Article

Phantoms of Faith—Experiences of Rupture and Residue of Amputated Religiosity among Norwegian Ex-Charismatic Christians

Espen Gilsvik

Department of Social Sciences, MF Norwegian School of Theology, Religion and Society, 0302 Oslo, Norway; espen.gilsvik@mf.no

Abstract: This article explores non/religious emotions and experiences among a group of high-cost Christian charismatic disaffiliates in Norway. It is a case study of members of the Facebook community "The Journey" (no. "Reisen"). With a qualitative approach, it uses lifestory interviews from 24 ex-Charismatics to describe their experiences of what I call *phantoms of faith*. The article gives thick descriptions of the disaffiliates' negotiations between current and past emotions and experiences and the explanations they have for these. It uses the metaphor of phantom to explore embodied and emotional religiosity, for which the analysis is inspired by the conceptual framework of Pagis and Winchester's *somatic inversions*. The analysis shows how phantom faith experiences create *ruptures* and *dissonance* in the disaffiliates' everyday lives and thus produce *interpretative demands*. The article argues that leaving charismatic Christianity, in this material, on an embodied and emotional dimension is much more complex than the cognitive and social dimensions of disaffiliation. Scholarly understandings of this phenomenon have implications for the disaffiliates who experience them, as well as the scholarly constructions of the spaces and categories between religion and non-religion. It argues that such experiences have been somewhat understudied in the literature and that current conceptualizations should be further developed.

Keywords: disaffiliation; charismatic Christianity; emotion; rupture; religious residue; religious experience; non-religion

1. Introduction

This article explores a fascinating phenomenon I found when interviewing Norwegian ex-charismatics who are members of the Facebook-group "Journey" (no. Reisen) which is devoted to topics concerning the loss of and changes in individual religiosity. My interest is exploring the particular embodied and emotional aspects of disaffiliation experiences. The aim of the article is to give thick descriptions of experiences I call *phantoms of faith* among disaffiliates from high-cost charismatic Christianity. Such experiences can be understood as a type of religious residue connected to the impact of childhood religious socialization. In my understanding, phantoms are residual, but not all religious residues are phantoms. I use the metaphor phantom to open-up nuances of such experiences, as they cannot easily be categorized as either good or bad, true or false. They are often both-and. They are experienced as significant to the informants, even if a Christian charismatic explanation has been abandoned.

Similar emotions and experiences have been found in previous disaffiliation studies (Ebaugh 1988; Cottee 2015; Beider 2023). However, I argue that the disaffiliation literature could benefit from further exploring the embodied perspectives of disaffiliation. This article's emphasis on the emotional stickiness of religiosity helps us to better understand why religious disaffiliation is often a long process. It argues that more cognitively and socially focused analyses of disaffiliation can benefit from an emotional and embodied

focus. Similar experiences have also been described in other fields, notably Leon Festinger's theory of *cognitive dissonance*, where a discrepancy between attitudes and behaviors leads the person to adjust either of them (Festinger 1957). Teemu Mantsinen picked up on dissonance and explored how this is related to disaffiliates' discourses of autonomy (Mantsinen 2023). Other relevant studies, particularly in the field of religious experience,[1] have examined experiences described as *disjunctures* (Jarvis 2008), *ruptures* (Pagis 2019), and *somatic inversions* (Winchester and Pagis 2021). The concept of somatic inversions is particularly useful to this article, as it describes a flip, where what is outside awareness is brought to one's attention (Winchester and Pagis 2021). However, phantoms, in my understanding include, but are not limited to, somatic inversions. The article's contribution is to complement and challenge scholarly concepts through the nuances of emotion and embodiment, which the phantom metaphor offers.

The broader societal importance of this study is drawn from the Norwegian context where charismatic Christians[2] are a minority religious group who are prone to stereotypes and prejudice from the majority population (Hoffmann et al. 2012). Being a Norwegian charismatic disaffiliate involves the navigation of tensions from (at least) two groups, as the informants also negotiate sympathies and critiques towards the community they have left. I argue that both the majority population and the charismatic communities would benefit from gaining deeper understandings of what the emotional elements of disaffiliation entails. The research question can be divided into two, one descriptive and one theoretical: (i) How are phantom experiences described, explained, and managed by the charismatic disaffiliates? And (ii), how does the phantom metaphor complement and challenge some established concepts which seek to capture similar phenomena?

1.1. The Phantom Metaphor

I define phantoms of faith as the continued visitations of experiences and emotions which a person connects to the religiosity from which they have previously disaffiliated. This definition is a result of combining the analytical findings with two areas from which the phantoms of faith metaphor draws inspiration. Within medicine, the phantom metaphor has been used to describe a phenomenon that clinicians and researchers have struggled to understand and treat for hundreds of years, namely phantom limb pain (PLP). In this context, the phantom is an established metaphor for describing real sensations of awareness, attention, discomfort, and pain in a limb which is no longer there. The amputation has been executed on the exterior body, while the interior parts, such as the brain, including emotions and perceptions of self and identity, takes longer to fully, if ever, register the loss.[3]

Similar to PLP, phantoms of faith can be felt as the pain, sensations, and awareness of an amputated faith. However, in contrast to PLP, they are not necessarily negative. They can be felt as good or bad, often both simultaneously, much like the emotions evoked by the phantom in Gaston Leroux' novel Phantom of the Opera. Here, the beautiful soprano Christine has a complex relationship with the phantom. She is tutored by this deformed angel of music whom she admires, fears, pities, desires, escapes, revisits, and eventually buries and grieves (Leroux and Flynn 2010). The story places agency and conflicting motives and emotions in both Christine and the phantom. They move and are moved both towards and away from each other. As such, a useful addition to the notion of *phantom pain* is that of *phantom pleasure*. Another mark of phantoms is the *disruption* they cause in the informants' everyday lives. The main point is that they are beyond the informants' control; the experience "just happens" whether they want it or not.

On the general concept of metaphors, Askeland and Agdestein claim that they are dialectic in nature. They define a metaphor as exchange and transference between an area of experience and the area it transfers meaning to (Askeland and Agdestein 2019). According to the classic Metaphors We Live By by Lakoff and Johnson, metaphors are foundational ways of knowing, both constituting and creating social realities (Lakoff and Johnson 1980). Furthermore, Johnson argues in The Body in the Mind that early and recurring bodily and spatial experiences are where they originate (Johnson 1987). Winchester argues that using

metaphors with emphasis on the embodied aspects would produce richer understandings of the relationship between culture and cognition (Winchester 2016). This article uses the phantom metaphor precisely with this emphasis to analyze the exchange between bodily experiences and religious cognitive models and beliefs which is no longer affirmed by the individual. Furthermore, it combines insights from the field of *religious disaffiliation* and the neighboring field of *religious experience* to synthesize an understanding of disaffiliation.

I deliberately use metaphors in the analysis for several reasons: Firstly, the informants are wary of using Christian charismatic language and are looking for vocabulary and new concepts that can help them to articulate their experiences. In fact, the phantom expression first caught my attention when one informant specifically related the metaphor to the way phantom is used medically on amputees, but not explicitly connected to pain or negative effects. Moreover, the informants actively engage and wrestle with the limitations of their past and current language repertoires. The term phantom avoids both explicit associations with the Christian charismatic terms, as well as reducing the phenomenon to psychopathology.

Another reason is informed by a key question within pragmatist epistemology: What is the significance of such experiences for the informants? This article is not interested in philosophical or theological discussions of the origin of these experiences. Rather, it focuses on how the informants understand the experiences and their significance. Both the informant and the researcher are distanced from the time and context of the experiences; hence, the access point is language and interpretation. In a phenomenological tradition, this entails both the informant's interpretation and the scholar's interpretation of their interpretation. As such, using phantom as a concrete but also relatively flexible metaphor opens up the empirical data for a complex and creative analysis.[4]

1.2. Phantoms—An Understudied Phenomenon?

In sociology of religion, what I call phantoms of faith have been observed and described in various studies, yet not in great detail. Within the field of religious disaffiliation, I have not encountered studies aiming to provide thick descriptions of the lived experience of religious residue. Helen Ebaugh wrote a classic work on role exits and argued that what she calls *exes* and *exiters* need to incorporate their past when creating new identities. She uses the terms *role residual* and *hangover identity* to describe what she says is a common experience for role-exiters (Ebaugh 1988). While hangover identity is a poignant metaphor for some types of exes, it also implies an imperative to dispose of and handle the negative hangover effects. However, hangover experiences are not unanimously negative among my ex-charismatic informants. In my material, there are positive, negative, and more neutral experiences. Hence, phantom is a metaphor that, in my understanding, allows the analyst to remain curious about the nuances of such experiences and to restrain from passing quick judgments.

The notion of residue has been picked up by scholars like Nadia Beider, who analyzed the impact of religious socialization among nones. She compared the lifelong nones to nones who have disaffiliated religion and found that the latter are consistently more religious than the former, ascribing this to childhood *religious residue* (Beider 2023). The sociologist of religion Simon Cottee, in his study among Muslim apostates used the term *unlearning process*, where apostates "unlearn certain structures of response and reaction which had defined and guided their former Muslim self" (Cottee 2015, p. 334). His examples revolve around feelings of morality and guilt. He also found informants who spoke of difficulties with leaving behind their *inner Muslim* and its spontaneous Islamic expressions. The most poignant example relevant to this article is how some apostates struggle with eating pork. The belief that bacon is haram has been abandoned, yet several of the apostates were found to be physically repulsed by the smell. Some were not bothered by this and explained this as a logical consequence of early childhood socialization. For others, however, this bodily reaction gave rise to worries, as it implied they were not fully over Islam but were still held in sway by their own psychology (Cottee 2015, pp. 334–39). As such, the alternatives and

strategies available for explaining and managing phantoms seem to have importance for its effects. Cottee's notion of unlearning implies agency to move away from old thought and reaction patterns, which I argue, in some cases, are limited. It raises the question if, for some, it is even possible to entirely disaffiliate and unlearn phantoms of faith, which I argue can be deeply imbedded bodily and emotional aspects of past and lingering religiosity.

Important insights from the field of religious experience describe constituents overlapping with phantoms. For example, Peter Jarvis says that such experiences create *disjunctures*, understood as the lack in our biographical experience to integrate the present experience (Jarvis 2008, p. 555). As mentioned, Pagis and Winchester used the term somatic inversion. They used examples from people fasting, where sudden rumbling sounds or the intense desire to eat is brought unwillingly to the focus of attention and is subsequently interpreted in a religious frame, here described as *the battle between spirit and flesh*. Somatic inversions help to produce religious experiences in the way that they "encourage and scaffold religious attributions" and produce interpretative demands (Winchester and Pagis 2021, p. 14). In this article, phantoms describe spaces in which apostasy and religious experience overlap; hence, I wish to combine these to provide thicker descriptions of a somewhat understudied phenomenon.

2. Results: Experience, Interpretation and Strategy

In this analysis, I present three levels on which the informants negotiate phantoms of faith. Firstly, I give a description of the *experiences* and how they rupture bodily and create dissonance cognitively. Secondly, I give an account of how these experiences create *interpretive demands* and the various explanations they have for their phantoms. Thirdly, I show some of the *strategies* they employ to manage their phantoms of faith.

2.1. Description: Experiencing Phantoms of Faith

I now present the informants and their descriptions of phantoms of faith. Here, I provide some particularly illuminating examples of the stories the informants told me about experiencing phantoms of faith.

2.1.1. Phantom Prayer

Geir is in his forties and lives with his wife and child in a city in the southern part of Norway. He grew up in a Christian family with his father serving as a pastor in their local congregation. He explains how he, sometimes during prayer and the laying on of hands, felt the presence of God, his heart pounding, and a warm feeling flowing through his body. In his early thirties, he disaffiliated from his faith and now regards himself an atheist. The phantom term is from an exchange about how he relates to some of these experiences now:

> **Interviewer:** Do you pray?
>
> **Geir:** No. [smiling]
>
> **Interviewer:** No?
>
> **Geir:** Eh, a few times I do engage in, like, "phantom-prayer", is what I call it.
>
> **Interviewer:** Oh? [laughter]
>
> **Geir:** [laughter] So I feel this, eh, I sense, eh, the impulse, the urge [to pray], sort of.
>
> **Interviewer:** Yes?
>
> **Geir:** If there are, eh, if things are heavy, or difficult.

Even though Geir no longer believes in the existence of God, he appreciates the social and psychological elements of religion. Although he has amputated his faith, he sometimes experiences phantoms lingering in his emotions.

Steinar labels himself as a "very vague atheist", but says, "It's my knee-jerk reflex, when facing difficulties I suddenly start to pray. And then, almost directly after, I understand that this is totally meaningless. I don't believe in this at all, but this is my first

reaction." He finds it curious that, despite having lost his faith, he has lots of Christian responses and impulses which continue to pop up.

Karianne firmly rejects the practice of prayer. Nevertheless, she still has ambivalent emotions and reflections around prayer. She explains that this dissonance mainly resides in her body:

> **Karianne:** It is felt. In my body. It feels like I sort of want to convince myself to pray. But then I sense that I, [. . .] The body is unwilling.
>
> **Interviewer:** The body is unwilling? But you think or feel (what)?
>
> **Karianne:** I think or feel like, maybe I should do it (pray) just in case. Or maybe this would be a natural thing to do now, it can't harm. And then. It stops. There. But, it doesn't mean anything. I don't know how to explain it. It sort of resides in the gut, more. [sighs heavily] I can probably also feel "ah, this sucks". That I lack this. That I don't believe.
>
> **Interviewer:** Like, you wish you could pray?
>
> **Karianne:** Yes, yes, almost! Like that that would have been a nice thing, like. But it isn't there.

Karianne was involved with church planting, missions, and several Christian charismatic churches before a process of disaffiliation in her late twenties. Now, more than a decade later, she does not believe in God or attend church and generally avoids the topic of faith. For all her attempts to place her religiosity firmly in the past, it still reaches into her present from time to time and is felt in her body.

2.1.2. Phantom Angst

Olav has described himself as an atheist for the large part of his adult life. He had an intense feeling of panic just a few weeks before the interview. This was when he first learnt of the Covid pandemic through the news. Olav automatically related this to the Biblical end-times:

> **Olav:** Yes, it's a sign of the last days, right. This comes up as automatic thoughts. Still now. The damage that I experienced as a child, they are stuck for the rest of my life. So, I have three children [. . .] It's not long ago since I was at home, and I called out to the youngest. I wondered if she could come over, I can't remember the details, but she did not answer, right. And then I thought "Shit, now Jesus has returned".
>
> **Interviewer:** That feeling!
>
> **Olav:** Yes, that feeling, it just comes.
>
> **Interviewer:** It's not conscious?
>
> **Olav:** It's automatic. It sits, it is so indoctrinated in my subconscious, these are automatic thoughts that are placed in that trauma. So, I sort of, must work with myself; "she is just in the children's room, or hides in the bathroom, or something".

Olav is still haunted by phantoms of faith decades after he left them and says they "automatically pop up". He describes his childhood religious experiences as "extreme", ridden with existential angst: "Anxiety, fear. Fear of Jesus' return, fear of sinful thoughts [. . .] Because that was all they spoke about [. . .] It was a lot of talk about Jesus' return, like; "are you ready?"." He says he often woke up in the middle of the night and that this fear can, even today, pop up in him.

Fredrik describes experiences from his teenage years, where he had the feeling of being chased. He clearly visualizes the room in which the youth meetings took place and takes several breaks during the interview when talking about this:

Fredrik: Someone watches you, makes sure you do the right thing. You are not able to achieve their goals or think what is right for you to do in your life. You're sort of astray. You are kind of on the border here. I got the feeling in this alter call-settings, that I don't go forward because I necessarily wish to do so. But maybe it can fix me, or I should do it to show this leader that I'm willing to change or something like that.

Interviewer: Did you experience any effect, like?

Fredrik: No, I didn't experience that. I felt the result was more condemnation, feeling inadequate. [breathes] Oof. It's very absurd to think about.

These emotions have followed Fredrik beyond his disaffiliation. He is aware of their continued presence and has taken measures to avoid them in his daily life. Siv, describes the phantom in a double way where both chasing and being chased occurs.

Siv: This idea of coming home. I had these moments when I longed to come back home. But in this period, I started to get anxiety related to churches. Like real panic attacks. But this had built up as well for a long time. My attempts to come home was stopped in the doorway, because I just didn't manage to be there.

Interviewer: So literally, you didn't walk in, or?

Siv: Yes, I could walk into the church building, but I had to walk about again.

Interviewer: How did you experience this?

Siv: You just notice the anxiety coming. Your thoughts are pacing. The heart is pounding. Heavy breathing. The body shakes. It can be different levels of intensity. I had this really intense episode where I hyperventilated and couldn't even stand up.

Interviewer: Inside the church?

Siv: Yes, well, I managed to get out, I was leaning up against the wall. I couldn't breathe, I was shaking badly. I couldn't really stop.

Siv is worried about her state of salvation and still has longings and attempts to "come home". But, as she chases after God, she encounters something in the churches that triggers panic attacks. Her case is an example of the duality of phantoms of faith where the negative and positive emotions are closely entangled.

2.1.3. Fascinated by Phantoms

Robert tells about the camps he went to as a child, with long meetings and the "preacher going on for hours", where the main goal was to come home spirit-filled: "In hindsight, you feel that you have been instrumentalized. I take it into my identity, like. I have gone to a therapist to sort out these things. Because you look up to these people, leaders. It is really strange growing up as a child in this package." Then, on the other hand, Robert also describes positive spiritual experiences which he has continued to have long after his disaffiliation:

Robert: But in my teens I had a meeting with god. I say "god" because [making air-quotes"]. That was a personal experience. Warmth on my back. I think it was this fellowship/belonging issue. I saw that I was on the outside. [Is overwhelmed with emotion] [long silence] Strange that I get an emotional reaction to this. [silence] Ah. Sorry, Shit. [wipes tears]

Interviewer: No problem. We can leave it and get back to it later.

Robert: [breathes heavily] I was included, belonged.

Robert is overwhelmed with emotion a few times during the interview. He says these are good feelings that he does not want to lose. Robert makes a point of staying with the emotion for as long as it lasts, even when I suggest that we pause the interview. Hence, phantoms of faith can also present themselves as fragile or elusive emotions.

Ingrid, who reluctantly identifies as agnostic, speaks with fondness and some awkwardness about her charismatic experiences. She retells her salvation experience and connects the emotion to how she still can connect with this emotion now. She gives a recent example from when she and a group of friends were listening to a worship song:

> **Ingrid:** ... my friend laid down on the floor [chuckles] and I was like, "Wow", getting sort of the same emotions. But it's a bit strange because I do not connect with the lyrics anymore.
>
> **Interviewer:** No?
>
> **Ingrid:** But still [chuckles] There is something good there. [...] Nothing has really changed. I'm drawn back into that atmosphere. The meditative feeling, like. My husband doesn't connect with this. So, it was me and this other friend, we were totally blissfull, blessed or [smiles]
>
> **Interviewer:** Right, so he was on the floor, what did you do?
>
> **Ingrid:** I think I was dancing around in the room. [chuckles] So typical. But, yes, that was just intuitively. I could imagine doing that alone as well. But what is this [feeling]? It's like a creative expression, perhaps.

All of the informants portrayed phantoms as experiences of disruption—some quite clearly as bad ones. Others are felt as good or neutral, while many are both or all at once. The informants had varied responses of being surprised and overwhelmed, intrigued and curious, or uncomfortable and shocked by the experiences. The phantom could often lurk and linger outside of conscious awareness and then could either suddenly burst or slowly seep into their attention. Furthermore, they described phantoms of faith as often triggered by various external factors. Examples not mentioned here include hearing a sermon or seeing a crucifix or a Christian symbol. Also prevalent are digital encounters with Christian content on social media. Other factors are not explicitly Christian but nonetheless evoke Christian associations, such as themes of sexuality, alcohol (and drugs), morality, or news events. A variety of complex factors can subsequently evoke different emotions such as anxiety, confusion, joy, anger, contentment, frustration, shame, and more.

2.2. Explaining Phantoms

Phantoms that disrupt the informants also create interpretative demands. Here, I present how some informants interpret and explain phantoms. This provides insights into their processes of making sense of their experiences.

2.2.1. The Non-Transcendent Factors

Geir firmly dismisses any supernatural explanation of the experiences he had when he identified as a Christian as well as the ones he had after his disaffiliation. He says, "Now, of course, I think all this has natural explanations." He says that he thinks faith is useful to handle emotions like grief, loneliness, heartbreak, and insecurity. Geir also calls prayer a "self-fulfilling prophecy". He argues that if you really expect and hope to receive or achieve something, you tend to understand it. On a more physiological level, he reflects on whether breath and oxygen levels relate to (religious) sensations in the body. When specifying why he still prays to a god he does not believe in, he regards it as psychologically venting. He is venting thoughts and feelings which are less available to him if he does not pray them out.

Karianne talks about religious socialization and the strong impact her mother's faith had on herself. She is particularly bothered by the notion of the afterlife, especially hell, but also heaven, because for her, it implies the need for correct behavior to be let in. Similarly, Olav offers early childhood socialization as an explanation for his continuous phantom pain. Furthermore, he reflects on whether his genetic disposition has had an impact on how strongly he feels what he calls childhood trauma. The persistence of how these emotions continue to haunt him has led him to be critical of exposing children to religion in general and charismatic Christianity in particular.

Several of the informants' descriptions can be understood through Durkheim's notion of collective effervescence (Shilling and Mellor 1998). Some informants suggest that religious emotional states are similar to those which can be evoked in a football stadium, where everyone gathers around one common purpose, producing similar and intense emotions. Fredrik says that being collectively in a concert atmosphere can create the same feelings he previously interpreted as the Spirit: "Like, art, an encounter with music, these things can be spiritual. It's very similar. [Like:] "Now we are here in the music" "We can feel it" [. . .] It's a bit warm, its dense, people are in the silence. [. . .] So, if it was anything I felt, it was more that [all these factors], then God." Einar echoes this view saying that group-belonging was an important emotional factor experienced in charismatic meetings. He describes how he has had similar feelings later as a non-Christian in concerts getting totally lost in the music:

> **Einar:** Yeah, so it's almost like a trance, well, I can't really call it that either. Yeah, sort of an active meditation. It's difficult to find out what to call it or exactly describe the emotion.

> **Interviewer:** So, you said you experience exactly the same [as in church], so in other words you made that connection then?

> **Einar:** Yes! I remember when I did that. When I experienced it again. Then I was like, "Oh, this reminds me about the experiences in church!"

2.2.2. The Possibility of Transcendent Factors

Lina says that psychological concepts like *cognitive dissonance*, *magical thinking*, and other *confounding variables* were a great help for her in hanging her experiences on explanations that made more sense to her. That does not mean that she entirely rules out the possibility of a god or other transcendent factors. She simply does not hold them as plausible any longer. Ingrid reflects curiously on her own fascination with phantoms and admits that rationally, it is weird, since she no longer believes:

> **Ingrid:** I didn't have any problems with experiencing lots of weird stuff. So, there's something about surrendering to something you cannot understand. There was this intense thinking to put away the cognitive. I was like, "this doesn't make sense". And I just had to put it away. Then I could experience it. I thought, this is so lame and so arranged or planned. I had to discuss with myself, really. I felt that it was like being tickled or something, I laughed and laughed [. . .] I still think I have this. I still get drawn into a worship song. It doesn't need to be about the lyrics. But that kind of music, I'm still drawn to or hypnotized by, eh, I could compare it to being in a meditative condition.

Robert gets emotional when trying to explain the positive effects of phantoms:

> **Robert:** It was just really nice to let go. Let down my mask. Cry in front of others. That was good to do that. To show yourself weak. It was good to show yourself as weak. And this is like a defining moment because [voice breaks] Ah, this is so stupid. Oh. [laughs it off]

Furthermore, he explains how phantoms are beyond rationality, without him trying to pin them down with one name or a single category. During the interview, he names this both as "*God*" and *God*, *mystery*, *the universe*, *love*, and more:

> **Robert:** It's an experience which is irrational. Which I return to, which gives me something now. It's like data I can access, it does something now. Even if it was banal. In an aftercall. Even if it was a teenager with lots of hormones and emotions. Even so, I sometimes can access that feeling. If I pray to God. And I do not plan to let that [feeling] go. Because it is [silence] If you should cultivate some ideas and concepts in your life. Is it that bad? If it revolves around love?

> **Interviewer:** You say banal?

Robert: Yes. It's banal and irrational, because I'm sitting in Norway, a product of heritage and environment, I'm sitting in this situation, because I'm born into a church, I'm born into a Christian context. If I was born in India, that would be different. This is my narrative. I haven't had the chance to influence this.

The informants have a number of different explanations for their phantom faith experiences. These interpretations can be structured on a scale from natural explanations on the one end to supernatural explanations on the other. The majority of the informants explain phantoms with social, psychological, and physiological factors, clearly placing them at the naturalistic end of the scale. Only a few of the informants use terms like mysticism, spirituality, and God as potential explanatory factors, but they are used in a rather humble and questioning manner.

2.3. Phantom Management

Emotion management is often hard and solitary work. For these ex-charismatics, this is especially so, because of the moral and social entanglement of their complex experiences. The analysis lays out degrees of various strategies, from acceptance to avoidance.

2.3.1. Acceptance

Acceptance of both past and current phantom experiences requires some effort from these informants. Although there may be a number of other factors involved, it seems that those who keep the explanations more open, even allowing for some kind of spiritual transcendent explanation, seem to more easily accept and access the positive phantom experiences and emotions. On the other hand, some informants who firmly reject transcendent explanations spend more effort accepting them.

Steinar talks about his strategies regarding phantom prayer:

Steinar: After a couple of years, I made the conscious decision that I need to relate to my knee-jerk reactions in a constructive way. For instance, the reflex to suddenly start to pray in lots of different situations. Previously this was something I terminated directly, like; "I'm gonna think about something else." [But now] I could just as well continue to pray.

Robert seems to negotiate between negative and positive phantom experiences. He relates negative experiences to trauma and avoids them. However, he wants to welcome the positive experiences. To do this, he says he needs to overcome the need to be rational and, at the same time, does not throw it away entirely:

Robert: [. . .] But when it happens, one can sort of resist it. Because it's not rational. The rational human being cannot believe in ghosts, right. But then again, it's a bit fun with ghosts, right? Its intriguing. And it's comforting. [. . .] But I cannot bind me to it. Because it has created so much pain. As a child, to relate to this. Satan and hell as a reality. It has been very difficult to get out of that. That's why I'm a bit cautious and sensitive, I do not speak out loud about what I experience.

He says that he keeps the phantoms to himself, as he expects to receive criticism from secular people. On the other hand, when he talks about the negative experiences from his childhood related to visions, prayer, and intercession, he uses a more psychological language to describe them, "Now I relate to those experiences as trauma". It seems important for him to label the negative experiences that brought about anxiety as trauma while keeping the positive phantoms in a more open category.

Ingrid explains how she negotiates the bodily and cognitive aspects of phantom experiences, using the previously mentioned example with her friends:

Interviewer: Do you remember the song?

Ingrid: Oceans, maybe. It was a Hillsong. Like first we had talked about how much contempt we had for Hillsong [laughter] And then my friend said, "well, but this one new song is really nice." It was very hypnotizing. It hits all the right buttons. Mysterious. [laughter] Yes, yes. I still have it. [...] It's not about Jesus anymore. It's difficult with some of the worship songs, I can't relate to the lyrics anymore. But the atmosphere is still there.

Interviewer: Right, so regarding the relationship between the atmosphere and the lyrics, then it is the text that is complicated in a way?

Ingrid: Yes, I don't understand the conceptual. Everything that is supposed to be logically cohesive. It doesn't give enough meaning in the end. It doesn't stand by itself. It has to be a bit vague.

Interviewer: In the head?

Ingrid: Yes.

Interviewer: But in the body?

Ingrid: Yes, there I can [--] What can I say . . .

Ingrid wants to avoid the cognitive content of phantoms, yet she clearly accepts and even invites the emotional effects of them. To hold this dissonance, she seems to embrace an agnostic position where she does not affirm any Christian beliefs but continues to stay open towards a more fluid spirituality.

2.3.2. Avoidance

Avoidance seems to be a rather common strategy for many of the disaffiliates. Bringing up the topic of religion in the interview evokes various difficult emotions. It is something they have taken measures to avoid. For example, Fredrik avoids churches as well as friends and family who are likely to bring up faith in conversation. Pernille is very critical of charismatic Christianity and says she has developed some kind of phantom aversion, perhaps only bordering on avoidance. When asked if she seeks out charismatic experiences, she answered "Noooh, I'm sort of burnt. I'd never seek out a charismatic meeting. But I have no problem with it. I have become a bad Christian, and I'm very comfortable with that." Lina points out that she is not anti-religion or hostile to other peoples' beliefs and experiences. A few weeks before the interview, when she put on a worship song just to explain to her partner what she had been heavily immersed in for years, she sensed the emotion welling up in her gut and said she could easily have started to cry, but she stopped it. She finds that breathwork, yoga, and being naturally in tune with her body is a truer way of dealing with emotional life, while she still admits that worship is one of the things she really misses from her Christian life.

Lars speaks with both fondness and awkwardness about his experience of speaking in tongues more than 20 years ago. He says that, at the time, it both felt artificial and that it was a good help when he was at a loss for words. It was exotic in a both intriguing and alienating sense simultaneously. He stopped the practice years before he paused his faith, but has, from time to time, checked in to see if he still has the gift of speaking in tongues:

Interviewer: But you still think it's there?

Lars: Yes.

Interviewer: Where?

Lars: [pats the back of his head]

Interviewer: In the back of the brain?

Lars: Yes, I don't feel it was a heart-language. It's in the head. Yes, yes. So, it's not something I have any joy from. So, what it really is? I don't know. Religious fanaticism, maybe? From that time.

Lars seems to manage phantoms of faith through a combination of acceptance and avoidance. He acknowledges that his gift of speaking in tongues is still in him, though safely placed in the back of his head. He avoids using it as he does not see any good coming from this, and so far, it has not ruptured through his defense strategy.

For Olav, phantoms rupture suddenly and cause distress, anxiety, and doubt, if only briefly. Even if they still surprise him, he does acknowledge them and has developed cognitive strategies to help him out of it. Also, he admits that some phantoms reside as bodily trauma; hence, he gives attention to his body to manage this. For example, if he, at times, feels ridden with sexual shame, he will book a massage just to be present in his body and affirm it. Also, he has tried nudism and experienced this as a helpful practice to feel present and more at ease with his body and sexuality.

Siv wants to overcome her anxiety but still seeks out churches and Christian expression that can trigger her panic. She is caught in a liminal state where she longs for the good phantoms but mostly seems to end up with the bad ones.

For some, phantoms of faith clearly fall on the side of negative experiences or what we could call phantom pain. For others, phantom pleasure could be more apt as they value the positive effects of the experiences despite their disaffiliation. For others again, these two are muddled together in a complex network of both good and bad emotions that are difficult to disentangle from each other. Still, the two main strategies to manage phantom faith experiences are acceptance and avoidance/rejection.

3. Discussion

3.1. Cognitive, Social or Emotional Phantoms

My findings suggest that, for some charismatics, even though they disaffiliate, they experience the difficulties of getting away from phantoms of faith. Phantoms can be interpreted as a temporal mismatch: these informants find that the cognitive and social dimensions of disaffiliation change faster, whereas the embodied dimension involves more inertia. It is in this domain that phantoms disrupt the everyday lives of the disaffiliates, which creates the need to interpret these emotions and experiences. Furthermore, the phantoms need to be managed in a way that does not cause too much disruption. How difficult it is for a disaffiliate to break with their emotional past depends on multiple factors. Some of the literature suggests that this can be unlearned or will diminish like a hangover (Ebaugh 1988). Cottee's concept of unlearning processes (Cottee 2015) favors a cognitive focus on religion where the rational subject has agency to actively unlearn religiosity. I am aware of the broader discussion on cognitive bias within religious studies which, for example, is addressed by Vásquez's call to "rematerialize the study of religion" (Vasquez 2020). To me, the topic of disaffiliation can benefit from such rematerialization, yet can also still be approached cognitively by examining how unlearning occurs by reading new books or listening to podcasts or socially by entering into new relations and environments where one is exposed to alternative cultural and moral codes that replace the old religious ones. New cognitive insights (or social relations) may replace, and hence help us *unlearn*, the old. When it comes to the emotional and bodily aspects of religiosity on the other hand, I would argue that, for my informants, this is an entirely different beast, and this seems to also be the case in Cottee's own example. His findings of Muslim apostates who are still physically disgusted by the smell and taste of bacon may suggest a bodily and deeply embedded religiosity (Cottee 2015), and hence, something that may not easily be unlearned. I am not convinced that framing it as an unlearning process is the best way to understand this phenomenon. For some, it would also require an *unfeeling process*. Phantoms of faith could, for some, be involved in an unlearning process, but I suggest that the phantom metaphor includes both the emotions and the dialectical emphasis which unlearning overlooks. Furthermore, the term unlearning may connote a normative drive: This is something that *should* be unlearned. Yet, this is perhaps not the perspective of all disaffiliates or apostates. Some would like to preserve their non/religious[5] emotion and see this as a resource. Even for those who regard them in a

negative light and could wish to shed every remnant of their previous religiosity, failing to unlearn places responsibility solely on the individual. Phantoms are difficult to unlearn in the moment they rupture, yet over time, their impact can be reduced. Awareness of how and when they rupture can help the disaffiliate prepare and train to manage them in the future. As such, Cottee's inclusion of the term *process* softens the emphasis on personal agency which unlearning evokes. I argue that the phantom metaphor opens up the idea that disaffiliating religious emotion and experience also includes aspects beyond personal agency and, therefore, personal responsibility. The choice on how to manage phantoms is both a real and simultaneously limited choice (for more on this, see (Mantsinen 2023)). Precise descriptions and plausible interpretations can, therefore, lead the disaffiliate to practical and social strategies when managing phantoms. However, the specific religious connotations that phantom experiences have seem to be a factor in the informants' wish to relegate these to the private sphere. They assume prejudice against charismatics from the Norwegian majority, not an unwarranted assumption, given the Holocaust Center study on Norwegians' attitudes towards minority groups[6] (Hoffmann et al. 2012). Another reason to hide their phantoms is that these ex-charismatics are in the middle of identity reconstruction. Negotiating phantom faith experiences can disturb this identity work. This disturbance can be understood as a temporal inversion where an unresolved past is foregrounded into a more stable present. If this negotiation takes place in social spaces, the present identity is threatened by destabilization. Hence, managing phantoms for these informants is both a difficult and lonesome labor that is mainly invisible to others. Phantoms entail both the immediate experience and the subsequent process. Cottee's unlearning process would benefit from the addition of the phantom metaphor. I argue that the metaphor invites a both-and understanding of disaffiliation. Cognitive and social aspects of Charismatic Christianity can be and are left behind, while the emotional aspects linger or keep revisiting the disaffiliate.

3.2. Phantoms Are Experiences Deemed Non/Religious

Furthermore, phantoms of faith illuminate the relationship between religious experience and the process of disaffiliation. This metaphor points to specific disaffiliation experiences of what could be deemed religious experiences or *revelatory events* (Taves 2016). However, as these informants are explicitly ex-charismatics, conceptualizing the experiences as religious, charismatic, or more openly spiritual or revelatory is imprecise. Another alternative could be Stephen Bullivant's concept of *irreligious experiences* (Bullivant 2008). Some of the informants would certainly fit this notion, while for most of them, the experiences are non/religiously intermingled. As stated, this article takes a pragmatic approach to the nature of these experiences and asks how they have significance for the informants. For them, it makes sense that the experiences are connected to a faith that has been amputated. It still makes concrete impressions bodily, demands interpretations cognitively, and is practically managed in various ways. For most of them, transcendent explanations are given less weight than non-transcendent explanations. Even so, it is not straightforward to label them in religious or secular categories; somehow, these are intermingled. For a few of my informants, it can be aptly understood as residue or a hangover identity, like Ebaugh (1988) suggests, even though it usually lasts a while. For others, a "morning-after" metaphor lacks the positive effects of still being intoxicated by charismaticism. I argue that the phantom metaphor allows for and helps us to understand this complex negotiation by the informants, without locking the experiences in either a negative or positive secular or religious frame.

3.3. Dissonance and Inversion

A premise of dissonance theory is that humans seek to avoid and minimize it by either changing behaviors or beliefs (Festinger 1957). The question of which area you adjust is not irrelevant. Manstsinen points to dissonance among ex-Pentecostals and admits that a cognitive, knowledge-based dissonance is less complex than solving emotional and

bodily dissonance. Still, Mantsinen focuses on connecting dissonance to discourses on freedom and autonomy and argues that two main factors can mediate the apostates' sense of dissonance: relevance and relatability (Mantsinen 2023). In other words, establishing new relationships that are relatable and relevant helps with the identity reconstruction of the disaffiliate, which will eventually minimize dissonance. Mantsinen's claim rings true to me, but at the same time, he stresses that *emotional* discrepancies are the key to understanding disaffiliates (Mantsinen 2023). The phantom metaphor is an analytical tool that contributes to Mantsinen's call.

From the field of religious experience, Pagis and Winchester's notion of somatic inversions gives a precise description of the moment the phantoms described in this article rupture bodily and how this flip creates interpretative demands (Winchester and Pagis 2021). The phantom metaphor aims to capture more than the moment of inversion. Phantoms capture the temporal range of both a sudden reaction (disgusted by bacon or panic of the endtime) and a lingering emotion (longing to come home). Furthermore, it elaborates on the ambivalence and the tension that inversion experiences were shown to produce in my study. A religious or secular interpretation is not straightforward for these informants, as they are bereft of the social context which previously "primed" and helped the scaffolding of such interpretations, as they did in the cases of Winchester and Pagis (2021). The religious disaffiliation complicates inversions which otherwise could be explained as either good or bad, Christian or secular. Now, they are often both simultaneous. Phantoms are mostly interpreted by the informants through the lens of psychology and childhood socialization, while some informants are somewhat open to metaphysical explanations. They all engage in emotional management to keep the phantoms from interfering too much in their everyday lives, while some informants welcome the experiences as a resource. What they cannot do is to easily unlearn or move beyond phantoms.

4. Conclusions

The ways that phantom experiences are framed is important for dealing with them constructively. Imagine a doctor telling an amputee patient with PLP to unlearn the itch or pain that is felt in the lacking limb without giving plausible explanations and tools to do so. Such a treatment is likely to be unsuccessful. Similarly, phantoms of faith, in this study, cannot easily be unlearned. A better and more precise description and interpretation of these experiences may be useful for managing them well. For scholars of religion and particular religious disaffiliation, one challenge is to study such a complex phenomenon from multiple perspectives and dimensions to avoid offering reductionistic analyses. I have argued that charismatic disaffiliation requires an emphasis on emotional and bodily aspects as well as cognitive and social dimensions. This article has both contributed thick descriptions of the phenomenon and developed concepts which both complement but also challenge conceptualizations from Ebaugh and Cottee. Furthermore, bringing insights from fields such as religious experience and disaffiliation in dialogue is one way of nuancing and enriching our understanding of phantoms of faith. Future studies could benefit from combining insights from the disaffiliation field and, for example, the relatively new perspectives of religious trauma[7] and religious literacy among psychologists[8]. These are areas and themes which both directly and indirectly could have positive impacts on people struggling with phantoms of faith.

5. Materials, Methods, and Researcher Positionality

Twenty-four in-depth lifestory interviews (150 min) are the basis for this analysis. The article is part of a PhD project exploring the experiences of ex-charismatics in Norway. My personal experience of leaving high-cost charismatic Christianity is a process that has since led to an academic interest in the topics of both religious experience and disaffiliation. As an academic, I aspire to what sociologist Ann Taves calls methodologic agility. This can be understood as active and flexible movement between both the insider and outsider perspectives (Taves 2015). This applies to my personal connection to Christian charismati-

cism and has been key in gaining access to the case and building trust with the informants. I also have experienced religious residue or what I call phantoms of faith. Indeed, my own resonance with some of what the informants told me led med to pursue the themes of emotion and experience in the second wave of interviews and develop the phantom concept in the analysis.

The 24 informants were selected from the Facebook community called The Journey (no: Reisen), which formed in 2018 around the launch of the podcast with the same name. Here, two ex-charismatics, one a former pastor, discuss various topics related to church exit and faith loss and development. The Facebook group was the access point where I launched a short survey (N = 79) to select a sample of interviewees I contacted for interviews. The survey data are not analysed in this article; they are merely used here to give relevant background information about the informants. Categorizing people as Christian charismatics in a Norwegian context involves constructing the category to an extent. It does not refer to one specific denomination[9], but rather points to a strand of Christianity where the Holy Spirit is primary in practice and dogma (Skjoldli and Moberg 2020). For the purposes of this article, charismatic is a useful construction, as it is this particular form of religiosity that the informants commonly disaffiliated from. However, a few are still somewhat involved in non-charismatic Christian practices or communities. Another term central to the informants' disaffiliation is high-cost religiosity, which is understood as the high level of commitment their faith has required from the informants on social, emotional, and theological levels (Scheitle and Adamczyk 2010). For example, most of them have been to Bible school or completed an internship. They have been involved with overseas missions, street evangelism, church planting, worship leading, and various forms of mostly unpaid Christian work. Furthermore, most said that they abstained from alcohol and sex before marriage, gave tithes and money regularly to the church or missions, and aspired to "live a pure and holy life". An expression used by many was that they had gone "all in for Jesus", referring to a popular yet criticized expression (Gilje 2021).

As this topic could be particularly sensitive for the informants, especially during the interview, I made certain ethical considerations to preserve the informants' well-being and minimize harm. For example, I let them suggest or choose an interview-location they would feel safe and comfortable. I reassured them of their control of the narrative and their right to pause, turn of the recorder or walk out if need be. Some of the informants chose some of these alternatives, yet still wanted to participate. As such, full and informed consent was brought up before, during, and after the interview. The loose structure gave the informants the time and security to develop their disaffiliation experiences which opened up some of the more emotional topics which would probably have been answered very differently in a structured interview. A recurring sentiment among several informants was that the interview was "worth it to be able to share my story". All names in the article are randomly assigned and personal details and descriptions has either been slightly adjusted or entirely altered to protect the privacy of the informants.

In the initial quite open and thematic coding process I noticed similar experiences that could be coded as phantom without this term explicitly being used by the informants (except one). Hence, it was a relevant term that I first used as a quite generic code relating to emotions and experiences, and later applied in a structured analysis. This type of exploratory analysis and coding has been called *abductive coding* (Vila-Henninger et al. 2022), which, in my case, meant that specific codes were revisited and reinterpreted through the phantom metaphor after engaging first with theories on metaphor in general and then phantom in particular.

Notes

1 This field of research explores phenomena which have also been called experiences deemed religious, revelatory experience, and irreligious experience, and others.

2 Pentecostals are the largest denomination within charismaticism. Furthermore, it is the specific category used in the HL-report.

3 This is a question that clinicians wrestle with and seek to answer with various treatments (Fuchs et al. 2018). Examples of treatments with some successes have been hypnosis, mirror-box (mvb), augmented reality (ar) or virtual reality (vr) technology, and experiments to treat PLP (Culp and Abdi 2022). A longitudinal study of upper limb amputees showed that phantom limb sensations, pain, and/or a general awareness of the missing limb were relatively stable over a three-year time period. However, general phantom limb awareness reduced over time for a group of patients who wore a cosmetic prosthetic (Hunter et al. 2008).

4 There is scholarly debate on the tensions between precise and a creative language in academic work. More specifically, metaphors such as *phantom*, *spirit*, *spectre*, or *ghost* are used in multiple fields and ways. Famously, Hegel wrote about the Phenomenology of Spirit, where spirit is understood as the mind, consciousness, and even history. In other words, this is a very wide metaphor, which critics have argued makes Hegel obscure and hard to read (Moyar and Quante 2008). Another renowned philosopher, Derrida, introduced the notions of *spectre* and *hauntology*, referring this to the recurrence or persistence of socio-cultural elements from the past (Derrida et al. 2006). Within political philosophy, Annika Thiem shows in her article how Walter Benjamin applied the metaphorical concept *skeletal eschatology* to diagnose the political, cultural, and religious transformations of the baroque, while Carl Schmitt used the notion of an *erzats-god* about the political sovereign, whereas they both discussed the cultural and political significance of *theological remnants* in a secularizing European society (Thiem 2013). In the psychoanalytical tradition, the phantom is used as a metaphor for the activities in the unconscious, or as Abraham and Torok puts it "the burial of an unspeakable fact within the love-object." (Abraham and Torok 1994).

5 The term non/religious describes identities, emotions, and categories that cannot easily be fixed with either a religious or a non-religious label. For more on non/religion see the article *"Some days I'm an Atheist and Other Days I'm a Believer": Variations of Ambivalence among Disaffiliates from Norwegian High-Cost Charismatic Christianity.* (Gilsvik 2023).

6 In the report, Pentecostals face similar levels of negative attitudes and stereotypes as Muslims and Polish immigrants.

7 Recent years have seen an growing interest in the term spiritual or religious trauma, especially in the US. Most of this has been through podcasts, blogs, and popular books, while academic articles on the phenomenon are yet to follow. Marlene Winell introduced the term religious trauma syndrome in her article (Winell 2011).

8 What is often called the "religiosity gap" in the therapy room has been described by the literature, for example, Mandelkow's (et al.) Norwegian study on spiritual care competence (Mandelkow et al. 2021)

9 The Pentecostal church is the largest Christian charismatic denomination in Norway as well as in this study, while a number of other churches and organizations are also represented, like the Faith movement, Vineyard, YWAM, Oase, and others.

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