

Losing faith in evangelicalism: Sexual 'purity' and lack of conversion key issues

April 17 2023, by Martin Lasalle



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The impossible imperative of conversion and the unsustainable ideal of sexual purity and marriage are two of the main reasons why young Quebec adults born to parents who had converted to evangelicalism are

deserting the religion and leaving the community.

Those findings are part of Benjamin Gagné's master's thesis, done under the supervision of Solange Lefebvre of the Institute of Religious Studies at Université de Montréal. An article based on his thesis now appears in the journal *Studies in Religion/Sciences Religieuses*.

Inspired by Caroline Gachet's sociological study of processes of religious disaffiliation among evangelicals in Switzerland, Gagné interviewed six women and six men between the ages of 25 and 37 who were born to convert parents and socialized in the evangelical community.

Roots in the 1970s

In his article, Gagné traces the roots of Quebec's evangelical movement to the 1970s, when the first generation of converts appeared.

"At a time when society was modernizing, in particular with secularization, which was eroding the power of religion over institutions ... thousands of young Quebecers of the baby-boom generation converted to evangelicalism in their early twenties," he writes.

"This evangelical awakening coincided with a period of economic prosperity and rising nationalism, and with the emergence of counter-cultural New Age movements."

But with the recession that followed in the 1980s, collective ideals lost their luster, and so did Quebec's evangelical movement. By 2011, evangelicals numbered between 150,000 and 200,000, divided into three main subgroups: Baptists, Pentecostals and others.

The 2021 statistics show declines in all of these groups.

Conversion is key

The act of [conversion](#) is very important for evangelicals because it affirms a spiritual awakening which involves the rejection of Catholicism.

"Conversion is a born-again experience that results from a crisis and makes a sudden, radical change in all aspects of the new believer's life," writes Gagné. "It manifests itself in a change of allegiance, and above all, in a conscious, comprehensive decision to accept Jesus as one's personal Savior and Lord."

However, for the children of first-generation evangelicals, this conversion is problematic if not unattainable. For them, evangelicalism is not a break with a previous religion but a continuation.

Moreover, unlike their parents, who converted as adults, the children report that their born-again experience took place between the ages of three and 10.

"Since they did not experience an inner revolution, a revelation, or a radical change like their parents, they describe the process as a conversion by default and are tormented by constant doubts about its authenticity," Gagné explains.

Sexual 'purity' until marriage

"The ideal of sexual purity, which is linked to the influence of American 'purity culture,' is one of the mainstays of evangelical identity and serves to preserve the 'all-or-nothing' mindset," he continues. "This ideal rests on three pillars: the sinful nature of humanity, clear gender-role distinctions, and control over sexuality to preserve purity until marriage."

This means that every individual must beware of sexual temptation and practice sexual self-control, including abstinence from masturbation.

"The ideal of purity is even harder to bear for women, who must dress to avoid arousing temptation in men: they are taught very young that they are responsible for the way men look at them, and their purity, their chastity and their modesty are presented as a 'treasure' which must be preserved for their future husband," Gagné writes.

As a result, by their mid-20s, most young evangelicals experience frustration and question the orthodoxy of the Bible and the eternal punishment that awaits them if they disregard the ideal of purity, leading them to want to disaffiliate from their religion and leave their community.

And leaving the religion has a very high social cost for these [young adults](#). Having grown up in a relatively insular environment, they lose their bearings when they abandon the faith of their parents and friends, which was the place where they belonged.

Transition can be long

"For some the transition is relatively short, but in most cases, these young people live isolated lives for five to six years before rebuilding their social network, especially because they move two to three times more often than their parents during their adult lives," Gagné reports.

According to the studies he reviewed, it can take disaffiliated evangelicals up to nine years to achieve a new balance in life.

The phenomenon of disaffiliation among evangelicals remains to be examined on a larger scale, and in the post-pandemic context, according to Gagné.

"The data show that many young people aged 20 to 35 left the evangelical community between 2012 and 2016, and today there are signs that another wave of disaffiliation could occur as a result of the closure of places of worship due to health restrictions in recent years," he writes.

Gagné is now pursuing doctoral studies and is working on a jointly supervised thesis in practical theology under Lefebvre and [religious studies](#) under Christophe Monnot of Université de Strasbourg, in France. Gagné's research focuses on urban churches that can serve as a place of transition for people who have left the religion.

More information: Benjamin Gagné, Désaffiliation chez les évangéliques de deuxième génération au Québec : le rôle de l'inatteignable conversion et de l'insoutenable pureté sexuelle, *Studies in Religion/Sciences Religieuses* (2023). [DOI: 10.1177/00084298221147530](https://doi.org/10.1177/00084298221147530)

Provided by University of Montreal

Citation: Losing faith in evangelicalism: Sexual 'purity' and lack of conversion key issues (2023, April 17) retrieved 26 June 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2023-04-faith-evangelicalism-sexual-purity-lack.html>

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