

Reassessing Conventional Approaches to Conversion: Toward a New Synthesis

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What are the crucial factors that may cause people to become religiously active at a certain point of their lives? I give an overview of key analytic elements of the conventional approaches to conversion: Lofland and Stark's (1965) social networks model; (spoiled) identity and religious seekership; socialization; religious markets; recruitment; cultural factors; and convert role monitoring and mastering. Subsequent sections present a critique of the conventional approaches, with their biases and emphasis on the crisis factor, and a synthesis of their best elements in the conversion career approach (currently in development). The latter distinguishes five levels of religious participation: preaffiliation, affiliation, conversion, confession, and disaffiliation. These levels are, in turn, influenced by personality factors, social factors, institutional factors, cultural factors, and contingency factors. The conversion careers approach offers directions for future research by distinguishing five levels of religious participation, systematically listing the factors in religious participation, avoiding "crisis determinism," developing a conceptualization of the individual with active and passive elements, being gender sensitive, and including a life-cycle approach to avoid the "adolescent bias" of earlier literature.

INTRODUCTION

The central question here is: *What are the crucial factors that may cause people to become religiously active at a certain stage of their lives?* I present a critique of the conventional approaches, with their biases and emphasis on the crisis factor, and a synthesis of their best elements in the conversion career approach (currently in development). This approach offers directions for future research by distinguishing five levels of religious participation, systematically listing the factors in religious participation, avoiding "crisis determinism," developing a conceptualization of the individual with active and passive elements, being gender sensitive, and including a life-cycle approach to avoid the "adolescent bias" of earlier literature. I distinguish five levels of religious participation: preaffiliation; affiliation; conversion; confession; and disaffiliation. These levels are, in turn, influenced by personality factors, social factors, institutional factors, cultural factors, and contingency factors.

I first give an overview of key analytic elements of the conventional approaches to conversion: Lofland and Stark's (1965) social networks model; (spoiled) identity and religious seekership; socialization; religious markets; recruitment; cultural factors; and convert role monitoring and mastering. I argue that conversion is only part of the story of people's varying levels of religious participation during their lifetime.

SOCIAL NETWORKS AND CONVERSION: LOFLAND AND STARK

Lofland and Stark (1965:874) summarized their motivational model, which they presented as a sequential "funnel" (Lofland and Stark 1965:863), in the following manner:

For conversion a person must:

1. Experience enduring, acutely felt tensions;
2. Within a religious problem-solving perspective;
3. Which leads him to define himself as a religious seeker;

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4. Encountering the D.P. [the cult] at a turning point in his life;
5. Wherein an affective bond is formed (or pre-exists) with one or more converts;
6. Where extra-cult attachments are absent or neutralized;
7. And, where, if he is to become a deployable agent, he is exposed to intensive interaction.

Lofland and Stark presented a four-level typology of religious “commitment,” of which they only defined and developed two levels. Conditions 1 to 3 were called background factors or “pre-disposing conditions” (Lofland and Stark 1965:864); Conditions 4 through 6 were “situational contingencies” (Lofland and Stark 1965:870). Factors 1 through 6 sufficed to turn the unspecified “pre-converts” (Lofland and Stark 1965:865) into verbal converts, “who professed belief and were accepted by core members as sincere” (Lofland and Stark 1965:864). Total converts “exhibited their commitment through deeds as well as words” (1965:864). The fourth level was made up by unspecified “core members,” who decided which converts are sincere and which are not.

The influence of William James ([1902] 1958) is visible in the emphasis on tension, deprivation, and subsequent frustration (Factor 1) as the underlying foundations for conversion. The importance James put on religious experience, however, is completely absent. The model is clear and systematic in outlining the prime factor in conversion: social networks, both involving members of the cult (Factor 5) and significant others like family and friends (Factor 6). The second important factor is personality, which forms the basis of the acutely felt tensions (Factor 1), the religious problem-solving perspective (2), and the self-definition of a religious seeker (3). The third factor in conversion is the contingency element: the turning-point experience (4).

The conceptualization of the individual as it appears from the Lofland/Stark model contains both active and passive elements in conversion. Young, frustrated Protestants come to define themselves as seekers and happen to meet a religious group they like. If emotional bonds with nonmembers, like peers and relatives, are stronger than those with cult members, they will most likely not convert. On the other hand, if the emotional bonds with cult members are stronger, conversion is likely to follow.

The Lofland/Stark model has been criticized as being too specific and without empirical foundations (Snow and Machalek 1984:184) and as too static and individualistic (Richardson and Stewart 1978:28, 31). The role of prior socialization is mostly ignored (see Greil 1977; Long and Hadden 1983; and below). Alienation and frustration are only measured after people already became members; “variability in social availability of potential recruits” (Bromley and Shupe 1979:168) is ignored; and there is a tendency “to explain away affiliation with marginal groups as the result of irrationality or emotional instability” (Bromley and Shupe 1979:168).

Snow and Philips (1980) make a rigorous empirical examination of the Lofland/Stark model by using data on the Buddhist group Nichiren Shoshu in the United States. They confirm that cult affective bonds and intensive interaction are “essential for conversion” (Snow and Philips 1980:444). However, their findings “are especially at odds with the contention that personal tension, ideological congruence, and religious seekership are necessary predisposing conditions for conversion” (Snow and Philips 1980:443). Their results also call into question the necessity of the turning point and that of weak or severed extra-cult attachments.

Another rigorous testing among Dutch adolescents of the Lofland/Stark model, which included a control group, confirmed most of the model’s conditions—but again with some caveats.

Evidently, a religious problem-solving perspective is not an independent condition for conversion The contribution of the turning point [Condition 4] identified as “job change” runs counter to expectation In contrast to Lofland and Stark’s theory, the conditions are largely independent of each other. No significant correlations were found among the five conditions. This finding contradicts the supposed cumulativeness of the Lofland and Stark model. (Kox, Meeus and ‘t Hart 1991:237)

I will add that, apart from mutual attractions between members and preconverts, this model is blind to the influence of gender.

SOCIALIZATION, SPOILED IDENTITY, AND RELIGIOUS SEEKERSHIP: STRAUS, GREIL, HEIRICH

Straus (1979:158–59) is highly critical of the “passivist” conventional approach, which he describes in terms strongly reminiscent of a “brainwashing model” as “depicting the convert as driven into the arms of a group that manipulates him or her so as to exact cognitive and behavioral commitment to its belief system and institutional structure.” Straus (1979:161) focuses on individual action: “we ask how a person comes to be a seeker and then how the seeker goes about finding a more adequate world of everyday life.”

The author never answers his first question, which is fundamental to the conversion process: How do people become seekers? In his model, Straus (1979:162–63) systematically outlines the typical patterns of religious seekers: first instrumentally combing for clues through their social networks and the mass media, gradually refining the nature of their quest, experimenting with a certain religious group (what I will call *preaffiliation* in my typology), “learning the appropriate language, set and interpretation schemes” (*affiliation*), following the institutionalized “bridge-burning acts” (*conversion*), and sometimes becoming an “agent or representative of the group” seeking new converts (what I will call *confession* or core membership below). There is no attention paid to life-cycle stages of the seeking individual.

The individual is conceptualized as a free, active seeker, instrumentally combing “through social networks, chance encounters, mass media . . . looking for leads to prospective means of help” (Straus 1979:162). Here, we already begin to see the contours of a rational choice approach to conversion (see below). Straus (1979:160) is balanced in his treatment of active and more passive approaches to conversion: “There is great tactical utility in treating collective behavior *as if* humans were passive objects of social forces and interactive pressures The two approaches are complementary, not antagonistic.” Unfortunately, Straus does not provide a clear answer to how the two approaches could be united in a single model.

By attempting to combine a socialization with a social networks approach, Greil (1977:120) is able to answer the question why certain people become religious seekers: “If we are willing to accept that man is a meaning-seeking animal who cannot endure the sense of being bereft of a viable world view, then we may also accept that those whose identities have been spoiled become ‘seekers’ who search for a perspective to restore meaning.” The concept of “spoiled identity” is derived from Goffman (1959, 1963). Identities become spoiled under the influence of significant others (via social networks) or “when that perspective is perceived as not dealing with the problems that the individual encounters in everyday life” (Greil 1977:119). This leads to a dissatisfaction and happens especially in times of rapid social change.

Socialization (“previous dispositions”) influences religious seekership: “The stock of knowledge developed out of the sedimentation of his past experiences sets limits to the range of perspectives he may find plausible” (Greil 1977:122). Direct face-to-face contact, however, tends to limit the influence of previous dispositions. Greil (1977:124) concludes “that—other things being equal—an individual in a situation of social strain will be attracted only to those movement perspectives whose intellectual style is compatible with the cognitive style of the social group in question.”

Concerning the levels of religious activity, the author only distinguishes between recruitment or “membership” (Greil 1977:116, 121) and conversion, i.e., “a radical change in the perspective of the recruited individual” (Greil 1977:116). The conceptualization of the individual would seem to determine the importance of the factors in conversion. For the more active converts, the seekers, personality comes first, followed by social networks. For the more passive converts, whose identities become spoiled through the influence of significant others, social networks obviously come first and personality factors are only of secondary importance. Greil’s model is not based on a concrete case study; neither does he address the influence of stages in the life cycle (adolescence, etc.). This severely limits the scope of his model. His main contribution is in conceptualizing and

modeling the importance of (religious) socialization in the conversion process and linking it to spoiled identity and seekership.

Heirich (1977) is one of the first scholars of conversion to use a control group, which enables him to show that converts and nonconverts *both* suffered from stress and tensions (Heirich 1977:664). Partly challenging Greil (1977), Heirich (1977:669) concludes that “immediate personal influences have more impact than does one’s psychological state or prior socialization.” Social networks are very important, but only “for those already oriented toward a religious quest” (Heirich 1977:673). Social encapsulation was often an important factor in conversion, but not always. Heirich concludes that he has shown “the *route* that conversion takes within a population, but . . . cannot explain what lies behind the religious quest” (1977:673).

The author argues that the basis for conversion seems to be the destruction of the clarity about our “root reality” (Heirich 1977:674–75). This happens when life’s problems cannot be solved within the conventional perspective (cf. Greil 1977) because of individual stress and tensions (cf. James 1958; Lofland and Stark 1965; and Greil 1977 on spoiled identity), or because “respected leaders publicly abandon some part of past grounding assumptions, [weakening] their authority” (Heirich 1977:674). The conversion process follows “a methodological application of common sense— . . . a fairly simple set of procedures for assessing new claims in terms of past experience” (Heirich 1977:676). It is similar to the adoption of new paradigms in science (cf. Kuhn 1970). A highly relevant finding is that Heirich (1977:658) suggests that converts tend to exaggerate their preconversion sinfulness to increase the power and value of their current conversions.

SOCIALIZATION AND COMMITMENT: LONG AND HADDEN

Long and Hadden (1983:2) note that all conversion models “highlight two central aspects of the socialization process: group efforts to *mold new members* (brainwashing model) and new members’ *journey toward affiliation* with the group (drift model). . . . each model has identified a central, but only partial, aspect of cult conversion processes.” The authors define socialization as “the social process of creating and incorporating new members of a group from a pool of nonmembers, carried out by members and their allies” (Long and Hadden 1983:5). This implies looking at the cultural and social organizational aspects of membership, acknowledging the fact that “members define who is a novice” (Long and Hadden 1983:6), and analyzing the sorts of activities the participants carry out. *Incorporating activities* include recruiting novices, certification (monitoring of novices), and placing novices in certain church positions. *Creating activities* include “displaying the requisites of membership for novices” (Long and Hadden 1983:7) and *shaping* novices by the application of sanctions (“shaping activities”). These three activities constitute the tools of the trade for religious organizations.

The Unification Church (UC) in the United States flourished in the 1970s. Many new members came in because recruitment focused on “available” young people. However, the dropout rate was also very high—presumably because commitment to the church was often low. Long and Hadden (1983:10) conclude that:

The overwhelming attention to commitment displays for certification encourages novices to give a good show, which they do If commitment is not grounded in reflection, as seems to be the case with the Moonies, converts will eventually experience serious doubt about their membership. The power of doubt to generate disaffection is greatly increased by weak *cognitive socialization* to the UC worldview. When affective bonds become uncertain, converts’ moral commitment to the group has no backing in cultural belief. The Moonie *placement system* encouraged quick but short-lived commitment.

So the same factors in the UC system of socialization that contributed to strong initial commitment, in the long term also contributed to a very high dropout rate.

Like most authors, Long and Hadden focus again on young adults. Their typology includes affiliation, conversion, confession (i.e., “commitment”), and even disaffiliation (“low retention”) (Long and Hadden 1983:13). Although Long and Hadden do not analyze the origin of the need

to join a religious group, their socialization approach allows for an integration of the more psychological brainwashing model and the more sociological motivational model (the “social drift” model going back to Lofland and Stark (1965) and subsequent revisions). They manage to do this by distinguishing and analyzing various types of creating and incorporating activities: novices following the requisites for membership as showed by members; core members shaping novices by applying sanctions; and the various forms of recruiting, certification (monitoring), and placing. Thus they accomplish an integration of more active and more passive elements in the conversion process. Together with Greil (1977) and Bromley and Shupe (1979; see below), Long and Hadden stress that recruitment precedes belief and commitment. However, by not addressing the original motivation for conversion, it is impossible to identify the factors that cause a change in religious affiliation. This is obviously influenced by the many options that are available on the religious market.

RELIGIOUS MARKETS AND RATIONAL CHOICE: GARTRELL AND SHANNON, STARK AND FINKE

The theory by Gartrell and Shannon (1985:33) “views recruits to religious movements acting as if they weigh rewards and sanctions from affiliation with members and nonmembers in addition to weighing the attractiveness of movements’ beliefs and ideas.” The expected rewards constitute “social-emotional outcomes like . . . approval, love, respect, and cognitive outcomes: . . . individual beliefs about, e.g., the nature of the world and one’s place in it” (Gartrell and Shannon 1985:34). Based on their study of the Divine Light Mission, without specifying the age of converts, Gartrell and Shannon (1985:37) conclude: “Prior to their involvement with the DLM, converts encountered a series of problems that could not be explained by conventional means . . . perceived ineffectiveness of counseling and therapy is perfectly associated with conversion.” From their data, the authors develop various axioms, of which 4 and 5 are particularly useful:

Axiom 4 (Cognitive Utility) The utility of a NRM’s beliefs varies directly with (a) their ability to explain problematic features of individuals’ stocks of knowledge and (b) the degree to which they are consistent with existing elements of individuals’ belief systems

Axiom 5 NRMs vary in the degree to which they supply cognitive rewards as part of a conversion strategy and also in the timing of the supply.

They add that “groups such as the UC . . . and Mormons . . . downplay core beliefs initially to avoid alienating prospective converts” (Gartrell and Shannon 1985:39). Finally, Gartrell and Shannon (1985:42) point out that “persons highly constrained by dense, strong contacts with foci outside of a New Religious Movement (e.g., family, school, work) have few reserves of time, effort and emotion to invest in participation in the movement. On the other hand, those with little investment in outside foci are prime candidates for conversion.” They conclude that conversion is “a linkage between individual attributes and dispositions and movement goals and ideologies” (Gartrell and Shannon 1985:45).

Gartrell and Shannon conceptualize the individual as a rational actor, experimenting with conversion to see if one gains more by changing religious affiliation than by not doing so. They do not distinguish between other levels of religious activity beside conversion. Socialization endows people with certain religious preferences. When they encounter new problems, which cannot be solved with conventional religious ideas, they will experiment with other religious groups and try out new religious ideas. If they like the social and cognitive rewards of these groups, they will stay and become members. This is how conversion works, according to Gartrell and Shannon.

Stark and Finke’s (2000) rational choice approach to religion has a much longer history, which I have analyzed elsewhere (Gooren 2006:43 ff). Stark and Finke (2000:114) first of all distinguish between *conversion* (“shifts across religious traditions”) and *reaffiliation* within the same religious tradition. They stress that “most people remain within the religious organization into which they

were born, and most of those who do shift from one organization to another remain within the religious tradition into which they were born. . . . fewer than 1 percent of Americans convert” (Stark and Finke 2000:115). They present no sources to corroborate these strong statements, but rely on GSS data.¹ Following Lofland and Stark (1965), Stark and Finke assume people converted “whose interpersonal attachments to members overbalanced their attachments to nonmembers. In part this is because . . . social networks make religious beliefs plausible and *new* social networks thereby make *new* religious beliefs plausible” (2000:117).

The authors (Lofland and Stark 1965:119) propose that “marriage and migration are major factors tending to produce shifts in attachments Consequently, reaffiliation and conversion will be more prevalent among the geographically mobile, teenagers, and young adults, at marriage and following a divorce. Each of these generalizations is supported by a wealth of research.” Stark and Finke (2000:122) make the new claim that “converts very seldom are religious seekers, and conversion is seldom the culmination of a conscious search.” Seeing themselves as seekers is something that is part of converts’ “biographical reconstruction” (Snow and Machalek 1983, 1984; see below). Converts are attracted and recruited by churches, which are actively competing with each other on the religious market (see Gooren 2006 for an elaboration and a critique). This is a surprisingly passive conceptualization of the individual.

But, somewhat contradictorily, Stark and Finke (2000:123) also conceptualize individuals as active agents, rationally weighing the benefits of one church over another (cf. Gartrell and Shannon 1985). If these individuals are not seekers, where does the need to change their religion come from? Stark and Finke again follow Lofland and Stark (1965) in seeing tension and stress as the source for individual dissatisfaction, but they do not describe how this process works for rational actors. Nor do they address Heirich’s (1977) detailed and methodological critique of the tension factor (see also Bromley and Shupe 1979; Kox et al. 1991). Following Leatham (1997:295), Stark and Finke distinguish between conversion and recruitment, but again they fail to specify how one would follow the other. Since their rational choice model of religion is controversial, many studies are being conducted to obtain empirical evidence to (dis)prove its assumptions and hypotheses (see Gooren 2006 for an overview).

THE CONVERT ROLE [1]: BROMLEY AND SHUPE

The central idea in the role theory model developed by Bromley and Shupe (1979:162) is that “an individual’s needs are not merely met by a group but . . . may be shaped to the group’s own purposes.” Their model is based on a detailed case study of young adults in the Unification Church in Texas. The authors divide the affiliative process into five conceptual components (*not* stages): predisposing factors; attraction; incipient involvement; active involvement; and commitment (Bromley and Shupe 1979:167).

Regarding predisposing factors, they find little evidence of stress or alienation in the age group of their sample, which is supposedly “characterized by considerable searching for meaning and direction” (Bromley and Shupe 1979:170). The respondents were initially attracted to the Unification Church because of “the theology, the communal group, or a specific individual” (Bromley and Shupe 1979:171). The initial involvement usually followed within a few weeks. If they decided to stay in the UC commune (active involvement), they gradually learned the role of being a church member, that is, to go out into the streets for witnessing and fundraising for 10 hours. They seem to reserve the term commitment for the core members, who live in the commune full time, perfect their knowledge of theology, and fulfill all the duties of membership. Bromley and Shupe (1979:181) are among the first authors to recognize the importance of *disaffiliation*: members walking away “out of frustration with attempting to fulfill the church’s goals in the face of rising public hostility.”

The role theory approach offers a very fruitful synthesis of more active (seekers trying out various churches) and more passive (role learning shaped by the church’s expectations of members)

factors in the conversion process. Its five-tier typology of religious activity is very sophisticated. Bromley and Shupe also stress the high dropout rate, suggesting that recruitment and maintaining commitment among members may have quite different dynamics. Social networks or personality might come first as the main factor in conversion. They also indicate that recruitment usually precedes belief and is in turn followed, or not followed, by commitment. This is a clear break with the Lofland/Stark (1965) motivational model, which assumes that conversion only follows after new beliefs have already been adopted.

THE CONVERT ROLE [2]: SNOW AND MACHALEK

Snow and Machalek posit that conversion involves a “radical change,” but they find this impossible to operationalize: “how much change is enough to constitute a conversion?” (1983:264). Moreover, they wonder “exactly what is it that undergoes radical change? Is it beliefs and values, behavior and identities, or something even more fundamental?” (Snow and Machalek 1983:265). They conclude that it is the convert’s “universe of discourse” (Mead 1934; see also Travisano 1970) that changes radically: “the broad interpretive framework in terms of which people live and organize experience” (Snow and Machalek 1983:265). Snow and Machalek (1983:266–78) discuss four key properties by which to identify a convert whose universe of discourse has changed: biographical reconstruction; adoption of a master attribution scheme; suspension of analogical reasoning; and embracement of a master role (which they change one year later into “embracement of the convert role” Snow and Machalek 1984:174).

They first selectively quote James (1958:177) on conversion: “a complete division is established in the twinkling of an eye between the old life and the new.” Noting that it does not always happen that quickly, they do agree with James in concluding: “Some aspects of the past are jettisoned, others are redefined, and some put together in ways previously inconceivable. One’s biography is, in short, reconstructed” (Snow and Machalek 1983:266). A consequence of this process is that “the convert’s former understanding of self, past events, and others is now regarded as a misunderstanding” (Snow and Machalek 1983:267).

The second key property that identifies the convert is the adoption of a master attribution scheme. “Feelings, behavior, and events that were previously inexplicable or accounted for by reference to a number of causal schemes are now interpreted from the standpoint of one pervasive scheme” (Snow and Machalek 1983:270). Since personal transformation is the goal of most religious groups, “effecting a shift from an external to an internal locus of control seems to be a necessary step in conversion to such groups” (Snow and Machalek 1984:272).

The third characteristic of the convert as a social type is his/her tendency to avoid analogical metaphors. Instead, they prefer iconic metaphors like “God is love” or describing themselves as “born again” (not *as if* they were born again). “Using iconic metaphors can establish the uniqueness of the group or its world view” (Snow and Machalek 1983:273–74).

The fourth indicator of conversion is the embracement of a master (i.e., convert) role, “discernable in both the behavior and the rhetoric of converts” (Snow and Machalek 1983:275). It involves “the generalization, rather than compartmentalization, of the convert role and its embracement by the convert” (Snow and Machalek 1983:276). There are various consequences of this. The convert role “governs their orientation in all situations” (Snow and Machalek 1983:277); in fact, converts “enthusiastically announce their identity in nearly all situations” (Snow and Machalek 1983:277).

Finally, embracement of the convert role gives rise to what Travisano (1970:605) calls the *ubiquitous utilization* of the identity associated with the convert role . . . : all role identities are subordinate to the identity that flows from the master role of the convert. (Snow and Machalek 1983:278)

Snow and Machalek make an important contribution to the role theory of conversion (see also Bromley and Shupe 1979 and above). However, their conceptualization of the individual is limited

and voluntaristic: the active actor is completely free to choose any religious group, any social networks. In an important and methodologically sophisticated testing of Snow and Machalek's model, Staples and Mauss (1987:137) similarly write that:

Snow and Machalek's theory offers us a rather weak conceptualization of the *person* who experiences conversion. In their scheme, the person is replaced with the term "consciousness," and the concept is never well developed. In contrast, we see conversion as involving primarily a change in self-concept (Mead 1934) . . . Thus, conversion is seen to involve a change in the way a person thinks and feels about his or her self.

Staples and Mauss (1987:140) are also correct when writing: "Unfortunately, Snow and Machalek (1983, 1984) do not provide any clues about how . . . to operationalize the four rhetorical indicators in some explicit way." Staples and Mauss develop their own operationalizations of the four supposed key properties of converts and test these on samples of young (19–28 years old) active Christians at Washington State University. Their findings are very important, and I quote them at length:

The fact that four "lifelong" Christians were equally likely as our 11 professed converts to suspend analogical reasoning, adopt a master attribution scheme, and embrace a master role, casts doubt, at least in our eyes, on Snow and Machalek's contention that these three rhetorical properties are unique to the convert . . .

If "conversion" involves the attempt to change, or create, the "real self," then it seems reasonable to view "commitment" as the attempt to maintain a consistency in the "real self." Where biographical reconstruction assists in the *creation* of a "real self," the embracing of a master role appears to assist in the *maintenance* of the "real self."

It seems reasonable to us that all three indicators (*other* than biographical reconstruction) are likely to be a product of religious *socialization*, and are also likely to play some role in the process of *maintaining* religious commitment. (Staples and Mauss 1987:143–44)

Finally, Snow and Machalek (1983:280) themselves note that "our observations raise serious questions about much of the research concerned with the causes of conversion. . . . Far from being trusted sources of information, converts are uniquely denied impartial knowledge about the factors that might have precipitated conversion." Staples and Mauss (1987:138) are thus correct to conclude that "from Snow and Machalek's point of view, the researcher or analyst is better qualified to determine who is or is not a convert than are the subjects themselves." This is a pity, as it ultimately denies researchers the opportunity to probe the inside view on conversion by asking the subjects themselves about it. In cultural anthropology, this is known as the *emic* view and it is considered important.

CULTURAL FACTORS IN CONVERSION: RAMBO

Rambo (1993:16–18, 165–70) develops a process-oriented, seven-stage model of conversion:

- (1) *Context* is the dynamic force field in which conversion takes place. . . . We forget that the political, religious, economic, social, and cultural worlds are shaped by people. Conversely, people are shaped by the socialization processes of the wider world. [Rambo (1993:22) distinguishes the macrocontext of political and ecological systems from the microcontext of family, friends, and religious or ethnic community.]
- (2) *Crisis* forces individuals and groups to confront their limitations and can stimulate a quest to resolve conflict, fill a void, adjust to new circumstances, or find avenues of transformation.
- (3) *Quest* is, to some degree, influenced by a person's emotional, intellectual, or religious availability. . . . most converts are actively engaged in seeking fulfillment.
- (4) *Encounter* . . . brings people who are in crisis and searching for new options together with those who are seeking to provide the questors with a new orientation. . . . Potential converts as active agents are skillful in seeking out what it is they want and rejecting what they do not desire.
- (5) *Interaction*: Relationships are often the most potent avenues of connection to the new option. Important here are rituals, rhetoric, and role-learning and -playing.

- (6) *Commitment* is the consummation of the conversion process. Central to the converting process is the convert's reconstruction of his or her biographical memory and deployment of a new system of attribution in various spheres of life.
- (7) *Consequences*: A radically transformed life, ... a sense of mission and purpose, ... security and peace.[But] One may find that the new orientation is not what one expected.

Looking carefully, one can see that Rambo's open-ended process model weaves together generations of conversion research—especially the Lofland and Stark (1965) model. Context was influenced by work on conversion in cultural anthropology; crisis owes a huge debt to both William James and Lofland and Stark; quest goes back to Lofland and Stark and especially Straus (1979); encounter comes again from Lofland and Stark (and mission studies); interaction is directly adapted from Lofland and Stark; while commitment is clearly based on Snow and Machalek (1983, 1984). Rambo's use of theology, however, seems limited and normative: "The central effect of theology on conversion is the creation of norms for what is expected in the conversion process and the shaping of expectations and experiences of converts" (Rambo 1993:181).

Rambo's approach to conversion covers the full spectrum of religious activity and offers a very useful synthesis of many previous models, including their weaknesses. Rambo (1993:13, 33, 53, 112, 136, 137) mentions *disaffiliation* various times, but does not analyze systematically why or when it happens. The concept of the individual is again that of an active agent (the seeker), but there is a keen sense of the constraints of culture, personality, society, and the religious group one is converting to. "The reality is that some people are passive and others are active, and many people are active at certain times and passive at other times" (Rambo 1993:59). The power of religious organizations is explored by referring critically to the brainwashing model (Rambo 1993:158). The importance of gender on conversion is mentioned once ("Do women experience conversion differently from men?") (Rambo 1993:174), but not elaborated in the approach. Another omission is the lack of reference to the age of the converting subject and so to the importance of distinguishing between conversions at various moments in the individual life cycle.

Rambo's approach to analyze conversion is useful for researchers, but it did not cause many follow-ups and only one testing (Kahn and Greene 2004). Rambo's own (1999) follow-up mentions 15 theoretical options on conversion, including globalization and feminist theory (1999:263), narrative and identity theory (Rambo 1999:265), and even psychoanalytic theory (Rambo 1999:266). Paloutzian, Richardson, and Rambo (1999:1073) conclude, after reviewing literature on conversion and personality change, that "religious conversion influences people's goals, strivings, and identities, but seems to have little appreciable effect on basic personality structure. Inversely, certain types of personalities may be more prone to religious conversion than others."

Kahn and Greene (2004:238) also note that "Rambo's model has been accorded little empirical attention." Their sample consisted of 65 female and 45 male participants, ranging from 25 to 84 years, "who self-identified as having experienced religious conversion" (2004:238). However, there was no control group, as was deemed essential by Heirich (1977) and Kox et al. (1991). Kahn and Greene (2004:240, 256) conclude that the context stage was impossible to operationalize and the encounter stage was probably "not a distinct dimension in religious conversion experience." They do, however, regard these results as an empirical validation of Rambo's seven-stage model.

ACTIVE AND PASSIVE CONVERSION APPROACHES: RICHARDSON

James T. Richardson (1978) coined the term *conversion career* to describe "multiple-event conversions" by people trying out a series of religious alternatives (Richardson and Stewart 1978:31). The adolescent converts to the Jesus Movement they studied arrived there after prior involvement with first the drug scene and then the peace movement. Finding the Lofland/Stark

(1965) model static, Richardson and Stewart (1978:33–34) propose a dynamic model of conversion with “three broad categories: prior socialization, contemporary experiences and circumstances, and the opportunity structure available for problem definition and resolution.” They provide a systematic summary of the existing conversion literature in a table (Richardson and Stewart 1978:39). According to this literature, conversion will always occur when there are positive ties with members of the religious group, whether congruence of the group with the potential convert’s predispositions is high, medium, or low (Cells 1, 4, and 7 in Table 1). However, if there are negative affective ties with group members, the potential convert will never convert (Cells 3, 6, and 9 in Table 1). Thus, they follow the conventional sociological models by stressing the importance of social networks. Social factors come first, personality second, and contingency factors third.

In a later article, Richardson (1985:164) presents another way of looking at conversion models: “The old conversion paradigm, with its deprivation and strain assumptions about the passivity of human beings, and its overemphasis on the individual, is giving way, at least partially, to another view of conversion. This new view stresses humans as volitional entities who assign meaning to their action and to the actions of others within a social context.” The prototype of the old passive paradigm is the “sudden, dramatic, and emotional” conversion of Paul on the road to Damascus by “a powerful external agent” (Richardson 1985:165). Modern versions of the passive paradigm include the brainwashing or mind control models, for which there is no empirical evidence (Richardson 1985:166).

The new and “active” conversion paradigm goes back to the definition of “volitional conversion” by William James (1958:169), as opposed to conversion by self-surrender. The Lofland and Stark (1965) article was important in the rise of the active conversion model, which was later developed more fully by Straus (1979), Bromley and Shupe (1979), and Travisano’s seminal (1970) work. “This view stresses an active subject seeking to develop their own ‘personhood,’ an emphasis that has caused something of a Kuhnian crisis because of the traditional paradigm’s assumption of a passive subject” (Richardson 1985:167). After 1965–1970, “several scholars have, in one way or another, recognized a more active subject ‘working out’ one’s own conversion. They have noted that conversion to new religions often means a series of affiliative and disaffiliative acts that constitute a conversion career, and that individuals are often deciding to behave as a convert, playing the convert role, as they experiment with or reaffirm their personhood . . . with affection and emotional ties playing key roles” (Richardson 1985:172). Following Long and Hadden (1983), socialization is seen as the key factor in bringing the needs of the individual and the needs of the religious group together.

Although Richardson gives a good overview of the conversion literature, his emphasis on a paradigm shift seems strained at times, since almost all researchers use the new, active conversion approach. In fact, I wonder how many scholars ever followed the traditional passive conversion model—apart from the authors following a brainwashing model. The influence of the Pauline conversion model is probably strongest within the Christian groups and churches themselves, but Richardson does not address this institutional factor, apart from his reference to socialization and role theory. However, his conceptualization of the dissatisfied individual undergoing conversion is again weak, following a long tradition of sociological conversion research. It does not move much beyond voluntarism, limited only by socialization (but how, when, and for how long?), social networks, and contingency factors like coming into contact with representatives of certain religious groups.

A CRITIQUE OF CONVENTIONAL CONVERSION APPROACHES

After this extensive summary and assessment of key elements in the conventional conversion approaches, it is easy to see the overlap and repetition between them. On the other hand, there are also a number of biases, omissions, and unsubstantiated claims of representativeness in these

approaches. I will first present my criticisms and then use these as the basis for a new theoretical synthesis.

First of all, the conceptualization of the individual as it appears from most authors is insufficient. It seems too voluntaristic for active conversions, suggesting that seekers are free to decide which group to join (e.g., Lofland and Stark 1965; Straus 1979), and too deterministic for passive converts by suggesting that groups can control the minds of converts. Part of the voluntarism was corrected by a socialization approach (e.g., Greil 1977; Long and Hadden 1983; Richardson and Stewart 1978). A more holistic conversion approach acknowledges that each conversion incorporates both active and passive elements, which are part of a continuum (Rambo 1993:59).

Second, Greil (1977:116) and Greil and Rudy (1984:311) already noted that some approaches confused recruitment to a church with conversion. Less attention was given to the worldview of the subject prior to conversion (i.e., preaffiliation), or to members becoming regular visitors without ever reporting a conversion experience ("affiliation" in my typology below). A change in religious activity always seemed to imply a conversion experience. It is true, however, that most authors did acknowledge the existence of other levels of religious activity. Lofland and Stark (1965) already distinguished four levels: preconverts; verbal converts; total converts; and core members. In fact, six out of thirteen approaches used a four-tier typology of religious activity. Bromley and Shupe (1979) and Long and Hadden (1983) already stressed the importance of disaffiliation by acknowledging the high dropout rates following conversion in many religious groups. However, none of these approaches systematically tried to explain both conversion and disaffiliation in one model.

Third, many conversion approaches (e.g., James 1958; Lofland and Stark 1965; Rambo 1993; Snow and Machalek 1983, 1984) seem to include a certain determinism, implying that crisis and tensions are at the heart of conversion. However, many other authors (e.g., Bromley and Shupe 1979; Heirich 1977; Kox et al. 1991) present highly convincing data questioning the importance of stress and crisis. They were often able to do so by using a control group of nonconverted adolescents, which suffered from very similar stress and tensions as the converts. The earlier studies had never used such control groups. Stress and tensions may certainly contribute to people looking for a conversion experience, but they are not necessary conditions for a change in religious affiliation.

Fourth, the attempts to construct general and universal conversion models have failed. Lofland and Stark (1965) never pretended to do this, but many scholars took their model to be universal. Snow and Machalek (1984) and Rambo (1993), however, clearly established that it was not. Even the socialization and role-learning approaches to conversion, which obviously corrected many of the flaws and biases of the earlier models, cannot be assumed to be cross-culturally valid. Socialization and role-learning are heavily influenced by cultural patterns and social control.

Fifth, then, an important empirical limitation is the fact that the approaches mentioned here were all based on research in Christian churches or in New Religious Movements. In fact, three used the Unification Church as a case and two studied the Divine Light Mission in detail.

Sixth, the scope of these studies is also severely limited by the fact that they were all conducted in the United States or Europe. The conventional approaches to conversion are difficult to use in the contemporary situation of growing religious pluralism in Latin America and other parts of the third world, where 85 percent of the world population lives. Patterns of conversion here are too complex and heterogeneous to capture in a Lofland/Stark type process model (cf. Gooren 1999). A systematic approach should be able to deal with conversion all over the world, and not be limited only to third world countries either, as was the case with some anthropological conversion approaches.

Seventh, the conventional conversion approaches clearly suffered from disciplinary biases. Psychologists still tend to focus on personality and crisis, sociologists stress social

networks and institutional factors, and anthropologists explore social and cultural factors. Only rarely did authors attempt to synthesize approaches from various scientific disciplines, as, for instance, Rambo (1993) did and as the new conversion career approach will attempt to do as well.

Eighth, with only a few exceptions, all of the approaches assessed here followed James (1902) in limiting themselves to study conversion among adolescents and young adults. Almost all authors based their approaches, models, and conclusions on research among people under 30, students, or young couples. Strictly speaking, the studies are therefore unable to shed any light on conversion in midlife or conversion at old age. A more systematic approach should include older informants from all cycles of life.

Ninth, the young adult bias is further exacerbated by a gender bias. Although all researchers had female informants, hardly any attempt was made to explore possible differences in the conversion experience between men and women. This did not even happen among the scholars following a socialization approach, in which gender has an acknowledged impact. It should also be mentioned that, again with only a few exceptions, not much attention is given to the influence of social class on conversion. Most informants, in fact, seem to come from a middle-class background—just like the researchers who study them (cf. Kilbourne and Richardson 1988:15; Richardson 1985:175–76).

Finally, almost all of the conversion approaches mentioned here conform to the typical social science bias of tending to reduce religion to social-economic or psychological factors. Most approaches ignore what people believe in (i.e., beliefs and doctrines), why this is so important to people, and how they express their religious feelings in rituals, emotions, or phenomena like speaking in tongues. Ironically, the rational choice models, which are often blamed for being highly reductionist, actually stress the importance of belief as a way for churches to compete (Gartrell and Shannon 1985; Stark and Finke 2000). The importance of rituals is also stressed in Bromley and Shupe (1979), Snow and Machalek (1984), and especially by Rambo (1993). The social science approaches to conversion would benefit greatly from the input of theology and mission studies (cf. Droogers, Houtepen, and Gooren 2003) to balance their tendency to reduce religion to other societal or psychological factors.

CONVERSION CAREERS: TOWARD A NEW SYNTHESIS OF CONVERSION APPROACHES

What are the best elements of the above-mentioned authors that should be integrated in our new approach to conversion, the conversion career? I mention the basics here.²

Following William James ([1902] 1958), the emphasis on subjective *religious experience* should be reestablished, since this tended to become neglected, especially in the process models inspired by Lofland and Stark. This is connected to the necessity of developing a new conceptualization of the *individual* that is neither voluntaristic nor deterministic.

Conversion in the narrow sense involves a radical change in worldview and *identity*. Travisano's (1970:598, 605) empirical indicators of conversion as a "rupture with a former identity" and the "ubiquitous utilization of the convert identity in all areas of life" are still highly relevant in contemporary studies of religious change worldwide.

The concept of *spoiled identity* (Goffman 1959, 1963; Greil 1977) lies conceivably at the basis of changes in levels of religious activity. During their entire life cycle, individuals all over the world will occasionally encounter new problems that make new solutions necessary (Greil 1977; Heirich 1977).

Spoiled identities may turn some people into religious *seekers* (Straus 1979). This seeking quest, however, will always be constrained by their prior cultural and religious *socialization* (Greil 1977). In turn, socialization is, of course, strongly gender specific.

As people consider the pros and cons of church membership, they always make an implicitly or explicitly rational cost-benefit analysis (Gartrell and Shannon 1985; Gooren 1999; Stark and Finke 2000). Again, exploring gender differences is relevant here.

It is clear that church commitment is built up through *role learning* and mastering (Bromley and Shupe 1979). Conversion is clearly shaped by prior (religious) socialization and subsequent role learning and mastering (Long and Hadden 1983). The influence of gender is equally important in both of these influences and should be further explored.

It is fruitful to analyze the conversion process by using the concepts of *incorporating activities*—recruitment and monitoring of (pre-) affiliates, *creating activities*—showing the requirements for church membership, and *shaping* the (pre-)affiliate's behavior with a code of conduct and the application of sanctions (Long and Hadden 1983).

The empirical *indicators* of conversion as developed by Snow and Machalek (1983, 1984) should be carefully operationalized to analyze changes in religious activity levels. More research is necessary to test if biographical reconstruction is, indeed, the only true indicator of conversion (Staples and Mauss 1987). The development of a master attribution scheme, the tendency to quit analogical reasoning, and the embracement of the convert role must also be empirically observed in converts (cf. Rambo 1993), unless they are simply signs of a more general church commitment (Staples and Mauss 1987).

Spoiled identity, seekership, and conversion are clearly influenced by significant others (relatives, friends, and acquaintances) through the *social networks* the individual belongs to (Lofland and Stark 1965). It is clear from the literature that almost all people (men *and* women) are recruited to religious organizations through social networks.

Recruitment to religious organizations is influenced heavily by the competition happening between various religious groups in most parts of the world (Gooren 2006). Whether one likes the term or not, this religious competition means that, in fact, a *religious market* is already in operation. More research is needed in different cultural contexts to analyze how the religious market functions, which is clearly influenced by state regulation of religion (Chesnut 2003; Gill 1998; Stark and Finke 2000).

The methods by which religious organizations compete on the local (and perhaps national) religious market must be carefully described and analyzed. What *recruitment strategies and methods* do they use to attract people's interest? Do religious organizations employ *cultural politics* to attract members and compete?

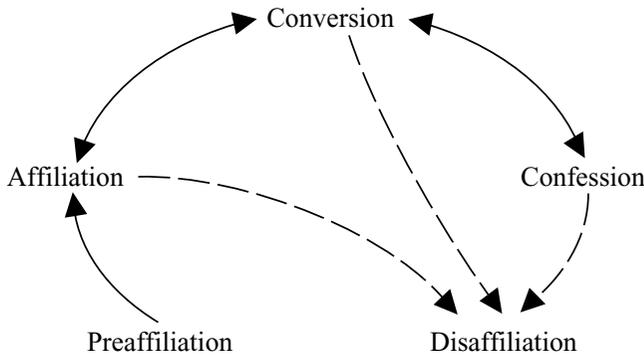
The *cultural or societal factors* that influence differences in religious activity levels must be carefully described and explored. Rambo's (1993) seven-stage model will help to integrate these influences with other factors.

Gooren (2005) gives a first overview of the *conversion career*. It is defined as "the member's passage, within his or her social and cultural context, through levels, types and phases of church participation" (Droogers, Gooren, and Houtepen 2003). This use of conversion career, then, is somewhat different from that of Richardson (1978), who coined the term. Here, it represents a systematic attempt to analyze shifts in levels of individual religious participation. The four essential elements of the new approach are: the conceptualization of individual dissatisfaction; a five-level typology of religious activity (disaffiliation, preaffiliation, affiliation, conversion, and confession); the need for a life-cycle approach; and the many factors influencing changes in individual religious activity.

A NEW TYPOLOGY OF RELIGIOUS ACTIVITY

If conversion is to remain a useful concept for scholars, it has to be carefully distinguished from its original religious—Christian—context and meanings. In other words, conversion needs

FIGURE 1
THE LEVELS OF INDIVIDUAL RELIGIOUS ACTIVITY IN THE
CONVERSION CAREER APPROACH



to be thoroughly reconceptualized to move it beyond the Pauline idea of a unique and once-in-a-lifetime experience. To be able to do this, it is necessary to develop a typology of religious activity that includes more dimensions than just disaffiliation and conversion. After reviewing the literature, I finally decided on five *levels of individual religious involvement* (see Figure 1).³

Preaffiliation is the term used here to describe the worldview and social context of potential members of a religious group in their first contacts to assess whether they would like to affiliate themselves on a more formal basis. (Some Christian churches use terms like “visitor” or “investigator” instead; scholars of religion often use the term seeker.)

Affiliation refers to being a formal member of a religious group. However, group membership does not form a central aspect of one’s life or identity.

Conversion (used here in the limited sense) refers to a comprehensive personal change of worldview and identity. It is based both on self-report and on attribution by others—people from the same religious group, but also outsiders.

Confession is a term from theology for a core member identity, involving a high level of participation inside the new religious group and a strong “missionary attitude” toward nonmembers outside of the group.

Disaffiliation refers to a lack of involvement in an organized religious group. This category may include various types. It can refer to an idiosyncratic personal religiosity, for example, New Age. But it can also stand for an unchurched religious identity: either an apostate rejecting a former membership or an inactive member who still self-identifies as a believer. In the last case, the difference between affiliation and disaffiliation can be small.

Affiliation, conversion, confession, and disaffiliation are the dynamic levels of individual religious activity, but they do not necessarily follow any chronological order during a person’s conversion career (see Figure 1). A person may go from affiliation to conversion, which is how many church leaders like to see it, or vice versa. Similarly, people may go from conversion to confession and vice versa. From the literature it is also clear that many go from affiliation, conversion, or even confession to disaffiliation. The many terms that are available for this—apostasy, backsliding, dropping out, church desertion—already attest to the frequency of its happening.

A LIFE-CYCLE APPROACH

Since changes in the level of religious activity may occur throughout the entire lifespan of people, that is, throughout the entire conversion career, a *life-cycle approach* obviously becomes necessary. However, most of the literature on religious change deals with conversion during

adolescence. Hence it is imperative that a more systematic approach should distinguish and analyze the various levels of religious activity during the various stages of people's lives. The different aspects and dynamics of five stages of the life cycle should then be differentiated carefully: childhood, adolescence, (early and late) marriage, midlife, and old age. These stages will be operationalized both in terms of age and life phase (e.g., a teenage couple with children would be in the "early marriage" stage).

FACTORS IN RELIGIOUS ACTIVITY

Finally, the many different *factors influencing religious activity* should be identified, operationalized, weighed, and analyzed. Over a century of conversion literature has yielded a great many facts and factors. I will distinguish five main groups of factors influencing changes in the individual level of religious activity.

Personality factors, relating to the self and personality traits. Here, one can think of a religious worldview or an inner need to become religiously involved (prior socialization) or certain character traits inductive to religious participation (e.g., insecurity).

Social factors: for example, the influence of social networks of relatives, friends, or acquaintances on changes in religious activity. Another example is the influence of other church members through socialization and role teaching. This factor is stressed especially in various conversion models by sociologists of religion, together with institutional factors.

Institutional factors deal with dissatisfaction with the current religious group and the impact of the new group. How does it compete with other groups on a religious market by using its attractive elements (e.g., beliefs, doctrine, rules, and organization)? What are the group's recruitment methods (including the use of mass media such as television and radio)? How does the religious group socialize and discipline its new members?

Cultural factors describe the influence on changes in individual religious activity of culture in a broad sense (i.e., including political and economic factors). What is the appeal of the culture politics of the religious group, that is, its view on local culture and society and its view on local politics? Are there tensions between the religious group and society and/or other specific groups? Social and cultural anthropologists have given special attention to these factors.

Contingency factors: situational events, random meetings with representatives of a certain religious group, an acutely felt crisis, stressful situations, natural disasters, etc.

The conversion career approach does not attempt to locate the basis of conversion at either the individual, (religious) organizational, or societal level—as most sociological approaches have done in the past. Instead, it will identify the many factors operating at each of these three meta-levels and pay special attention to their *interconnections*. Conversion could be viewed as a way to break out of old social roles and embrace new ones. As this never happens in a social or cultural vacuum, every individual conversion is unique. However, scholars should always attempt to identify both the patterns and the local variations. Hence, it is important in future research to: (1) distinguish various levels of religious commitment; (2) systematize the factors affecting both conversion and disaffiliation; and (3) collect the most complete data possible in order to fill the longitudinal conversion career. To achieve this, conducting worldwide comparative research on conversion is indispensable.

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NOTES

1. Roger Finke, personal communication, SSSR Kansas City, October 24, 2004.
2. Gender, for instance, is still not integrated fully in this synthesis. See, for example, Gooren (2005).
3. These are merely levels of religious participation in a typology and not chronological or progressive phases of individual spiritual development.

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