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Personality and values of deconverts: a function of current nonbelief or prior religious socialisation?

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ABSTRACT

Research has established meaningful relationships of religiosity and spirituality with personality and values. Little though is known regarding those who have exited faith. Do they resemble socialised believers, due to their prior religious education, or socialised nonbelievers given their current nonbelief? Data from 404 adults in a secularised country (Belgium) indicated that deconverts were more similar to socialised nonbelievers regarding neuroticism and decreased conservative values – characteristics that were functions of current nonbelief. But they were midway, approaching socialised believers regarding increased spirituality and benevolence and, partly due to age differences, decreased power and hedonism – trends that were functions of religious education. Spirituality denoted, across all groups, extended self-transcendence and self-direction, and, additionally, low power among the deconverts, but search for stimulation and novelty among the socialised nonbelievers. Thus, deconverts' abandon of faith may denote search for autonomy, whereas religious education may contribute to their endorsement of self-transcendence over materialistic values.

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deconversion; spirituality;
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Substantial previous research has established meaningful associations between, on the one hand, religiosity and spirituality, and, on the other hand, personality and values (Roccas & Elster, 2014; Saroglou, 2010). This has often been in terms of the five basic traits of personality model (extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, neuroticism and openness to experience) and the Schwartz values model. The latter identifies ten values organised into four poles of two bipolar axes, i.e., self-transcendence (benevolence, universalism) versus self-enhancement (power, achievement, and hedonism), and conservation (tradition, conformity, and security) versus openness to change (stimulation, self-direction).

Overall, religiosity is associated with both prosocial and order preservation-oriented dispositions (Roccas & Elster, 2014; Saroglou, 2010). These include agreeableness, conscientiousness, and occasionally extraversion; a limited scope of self-transcendence (high benevolence, but not universalism); and values denoting conservation vs. openness to change, i.e., high conformity and tradition, and low self-direction, stimulation, and hedonism. Spirituality denotes the more individual dimension of connection with a transcendent

reality and the universe and thus may be independent of tradition and institutions, whereas religiosity includes both an individual and a social dimension (Zinnbauer & Pargament, 2005). Thus, while spirituality shares with religiosity associations with agreeableness, conscientiousness, and benevolence, it is also related to openness to experience, extraversion/low neuroticism, and extended self-transcendence (universalism) over self-enhancement (thus, low power and occasionally low achievement) values (MacDonald, 2000; Saroglou & Muñoz-García, 2008; Saucier & Skrzypińska, 2006). The major trends of the above patterns of associations have been evidenced cross-culturally, with cultural factors influencing the strength rather than the direction of these relationships (Gebauer et al., 2014; Roccas & Elster, 2014; Saroglou, 2017).

Longitudinal and experimental research has provided evidence suggesting several possible causal directions. Personality dispositions such as agreeableness and conscientiousness may push some people to remain or become religious, particularly in contexts where religion is available and normative; and openness to experience predicts increase of spirituality years later (Saroglou, 2010, 2017, for reviews). There is also evidence that attachment insecurity, or more generally neuroticism, predicts later religious changes, including conversion or the abandonment of religion and faith (Granqvist & Kirkpatrick, 2016; Hui et al., 2018).

However, religiosity and religious changes may also shape personality, particularly characteristics at the second and third levels of personality, i.e., identity, values, and goals (Hardy et al., 2011a), but possibly also basic traits at the first level of personality (Huuskes et al., 2013; Wink et al., 2007). Moreover, religious socialisation, especially within the family, considerably influence children's and future adults' values (Uzefovsky et al., 2016). Finally, values (Schönplugg, 2001), religious attitudes (Miller, 2005), and certain personality tendencies (Duriez et al., 2008; Verhage et al., 2016) are intergenerationally transmitted. The associations between these three reflect common genetic and environmental influences (Kandler & Riemann, 2013; Lewis & Bates, 2013; Schermer et al., 2011).

Therefore, it is intriguing to identify the personality and values of those who deconvert, i.e., exit from and abandon religious faith. We refer here to people who have not only stopped practicing (this is a first step in exiting from religion; Wink et al., 2019), but have abandoned religious beliefs, in particular belief in God, and define themselves as no more religious. Two possible pathways may (co)exist. First, ending up as nonbelievers, deconverts may resemble, in personality and values, their nonbeliever peers who have been socialised as such. Second, having been religiously educated, deconverts may resemble, at least to some extent, socialised religious believers.

Specifically, on the one hand, if personality dispositions push people to continue being, become, or stop being, religious, then one could expect people lower in agreeableness and conscientiousness to be more likely to become nonbelievers. There indeed exists longitudinal evidence that low agreeableness in childhood predicts decreased religiosity in adulthood (McCullough et al., 2005; but not confirmed in Hui et al., 2018). This should be the case especially in young adulthood, when genetic influences on personality and religiosity become clearer (Button et al., 2011; Kandler & Riemann, 2013) and people gain their autonomy from the family's influence. Similar tendencies of lower prosociality and order-orientation should be observed regarding the values of deconverts: like the always nonbelievers, compared to the still religious, deconverts should emphasise

benevolence less and self-expansion values (power, achievement) more, and should attribute lower importance to conservation values and higher importance to openness to change values. Finally, deconverts, having made an important change in their religious trajectory, but also simply because of their current nonbelief, should be higher in neuroticism, compared to their still-religious peers, in line with previous research (Granqvist & Kirkpatrick, 2016; Hui et al., 2018; Streib et al., 2008).

On the other hand, the concurrent expectation is that religious family education and broader religious socialisation may have a lasting impact on deconverts' personality and values. Religious parents and environments may have transmitted, and thus shaped, prosocial and order-oriented personality and values tendencies. Thus, deconverts could be more like the believers than the nonbelievers, by showing higher agreeableness and conscientiousness, as well as stronger emphasis on benevolence and conservation values, and a lower emphasis on hedonistic and openness to change values. In this case, they may have abandoned religion for socio-cognitive reasons – seeing religion as irrational, inefficient, and outdated –, while maintaining the values transmitted by the (religious) family.

The coexistence of these two concurrent influences on personality and values – deconverts, as current nonbelievers, should be similar to socialised nonbelievers, but, as religiously educated, should be similar to the socialised religious – opens a third possibility. Deconverts maybe midway between the two other groups, i.e., traditional believers and traditional nonbelievers. Such midway would encompass traits and values of both the conservation vs. openness to change axis (order-oriented tendencies) and the self-transcendence vs. self-expansion and hedonism axis (other-oriented tendencies).

A complementary perspective is that people who abandon religion, at least some of them, may still be interested in spirituality (Streib et al., 2008; Willard & Norenzayan, 2017). Among nonbelievers in general, including those socialised as such, some are attached to spirituality. Spirituality implies the belief that there exists something that transcends humans and the world, and that all beings are interconnected and should be seen with great respect (Piedmont, 1999). Some deconverts may thus maintain thoughts, affects, values, and behaviour denoting a connection with a transcendent reality and the universe, without necessarily endorsing beliefs, practices, and affiliation as defined by religious traditions and institutions. The question thus arises as to whether non(religious)believers, including deconverts, who possibly endorse spirituality, more closely resemble the religious or the nonreligious in their personality and values. The very definition of spirituality and its personality and value correlates found in previous research should imply prosocial and self-transcendent inclinations, but it is unclear whether nonbelievers' spirituality should denote order- or openness to change-oriented inclinations.

Previous research indicating similarities and differences between religiosity and spirituality in personality and values (Li & Chow, 2015; MacDonald, 2000; Piedmont, 1999; Saroglou & Muñoz-García, 2008; Saucier & Skrzypińska, 2006) has mostly confounded religious believers' spirituality with nonbelievers' spirituality. Moreover, emerging research on those who are "spiritual but not religious" has mostly investigated cognition and thinking (theistic beliefs, intuitive thinking, cognitive biases, paranormal beliefs) and not basic personality traits and value hierarchies (Johnson et al., 2018; Lindeman et al., 2019; Willard & Norenzayan, 2017). Nevertheless, we identified three studies that compared on the five personality traits the "spiritual but not religious" with the religious believers (but not the non-spiritual nonbelievers; Schnell, 2012), normative data (Streib et al., 2016), or the

religious believers and the non-spiritual nonbelievers (Lace et al., 2019). Results were rather inconsistent across these studies, except that nonbelief and/or spirituality among nonbelievers seemed to denote high openness to experience and neuroticism.

To investigate the above questions, i.e., whether deconverts and the spiritual nonreligious more closely resemble, in their personality and values, socialised believers or socialised nonbelievers, or are in the middle between the two, we carried out a study in an adult sample in a typical Western secularised European country, i.e., Belgium, a country of predominant Catholic tradition, but with also strong presence of organised secularism. By its nature, the study was rather exploratory. Importantly, with respect to previous research, we compared the deconverts not only to the socialised religious but also to the socialised nonreligious, and we investigated the personality and values correlates of spirituality distinctly for the nonbelievers (deconverts and socialised) and the religious believers.

Method

Participants

Participants were 404 adults (mean age = 32.74; $SD = 15.57$; range = 17–83), mostly women (319), living in Belgium (Belgian citizenship: 83%), and of various professional statuses (52% students). They self-identified as Catholics (32.4%), Protestants (5.2%), Buddhists (1.5%), Muslims (1%), atheists (28%), agnostics (23.3%), and “other” (8.6%). In responding to a question on religious trajectory (see below), they self-identified as socialised religious (126), deconverts (123), converts (32), or socialised nonbelievers (123). Among the deconverts, 70% self-identified as atheists (40%) or agnostics (30%). Among the socialised nonbelievers, 89% self-identified as atheists (50%) or agnostics (39%). Participants were recruited through the snowball technique, starting from acquaintances of the second author.

Measures

Participants were administered online measures of personality, values, and religiosity/spirituality. No other measures were administered. The five basic traits of personality, i.e., extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, neuroticism, and openness to experience, were measured through the *Ten Item Personality Inventory* (Gosling et al., 2003, seven-point Likert scales here). Then ten values as in Schwartz’s model (security, conformity, tradition, benevolence, universalism, self-direction, stimulation, hedonism, power, and achievement) were measured through the 21-item *Portrait Values Questionnaire* (six-point scales) developed for the European Social Survey (Bilsky et al., 2010; see also Cieciuch et al., 2018).

Religiosity was measured through a widely used index of three items measuring the importance of God and the importance of religion in one’s own life, as well as the frequency of prayer; and importance of *spirituality* was measured with a one-item index (Saroglou & Muñoz-García, 2008, seven-point scales). We also administered eight items from the *Spiritual Transcendence Scale* (Piedmont, 1999, five-point Likert scales here) belonging to the two major subscales of Universality and Connectedness. Respective sample items

are “There is a higher plane of consciousness or spirituality that binds all people” and “I am a link in the chain of my family’s heritage, a bridge between past and future”.

Moreover, participants were asked to select one of the four propositions: (1) “I grew up in a family that gave me a religious education, and today I believe in God”, (2) “I grew up in a family that gave me a religious education, but today I do not believe in God”, (3) “I did not grow up in a family with religious education, but today I believe in God”, and (4) “I did not grow up in a family with religious education, and today I do not believe in God”. This question served to classify the participants into one of the four *religious trajectory groups*. Finally, to measure participants’ relative *preference for (ir)religion and/or (non)spirituality*, we asked them to select one of four propositions: “I self-identify as (1) religious rather than spiritual, (2) equally religious and spiritual, (3) spiritual rather than religious, or (4) nonreligious and nonspiritual”.

Results

Between group comparisons

Means and standard deviations for all measures, distinctly by religious trajectory group, are detailed in Table 1. The same Table 1 details the results of a MANOVA analysis for all measures, as well as the significant post-hoc comparisons (Tukey tests). Given their very small sample size (32), we did not retain the converts for the group comparisons.

Overall, the three groups were different, $F(2, 372) = 16.33$, $p < .001$, Wilk’s $\Lambda = 0.282$, partial $\eta^2 = .47$. Differences between the three groups were found in religiosity, spirituality,

Table 1. Descriptive statistics for all variables, distinctly by group, and comparison tests.

Variables	Socialised religious 1. <i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)	Deconverts 2. <i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)	Soc. Non- religious 3. <i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)	Comparisons <i>F</i> ^a	Post-hoc
Personality					
Extraversion	4.12 (1.24)	4.23 (1.62)	4.02 (1.35)	.69 (1.08)	
Agreeableness	5.39 (1.15)	5.51 (1.15)	5.31 (1.07)	1.02 (1.34)	
Conscientiousness	5.69 (1.17)	5.69 (1.14)	5.54 (1.19)	.66 (.40)	
Neuroticism	3.68 (1.37)	4.11 (1.43)	4.17 (1.41)	4.63* (2.34 [†])	1 < 2*, 1 < 3*
Openness to Exp.	5.03 (1.33)	5.19 (1.29)	5.38 (1.11)	2.45 [†] (1.58)	1 < 3 [†]
Values					
Security	4.22 (1.11)	4.05 (1.21)	3.87 (1.04)	3.07* (1.85)	1 > 3*
Conformity	3.50 (1.09)	3.05 (1.16)	2.94 (1.03)	9.24*** (8.28***)	1 > 2***, 1 > 3***
Tradition	3.66 (1.04)	2.36 (.85)	2.25 (.80)	94.10*** (73.08***)	1 > 2***, 1 > 3***
Benevolence	5.31 (.64)	5.23 (.68)	5.12 (.74)	2.45 [†] (5.13**)	1 > 3 [†]
Universalism	5.11 (.70)	5.11 (.61)	5.16 (.64)	.24 (.13)	
Self-Direction	4.39 (.86)	4.60 (.91)	4.62 (.92)	2.55 [†] (1.80)	1 < 3 [†]
Stimulation	3.22 (1.22)	3.46 (1.17)	3.62 (1.16)	3.54* (1.09)	1 > 3*
Hedonism	4.31 (1.15)	4.61 (1.02)	4.87 (.93)	9.10*** (1.84)	1 < 2 [†] , 1 < 3*
Power	2.37 (.96)	2.32 (.91)	2.61 (1.02)	3.19* (1.55)	2 < 3*
Achievement	3.25 (1.25)	3.49 (1.28)	3.52 (1.27)	1.76 (.40)	
Religiousness					
Religiosity	4.99 (1.59)	1.57 (.95)	1.32 (.73)	399.29*** (319.86***)	1 > 2***, 1 > 3***
Imp. spirituality	5.77 (1.54)	4.10 (2.11)	3.50 (2.16)	45.04*** (33.42***)	1 > 2***, 1 > 3***, 2 > 3*
SP-Universality	3.94 (.71)	3.38 (.83)	3.17 (.91)	29.24*** (17.90***)	1 > 2***, 1 > 3***
SP-Connectedness	4.09 (.59)	3.85 (.69)	3.67 (.70)	12.63*** (6.67***)	1 > 2*, 1 > 3***, 2 > 3 [†]

Note. Total $N = 372$. Group N s = 126 (1), 123 (2), and 123 (3). Post-hoc: Tukey tests.

^aIn parentheses, F controlling for age and gender.

*** $p < .001$. ** $p < .01$. * $p < .05$. [†] $p < .10$.

personality (neuroticism and, to a marginally significant way, openness to experience), and values. The latter included the three conservation values (conformity, tradition, security), almost all values of self-enhancement and openness to change (power, hedonism, stimulation, and, to a marginally significant way, self-direction), and benevolence (marginally significant). No differences were found in universalism and achievement.

Post-hoc comparisons (Tukey) showed that the major differences were between the socialised religious and the socialised non-religious. Compared to the latter, the religious were less neurotic and less open to experience, as well as more conservative in their values. They also placed greater value on benevolence and less on hedonism, stimulation, and self-direction. Deconverts were, in several cases, closer to the socialised nonreligious, by also differing significantly from the socialised religious in neuroticism, conformity, tradition, hedonism, and religiosity. However, they differed from the socialised nonreligious by placing a lesser value on power, similar to the socialised religious, and by scoring higher on spirituality, though still lower than the socialised religious.

A visual inspection of the mean scores of the three groups on values and religion/spirituality, as in Table 1, suggests that in six out of the ten values (three conservation values, benevolence, and the two hedonistic values), as well as in religiosity/spirituality, the deconverts were in the middle, between the two other groups. In self-direction and achievement, deconverts resembled the socialised nonbelievers (higher scores compared to the socialised religious), whereas in power they resembled the socialised religious (lower scores than the socialised nonreligious).

Note however that the three groups differed in mean age, $F(2, 372) = 35.28, p < .001$. The socialised religious were older, $M = 40.31$, than the socialised nonreligious, $M = 25.02$, and the deconverts were in the middle, $M = 32.11$. The groups did not significantly differ in gender ratio, $\chi^2 = 3.08, p = .214$. Recomputing the same MANOVA analysis by controlling for gender and age confirmed an overall group effect, $F(2, 371) = 13.82, p < .001$, Wilk's $\Lambda = 0.325$, partial $\eta^2 = .43$, and a group effect for neuroticism (marginally significant), conformity, tradition, benevolence, religiosity, and the spirituality measures (see Table 1).

Unique effects of current religious belief and religious socialisation

To better disentangle the unique effects of (1) current religious belief vs. disbelief and (2) religious vs. irreligious socialisation on personality, values, and religiosity/spirituality, we carried out a series of hierarchical regressions. Each of the target variables was regressed, in Step 1, on these two variables, operationalised as two respective contrasts: (1) being a socialised religious vs. being a deconvert or socialised as nonreligious (coded 1 vs. -1), and (2) being socialised as religious or a deconvert vs. being socialised as nonreligious (coded 1 vs. -1). In Step 2, age and gender were added as predictors.

Tables 2 and 3 detail the results for personality, values, and religiosity/spirituality. Low neuroticism was predicted by current religious belief, and not by religious education, a result that remained significant after controlling for age and gender. Being high in agreeableness was predicted, after controlling for age and gender, by religious education (in a marginally significant way) but not by current religious belief. Valuing conformity and tradition (and in a marginally significant way not valuing self-direction), was predicted by current religious belief, but not by religious education, a finding that remained significant after controlling for age and gender. Not valuing hedonism and power was predicted by

Table 2. Regressions of the big five personality traits and religiousness on affiliation and education (Religious vs. Not).

	Personality					Religiousness	
	Extra-version	Agreeableness	Conscientiousness	Neuroticism	Openness to Exper.	Religiosity	Spirituality
Model 1							
Currently Religious	-.05	-.05	.00	-.14*	-.06	.79***	.29***
Educated Religious	.08	.08	.06	-.02	-.07	.06	.14*
Model 2							
Currently Religious	-.05	-.04	-.03	-.12*	-.04	.75***	.24***
Educated Religious	.09	.10 ^a	.05	.01	-.07	.02	.11*
Gender	.17**	.07	.25***	.14**	-.06	.00	.14**
Age	.03	-.05	.12*	-.09	-.05	.19***	.20***

Note. $N = 372$ (socialised religious, deconverts, and socialised nonreligious). Numbers indicate standardised regression coefficients.

*** $p < .001$. ** $p < .01$. * $p < .05$. ^a $p < .10$.

Table 3. Regressions of values on affiliation and education (Religious vs. Not).

	BE	UN	SD	ST	HE	PO	AC	SE	CO	TR
Model 1										
Currently Religious	.05	.01	-.11 [†]	-.09	-.13*	.03	-.09	.07	.19***	.56***
Educated Religious	.08	-.04	-.02	-.06	-.12*	-.15*	-.01	.07	.04	.04
Model 2										
Currently Religious	.08	.03	-.10	-.05	-.05	.10	-.01	.06	.19***	.53***
Educated Religious	.12*	-.03	-.02	-.04	-.06	-.09	.05	.07	.05	.00
Gender	.16**	.00	-.07	-.12*	-.06	-.04	.03	.06	.06	-.12**
Age	-.12*	-.07	-.03	-.16**	-.30***	-.26***	-.29***	.06	-.00	.11*

Notes. $N = 372$ (socialised religious, deconverts, and socialised nonreligious). Numbers indicate standardised regression coefficients. BE = Benevolence; UN = Universalism; SD = Self-Direction; ST = Stimulation; HE = Hedonism; PO = Power; AC = Achievement; SE = Security; CO = Conformity; TR = Tradition.

*** $p < .001$. ** $p < .01$. * $p < .05$. [†] $p < .10$.

religious education (and hedonism additionally by current religious belief), but these effects lost significance after controlling for age and gender. Finally, religiosity was predicted only by current religious belief, whereas spirituality was predicted by both current belief and religious education, and this held true after controlling for gender and age.

Spirituality across groups and related personality and values

Figure 1 depicts the frequencies of participants' answers, distinctly by religious trajectory group, on the forced-choice question on the spiritual versus religious preferences. Since the percentages here will not be subject to statistical analyses, we also included the group of converts. Across all four groups, most respondents selected "spiritual rather than religious", i.e., 47.6%, 65.6%, 60.2%, and 56.1%, respectively for the socialised religious, converts, deconverts, and the socialised nonreligious. Among nonbelievers, the second option was "nonreligious/non-spiritual", at 37.4% and 43.9% respectively for the deconverts and the socialised nonreligious. Among the socialised believers, the second option was "religious and spiritual" (32.5%) and the third was "religious rather spiritual" (15.9%).

To investigate what distinguished, among the deconverts and the socialised nonbelievers, those with high versus low scores on spirituality, we computed correlations between

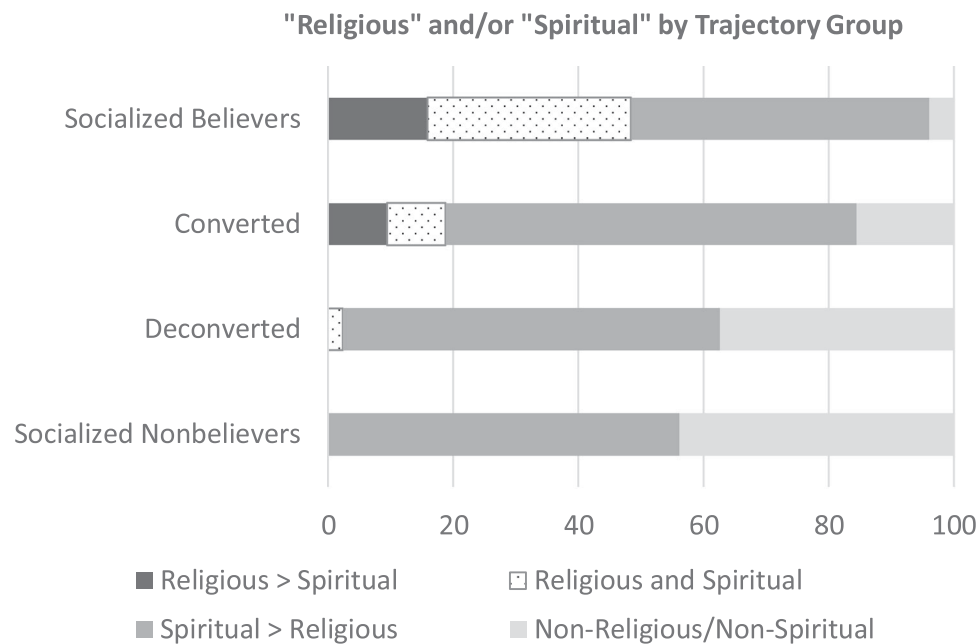


Figure 1. Self-identifications as (non)religious and/or (non)spiritual, distinctly by trajectory group: socialised religious (126), converted (32), deconverts (123), and socialised nonreligious (123).

spirituality, as measured through the Spiritual Transcendence Scale items, and personality and values. For comparative reasons, we also computed the same correlations among the socialised religious, as well as the correlations of religiosity in the whole sample (all 404 participants together) with personality and values. Table 4 details the results, including the ones of partial correlations controlling for age and gender. In most cases, results

Table 4. Coefficients of correlations of religiosity and spirituality with personality and values.

Variables	Religiosity	Spirituality		
	Whole sample	Soc. Religious	Deconverts	Soc. Nonreligious
Personality				
Extraversion	.02 (.00)	.02 (.08)	.12 (.07)	.19* (.15 ^a)
Agreeableness	.01 (.03)	.09 (.15 ^a)	.28** (.26**)	-.03 (-.03)
Conscientious.	.00 (-.05)	.25** (.24**)	.20* (.11)	.15 ^a (.11)
Neuroticism	-.19*** (-.14**)	-.29*** (-.26**)	-.04 (-.05)	-.01 (-.03)
Openness to Exp.	-.08 (-.07)	.15 ^a (.19*)	.08 (.11)	.27** (.29***)
Values				
Security	.11* (.08)	.05 (.03)	.08 (.04)	-.09 (-.08)
Conformity	.17*** (.15**)	-.03 (-.05)	.02 (-.01)	-.13 (-.14)
Tradition	.68*** (.63***)	.20* (.10)	.09 (.13)	.06 (.16 ^a)
Benevolence	.09 ^a (.13**)	.16 ^a (.27**)	.09 (.07)	.31*** (.29***)
Universalism	-.04 (-.01)	.21* (.23*)	.26** (.29***)	.23** (.23**)
Self-Direction	-.05 (-.03)	.32*** (.36***)	.15 (.17*)	.21* (.25**)
Stimulation	-.09 ^a (-.03)	.06 (.14)	.02 (.05)	.23* (.26**)
Hedonism	-.24*** (-.10*)	.05 (.17 ^a)	-.09 (-.06)	.16 ^a (.20*)
Power	-.07 (.05)	-.14 (-.07)	-.24** (-.19*)	.08 (.10)
Achievement	-.14** (-.01)	-.08 (.04)	-.11 (-.05)	.10 (.10)

Notes: *Ns* = 404 (whole sample), 126 (socialised religious), 123 (deconverts), and 123 (socialised nonreligious). Partial correlations, controlling for gender and age, are in parentheses.

****p* < .001. ***p* < .01. **p* < .05. ^a*p* < .10.

were similar in significance and direction when controlling for these two socio-demographics. For the economy of presentation, we focus here on the partial correlations.

Like religiosity in the whole sample, spirituality, across the three groups, showed positive associations with prosocial dispositions, i.e., benevolence (all groups except deconverts) or agreeableness (deconverts). Spirituality was also related to conscientiousness across the three groups. A clear contrast between religiosity and spirituality consisted in that religiosity was positively related to all conservation values (tradition, conformity, and security) and was unrelated to openness to experience, universalism, and self-direction, whereas spirituality was unrelated to conservation values and positively related to openness in personality and values (openness to experience, universalism, and self-direction).

Subtler distinctions appeared between the three religious trajectory groups. Among the socialised religious, spirituality was additionally related to tradition. Among the deconverts, spirituality was additionally related negatively to power, whereas, among the socialised nonbelievers, it was positively related to extraversion, stimulation, and hedonism.

Discussion

In this work, adults living in a highly secularised Western European country (Belgium) were classified into three major groups: (1) *deconverts*, i.e., those who had been religiously socialised but had abandoned religious belief, (2) *socialised current religious believers*, and (3) *socialised current nonbelievers*. In several personality traits and values, deconverts resembled the socialised nonbelievers as both groups differentiated from the socialised religious. In other traits and values, deconverts were midway between the two other groups, to some extent approaching those who had remained religious. The evidence is cross-sectional, but it may evoke two respective kinds of influences on deconverts' personality and values: individual dispositions for irreligion and lasting effects of prior religious education.

Specifically, first, both kinds of nonbelievers, i.e., deconverts and the socialised, compared to the socialised believers, were more neurotic and placed less importance on the conservation values of conformity and tradition. Regression analyses aiming to disentangle the role of the two kinds of influences indicated that it was current irreligiosity rather than irreligious education that predicted neuroticism and the low valorisation of conservation values – and, in a marginally significant way, high valorisation of self-direction. The finding regarding neuroticism is in line with research showing neuroticism to cross-sectionally and longitudinally predict religious apostasy (Hui et al., 2018; Streib et al., 2008) and to be higher among those low in religiosity (Saroglou, 2010, 2017). Though irreligion is normative in secular societies, being or becoming a nonbeliever still denotes high existential quest, doubt, and uncertainty (Fisher, 2017). Similarly, low endorsement of conservation values is typical of low religiosity (Roccas & Elster, 2014), whereas secularism implies self-expressive and emancipative values (Norris & Inglehart, 2004). The two may be related, with some research showing conservatives to be happier (Napier & Jost, 2008). In sum, this first series of findings suggests that being somewhat emotionally unstable and individual dispositions to oppose conservation and search for autonomy may be characteristics of those who exit from religion.

Second, deconverts differed from the socialised nonbelievers and/or were midway between them and the socialised current believers regarding other characteristics. They tended to value spirituality more and power less than the socialised nonbelievers. In several cases where significant differences existed only between the socialised believers and the socialised nonbelievers, deconverts were in between, not differing significantly from either of these two groups. This included openness to experience, stimulation, and hedonism, for which the religious had the lowest scores, as well as benevolence, most valued by the religious. Interestingly, as shown in the regression analyses, it was (prior) religious education rather than current religious belief that predicted a low emphasis on power and a high emphasis on benevolence. Low hedonism and high spirituality were also predicted by religious education, in addition to religious belief. Thus, for traits and values known to differentiate the religious from the non-religious, the former being lower in openness to experience and change, and privileging a prosocial orientation over self-enhancement (Roccas & Elster, 2014; Saroglou, 2010), deconverts find themselves, to some extent, in the middle. In sum, this second series of findings open the possibility that deconverts may still be influenced by their prior religious education: they emphasize dispositions and values denoting some self-transcendence and self-restraint and, thus not surprisingly, they are more spiritual compared to their socialised nonreligious peers. Thus, the combination of the first and the second series of findings suggests that deconverts may abandon religion by opposition to conservative values, but may maintain, given their prior religious education, a spiritual emphasis on prioritising quality in interpersonal relationships over attachment to “materialistic” values, i.e., hedonism and power.

In addition to deconverts’ higher spirituality compared to the socialised nonbelievers, the present work provided correlational evidence on how spirituality differs from religiosity, in terms of related personality and values, and how it differs between deconverts, the socialised religious, and the socialised nonreligious. Among both believers and nonbelievers, spirituality and religiosity shared a self-transcendent orientation (benevolence), in line with the core nature of the two constructs (Piedmont, 1999), but spirituality denoted more extended prosociality, i.e., universalism. Moreover, religiosity was positively related to the conservation values and was unrelated to the openness to change values, whereas spirituality was unrelated to the former values (apart from tradition among the religious) and positively related to openness to experience and the value of self-direction. This shift from religiosity to autonomous spirituality parallels previous research (Li & Chow, 2015; MacDonald, 2000; Saroglou & Muñoz-García, 2008; Saucier & Skrzypińska, 2006), but the present work clarifies that this holds among both the religious and the nonreligious. Note also that, in the present work, spirituality implied disposition for personal order, since it was associated with conscientiousness among both believers and nonbelievers.

Beyond these tendencies common to believers and nonbelievers, spirituality also denoted something specific for the deconverts versus the socialised nonreligious. Among the former, it reflected anti-materialism, i.e., a stronger endorsement of the self-transcendence versus self-enhancement axis of values, if judged by spirituality’s positive association with agreeableness and negative association with power. This could be interpreted as a possible residual of prior religious education. However, among the socialised nonbelievers, spirituality clearly reflected, in addition to its other “typical” tendencies, an extraverted orientation toward excitement, challenge, and pleasure in life, if judged by

spirituality's positive associations with extraversion, stimulation, and hedonism. The latter association was in full contrast with traditional religiosity which typically implies (Roccas & Elster, 2014) a low appreciation of pleasure and sensuous gratification (value of hedonism). In other words, in addition to self-transcendence and autonomy, spirituality among the socialised nonbelievers seems to denote a thirst for alternatives, novelty, and fun. Together, these findings indicate subtle nuances of what spirituality specifically represents in people's lives when moving from traditional religiosity to deconversion and then to normative, established nonbelief.

Several limitations of the present work should be mentioned. The study is clearly exploratory. The convenience nature of the sample does not eliminate the possibility of a self-selection bias among participants. Age and gender seemed to have a non-negligible influence, especially when comparing between groups (see Lace et al., 2019, for the role of gender in moderating spirituality's characteristics). The cross-sectional nature of the study does not allow for establishing any causal direction. The short nature of the measures used for personality and values may have hidden some real effects (Type II error) since religiosity's and spirituality's personality correlates are clearer when more extended measures are used (Saroglou, 2010). This may explain the absence of some expected results – agreeableness and conscientiousness were unrelated to religiosity in the current study, but note that, in secular contexts, agreeable and conscientious people may also find nonreligious and nonspiritual ways to express these individual dispositions (Saroglou, 2010). Finally, though the distinction between the three religious trajectory groups was both legitimate and heuristically rich, it is important to keep in mind that there exists non-negligible variability within each group, i.e., the socialised religious (Hardy et al., 2011b), the deconverts (Streib et al., 2008), and the socialised nonbelievers (Silver et al., 2014). Similarly, the cultural context, in particular the religious versus secular character of the country, has been found to moderate the religiosity-personality associations (Gebauer et al., 2014; Saroglou, 2017). Thus, the present results, before generalisation, deserve replication in more religious contexts.

Nevertheless, the present work provides meaningful evidence that extends and nuances previous knowledge and has both theoretical and social implications. The major forces, from an individual difference perspective, behind deconversion seem to be a search for autonomy and distancing from conservative norms, and this despite some costs, i.e., some emotional instability. The above seems to sustain the exit from religion and to result in deconverts' resemblance to their nonbeliever peers who have been socialised as irreligious. At the same time, deconverts seem to also be marked by their religious education since they differ from the socialised nonbelievers. They value spirituality and their spirituality reflects, specifically for them, a low consideration of materialistic and hedonistic values. But for those socialised nonbelievers who are spiritual, spirituality specifically denotes a search for excitement, challenge, and novelty, possibly encompassing alternatives to their nonreligious education.

These trends of findings are of interest to the social debate, especially within secular Western societies, regarding the impact of religious education on citizens' personality and values and the role the State should play or not in supporting religious education and socialisation. If replicated and generalised in subsequent research, the results seem to suggest that religious education, independently of the religious belief or disbelief in later life, may have some positive effects on citizens' ethics, for instance in de-emphasising

materialism and self-interest and emphasising concern for the common good. At the same time, the results also suggest that distancing oneself from traditional religious beliefs may also constitute a positive personal trend toward nonconformity and individuation. Taken together, these two lines of evidence contribute to the idea (Saroglou, 2014) that both religious belief and disbelief have psychological and social costs and benefits, which are distinct and complementary.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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