

BOOK REVIEW

Leaving Christian Fundamentalism and the Reconstruction of Identity

By Josie McSkimming. New York: Routledge, 2017, 264 pages.

Australian Josie McSkimming, a former member of a Christian fundamentalist (CF) church for 30 years, provides readers with great insight into why a person might leave CF, the process of leaving, and how each person participates in his/her journey to reconstruct his/her identity. This monograph is a well-written contribution to the *Routledge New Critical Thinking in Religion, Theology and Biblical Studies* series.

McSkimming analyzes respondents' stories and categorizes them into three "stories of stories" which she then elaborates using Foucault's triangle of "truth, power and self." In this work, the author provides much more than a simple retelling of the experiences of the study's participants; it is not simply a series of transcribed stories. Instead, the author groups participants' responses and presents them in chapters focused on particular issues. Specifically, McSkimming begins her work with a discussion of the historical emergence of CF as a social movement (chapter 1) and a description of her qualitative methods (chapter 2). She then examines the journeys of change and renewal of her subjects (chapters 3-4), followed by how their identities have been shaped by truth, power, and self (chapters 5-7). Finally, the book contains a discussion of a new ideological becoming (chapter 8) and the co-construction of the role of the interviewer in the construction of identity stories (chapter 9). In her presentation of individual experiences, McSkimming does not simply critique CF, but instead provides insight into the specific process of exiting CF and the reconstruction of identity it necessitates.

McSkimming stresses in Chapter 1 that she cannot provide a complete history of CF, nor is it her desire to do so (15). She concludes that Christian Fundamentalism is "a contemporary movement reaction to secularization [that works] to create meaning and a collective identity in its members" (39). She goes on to suggest "that collective identity and biographical reconstruction may be achieved and maintained discursively... with a particular interpretation of biblical 'truth'" (39). CF provides an all-encompassing social movement that provides a collective defensive identity which defends against others (39-40).

The author's work provides a good example of qualitative analysis, as she uses the reflexive enquiry of analysis. In doing this she "makes[s] clear [her] experiences and biases" (7). Throughout the book, McSkimming "revisit[s] notions of reflexivity, ethical accountability and the unfinalised nature of identity, both [the author's] and others" (7). McSkimming's "experiences [became] part of the co-construction with others' stories" (7). She revealed how people move from a rule-based group identity to identities of "growth and maturity" (77). Study participants redefined their conceptualization of Christianity so that it was different than

how it was defined in CF. Study participants have moved away from a narrow and constraining sense of self (78).

According to McSkimming, CF defines a particular type of truth which includes an inerrancy of Biblical scriptures interpreted by “experts.” CF truth includes submission and the internalizing of rule-based “micro-management” of their lives. These rules tell group members how they should think, live, and engage in sex (125). CF power includes “internalised surveillance, small group immersion and surveillance, Christian counselling, cultic rules, tiers of acceptability and strategic exclusion... Churches have gained effective power by controlling members’ bodies, behaviors, and attitudes” (155). In Chapter 7, the author reports how people have actively helped to redefine their sense of self. For many, their new identities are more about “*doing* than *looking*” (189, italics in the original). They have found ways to reconceptualize their identities through different ways of reading the Bible. Some transformed themselves from being a “religious” person to a “spiritual person.” In this process they began to think differently about “gender roles and sexuality” (189). McSkimming concludes her work with a discussion of new identity construction (chapter 8). Finally, McSkimming discusses her role as interviewer. As a member of CF for 30 years, she is an insider engaged in the co-construction of her identity throughout the project (chapter 9).

This book is informative and the author accomplishes what she sets out to do. She provides readers with insight into how CFs move away from their religion and reconstruct their identities. This work will inform a wide variety of readers: upper level undergraduates and graduate students in religious studies, sociology, psychology, social psychology, and social work. Clergy and others involved in church administration will find McSkimming’s work useful, as she describes the experiences of those who have left Christian fundamentalist churches.

McSkimming should be encouraged to engage in future research in this area. This research project included 20 people, and 20 people may not be representative of all those who have left CF. Nearly half of them (9/20) were self-described as gay (8) or transgender (1). Being homosexual or transgender appears to be such a blatant violation of CF that it would be very difficult to remain in the group. McSkimming states that CF supports strongly traditional gender roles and is homophobic.

Future research is needed to provide insight into how other people exit Christian Fundamentalism and possibly into the narratives of people who stay. For instance, traditionally CF has not supported psychiatry. Many people with mental illnesses who turned to modern medicine were shunned by those in their faith and had to hide their treatment from others. While there are basic CF values and attitudes (e.g., disapproval of homosexuality), there may be differences between specific internal groups. Do those who are dissatisfied with their individual CF church seek out other churches that are CF but have a somewhat different focus? For instance, a person attending a CF church that focuses on women not working outside the home might find another CF church that does not focus on this as much. If CF churches are focused on

power and control, there may be differences between individual churches even while those churches maintain tight control of their members. Certainly there must be some variation among CF churches, just as there is variation among those who participate in such churches. It would also be interesting to explore why people stay in CF. While some leave, others stay, and their narratives would be interesting to understand as well. McSkimming's work is informative and could be the beginning of larger research projects with a wider variety of people.

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