been some suggestions as to a label for these people. Bahr and Albrecht (1989), following Roozen (1980), employ the term “dropout” to describe such individuals, as do others (Albrecht and Bahr 1983; Hoge 1981, 1988; Wilson and Sherkat 1994). Dropout has been used regularly in the sociological literature, occurring in various forms 2,706 times in the journals and periods analyzed.

Obviously, “dropout” has negative connotations. A “dropout” in the context of schooling or the military is someone who was unable or unwilling to “endure to the end” in the pursuit of some positive goal, like graduating from high school or completing basic training. Just as exiters do not call themselves “apostates,” those who were raised religious who leave rarely consider themselves “dropouts” (Bromley 1988).^{vii} Rather than accept the pejorative label “dropout,” then, we suggest a different term: “re-nones.” The term is descriptive of the status of such individuals as it indicates they were born without an association with a religion, spent some time associating with a religion, but no longer associate with a religion. They have returned to disidentified status. Formally:

- *re-none: a person who leaves a religion and becomes a religious none (specifying that they were born as a none is superfluous but implied by the terminology)*

There is an additional subgroup of “religious nones”: those raised without a religious

association who remain unassociated with religion. Such individuals are usually raised by non-religious parents or by religiously heterogeneous parents (Kosmin et al. 2009; McCarthy 2007). The most widely used term for this group of individuals is “unchurched,” having occurred 428 times in the journals analyzed. There is some disagreement over the meaning of this label, as some use it to refer to individuals raised without a religious association who never join a religion (Hoge 1981; Hunsberger 1983), but other scholars have defined “unchurched” differently. The Princeton Religious Research Center’s “Unchurched American” studies (1978, 1988) define “unchurched” as, “a person who is not a member of a church or synagogue or who has not attended church or synagogue in the last six months, apart from weddings, funerals, or special holidays such as Christmas, Easter, or Yom Kippur.” This definition is illustrative of just how pro-religious terminology can be, as the label is basically applied to everyone who is not actively engaged in religion, including: re-nones, those who never had an association with religion, and individuals who have simply stopped attending (a.k.a. “disengagers”). This difference in definition presents a good opportunity to illustrate how unclear definitions can result in misleading findings (Chafetz 1978). By grouping the “unchurched” with “re-nones” and “disengagers,” The Princeton Research Center’s study convolutes the differences that exist between these groups. Cragun (2007) finds that the unchurched are significantly different from re-nones in two important ways: re-nones are significantly more likely to have migrated from the region in which they were raised than are native nones, and re-nones are more likely to have married someone with a religious affiliation different than the one they had at age 16 than are native nones.^{viii} By grouping native nones in with re-nones and disengagers, The Princeton Research Center researchers fail to find significant and important differences that exist between these groups.

As is the case with many of the terms used to describe the non-religious, “unchurched” has a connotation that makes it unlikely such individuals would use the term themselves: it suggests that they

should be “churched” or have a religious affiliation. This is revealing of the normative nature of much of the terminology used by sociologists in describing those without a religious affiliation: it suggests that this is a deviant position that should be remedied. Given the pejorative nature of the term “unchurched,” we suggest an alternative term, “native nones.” “Native nones,” like “re-nones,” is reflective of both the fact that such individuals do not associate with a religion and were raised that way. Formally, then:

- *native none: a person raised without a religious association who has not joined a religion*

“IDENTIFIERS”

The last group of labels we discuss is for people who associate with religions. Individuals who associate with religions are a broad group that includes converts who have never switched or exited (i.e., “loyalists,” see below) and “switchers.” The obvious labels for this broad category are “affiliate” and/or “identifier,” both of which are frequently used in various forms (affiliate has been used 9,269 times; identifier has been used 12,842 times).

While the previous paragraph suggests that “identifier” and “affiliate” are interchangeable, and they commonly are used interchangeably, the terms actually have slightly different meanings that were hinted at in our earlier discussion of “disaffiliate” and “disidentify.” “Affiliates” are formal members of religions, but have, in a sense, given the institution control over their religious identity. In other words, the institution determines their membership or “affiliation” status through things like baptismal records or excommunication proceedings. “Identifiers,” on the other hand, self-identify with a religious institution, but retain control over their religious identity by self-determination. Thus, an identifier could have been excommunicated from a religion yet retain an identification with that religion despite no longer technically being an affiliate. We prefer “identifier” over “affiliate” as most

surveys ask for self-identification and not formal affiliation. Formally, then,

- *identifier: a person who self-identifies as being associated with an organized religion*
- *affiliate: a person who claims formal membership status in an organized religion*

Neither “identifier” nor “affiliate” speaks to the past history of current identifiers or affiliates. There are two groups of identifiers/affiliates: converts who have not switched, and switchers. There are no “native identifiers/affiliates” as all individuals who associate themselves with religions started out as nones. Thus, there are only non-switching converts and switching converts.

In our review of the literature, we found just two terms that refer to various types of identifiers. The first term is “stayer,” which refers to individuals who were raised religious and remained so, but does not specify whether they have switched. Variants of “stayer” have occurred 1,318 times in the journals we examined. However, this term is inaccurate unless one is comparing childhood religiosity to adult religiosity, as all identifiers/affiliates are converts, having been born nones.

The second term we found was “loyalists,” which refers to individuals who were raised in a religion (post-conversion from none, of course) who have remained in that religion and have not switched. Thus, these individuals are non-switching or one-time converts to religion. This term has been used with a moderate degree of frequency, occurring 1,754 times over the last 40+ years. Wilson and Sherkat (1994) used the term “loyalists” in their study of individuals who return to religious activity, but include in that group “native nones.” Technically, native nones are “loyalists,” but loyal “nones.” In this sense, their classification makes sense. But it is problematic when you consider that what keeps people nones may differ substantially from what keeps people religious loyalists (Hadaway and Roof 1979). Wilson and Sherkat recognize this problem in the limitations section of their paper.

The term “loyalist,” of course, is a biased term, but biased in the opposite direction to all of the

terms referring to those who leave – it is positively biased. Loyalty suggests positive traits; it suggests endurance, fealty, commitment, and devotion. Given the bias and the fact that these individuals are simply non-switching converts, we recommend that sociologists not use this term to describe identifiers.

OVERVIEW OF THE TERMINOLOGY

While our intention here is not to dictate every instance when one should favor one term over another, we do believe consensus in terminology will facilitate research in the field (Bromley 1988; Chafetz 1978). In this vein, we propose using the definitions in Table 1 that are not shaded. We discourage using terms that are shaded as they are biased.

To help readers visualize the relationships between these terms we created a Venn diagram that depicts the overlaps and distinctions (see Figure 2). As the figure illustrates, there is substantial overlap between the convert and exiter groups. In fact, all exiters are also converts – they all experience changes in religious identity. The implication of this fact is that “One person's apostate is another person's convert.”^{ix} Or, to put it in the less pejorative sense, “One person's exiter is another person's convert.”

[Insert Figure 2 here]

Readers should also keep in mind that many of these labels are fluid as they apply to specific periods in peoples' lives. For instance, a person can transition from a “switcher” to a “taster” to a “re-none.” Thus, while an individual may have one label at one point in his/her life, that label is not necessarily static.

We also want to note here that even our recommended terminology suffers from some degree of ambiguity. For instance, the term *exiter* can refer to someone who joins a religion for the first time, switches religions, or leaves religion altogether. That is a little confusing, admittedly. However, it does reflect the complex and often times confusing nature of religion and religious/irreligious identification. We believe Figure 2 is a helpful illustration of the terminology that may reduce the ambiguity in usage in the future.

TWO DIMENSIONS

Astute readers will notice that all of the above definitions are limited to just one dimension of religious change – religious association or belonging. This is intentional. However, extending the above ideas to levels of commitment results in a typology as depicted in Figure 3. The two squares to the right of the figure are “*identifiers*”; the two squares on the left are “*nones*.” The other dimension relates to level of commitment. Religiosity is multi-dimensional (Hill and Hood 1999), but in a sense it can be broken down into a continuum reflecting level of commitment, ranging from highly committed to one's religious/secular views to having very little commitment to one's religious/secular views (Kosmin 2007). We dichotomized this into two groups in the figure: “*hard*” on the top and “*soft*” on the bottom, following the terminology of Kosmin (2007) in referring to the different types of seculars.

[Insert Figure 3 here]

We include this figure because the terminology detailed above is inherently limiting; it focuses on just the one dimension of religious change – from none to identifying. However, in order to truly understand religious change you must understand it in *at least* two dimensions – affiliation and level of commitment. This is, of course, a major simplification as we are suggesting that all of the other

dimensions of religiosity (some estimate as many as 8 dimensions) are subsumed by commitment. We recognize this simplification, but do not address it in this paper as it would push us outside the focus of the paper.

The figure does lead one to ask: Are there really people who fall into each of the squares in the typology? The answer, of course, is yes. Hard nones are individuals committed to their secular beliefs and values (e.g., Richard Dawkins). Soft nones do not affiliate with a religion but often retain many religious beliefs and may consider themselves spiritual (Zinnbauer et al. 1997). Almost 50% of individuals who report no religious affiliation fall into the “soft none” category (Kosmin et al. 2009; Storm 2008). There are, of course, varying levels of religious commitment among those who identify with religion, a fact that has long been noted and been associated with various findings, including varied levels of prejudice (Allport and Ross 1967).

PRO-RELIGIOUS HEGEMONY

After reviewing the widely used terminology in the sociology of religion, it should be apparent to readers that much of the terminology used in the sociology of religion frames religious association and high religious commitment as the norm and exiting and non-religion as deviant. Granted, “religion” **IS** the frame of reference. But this begs the question: Why is RELIGION the frame of reference, especially when not everyone experiences a portion of their life as a religious identifier, but everyone does spend a portion of their life as a none? Being non-religious is the default category; it is the position at which we all start and is the position many millions of Americans now hold (Kosmin et al. 2009).

The answer lies in the social construction of deviance. Kitsuse (1962), in conjunction with his

work on social problems, argued that deviance is not the act itself but rather “the processes by which persons come to be defined as deviant by others” (p. 248). The construction of deviance is tied to claims-making: groups of people develop an argument and claim that some phenomenon is a social problem. Liazos (1972) and Troyer and Markle (1982) argue that institutions are one of the social entities that have the requisite power to label something “deviant.” Troyer and Markle argue that individuals and/or institutions best able to mobilize resources will be the most likely to win in a fight between opposing systems of moralities. At its heart, the designation of deviance is an issue of status conflict and competition – whichever group loses this competition comes to be labeled as deviant, leaving the winner to be seen as normative and “better.”

This insight is of particular relevance to our discussion of terminology for the non-religious. Of the four largest professional organizations of sociologists of religion – Society for the Scientific Study of Religion (SSSR), Association for the Sociology of Religion (ASR), Religious Researchers Association (RRA), and the International Society for the Sociology of Religion (ISSR) – three were started as either organizations run by religions (ASR and ISSR) or as a group of scholars employed by religions (RRA). The RRA remains the only association that is closely allied with religion, though it is non-denominational. The RRA was founded in 1951 “under the auspices of the Institute of Social and Religious Research in association with the Federal Council of Churches” (Religious Research Association 2010). The RRA has four goals: (1) To increase understanding of the function of religion in persons and society through application of social scientific and other scholarly methods; (2) To promote the circulation, interpretation and use of the findings of religious research among religious bodies and other interested groups; (3) To cooperate with other professional societies, groups and individuals interested in the study of religion; and (4) To aid in the professional development of religious researchers (Religious Research Association 2010). Many of the members of the RRA are

researchers employed by religions who are tasked with helping the religions better understand their members and their wants/needs as well as helping them retain members and gain new ones. The RRA is a pro-religious association of scholars.

The ASR was founded in 1938 as the American Catholic Sociological Society, “to conduct scientific research in an atmosphere congenial to religious faith” (Association for the Sociology of Religion 2010). The change to the Association for the Sociology of Religion was in 1971. While the ASR is no longer affiliated with the Catholic Church, the original mission was, by the organizations own admission, pro-religious.

The ISSR was founded in 1948 by Jacques Leclerg, professor of moral and social philosophy at the Catholic University of Louvain in Belgium (Dobbelaere 2010). The purpose of the association was “to stimulate a methodologically well-founded empirical study of social facts, i.e., the religious situation, in order to promote an efficacious pastoral action” (Dobbelaere 2010). In other words, the goal was to help religions. While Leclerg's original aim was a non-denominational association of scholars, his vision was short-lived. In 1951 the ISSR, then called “La Conference Internationale de Sociologie Religieuse” or “International Conference for Religious Sociology” (CISR), was literally taken over by the Catholic Church. As a result, the association became “an instrument to improve the methodology of socio-religious research, in order to improve the validity and reliability of the sociological studies done for the bishops” (Dobbelaere 2010). Dobbelaere summarizes the state of the ISSR through the 1960s, “All in all, up into the sixties, CISR practiced a special type of sociology of religion: “religious sociology”. This type of “sociology” was self-sufficient, particular, mostly at the service of one church, and “sociological” only in its methods. The Catholic church clearly wanted to control the output of religious sociology, and CISR could defend itself against the Holy See only by stressing its methodological objectives and the services it could provide for the Church.” In other

words, ISSR was run by and for the Catholic Church through the 1960s. While it is no longer run by the Catholic Church, the origins were clearly pro-religious.

The historical connections of these three professional organizations to religions, two of them to the Catholic Church, likely laid the foundation for the negative portrayal of religious exiters and religious nones. The Catholic Church and the Federal Council of Churches (now “The National Council of the Churches of Christ in the USA” or NCC) are large, powerful institutions. The Catholic Church claims over 1 billion members, and the NCC has over 45 million adherents in the U.S. Their size and power allow them to dictate the state of the religious landscape, including labeling those who fall outside of their domain or who leave it as “deviants,” resulting in the negative terminology outlined above. The terminology used to refer to the non-religious and exiters was developed in these associations while they were explicitly pro-religious. As far as resource mobilization goes – this was not even a contest. When the terminology was developed to refer to the non-religious, religions were organized and enormous compared to the ranks of the non-religious. Any competition over which group would be labeled deviant was over before it began: the non-religious lost because they had virtually no representation among those doing the labeling and certainly could not muster the resources to compete with these institutional hegemonies. As a result, the existing terminology reflects the biases of those institutions and institutional members who founded these scholarly associations.

But what about the unaffiliated SSSR? The SSSR was founded in 1949, after the ASR and ISSR, which means the other two associations had a chance to lay the foundations of the terminology before the SSSR came into existence. But there are two other explanations for why this terminology is also found in the JSSR. First, many members of the SSSR are also members of the RRA, ASR, and ISSR and always have been. Given the overlap in membership, the overlap in terminology is not surprising. But there is another possible explanation: the religious makeup of members of the SSSR.

Cragun (2004), using a sample of scholars affiliated with the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion, found that 86% identify with a religion; 14% do not. Those numbers were comparable to the general public in 2001 (Kosmin et al. 2001), but are higher than for other professors/scientists, among whom only 81% identify with a religion (Iannaccone, R. Stark, and R. Finke 1998). Additionally, members of the SSSR are almost twice as likely to attend religious services as the general public, with 72% reporting religious service attendance at least monthly (55% attend weekly or more often), compared to 40% in the general public and 38% of other professors/scientists (Iannaccone et al. 1998). In other words, even among the professional organization that is not and never has been formally affiliated with a religion, the membership is quite religious.

Why do the affiliation of professional organizations with religions and the religiosity of sociologists of religion matter? We believe they matter because they have made religious affiliation normative and non-religion deviant (Vernon 1969). The association of non-religion with deviance is not just implicit in the literature. Deviance, and theories of deviance, have been used to explain religious exiting for decades in the sociology of religion and continue to be used in this fashion (see Tamney 1980; Uecker, Regnerus, and Vaaler 2007; Zito 1983; though see Spray and Marx 1969 for an article that suggests apostasy is not deviant for therapists). In short, those with power and resources, both institutions and the majority of scholars in this area, have used that power to portray non-religion as a deviant status.

That deviant status is reinforced by the terminology used in the discipline. If the labels we use speak to our underlying biases (Bosmajian 1983; Goffman 1986), the labels used to describe the non-religious and those who leave religions clearly reflect the pro-religious hegemony of the sociology of religion. Since the sociology of religion is interested in “religion,” that which is not religion is contrasted with that which is. This is the nature of the area of study. In this sense, we do not think it is

prejudicial to call those who have no religious affiliation “nones,” as religion is not a part of their identity. But to call them “apostates” or the “unchurched” clearly suggests a favoritism towards religion. In fact, there is not a single, widely used term in the sociology of religion to refer to those (1) without a religious identity, (2) those who change their religious identity, or (3) those who lower their commitment to religion that is not at least somewhat pejorative: apostate, dropout, defector, deserter, none, disaffiliate, disidentifier, disengager, unchurched, deconvert, taster, and switcher. Contrast those terms with the terms used to describe religious affiliates who join a religion or remain members – stayers, loyalists, and converts – and the bias in the terminology is apparent.

That religious nones are labeled relative to religion is probably because historically the majority of people were religious. But that is changing in most developed countries. Religious affiliates/identifiers are increasingly the minority in developed countries around the world (Mason, Singleton, and Webber 2008; Norris and Inglehart 2004). In some countries they make up less than 50% of the population (Zuckerman 2006). Calling the sub-field of sociology that studies religion the “sociology of religion” or calling the ASA section that studies religion the “ASA Section on Sociology of Religion” makes sense when religion is statistically normative. In much of the world, including the U.S., religion remains statistically normative (Norris and Inglehart 2004; Zuckerman 2006). But what happens when religion ceases to be statistically normative, as secularization theory suggests will happen (Bruce 2002)? If religion ceases to be statistically normative around the world, like it has in much of Western Europe, will the sociology of religion become “the sociology of secularism?” Will it continue to be called “the sociology of religion,” but the religious will come to be seen as the deviants and not those without religion, making the sociology of religion similar to the sociology of deviance? Or will the sociology of religion dissolve, leaving the study of religion to historians?

Finally, some religious nones have taken it upon themselves to offer alternative labels as they

no longer want to be labeled by what they are not (Dan Barker 2006; Dawkins 2008; Dennett 2006). The terms they have suggested – “freethinkers,” “brights,” “rationalists,” – reverse the roles, painting the religious as deviant (Dennett 2006). Given the discussion of terminology above, there is certainly some reason to think that being religious is a non-normative state: all children are born non-religious and have to be taught to be religious. Thus, in a sense, being religious is deviant. But the goal of this article is not to simply claim that being religious is deviant but to move past delineations of deviance or non-deviance and offer terms that are fair, neutral, and that minimize bias as much as possible. Removing all bias from terminology is, of course, impossible. But it does seem like sociologists should have more to offer than labels that reflect, implicitly or explicitly, a tradition of pro-religious hegemony. It may no longer be the case that members of these organizations consider religious exiting and non-religion deviant and that institutional inertia is maintaining the use of this terminology. But there is power in language; a good way to illustrate that the bias of the founders of the discipline is no longer extant would be to discontinue the use of pejorative terminology.

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- i Provided here is a complete list of the stem terms included in the searches:
- exiter: exit, exits, exiter, exiters, exiting, exited
 - disaffiliate: disaffiliation, disaffiliate, disaffiliated, disaffiliates, disaffiliating, disaffiliation, disaffiliative
 - disidentifier: disidentification, disidentified, disidentifiers, disidentify
 - apostate: apostacy, apostates, apostasies, apostasized, apostasy, apostate, apostatea, apostates, apostatize, apostatized, apostatizing
 - deserter: desert, deserted, deserters, deserting, desertion, desertions
 - switcher: switch, switched, switcher, switchers, switches, switching, switchover
 - taster: tasted, taster, tasters, tastes, tasting, tastings
 - defector: defect, defected, defecting, defection, defections, defector, defectors, defects
 - convert: convert, converted, converter, converters, converting, converts
 - deconvert: deconversion, deconvert, deconverting
 - none: none, nones
 - religious independents: “religious independent,” “religious independents”
 - dropout: dropout, dropouts, “dropped out,” “drop out”
 - unchurched: unchurch, unchurched, unchurching, unchurchly
 - identifier: identified, identifies, identification, identificational, identifications, identified, identifier, identifiers, identifies, identify, identifying
 - affiliate: affiliation, affiliate, affiliated, affiliates, affiliating, affiliation, affiliational, affiliations, affiliative, affiliators
 - stayer: stay, stayed, stayer, stayers, staying, stays
 - loyalist: loyal, loyalism, loyalist, loyalists, loyalties, loyalty, loyally
- ii This is the approach used in naming living things: a genus and a species modifier.
- iii The religion does not remove people from the membership roles unless they formally resign or are over the age of 110 and are not active in the religion (Phillips 2006). Thus, people who no longer attend or self-identify as Mormons are still considered “members” in the affiliation sense, though not in the self-identification sense.
- iv We should also note that there are many more colorful labels used by loyalists to describe apostates, as Stuart Wright mentioned during a paper presentation of these definitions at the 2006 SSSR meetings. All such terms are useful for examining the “framing” of apostates by loyalists, but should not, generally, be used by researchers to describe apostates when labels free of negative connotations exist.
- v “Family” generally refers to the five world religions and their derivatives: Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Buddhism, and Hinduism (Kurtz 2006).
- vi We can envision someone creating a “conversion scale” that is used to indicate who “true” converts are and who are simply converts in “name” only. Such a “conversion scale” would further support the hegemony of religion by suggesting that there is a right way and a wrong way to convert.
- vii This assertion is also partially based on our reading of dozens of books on the subject and the stories of many people who have left.
- viii In Cragun's (2007) study, he found that, while both dropouts and the unchurched were significantly more likely to marry “religious nones” than were loyalists, switchers, or first-timers, there is an important nuance in this finding that leads to religious change. Dropouts were religious, and their marrying a non-religious individual is a major factor in leading them to dropout. The unchurched, on the other hand, married someone like them. Thus, the difference is noteworthy as it keeps the “unchurched” “religious nones” while it leads affiliates to drop out.
- ix We use the pejorative label “apostate” here purely for effect. Also, the idiom we are evolving here is “One person's terrorist is another person's freedom fighter.”

Table 1. Religious change terminology.

exiter	any person who leaves a religion
disaffiliate	a person who leaves a religion by formally requesting their name be removed from the membership roles of the religion
disidentifier	a person who leaves a religion by no longer self-identifying as a member of the religion
apostate	a person who leaves a religion and then fights against that religion
deserter	a person who leaves a religion with no intention of returning
switcher	a person who leaves a religion and joins another religion
within family switcher	someone who leaves a religion and joins a religion that belongs to the same broad religious family (e.g., Methodist to Baptist)
between family switcher	a person who leaves a religion and joins a religion that belongs to a different broad religious family (e.g., Catholic to Buddhist)
taster	a person who repetitively joins and leaves religions
defector	a person who leaves a religion with the intent of joining a rival group
convert	anyone who experiences a change in religious identity
deconvert	a person who leaves a religion
none	a person who does not associate with a religion
re-none	a person who leaves a religion and becomes a religious none
native none	a person raised without a religious identity who has not joined a religion
religious independent	a person with no religious affiliation
dropout	a person who leaves a religion and becomes a religious none
unchurched	a person raised without a religious affiliation who has never joined one
identifier	a person who self-identifies as being associated with an organized religion
affiliate	a person who claims formal membership status in an organized religion
stayer	a person who was raised with a religious affiliation and remains religiously affiliated later in life, regardless of any changes in affiliation
loyalist	a person raised with a specific religious affiliation who maintains that affiliation later in life

* Terms shaded are either terms with a pejorative connotation that we suggest should not be used except in the context of reporting how those who still belong to a religion view those who have left, terms that are not widely used but have been used, or terms that are confusing in this context and we recommend should not be used.

Figure 1. Frequency of Terms in JSSR (1961-2007) and SofR (1961-2007).

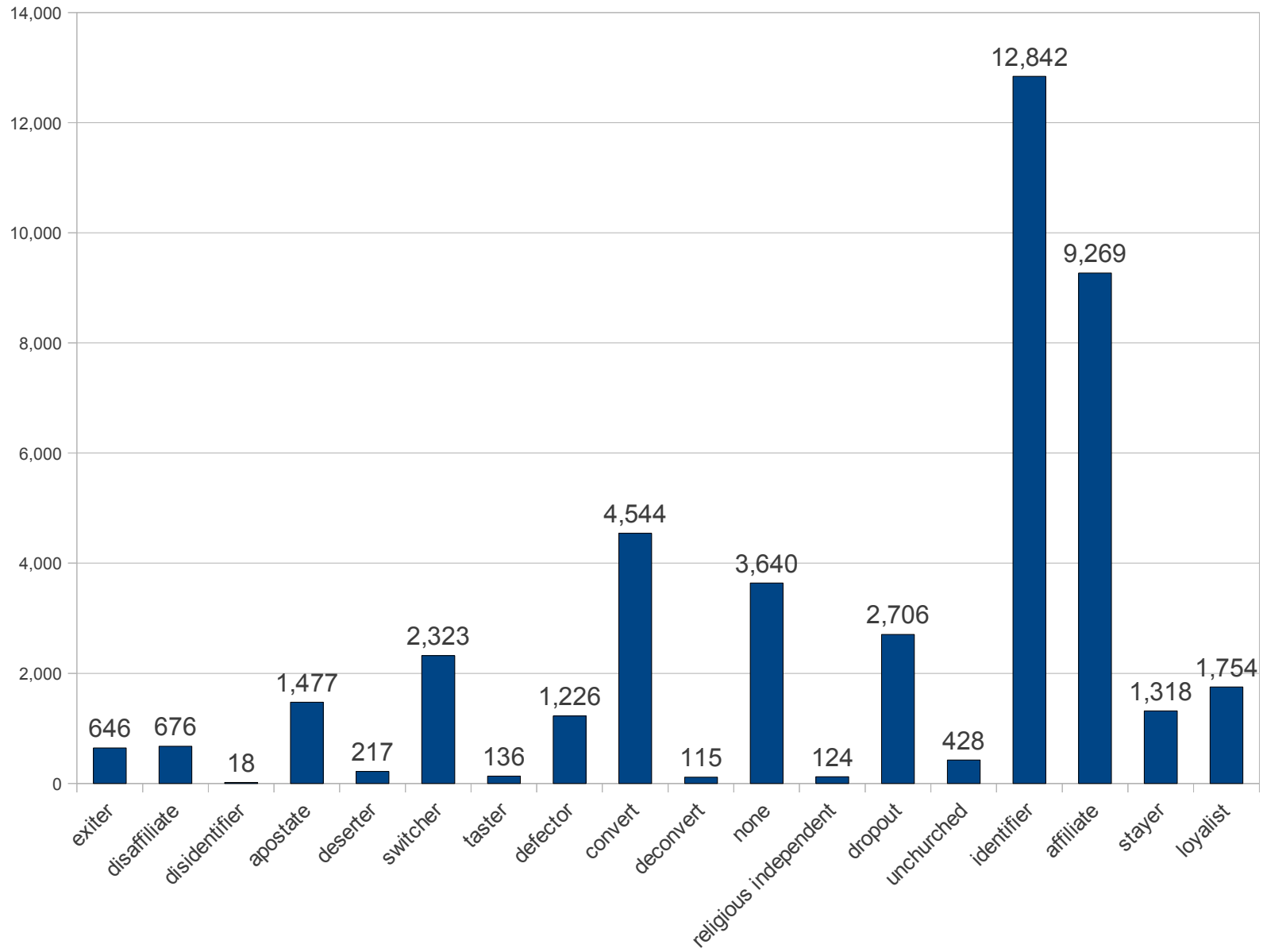


Figure 2. Venn diagram of religious change terminology.

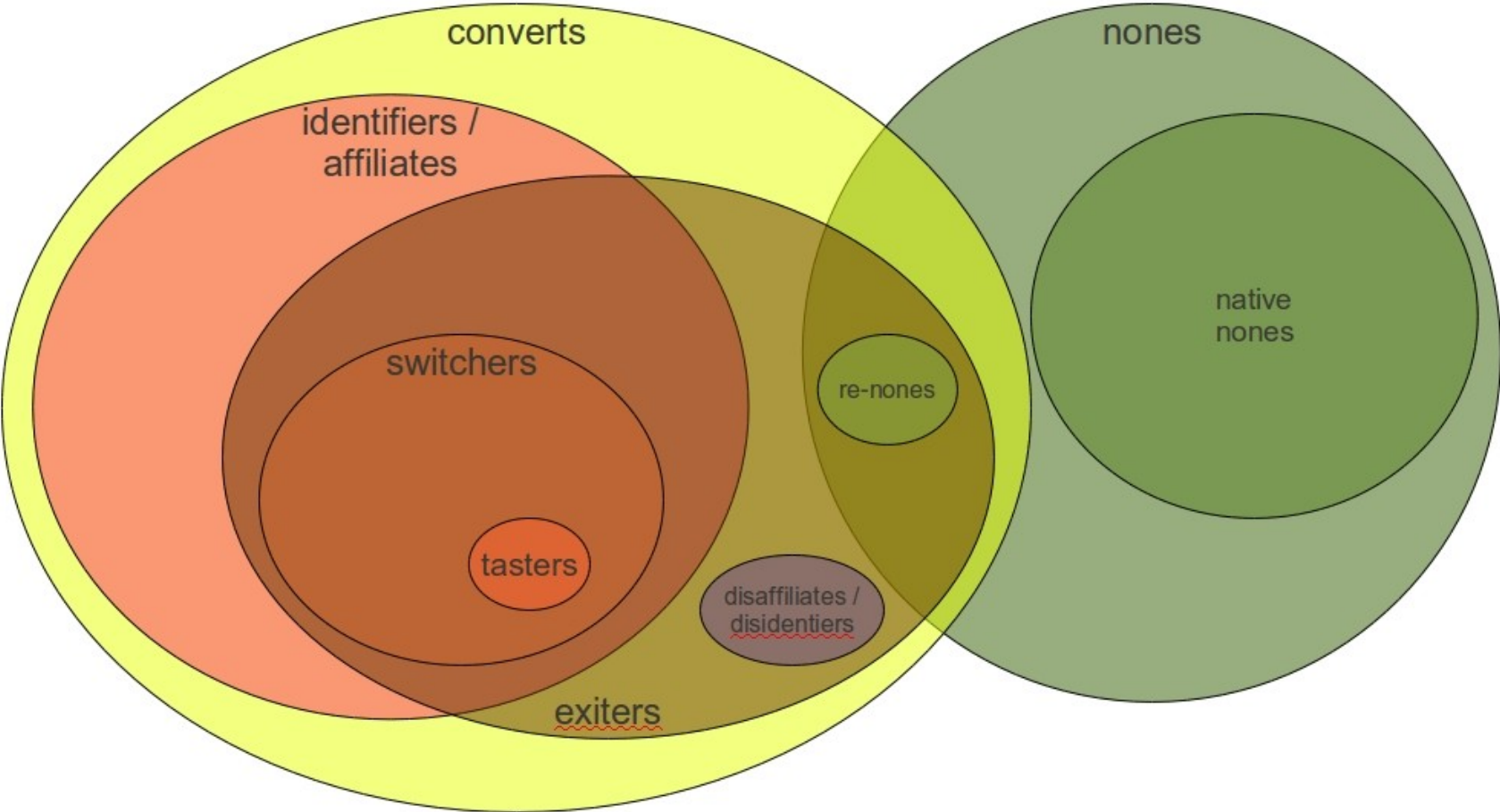


Figure 3. The two dimensions of religious change terminology.

