RELIGION

The Social Context

Fifth Edition

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This book is dedicated to

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and to all other victims of a violent world.

places great value on one's work role (especially for men, but increasingly also for women) throughout the individual's adult life, and old age brings the often abrupt end of that role. Retirement effectively means, for many people, leaving the public sphere. Thus, the elderly person must find all bases of identity and self-worth in the private sphere—family, leisure-time activities, religion, neighborhood. Perhaps because they have been characteristically confined to the private sphere, women often adjust better than men to old age. They have already developed more social roles in the private sphere, and society has not expected them to invest themselves in their employment roles (if any) as heavily as men (Myerhoff, 1978).

By contrast, some societies provide recognizable spiritual roles for elderly persons to assume. In India, elderly persons can assume valued spiritual roles (especially if they are economically comfortable enough to "retire" from economically productive roles). Hindu men who have raised and supported their children to adulthood are allowed to retire in honor to a life of contemplation and spiritual exercises. Upper-class, married Hindu women are allowed a similar freedom after menopause to perform *habisha*—rituals to protect their husbands and develop their own spirituality. Women's freedom is temporary, however, ending when they become widows and must observe the social and ritual prohibitions for that status (Freeman, 1980).

Elderly women in other cultures often have spiritual roles as healers and midwives—positions of culturally recognized spiritual power; elderly men may be diviners, healers, or seers. Urban Western cultures, characteristically, do not provide such roles. Individuals may be recognized and honored for their "holiness" or "goodness" within their own immediate religious group, but such roles are *privatized*. The honor an elderly woman may receive at her Wednesday-night prayer meeting does not carry over to her treatment by the Social Security bureaucracy, hospital clinic, or other tenants in her apartment building.

One of the critical problems of meaning in middle and old age is modern society's sense of time. Primitive religions integrate all human action into cosmic time; the events of one's life can be interpreted as part of a larger cosmic drama. The individual's passage through the life cycle repeats and imitates the deities' birth, adolescence, marriage, childbirth, parenting, work, play, fighting, aging, and death. In this religious perspective, time has sacred significance. It collapses past and future into an eternal present.

Historic religions such as Christianity and Islam also give sacred significance to time. The past is full of the deities' self-revelation to humans; the present is important in the working out of the deities' will for humans; the future will bring the full realization of that will and celebration of a glorious reward. In this perspective, time promises immortality. Old age has sacred meaning, both as a fulfillment of divine will and as a threshold to higher levels of spiritual rewards. Modern society, by contrast, encourages a profane image of time. Time "passes," and its passage signifies decay or entropy. Time is a resource to be used but contains no special meaning; when the resource is depleted, life ends. In this context, old age has no special significance with reference to past accomplishments (e.g., social rewards for living a good life) or to future rewards

(e.g., heaven, nirvana). Old age means merely the end of full life opportunities (Kearl, 1980).

The U.S. society values economic roles especially highly. The individual's occupational role shapes the society's evaluation of that person and his or her own identity. Consumer roles are equally important. Social status is based partly on evaluations of the individual's ability to maintain a certain standard of consumption (e.g., quality of house, car, neighborhood, clothing). Elderly persons are often deprived of valued statuses in both kinds of economic roles; they are retired from their work roles, and, simultaneously, their fixed incomes leave them unable to maintain valued standards of consumption.

The legitimation offered for this loss of valued statuses is the idea of "retirement." Retirement is supposed to be an economic and moral vindication for growing old. It is described as a time for individualism (e.g., the freedom to move away to a retirement resort, play golf, lounge around, putter in the garden, and escape social obligations). The concept of retirement implies that the individual has earned this escape by having fulfilled life's social obligations. This individualism (if, indeed, the retired person can afford such luxuries in retirement) does epitomize what younger members consider to be freedom and a desirable reward. It cannot, however, provide meaning to life and death, a sense of belonging or self-worth, for the retired person (Kearl, 1980).

This life is made even more problematic in its ending. Often biological death follows the individual's social death by many years; the individual may become physically, financially, or mentally unable to sustain interactions that the society considers "alive." Yet the person is kept biologically alive, often by extreme measures of medical intervention. It becomes difficult to die "on time" (Kearl, 1993). The medical supervisors of death not only treat it as meaningless but also often segregate dying persons from family, neighbors, or friends who could support their personal meaning system. Religion has traditionally given meaning and dignity to old age and dying. Attempts to retain these values are not supported, however, by the structure of modern society. Old age and dying are generally perceived as times to fear.

CONVERSION

The capabilities of religion for providing the individual with a sense of both meaning and belonging are especially evident in the process of conversion. **Conversion** means a transformation of one's *self* concurrent with a transformation of one's basic *meaning system*.[2] It changes the sense of who one is and how one belongs in the social situation. Conversion transforms the way the

2. Throughout this discussion we will emphasize the broad concept of *meaning system* more than the specific term *religion*. This usage is helpful because the processes described here apply to other comprehensive meaning systems as well as to specifically religious ones. The processes of conversion and commitment can apply not only to religious changes but also to psychotherapeutic and political transformation.

individual perceives the rest of society and his or her personal place in it, altering one's view of the world.

This definition of conversion distinguishes simple changes in institutional affiliation from more fundamental alterations in the individual's meaning system. An Episcopalian who marries a Roman Catholic may join the Catholic church to accommodate the spouse's wishes. Such a change of affiliation is not necessarily a conversion. Similarly, a Presbyterian who moves to a new town and, finding no local church of that denomination, joins a Congregational church has probably not—strictly speaking—converted. Such denomination switching is relatively common in the United States. Some 40 percent of the U.S. populace have switched denominations at least once (Roof and McKinney, 1987:165), but when they do, they are highly likely to stay in the same "larger denominational family" (Hadaway and Marler, 1993:102). These findings are corroborated by Canadian studies, which suggest that people switch along lines of "comfort zones" in the worship services of religious groups other than one's own (Bibby, 1999). Thus, when other factors (such as marriage, friendship, geographical and socioeconomic mobility) cause people to consider changing religious affiliation, they are highly unlikely to change their religion dramatically. Such changes are not conversions but simply changes of affiliation from one organization to another.

Conceptualizing Conversion

There is considerable diversity among conversions. One distinction is the degree of personal transformation that takes place. How different are the new meaning system and self from the former ones?

The extreme case is a *radical transformation of self* and meaning system such as when a highly committed Conservative Jew converts to a fundamentalist Christian worldview. Not only are such extreme conversions relatively uncommon, but they rarely occur as dramatically as popular imagery implies. The processes by which such radical transformations occur are actually similar in kind, though usually not in degree, to less extreme conversions (see Berger and Luckmann, 1966:157–163). These processes are described in greater detail in the next section.

Less extreme cases include conversions in which the new meaning system and self represent a *consolidation of previous identities.* Some young men who became *ba'ale teshuvah*—members of strict Orthodox Jewish *yeshivot* (i.e., commune-schools)—had come from non-Orthodox Jewish homes but rejected their Jewish way of life and had then tried various alternative worldviews. Becoming newly Orthodox eventually enabled these members to consolidate elements of both their former identities into a new, "superior" self (Glanz and Harrison, 1977; see also Danzger, 1989).

Another less extreme type of conversion is essentially a *reaffirmation* of elements of one's previous identity. Many "born-again experiences" fit this model. It is difficult to specify how much change such conversions really entail. Often they involve no change in one's religious affiliation, yet exhibit real changes in the individual's personal religious behavior and sense of iden-

tity. This type of conversion does not necessarily entail a total rejection of the previous meaning system.

Some identity–consolidating conversion experiences involve little or no change in meaning system and sense of self. Many religious groups expect young members to make a personal faith decision and to undergo a conversion experience as they approach adulthood. Such groups provide opportunities such as youth revivals in which the necessary conversion experience is more likely to occur. These experiences, although very real and meaningful to participants, are better understood, not as conversions, but rather as rituals of reaffirmation of the person's existing identity and meaning system (Wimberley et al., 1975). Reaffirmation experiences are part of a process of commitment in which the individual's self-concept as a religious person becomes more central (see, for example, Staples and Mauss, 1987).

Conversion in the Context of Modern Societies Modern societies are characterized by the expectation that more areas of life are matters of *individual* decisions. In modern societies, individuals believe they are free to make such significant *choices* as marriage partner, occupation, place of residence, and religion. They also typically have more real options for choice than do persons in traditional societies. At the same time, however, many people are genuinely ambivalent about such individual freedom and try to constrain these choices by other means. While parents may no longer arrange marriages, they still try to limit their children's range of choice of partners by, for example, sending them to small colleges attracting the desired ethnic, religious, and social class groups of students. Similarly, although in principle modern societies hold that religion is a matter of individual choice, few people would agree that all religions are valid "acceptable" options.

Ironically, unlike in traditional societies, religions in modern contexts must actively work at generating members' individual choices and commitments. In modern societies the religious training of youth, for instance, is aimed largely at keeping them in "the faith" as adults when they face many other options. By contrast, in highly traditional societies, young people's belonging to the group's religion in the future is taken so for granted that youth need only to learn how to perform their own roles in that group. In the modern context, some religious groups consciously orchestrate social occasions at which the "correct" individual choices will be made, yet be experienced as freely and fully chosen.

Social scientists are particularly fascinated with conversion and commitment, because these processes highlight important features of the relationship between the individual and society in the changing contexts of modern life. **Individuation** is the process by which cultural and social structural arrangements come to consider each individual as a separate entity—in relation to group entities such as the family, tribe, religious group, or political and judicial institutions. Modern societies are characterized by a much higher degree of individuation than traditional societies, but modern societies differ culturally in how they think about the individual and about individual choices and

rights. For example, Protestant Christians have traditionally emphasized individual repentance and salvation, whereas Eastern Orthodox Christians have emphasized being saved in a community united by ritual practices. A social scientist would ask how these two groups adapt their understandings of the individual-to-society relationship in the context of largely urbanized modern social and economic conditions.

Because of this cultural diversity, however, we must be cautious not to confuse our own cultural "rhetorics" for the essential or definitive features of conversion. For example, Euro-American cultures assume that religious belief and practice are (or ought to be) matters of voluntary *individual* choice, but many other cultures view decisions about religious affiliation and practice to pertain to the entire family, so if the head of the family changes religion, the entire family changes. Similarly, most U.S. religious groups believe that conversion entails accepting a new set of religious ideas or beliefs; other cultures downplay religious beliefs and emphasize changed ritual practices. One anthropologist (Rosaldo, 1989) recounts his failure to comprehend the conversion of a tribesman of the Ilongot (of the highland Philippines) to evangelical Christianity. Christian beliefs—including beliefs about death or heaven—were unimportant to this man who was suffering greatly the death of seven children in a short span; what mattered was that the new religion offered religious *practices* that enabled him to cope with his grief and rage. In the traditional Ilongot way of life, the grief and rage experienced in bereavement had been ceremonially dealt with by head-hunting. After Marcos's declaration of martial law in 1972, the government forbade and severely punished head-hunting, so tribesmen had no way of dealing with these intense emotional experiences. In this example, the man's abandonment of the Ilongot way of life probably preceded his embracement of a Christian way of life, but Christian *beliefs per se* appear not to have been a significant feature of his conversion.

Conversion Accounts and Rhetorics The main difficulty in distinguishing the degree of change that occurs in any given conversion is that the individual who converts *reinterprets past experiences* in relationship to the new meaning system. Therefore, it becomes difficult to determine what amount of the convert's description of the changes experienced represents the objective process of conversion and how much expresses the convert's subjective reinterpretation of those events. The convert constructs the story of conversion, drawing on a socially available set of plausible explanations, or *rhetoric*.

Several rhetorics are available to converts to use to "explain" their conversion (Burke, 1953). Rhetorics of choice emphasize how much the change resulted from a personal, often agonizing decision. Our society places much value on individual decision, so these rhetorics are prominent in explanations of conversion. In cultures where personal decision is less valued or even discouraged, rhetorics of choice are not emphasized; indeed, often converts do not even experience "making a personal decision" (Tippett, 1973). Rhetorics of change emphasize the dramatic nature of personal change in the conversion. Converts may compare the evil or unhappiness of their previous way of life

with how wonderful their new way is. Rhetorics of continuity focus on the extent to which one's new meaning system and self are the logical extension of earlier beliefs and experiences. The convert might remember important past experiences as tentative steps toward the newfound truth.

Religious groups themselves often encourage the application of one type of rhetoric over another. Thus, the Catholic Charismatic Renewal encourages new members to interpret their "born-again" experiences as continuous with their former way of life, whereas many Pentecostal sects encourage new members to interpret their similar "born-again" experiences as a dramatic change and repudiation of their former way of life. Because the main source of information about conversion is the converts themselves—and because their explanations of events surrounding their conversions are reinterpretations consistent with their new meaning systems—evaluating evidence about conversions is difficult. Sociological theories of conversion must not mistake these interpretations and rhetorics that express them for the objective events of the conversion (Beckford, 1978a; Machalek and Snow, 1993).

Explaining Conversion

A theoretical understanding of how conversion occurs is nevertheless worthwhile because it reveals much about the connection between the individual's meaning system, social relationships, and very identity. Because conversion consists in a change of the individual's meaning system and self, it has social, psychological, and ideational components. The social component consists of the interaction between the recruit and other circles of associates (e.g., parents, friends, coworkers). The psychological component refers to emotional and affective aspects of conversion as well as to changes in values and attitudes. The ideational component includes the actual ideas the convert embraces or rejects during the process. These ideas are rarely very philosophical or theological; they are simply a set of beliefs that both justify the new meaning system and negate the former one.

Factors in Conversion An adequate theory of conversion must take all the aspects mentioned into account without overemphasizing any single component. Some theories give too much weight to social factors by creating the image of a passive person being pushed and pulled by various social forces. Although very real social pressures are exerted on the potential convert, the person who converts is not a passive object of these pressures. Conversion entails an interaction during which the recruit constructs or negotiates a new personal identity (Beckford, 1978a; Kilbourne and Richardson, 1989; Straus, 1979). Furthermore, only some of those exposed to such social pressures do decide to convert (Barker, 1983).

Some theories of conversion overemphasize ideational components of the process. These theories are consistent with the ideological claims of the religious groups themselves. Religious groups like to believe that the truth value of their beliefs alone is sufficient to compel a person to convert. The content of the belief system *is* a factor in conversion. Some beliefs are more appealing

than others to people in certain circumstances; indeed, the potential convert will likely be recruited to a group whose perspective is consistent with that person's previous outlook, even though the specific content of the group's beliefs may be unfamiliar (Greil, 1977). Also, we must acknowledge people's religious reasons for their religious behavior and not try to reduce every motive to some psychological function.

Nevertheless, ideas alone do not persuade a person to convert. Even in the scientific community where objective facts and the truth value of interpretations are supposed to be paramount, there is considerable resistance to change from an established interpretive paradigm to a new one—even when the old paradigm is inconsistent with the "facts" (Festinger, 1957; Kuhn, 1970). How much more are religious believers, with their emphasis on supraempirical reality, likely to resist changing their ideas? Thus, although the ideational component is important in the appeal of a new belief system, it is not sufficient to bring about conversion.

Other theories place too great an emphasis on psychological factors in conversion, explaining the change entirely in terms of the individual's personality, biography, and personal problems. Psychologistic explanations are attractive because they mesh with many of our individualistic cultural values. Nevertheless, they are too one-sided, leaving out social situational factors and other important components. Also, some of these theories tend to assume that conversion to unusual religious groups entails "sick" behavior. Yet adherents' behavior is quite understandable and rational within their alternate meaning systems. If one believes that astrological forces influence human events, it is perfectly rational to act in accordance with those forces. Likewise, if one believes that the world is coming to an end in the very near future, it is not irrational or "sick" to give up one's possessions or career plans.

"Brainwashing" One particularly misleading psychologistic model of conversion is the "brainwashing" metaphor. This model is based on studies during the 1950s of the processes by which certain U.S. military personnel in the Orient were pressed to convert to Chinese communism. The popular image applied to this process was "brainwashing," conveying the idea that the convert's mind was cleansed of prior beliefs, values, and commitment, then filled with a new belief system. Psychological studies of this process identified several factors contributing to conversion without cooperation of the converts (Lifton, 1963; Sargant, 1957). Various social scientists have subsequently generalized the interpretations of this drastic type of political conversion to other forms of conversion. Some accurate parallels do exist between forcible "brainwashing" and conversion, but these characteristics apply to all forms of resocialization. Thus, the training of soldiers for combat and the rehabilitation of juvenile delinquents also involve these processes. To say that conversion is a form of resocialization does not mean that it is therefore an extreme, involuntary form of resocialization.

The key problem with the "brainwashing" metaphor is its ideological use and potential application for abuses of civil liberties. Nonconverts often feel

threatened by the conversion of someone close to them. The convert has rejected their own dearly held views and norms and has indirectly threatened the nonconverts' own meaning system. When people cannot understand why an individual would *want* to convert to an unfamiliar religious perspective, they find "brainwashing" an attractive explanation. This metaphor implies that the converting individual did not change voluntarily. The metaphor also allows people to negate the ideational component of the convert's new meaning system. A convert's parents can feel, "He doesn't believe those ideas because they are meaningful to him but because his mind has been manipulated." In its extreme form, the "brainwashing" metaphor has been recently used to justify the denial of converts' religious liberty on the ground that they do not know their own minds (Anthony and Robbins, 1992, 1995; Richardson, 1991, 1993c).

An interesting parallel with the current anticult charge of "brainwashing" is the nineteenth-century anti-Mason movement. Freemasonry is now a legitimate, middle-class form of fraternal organization, but it was severely attacked in the nineteenth-century United States as subversive to democracy. Other now respectable groups that were attacked (often violently) were Roman Catholics and Mormons. The key themes of the movements against Masonry, Roman Catholicism, and Mormonism emphasized that, unlike conventional denominations that claimed only partial loyalty of their members, these groups allegedly dominated their members' lives, demanded unlimited allegiance, and conducted some activities in secrecy (Holt, 1973; Vaughn, 1983).

This parallel suggests that the "brainwashing" controversy is an ideological issue at another level (see Robbins and Anthony, 1979). The society defines as "deviant" one who is *too* committed to religion, especially authoritarian religion. The resocialization processes themselves are less of an issue than the legitimacy of the group's religion itself. To illustrate this discrepancy, two researchers compared conversion and commitment processes of the Unification Church of Sun Myung Moon and similar late-twentieth-century sects with the nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century practices of the now socially acceptable Tnevnoc "cult." The Tnevnoc practices were essentially comparable and seem bizarre until we discover that the authors were actually referring to life in the convent—which, spelled backward, is Tnevnoc (Bromley and Shupe, 1979). The chief difference between many modern "cults" and groups such as Roman Catholicism, Freemasonry, and Mormonism is that the latter groups have now achieved social legitimacy.[3]

Keeping these cautions in mind, we can examine some of the factors in conversion. By emphasizing conversion as a *process* rather than an event, we take into account the fact that the convert has both a history and a future. Although an individual may experience conversion as a discrete event, numerous other experiences lead up to and follow that event that are also parts of the

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3. To reduce the impression that conversion and commitment processes characterize only "weird" religions, I have drawn examples from both traditional and "new" religions.

conversion. The following description examines the sequence of events in the process of conversion; but let us remember that no single step in the sequence is itself sufficient to "cause" conversion (Beckford, 1978a; Heirich, 1977; Machalek and Snow, 1993; Richardson, 1985).

Predisposition to Conversion

Several personal and situational factors can predispose people to conversion by making them aware of the extent to which their prior meaning system seems inadequate to explain or give meaning to experiences and events. By contrast, if individuals can satisfactorily "handle" experiences and events within the framework of their meaning system, they have no desire to seek alternative meanings for their lives. Sometimes the individual who acutely feels the need for a new set of meanings becomes a *seeker*—that is, a person who actively looks for a satisfactory alternative belief system. A seeker often tries many different alternative beliefs and practices (Balch and Taylor, 1977). One American (a business analyst) convert to Soka Gakkai, a recent Japanese form of Buddhism, described her previous path:

> I practiced Christianity [in] the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints [Mormons], which taught [that there was] no salvation outside the Church, yet there were some good people outside. My church was very rigid (drinking rules and such). In 1971, Transcendental Meditation—I was looking for balance, for a daily rhythm. It helped me feel good—computer work is very stressful. It was more powerful than praying to God. I did Transcendental Meditation for a year. I also met Gurdjieff teaching in 1974, and was part of the Gurdjieff Society from 1974 to 1977. I was against organized religion—protocol, ceremony. A lady I met in the Gurdjieff group was starting chanting. She said "Try it!" When she chanted I felt sick—I was against trying it. However, I felt the strength. I was searching, but blocked. (quoted in Wilson and Dobbelaere, 1994:82)

Often, however, the individual experiences the desire for a more satisfactory meaning system as a vague tension, a malaise.

Many converts describe a crisis that they felt was a turning point in their lives. It is very difficult to evaluate the extent to which such crises actually precipitate the individual's conversion. Some crises may disrupt a person's life so completely that the individual has difficulty integrating them into the previously held meaning system. Natural disasters, war, and personal tragedy are particularly acute challenges. Serious illness or unemployment may be experienced as turning points. Social events such as an economic depression or anxiety over social conditions (e.g., crime or erosion of morals) may predispose people to conversion. Nevertheless, such crises do not *cause* religious conversion. Religious conversion is one among several possible resolutions of tensions and problems created by the crisis. Thus, serious illness might predispose one person to convert to a new meaning system; another person with a simi-

lar illness might find great meaning and comfort in his or her existing meaning system and have that belief confirmed by the crisis experience. Diverse other responses are possible, including alcoholism, political conversion, psychotherapy, suicide, and so on. Individuals converted to religious meaning systems are typically people whom previous socialization has predisposed to a religious perspective (see Greil, 1977; Lofland, 1966, 1977).

Determining to what extent the convert's description of a crisis experience is the result of after-the-fact interpretation of events is also difficult. Some religious groups encourage their members to witness about their conversion experience by telling the group how they came to "see the light." Whether the events thus described were really critical when they occurred is therefore difficult to reconstruct. Often the new group itself promotes the recruit's experience of a crisis. Many groups raise the recruit's anxiety over social and personal problems. Jehovah's Witnesses, for example, often approach strangers with a message about common worries—war, inflation, crime. By "mediating" anomie, the group encourages the individual to convert. The group encourages an experiential crisis of meaning by emphasizing order-threatening conditions and magnifying the potential convert's feelings of dissatisfaction, fear, and anxiety, which the person may have previously felt only vaguely (Beckford, 1975b:174).

Initial Interaction

Most recruits are drawn to the group by friends or relatives. Besides introducing the newcomer to the group and its beliefs, these preexisting networks of friendship account for the plausibility of the beliefs and the attractiveness of belonging. Thus, a person might be impressed by a roommate's happiness in a religious group and be curious enough to "check it out." The fact that a person whom one knows and likes belongs to the group attests to the normalcy or desirability of the group's way of life (Gerlach and Hine, 1970; Lofland, 1966). Even groups such as the Nichiren Shoshu (a Japanese movement brought to the United States in 1960), which conspicuously proselytize in public and anonymous settings, typically recruit most of their members through preexisting networks of friends and relatives (Snow et al., 1980).

Through interaction with members of the group, the recruit is gradually resocialized into that group's way of life. This resocialization consists of the individual's reshaping of identity and worldview to become consistent with those considered appropriate by the group. Several social processes enable the individual to make this transformation. Group support is particularly important. The recruit enjoys warm, affective relationships with the new group. Members of the Unification Church, for example, shower the potential member with attention and affection. These bonds affirm the new self and meaning system. As the recruit gradually withdraws from competing social relationships, the new group's opinions become increasingly important (Berger, 1967:50–51). Intensive interaction and close affective bonds with group members are central to the conversion process because they link the

individual's new identity with the organization's perspective and goals (Greil and Rudy, 1984).

At the same time, the recruit also weakens or severs those relationships that support the old self. Former attachments compete with new commitments, symbolize a worldview that the recruit wishes to reject, and are based on an identity that the recruit wishes to change. Imagine, for example, that through two good friends you are introduced to a group of U.S. Sufis (Sufism is a mystical sect within Islam). Suppose that you learned enough about the group that you decided you would like to join them. How would your non-Sufi friends and relatives react? Your roommate might say, "Oh, come off that mysticism kick. I liked you better when you were a drinking buddy." Imagine your parents' reaction when you announce at supper that weekend, "Guess what, Mom and Dad, I've decided to join this fantastic bunch of Sufis, and I'm going out to the West Coast to live in a commune with some of them!" Most converts find their former set of friends less than supportive of their newfound truth and new self. Relationships with the new group therefore become even more important to counteract opposition from others.

During this resocialization, recruits learn to redefine their social world. Relationships once valued become devalued, and patterns of behavior once undesirable become desirable. New believers may redefine their families to exclude the biological family and to include the new family of fellow believers. A Shaker hymn thus celebrates the severance of old family ties:

> Of all the relations that ever I see
> My old fleshly kindred are furthest from me
> So bad and so ugly, so hateful they feel
> To see them and hate them increases my zeal . . .
> My gospel relations are dearer to me
> Than all the flesh kindred that ever I see . . .
> (quoted in Kanter, 1972:90)

This process results in a whole new way of experiencing the world and oneself. The individual comes to "see" the world with an entirely different perspective; indeed, the new believer may say, "I once was blind, but now I see." This phrase is not merely metaphorical because the new perspective actually causes the individual to *perceive* the world differently. That which was marginal to consciousness becomes central, and that which once was focal becomes peripheral. Every worldview entails the selective perception and interpretation of events and objects according to its meaning system. Conversion means adopting new criteria for selecting (Jones, 1978; Snow and Machalek, 1983).

Recruits also redefine their own biographies. They remember episodes that appear consistent with the newfound perspective and interpret them as "part of what led me to the truth." Events are reinterpreted in terms of new beliefs and values. Remembering how proud she was to have achieved scholastic honors in school, one young woman said, "What a fool I was back then to have put so much store on worldly achievements."

The actual interaction between the recruit and the group is especially important in bringing about this transformation of worldviews. The most obvious action of religious groups is **proselytizing** potential converts. *Proselytizing* means that an individual or group actively tries to persuade nonbelievers to become believers. Some religious groups (e.g., Jehovah's Witnesses) do much proselytizing among nonbelievers; others (e.g., Conservative Jews) do virtually none. Although proselytizing activities are relatively conspicuous to outsiders, they are important primarily as a commitment mechanism for already converted members (Beckford, 1975b; Festinger et al., 1956; Shaffir, 1978). One study of a growing Pentecostal denomination found that members with extensive religious experience (e.g., speaking in tongues, divine healing) were especially vigorous evangelizers of potential recruits (Poloma and Pendleton, 1989). Thus, a mutually reinforcing relationship developed between members' involvement in the group and their attempts to share their religious faith and experience.

Mutual witnessing within existing friendships appears to be especially effective in bringing about the recruit's conversion to a new meaning system. Thus, the newcomer may mention an apparent coincidence that had recently happened, and a group member may respond, "That was no coincidence. That was God trying to show concern for you so that you will change your life." Or a member might say, "I used to be just like you. I had my doubts and didn't know what to believe, but now it all fits together. Now I can see what I was missing." Through these informal interactions, the recruit may gradually "try on" the interpretations suggested by members and apply their meaning systems to personal experiences. Thus, the new recruit comes to share their distinctive worldview.

Symbolizing the Conversion

The part of the conversion process typically identified as "the conversion" is essentially some form of *symbolizing* the transformation that has already been occurring. The convert affirms the new identity by some symbolic means considered appropriate in that group. In many Christian groups, baptism is meaningful as a symbol of conversion. Other ritual expressions of the new self include speaking in tongues (i.e., *glossolalia*) and witnessing. Some groups have very formal means for symbolizing transformation; others have more informal symbols that are not obvious to the nonbeliever (Gerlach and Hine, 1970; Lebra, 1972).

Although conversion is a gradual process, many recruits who have decided to convert adopt some of the symbols of conversion rather dramatically. Part of the resocialization itself is learning to act, look, and talk like other members of the group. Indeed, groups such as the Unification Church may focus on teaching recruits to display signs of commitment to the neglect of socializing them to actual commitment (Long and Hadden, 1983:9). The imitation of signs of commitment—which might be called "doing being converted"—

may be one part of the resocialization process. It is, however, often mistaken by observers as evidence that a dramatic conversion has been accomplished.

Some groups may encourage the new member to seek a conversion experience. This special emotional and spiritual event thus symbolizes the person's full conversion. Such experiences, however, are only part of the larger conversion process but are valued ways of symbolizing the transformation in some groups. Often these conversion experiences are brought about in carefully orchestrated settings. In a revival meeting, the timing of the altar call is synchronized with music and spoken message to proclaim, in essence, "Now is the appropriate time to have that special experience you came for" (W. Johnson, 1971; Walker and Atherton, 1971).

Another symbolic expression of the new self is changing one's name. Nuns traditionally changed their names upon taking their vows. The new name both symbolized the person's new identity and helped confirm that identity every time she was addressed. Some groups also encourage converts to confess the wrongness of their previous way of life. Among the Society of Brothers (Bruderhof), such a confession event symbolizes the conversion and demonstrates how new members' views of themselves have been transformed (see Zablocki, 1971:239–285). In the confession, converts affirm their new selves by derogating the behavior of their old selves. These symbols of conversion illustrate the complexity of the larger process of resocialization (see Goffman, 1961, especially his comparison of the "mortification of self" in several different institutional settings).

COMMITMENT

The process of conversion does not end when the recruit formally joins the group and symbolically affirms the conversion. Rather, the conversion process is continued in the **commitment** process, by which the individual increasingly identifies with the group, its meaning system, and its goals. Groups that have highly effective recruitment strategies may not be able to keep and effectively deploy their members if their commitment processes are not also effective (Long and Hadden, 1983). Popular imagery somehow envisions the converted recruit as permanently changed. The turnover of members in contemporary religious movements belies this notion. A British study found that, in the tightly organized Unification Church, the majority of converts leave the group of their own free will within two years (Barker, 1983). Similarly, a Canadian study of numerous new religious and parareligious movements found that, while participation rates were relatively high, the proportion of adherents staying in these movements was extremely low (Bird and Reimer, 1982).

Commitment is a problem not only for contemporary movements. George Whitefield, an eighteenth-century Calvinist preacher, observed that his efforts were not as successful as those of John Wesley, the principal founder of Methodism. The key difference was that, although both preachers achieved

many converts, Wesley insisted that the localities where he preached should establish "classes" to ensure the commitment of new converts (Snow and Machalek, 1983). Relative commitment of members is no indicator of the truth or "deviance" of a religious group. Maintaining commitment to *any* group is always problematic, and it is especially difficult in a modern, pluralistic, mobile, individualistic society.

Commitment means the willingness of members to contribute in maintaining the group because the group provides what they want and need. *Commitment* therefore implies a reciprocal relationship. The group achieves its goals by fulfilling the needs of its members, and the members satisfy their desires by helping to maintain the group. Persons who are totally committed to a group have fully invested themselves in it and fully identify with it. Commitment is the link between the individual and the larger social group. A person cannot be coerced into commitment but decides to identify with the interests of the group because of personal values, material interests, or affective ties (Kanter, 1972:65–70).

Conversion is a resolution of the individual's problems with former meaning systems and former self, but conversion alone is not sufficient to resolve new problems. The group's commitment processes help prevent the individual's doubts and new problems from undermining the conversion. The final result of the entire conversion process is not merely creating new members but creating members who will invest themselves in what the group is believing and doing. The same process also ensures the commitment of all members, new and old, to the group's values and objectives. *Commitment processes build plausibility structures for the group's worldview and way of life.*

The level of commitment that a group expects varies. Most major denominations in the United States do not expect intense commitment from their members or for that commitment to influence all aspects of their lives. At the opposite extreme, religious groups such as many fundamentalist and Pentecostal churches, as well as most communal groups ranging from Hassidic Jews to Trappist monks, expect members to demonstrate intense religious commitment in all spheres of daily life. Commitment mechanisms in dissenting or deviant groups are especially important because of their difficulty in maintaining their worldview in face of opposition both from established religious groups and the larger society. All social groups, however, need some commitment from their members in order to maintain the group and achieve their goals (see Gerlach and Hine, 1970). And all social groups (including nonreligious groups such as the army) utilize commitment measures similar to those used by religious groups.

The processes by which the group fosters commitment are similar to processes of conversion. Both processes urge members to *withdraw* from competing allegiances and alternate ways of life, and both processes encourage members to *involve* themselves more deeply in the life of the group, its values and goals. These commitment mechanisms are used to some degree by all social groups. Groups desiring more intense or total commitment of members, however, are likely to use more extreme commitment processes. Groups gain

greater commitment of members by asking them to sacrifice something for the group, but the degree of required sacrifice varies widely. Most religious bodies ask their members to give up some of their money and time for the group's goals and projects; and some groups expect their members to tithe a specific, substantial percentage of their income. Still other groups ask members to give up all belongings to the group and to live communally.

Withdrawal from Competing Allegiances

Any degree of sacrifice enhances the individual's commitment because giving up something makes the goal seem more valuable. Sacrifice gives observable evidence to the group that the member is committed, and it "weeds out" members who are not sufficiently committed. Religious groups further encourage sacrifice by signifying it as a consecration, so the act of sacrifice gains sacred status. Some groups ask members to sacrifice time and energy (e.g., devoting a certain number of hours each week to proselytizing new members). Some groups expect members to abstain regularly or periodically from certain foods or from alcohol, tobacco, drugs, or sexual relationships. Several Christian groups encourage or require their members to fast during Lent. Either for all members or for an elite core group, many religious groups place special value on celibacy. Other groups may expect members to do without "worldly" pursuits (e.g., dancing, going to movies, wearing makeup or stylish clothing). Such sacrifices are demanded by most contemporary religious groups, especially marginal ones. Celibacy, for example, figures in the commitment process of such diverse groups as Roman Catholic clergy, some neo-Pentecostals, the Divine Light Mission, and the Unification Church. Vegetarianism and abstinence from smoking, drinking, and drugs are commonly required sacrifices (see Kanter, 1972, for examples from nineteenth-century communal groups; for contemporary examples, see Gardner, 1978).

Some sacrifices may also be interpreted as forms of **mortification,** the process of stripping the individual of vestiges of the "old self." Groups seeking to resocialize their members into a new identity consistent with the group's beliefs and values often encourage mortification. Members are asked to let go of those areas of life that compete with the new, desired self. They may have to wear prescribed dress and hairstyle, do without makeup or jewelry, and give up certain prized possessions. They are asked to sacrifice not because these things are wrong in themselves but because using them supports the "old self." Other forms of mortification include public confession, giving up control over one's time and personal space, and relinquishing personal choice in a wide range of matters (Goffman, 1961; see also Chidester, 1988; Zablocki, 1971). Some groups use rituals in which participating members must violate taboos pertaining to their former way of life. Thus, ritually consuming some formerly forbidden food or engaging in formerly taboo sexual practices, for example, serve as group commitment mechanisms (Palmer and Bird, 1992).

The group sometimes promotes further withdrawal of members from their former way of life by asking them to renounce competing relationships. Many sectarian groups discourage members from interacting with the "outside

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BOX 3.3   Historical Perspective: Mortification of Self in a Protestant Communitarian Sect

As the tour guide, dressed in clothing of the style the Sisters wore, took us from monastic cell to cell, I tried to imagine what it was like to live and work and pray in the Cloister at Ephrata. This communitarian settlement in Pennsylvania was founded in 1732 by Pietist immigrants from Germany. Every aspect of their schedule, buildings, and interactions was designed to mortify the self in order to shed all their worldly ways in order to fully practice their Christian faith. Each tiny cell had a small window, a wooden bench for a bed, and a block of wood for a pillow. The Sisters and Brothers arose each day while it was still dark, dressed in their plain work clothes, and made their way to the chapel for the first of several daily periods of prayer. They read only what was approved, and they had minimal interaction with the nonbeliever neighbors. They

spent the day hard at work in the fields, barns, kitchens, and laundries of the community. Their food was simple, vegetarian fare, grown and cooked in their own community. Members of the Cloister were celibate, but a few "Outside" coreligionists lived with their wives and children in cottages nearby (Longnecker, 1994).

Reaching the end of the tour, one of the women in our entourage exclaimed admiringly: "You don't see that kind of Christian commitment nowadays!"

- If we did see it, would the media label it a "cult," and would social service workers try to wrest the children away?
- Why is extreme asceticism deviant in our society?
- Why does our society distrust extreme religious commitment?

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world" and may adopt special social arrangements to insulate members from outside influences. Groups such as some Mennonites, Jesus communes, the early Hare Krishna movement, and centuries of Christian monks geographically separate themselves from the rest of society. Other groups insulate their members by operating their own schools, places of work, and social clubs. For instance, numerous conservative evangelical groups have instituted home schooling or separate sectarian schools (see Peshkin, 1986; Rose, 1988; Wagner, 1990). The group may also exercise control over the communication media to which members are exposed or may limit interaction with outsiders.

More important than physical withdrawal from "the world" is the creation of psychic **boundaries** between the group and the outside. By use of these boundaries, members come to think of the group as "we" and the rest of society as "they." Furthermore, members perceive their in-group as good or superior and the outside as evil or degraded. Thus, the individual member's withdrawal from competing activities is motivated not only by controls that the group exercises but especially by the wish to identify with the in-group and to avoid the negative influences of the outside. Even groups that have not withdrawn fully from the larger society often create these kinds of psychical boundaries, for example, by urging members to join parallel religious organizations

rather than secular organizations. Thus, groups like Christian Veterinarian's Fellowship or Fellowship of Christian Athletes provide some of the prestige and business networks of professional associations, while protecting members from secular society (Elzey, 1988).

Withdrawal from competing relationships often entails changes in the member's relationships with parents, spouse, and close friends. Typically, the individual identifies with outside relationships less and less, while simultaneously drawing closer to fellow group members. Many religious groups try to exert some control over the member's choice of a marriage partner. Marriage to someone who does not support (or who even opposes) one's worldview can undermine the believer's meaning system.

The group frequently tries to guide or control even its members' relationships within the group. Close relationships among a small part of the group may detract from commitment to the group as a whole. The attachment of a married couple to each other or of parents to their children can compete with their involvement in the larger group. Groups that seek intense commitment from their members often have special structural arrangements to reduce this competition. The Oneida commune of the nineteenth century had a form of "open marriage" that diminished the pairing off of couples. The Unification Church treated their entire movement as the "united family," based on Reverend Moon's teachings that the family was essential to the salvation of the nation and world. The Church chose marriage partners and scheduled mass weddings, promoting the sense that members' commitment was primarily to the united family rather than the spouse or immediate family (Christiano, 2000).

These processes all promote commitment to the group by encouraging individual members to withdraw themselves from those aspects of their former life that prevent them from being fully a "new self." The degree to which any given religious group asks its members to withdraw from nongroup loyalties depends largely on the type of group. The more marginal, sectlike groups typically expect high levels of attachment. Their commitment processes are therefore more intense and extreme than those of ordinary denominations.

Attachment

At the same time that groups encourage members to withdraw from other allegiances, they also urge members to become more and more involved in the group itself, drawing them into greater oneness with the group. This sense of unity is clearly related to the concept of belonging, discussed in Chapter 2. The provision of a sense of belonging may be as important, if not more important, than the specific beliefs of sectarian groups in maintaining high levels of member commitment (Ammerman, 1987; McGaw, 1980).

Activities that draw the members into the fellowship and consciousness of the larger group promote both the cohesion of the group and the commitment of individual members. These commitment mechanisms make belonging to the group an emotionally satisfying experience. Commitment mechanisms for attachment are also likely to differ according to the intensity of the commit-

ment desired by the group. Groups that expect intense commitment of members use stronger measures to promote attachment to the group.

The "we feeling" of group consciousness is promoted by homogeneity of membership. The more alike members feel, the easier it is for the group to gain a sense of unity. Established religious bodies typically achieve member homogeneity by self-selection. Individuals choose to join a church or synagogue with membership characteristics comparable to their own social status, racial, ethnic, or language group, and educational and religious background. Sectlike groups, by contrast, have more selective memberships, screening out or discouraging unacceptable members. Sectlike groups put greater emphasis on resocializing new members, thereby *creating* more homogeneity (Kanter, 1972:93, 94).

Group unity is also enhanced by the sharing of work and possessions. The extreme form of such sharing is full communal living, in which all possessions are held in common and all work is performed together. At the opposite pole are nominal forms of sharing, such as gathering Thanksgiving baskets for the needy or a painting party to decorate Sunday school rooms. Even these minimally demanding kinds of sharing promote a sense of unity in the group. Much sharing in religious groups consists of people taking care of each other. Group members may aid the family of a hospitalized member by caring for the children, preparing meals, and comforting the worried spouse. This kind of sharing promotes the commitment not only of the family receiving care but also especially of those giving the care.

Regular group gatherings also bring about greater commitment of members, and such gatherings need not be for overtly religious purposes. A church supper helps increase members' feeling of belonging to the group. For example, ethnographies of African-American churches note the centrality of preparing church suppers and of eating food together as an expression of group solidarity and sharing (Goldsmith, 1989; Williams, 1974). Communal groups meet very frequently, sometimes each day. Other sectlike groups also urge their members to meet often. Some groups hold prayer meetings three nights a week in addition to Sunday services and church socials.

Not all religious groups, however, identify commitment to the congregation as critical. Some groups emphasize both family-level religiosity and supracongregational commitment as very important. Religious gatherings of the family (e.g., the family saying the prayers of the rosary together or praying special Sabbath blessings, *Shabbat b'rachot*) serve similar functions of commitment but not necessarily to the congregation.

The content of group gatherings can also promote the commitment of individual members. **Ritual** is one particularly important aspect of a group gathering. By ritual, the group symbolizes meanings significant *to itself.* Ritual gives symbolic form to group unity, and participating individuals symbolically affirm their commitment. Ritual both reflects and acts on the group's meaning system. Too often we tend to think of ritual as being empty and a matter of "going through the motions." Even going through the motions can promote a sense of unity, but in many groups the content of ritual is highly meaningful

and especially successful in creating a sense of oneness. Rituals important in many religious groups include communion and other ritual meals, healing services, symbols of deference, embraces, special prayer postures, hymns, and rituals of purification.

Mutual **witnessing** continues to be as important in the commitment process as in the initial socialization or conversion of the believer. Through witnessing, members show themselves and others how their daily lives can be interpreted in terms of the group's meaning system. This kind of public witnessing is prominent in evangelical and charismatic Christian prayer meetings and in the *satsang* of some imported neo-Hindu movements. Witnessing transforms all events, thoughts, and experiences into significant events, meaningful thoughts, and special religious experiences. Witnessing explicitly devalues everyday and nonbelievers' interpretations of events and replaces them with approved religious interpretations. Witnessing can be relatively public or can occur in the setting of a small fellowship group or family. The public proselytizing of Jehovah's Witnesses, Mormons, and Hare Krishnas is different from the relatively private witnessing of the evangelical Women's Aglow movement or the Catholic Charismatic movement. Religious groups that consider themselves in opposition to the rest of "the world" are more likely to emphasize witnessing as a commitment mechanism (on witnessing in religious groups, see Ammerman, 1987; Kroll-Smith, 1980; McGuire, 1982; Shaffir, 1978). Mutual witnessing is an important commitment mechanism in nonreligious groups, as well. For instance, it has functions in Alcoholics Anonymous and other "twelve-step" groups: Overeaters Anonymous and Christian diet groups (e.g., Jesus is the Weigh); psychotherapeutic groups; and quasi-religious corporations such as Amway (see Bromley, 1998c; Griffith, 1999; Jones, 1975; Lester, 1999; Rice, 1994; Rudy and Greil, 1987, 1989).

Commitment to a group can be strengthened if the group convinces the member that the group itself is extraordinary. Groups (such as those described in Chapter 2) that expect the imminent end of the world typically portray themselves as the elect who will be saved. Their elaboration of millenarian catastrophic prophecies often intensifies group members' commitment (Wessinger, 2000a). Other groups represent their rituals and practices as necessary for salvation in the next life. Many of these groups teach that fallenaway members will be even worse off than people who never knew the "right" way.

Group practices that promote a sense of awe further emphasize the significance of the group itself. These practices make the actions of the group appear more than mundane; mystery, magic, and miracles surround the group actions. When the leaders "receive directions" from God, as among Mormons and Pentecostals, the directions seem far more awesome than if members had voted on them. Social and symbolic distance also promotes a sense of awe. Thus, medieval churches used physical barriers (e.g., rood screens) and space to separate the body of the congregation from the central ritual performance. Even today many religious groups have certain sacred spaces in their places of worship where ordinary members cannot routinely go. These practices may not

have been deliberately created to generate commitment, but the production of a sense of awe does result in enhancing members' commitment.

DISENGAGEMENT

Although many members continue or increase their commitment to their religious group, others become less committed or drop out of the group. In many respects, the process of **disengagement** is the reverse of conversion. Like conversion, disengagement typically entails a transformation of self and basic meaning system. When a religious meaning system and identity have been especially central in a believer's life, the process of altering self and meaning system may be a wrenching transformation.

Both conversion and disengagement are forms of "status passage" in which the individual leaves one role and enters another (Glazer and Strauss, 1971). Persons in modern, mobile societies may go through many role-exit experiences, such as moving out of one's parents' home, divorcing a spouse, being discharged from the armed services or hospital or prison, moving away from a community, changing jobs, retiring, or quitting a social club. Some of these roles are more central to the individual's identity, and thus role exit may be more complex and emotion-laden than for other secondary roles. If the religious group has been the primary source of all other parts of the member's identity and social life, leaving can be particularly socially and emotionally wrenching. One Israeli who left the ultra-Orthodox *haredi* (Jewish) community said:

> You feel an emptiness, a very deep emptiness, and there's also confusion. You have nobody to talk to, nobody who really understands what you're going through. The loneliness can be overpowering. You're cut off. The close friends you've had since childhood, you never see again (quoted in Shaffir, 1995)

The exit process itself depends not only upon the individual's identity, roles, and social relationships, but also upon the group or organization's response. If a person leaves after a long struggle to change a group from the inside, and the group's stance toward that person has been one of hostility or even intimidation, then the process of disaffiliation itself is fraught with considerable emotion and social tensions. Interestingly, the position of the religious group itself, relative to the larger society, has considerable influence on the exit process for individual members (see Bromley, 1998a). For example, the high moral status of the Catholic Church enabled it to control the role exit of priests and nuns, treating their quitting the priesthood or religious order as defection or as personal failure. By contrast, a group such as Hare Krishna, which was already under considerable pressure from an organized anticult movement, had little control to prevent its former members from taking new roles, with considerable social (and economic) support as active apostates.

Although these organizational factors help us understand religious role exit, they apply also to other forms of defection and role exit, such as the whistle-blower in business or political organizations.

Stages of Disaffiliation

Like the commitment process, the disengagement process involves the pushes and pulls of various social influences. Individuals must weigh what they are accomplishing by being members against opportunities to reach those (or other) goals elsewhere. Typically, members reach the decision to leave the group only gradually, but just as members' retrospective accounts of their conversions are transformed to fit their new beliefs and image of self, so too are ex-members' accounts of the events and decisions that led up to leaving the group transformed. Four stages characteristic of role exit include (1) first doubts, (2) seeking and weighing role alternatives, (3) a turning point, and (4) establishing an ex-role identity (Ebaugh, 1988).

Disengagement is often the result of a breakdown or diminished effective-ness of the plausibility structure (described in Chapter 2) that supports the reli-gious group's beliefs and practices. One study found that this breakdown of plausibility resulted from such factors as reduced isolation from the outside world, competing commitments (such as intimate dyadic relationships within the group or family links outside the group), lack of movement success, and apparent discrepancies between leaders' words and actions (Wright, 1987). Particularly if the social-emotional climate of a religious group was important in a recruit's initial conversion or commitment, those interpersonal experi-ences that fail to fulfill the believer's affective needs can be disconfirming (see Jacobs, 1989).

Just as social networks initially brought members into the group and sus-tained their commitment to its worldview, so too competing social networks make disengagement plausible and attractive. One study (Aho, 1994) of per-sons who voluntarily left hate groups (such as the KKK or the Aryan Nations Church) found that voluntary exit was promoted by social pushes (e.g., harassment by colleagues) and social pulls (e.g., falling in love with a nonbe-liever). One elaborated ex-role identity is that of the vocal apostate. In con-trast to people who simply take leave of their religious group, apostates are defectors who subsequently aid the opposition, making public claims against the group. Becoming an apostate is like a new conversion, in which the for-mer religious identity is construed as "lost" and the new one as "found" (Wright, 1997).

Just as conversion involves coming to take a new member role for granted as part of the recruits' identity, so too the "first doubts" stage of role exit typ-ically involves experiences that call that taken-for-granted reality into question. Often the doubts are not about the group's beliefs; for example, many nuns who eventually left the convent were not doubting their Christian faith but rather their role commitments as nuns (Ebaugh, 1988). Like the conversion experience, disengagement often entails a turning point, which is remembered

more vividly in retrospect than many other parts of the gradual change. Just as the researcher must be careful when interpreting retrospective conversion sto-ries, so too must tales of disaffiliation be treated with caution (Richardson et al., 1986).

The believer might respond to first doubts in a number of ways, such as seeking advice from other believers, trying to relieve doubts, reaffirming belief and allegiance to the group, or reconsidering commitment. Furthermore, per-sons who are disengaging from a group typically try to identify and weigh their alternatives to the member role. Whatever the outcome, neither conversion nor disaffiliation is a passive, mindless process.

Coerced and Voluntary Exit

The inadequacies of the "brainwashing" explanation of conversion become particularly acute in interpreting disengagement. If, as the "brainwashing" the-sis holds, converts are coercively persuaded to belong to a religious group, then once converted and held in the group they would be unable to exercise the will to change beliefs and leave the group. This interpretation became the jus-tification for the practice of forcible "deprogramming," by which believers were kidnapped, held against their wills, and subjected to a barrage of tactics designed to turn them against their former religious group and to convert them to an alternative perspective.

Sociological studies of disengagement from religious groups show, how-ever, that the brainwashing/deprogramming conceptualization is a grossly inaccurate portrayal of these processes. Using this model, sensationalistic media have conveyed the impression that converts are trapped, indeed "lost" indefi-nitely. In fact, much conversion (especially to demanding religious groups) is temporary (Wright and Ebaugh, 1993), and most persons exiting religious groups—even intensely demanding ones such as Unification Church, Hare Krishna, and Children of God/Family of Love—do so voluntarily (Wright, 1991). For example, even socially "acceptable" conversions to well-established religious movements (like a Billy Graham crusade) are often very tenuous and short-lived (W. Johnson, 1971).

The Unification Church is one of the religious movements frequently accused of brainwashing its recruits; however, a sociological study found that most recruits' involvement was temporary. During the movement's growth period in the 1970s, of some 1,000 recruits who were interested enough to attend a residential workshop, only 8 percent joined and remained as full-time members for more than one week. And of those few who did join, only about 5 percent remained full-time members for a year. Those recruits most likely to have joined with enthusiasm and later disengaged were those who had con-verted with idealistic expectations that the movement would make the world a better place, whereas those who continued in the movement were more likely to have joined for personal spiritual goals. The study concluded that it was "per-fectly plausible" for the action-oriented idealists to decide to disaffiliate from the Unification Church when it appeared not to live up to its promise as an agent

of social change (Barker, 1988a). Those converts who stayed in groups expecting high levels of commitment were hardly passive; they influenced and sometimes changed the group, even while the group influenced them (Richardson, 1993b). Mounting evidence from studies of the many "new religious movements" of the last three decades indicates that new members of unconventional religious movements are hardly the malleable, passive, gullible dupes portrayed in the media. Rather, recruits to religious groups are both open to the spiritual alternatives and yet relatively resistant to conversions that entail high levels of commitment and drastic changes in identity (see Bromley, 1998b, for a recent summary of arguments questioning the brainwashing thesis).

Role exit from intensely committed religious groups in which much of each member's identity is invested can be extremely difficult. Similarly, disaffiliation in the context of a small, close-knit village is likely to be more difficult than in a large urban area. Most religious groups in modern societies get far less commitment and investment from their members. Religious disaffiliation from a casual or peripheral religious role is simple and needs no social support.

Collective Forms of Disengagement

Doubts and unsatisfied needs may propel a member to leave a religious group, but individual disaffiliation is not the only response. One possible response to doubts and disillusionment is internal reform of the religious group. For example, during one of my own research projects, members of a large meditation group gradually realized that their guru was using his esteem and influence in sexual advances to several women members. Because the disappointed members still very much believed in their group's spiritual practices and ideals, instead of leaving the group they began discussing how to change the group. They decided to send the guru back to India and continue without him.

A related response is when a group of dissatisfied members collectively defect over movement politics, often staging their departure to make a strong statement to the leadership of the movement organization. For example, a group of former ISKCON (Hare Krishna) members formed the "Conch Club" to collectively defect from the national organization, which they rejected as unworthy of their commitment, due to its direction after the death of its founding guru. They continued to retain their beliefs and identity as Krishna devotees, locating themselves within the larger movement but rejecting the organization of that movement (Rochford, 1989). Similarly, many former residents of Rajneeshpuram, the Oregon commune of disciples of Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh, had generally positive retrospective accounts of membership in the movement and living at the commune. Because the commune and movement organization were disbanded by the guru, they had not left as defectors, and many retained friends in the movement, so role exit was less drastic (Latkin et al., 1994).

Another historically important form of disengagement is for dissatisfied members to break off from the religious group and form a separate group. Rarely do schismatic groups consider themselves to be *leaving* their faith;

rather, they view their exit from the group as keeping the true faith. Often, they view their new ideology as more pure and their new practices as more faithful than those of the parent group. For example, the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship is an alliance of former Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) churches and individuals, formed in 1991 in response to the growing control of the more fundamentalist faction over the denomination's seminaries, publishing, and management. The Fellowship holds that the SBC had violated core principles of their Free Church heritage and congregational polity. Ironically, that same Free Church tradition makes it virtually impossible for the SBC to excommunicate the Fellowship members (see Hadaway, 1989), so the dissenters do not need to form a new denomination.

Similarly, the founding members of many of today's mainstream religious organizations had to cope with the decision and social agonies of disaffiliation. Virtually all of the Christian denominations formed in the Early Modern era were created in dissent and disaffiliation. Such collective forms of disaffiliation are also occasions of some role transition and perhaps personal anguish, but they are rarely so wrenching as individual role exit because members have the mutual support and idealism of a group making the exit together.

SUMMARY

This analysis of the processes of religious socialization, conversion, and commitment illustrates the interrelationship of religious meaning and religious belonging. The individual's meaning system is socially acquired and supported through early socialization and interaction with other believers throughout life. If the individual changes meaning systems, it is through social interaction. And the processes that promote commitment to the meaning system and the group supporting it are fundamentally social processes.

Social factors are important in shaping the individual's religion, and examination of critical periods in the individual's life cycle suggests some of these factors. Early socialization in the context of the family, neighborhood, and ethno-religious community is particularly important in establishing not only the basic beliefs and values but also the connection between the individual's belief system and very identity. Rites of passage to new statuses are often filled with religious significance. Passage to adulthood and marriage illustrates some of the ways in which religion can shape critical moments as the individual takes on a new social identity. The society's secularized conception of time may be an important cause of some of these problems. Evidence about the nature of the interrelationship between the individual's religion and social factors is, however, generally limited either to nonmodern examples or to studies of narrowly defined, church-oriented religion. Thus, this chapter has suggested some of the directions that further research into the individual's religion might take.

Conversion is essentially a form of resocialization similar to nonreligious resocialization. Through interaction with believers, the recruit comes to share

their worldview and takes on a new self consistent with that meaning system. Mere transfers of organizational affiliation are not real conversions of worldview and identity. The process of conversion funnels recruits from a general predisposition to conversion, through interaction with group members, to growing identification with the group and its belief system. The conversion process is generally gradual, although it may appear sudden and dramatic because of the way it is symbolized by some individuals or groups.

Commitment mechanisms promote the loyalty and attachment of all members, new converts and old members alike. Groups such as most denominations, which expect only partial commitment of members, typically use less extreme commitment mechanisms than do sectarian groups, which expect members' total commitment and immersion in the life of the group. The process of commitment involves simultaneously the individual's withdrawal from competing allegiances (e.g., by sacrifice) and greater attachment to the group (e.g., by frequent interaction with fellow members). Through these commitment processes, the group builds a firm plausibility structure for its meaning system. Like conversion, disengagement from religious commitment entails a transformation of self and worldview supported by a changed plausibility structure.

4

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Official and Nonofficial Religion

In the United States, the mention of "religion" or "being religious" typically evokes the image of church-oriented religion. When we think of religion, we generally think of Protestantism, Catholicism, and Judaism. When we think of being religious, we tend to locate that religiosity in the social framework of Old First Church, Saint Mary's Church, or Temple Sholom. Church-oriented religion is a prominent and important social form of religion in Western societies, but some other modes do not conform to the "official" model of religion.[1]

How can we interpret the social form of the religious practices and experiences of the following four people, who could be practicing their religion in any number of cities in the United States today?

- Elizabeth thinks a lot about her religion because it is not only an important part of her personal spiritual life, but it is also part of her job: She is a priest in the Episcopalian Church. After years of college and seminary training, Elizabeth is now one of three priests serving a large and active suburban parish. She does a lot of reading and reflection to prepare a sermon each week for the Eucharistic service she performs. Her favorite

1. For sources on official religions in the United States, see Castelli and Gremillion, 1987; D'Antonio, 1999; D'Antonio, Davidson, Hoge, and Wallace, 1989; Dillon, 1999; Greeley, 1990; Haddad and Smith, 1994; Heilman, 1995; Hoge, 1999; Hoge, Johnson, and Luidens, 1994; Hunter, 1987b; Lazerwitz et al., 1998; Liebman, 1988; McKinney and Roof, 1990; McNamara, 1992; Meyer, 1999; Roof and McKinney, 1987; Rosenberg, 1989; Seidler and Meyer, 1989.