

# How do former churchgoers build a new moral identity?

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As their moral perspectives change, disillusioned churchgoers find it increasingly difficult to remain associated with their church, yet many also find it difficult to leave. According to a new study in the *Journal of Consumer Research*, former churchgoers experience deep identity crises as their most important relationships and beliefs are put at risk.

"Our research examines currently unsatisfied and former members of the Mormon Church, exploring the experiences of people who have lost their faith in the institution that structured both their morality and their day-to-day lives," write authors James H. McAlexander (Oregon State University), Beth Leavenworth DuFault (University of Arizona), Diane M. Martin, and John W. Schouten (both Aalto University).

The authors conducted interviews with people who identify as former churchgoers and asked them to reflect on their experiences in leaving the church and the challenges of constructing a new [identity](#) as they rejected church authority and its doctrines.

The authors examined religion as it relates to consumption, including the role of the church in dictating what its members can (and cannot) purchase in the marketplace. Most former churchgoers experienced deep crises of identity as they questioned their previous moral assumptions and behaviors, right down to consuming wine or coffee, viewing R-rated movies, or wearing more revealing garments. Finding no clear guidance outside of their familiar world, they experimented with different acts of consumption that were once taboo and reflected on how they felt.

These results can help brands and society understand the challenges former churchgoers face in forming their new lives. "Part of the challenge in developing a new self-understanding after rejecting an identity based on a particular institution and ideology is that it requires people to reassemble their lives from a much broader marketplace of ideas, experiences, goods, and services than was previously available to them. In doing so, they must also assume personal responsibility for determining the morality of their choices," the authors conclude.

**More information:** James H. McAlexander, Beth Leavenworth DuFault, Diane M. Martin, and John W. Schouten. "The Marketization of Religion: Field, Capital, and Consumer Identity." *Journal of Consumer Research*: October 2014.

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