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22. Cf. T. Hodgkin, *Nationalism in Colonial Africa*, Muller, London, 1956, Part I; and M. Crowder, *West Africa under Colonial Rule*, Hutchinson, London, 1968, Part III.

23. J. C. Davies, 'Towards a theory of revolutions', *American Sociological Review*, 27, 1962, pp. 1-19.

24. C. Geertz, 'The integrative revolution', in idem (ed.), *Old Societies and New States*, Free Press, New York, 1963; and K. Silvert (ed.), *Expectant Peoples: Nationalism and Development*, Random House, New York, 1963, Introduction.

25. For a fuller exposition of the bureaucratic discrimination argument, and the excess of qualified aspirants to positions in bureaucratic centres, cf. A. D. Smith, '"Ideas" and "Structure" in the formation of independence ideals', *Philosophy of the Social Sciences*, 3, 1973, pp. 19-38. For some illustrations of the results, cf. E. Kedourie (ed.), *Nationalism*

*in Asia and Africa*, op. cit., Introduction, pp. 81-90.

26. The phrase is R. Rotberg's in his 'African nationalism: concept or confusion?', *Journal of Modern African Studies*, IV/1, 1967, pp. 33-46. On some recent separatist ethnic movements, cf. *Nationalism and Separatism: Journal of Contemporary History*, 6, 1971; and P. Mayo, *The Roots of Identity: Three National Movements in Contemporary European Politics*, Allen Lane, London, 1974.

27. Cf. E. Alworth (ed.), *Central Asia, A Century of Russian Rule*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1967.

28. A. Bennigsen and G. Lemercier-Quelquejay, *Islam in the Soviet Union*, Pall Mall, London, 1966; and G. Wheeler, *The Modern History of Soviet Central Asia*, Weidenfeld & Nicolson, London, 1964.

29. On the early Central Asian reformists, cf. H. Carrere, d'Encausse: *Réforme et Révolution chez les Musulmans de l'Empire Russe*, Armand Colin, Paris, 1966.

30. Cf. S. Zenkovsky, *Pan-Turkism and Islam in Russia*, op. cit., and idem, 'Kulturkampf in pre-revolutionary Central Asia', *American Slavic and East European Review*, 14, 1955, 15-41.

31. For examples of this in the territorial 'state-nations' of sub-Saharan Africa, cf. J. F. A. Ajayi, 'The place of African history and culture in the process of nation-building in Africa south of the Sahara', *Journal of Negro Education*, 30, 1960, pp. 206-13; R. July, *The Origins of Modern African Thought*, Faber & Faber, London, 1968; and V. Olorunsola (ed.), *The Politics of Cultural Subnationalism in Africa*, Anchor Books, New York, 1972.

James A. Beckford

## Accounting for conversion

### ABSTRACT

Starting from the view that actors' self-reported accounts of religious conversion cannot be taken as objective and unproblematic reports on experience, this article shows that Jehovah's Witnesses' conversion accounts are typically constructed according to a set of guidelines which reflect the Watchtower movement's changing organizational rationale. In particular, the central ideas regarding its position as God's visible organization on earth, a Theocracy and the exclusive publisher of God's intentions have a decisive influence on some major features of Witnesses' conversion accounts. These features, abstracted from the transcripts of interviews with a sample of English Witnesses in the early 1970s, embody the view that 'appropriate' ways of talking about conversion must refer to progressive enlightenment; cognitive conviction; conversion as an achievement; and conversion as organizational work. Moreover, the dominant style of Witnesses' accounts is related to the Watchtower movement's changing fortunes in Western societies. Ideology plays a central role in mediating between the movement's external circumstances, its organizational rationale and its members' ways of accounting for their conversion.

Recent criticism of the prevailing orthodoxy in sociological approaches to the understanding of religious conversion has taken several distinct, but interrelated, forms. The first criticism is that sociologists typically fail to take a sufficiently broad and inclusive perspective on the topic.<sup>1</sup> The proposed remedy entails exploring conversion from the perspectives of psychiatry, politics, religion, psychology and all the strategies that people conventionally adopt for 'muddling through' with their difficulties.

A second criticism is that sociologists typically fail to take seriously enough the need to discover the nature of individuals' personal experiences of conversion.<sup>2</sup> The commonly proposed remedy here is to regard the religious actors' own views of reality and their own accounts of experience as the primary materials for interpretation.

A third type of criticism is directed more fundamentally against all

those attempts to explain religious conversion which do not acknowledge the fact that actors' accounts of experiences cannot be objective reports in a neutral observation language but are artfully accomplished constructions. They allegedly embody the socially transmitted rules for constituting certain experiences as religious conversions.<sup>3</sup> The remedy here is to be alert to the 'awesome indexicality' of all linguistic expressions and therefore to see actors' accounts of their religious conversion as situated in social contexts which lend them meaning.

It follows that actors' talk about conversion ceases to be an objective resource for the sociologist and becomes, instead, an interesting topic in its own right. To study conversion is then to study the variety of conditions under which it makes sense to talk about being converted. The most general aim of this paper is to explore some of the implications of this approach for the understanding of Jehovah's Witnesses' accounts of conversion.

The first reason for wanting to make a special study of conversion to the Watchtower movement (or Jehovah's Witnesses) in Britain is that, in the course of wider research into this movement,<sup>4</sup> I noticed a discrepancy between what passes in everyday language for religious conversion and what the Witnesses described as their own distinctive version of this phenomenon. The first problem was therefore to account for the discrepancy. A second reason for studying the Witnesses' reported conversion experiences in depth was generated during overt participant-observation in the whole range of their activities. I gradually perceived a striking congruence and correspondence between the symbols employed in their reports and many other features of the movement's ideology and organizational structure. The second problem was therefore to account for this homology. In time, and with greater knowledge of the movement's history, I came to entertain a third reason for exploring the meaning of reported conversion experiences among Jehovah's Witnesses. The Watchtower Society's voluminous publications and my own investigations showed that the implicit understanding among its members of what constituted evidence of 'proper' conversion had changed considerably during the period of almost one hundred years since its inception. The third problem was therefore to account for these historical changes.

This article therefore addresses the topics of:

- (a) Jehovah's Witnesses' rules for speaking about conversion,
- (b) the relationship between the rules and other aspects of the Watchtower movement, and
- (c) historical changes in the character of the rules.

Questions about the reality status of Jehovah's Witnesses' conversion experiences have been omitted. Similarly, there is no attempt to investigate either the factors which might be said to predispose/attract people towards the Watchtower movement or the logic of such investigation.

Two final remarks are in order. Firstly, at no point in my research did I question Jehovah's Witnesses explicitly about conversion. When the word was used it was theirs: not mine. And secondly, their self-reports were constant in all significant respects regardless of whether they were addressing me alone or an audience of other Witnesses. I am confident, therefore, that the distinctive features of their speech about conversion which I shall now try to formulate and analyse were not specific to interaction with non-Witnesses.

#### THE CONTEXTUAL FEATURES OF TALK ABOUT CONVERSION

One of the assumptions on which the present analysis is founded is that speech is not simply an objective report upon reality. It is the speakers' way of using available resources to construct an appropriate view of reality. Speakers' decisions about the appropriateness of different resources are made partly by reference to their sense of the kind of context in which they are speaking. And one of the considerations to be taken into account in making such decisions is the set of rules which are considered to govern speech and action in particular contexts. It is also assumed that speakers are concerned to display their knowledge of the rules for the sake of proving their competent membership of the relevant social groups.<sup>5</sup> How does this bear on the understanding of Jehovah's Witnesses' conversion accounts?

The Witnesses' accounts may be usefully located against a background of the knowledge which members of the Watchtower movement acquire in the process of their religious socialization and practice. To be a competent member is partly to have learned to make skilful use of the rules which render certain kinds of actions appropriate in certain kinds of situations. The present task is, therefore, to examine Witnesses' conversion accounts as expressions of practical reasoning about the problem for them of discovering appropriate ways to describe what supposedly happened in the course of their conversion. 'Appropriateness' is something which is sought by Jehovah's Witnesses in accounting for their behaviour in terms of tacitly understood rules, blueprints or conventions.<sup>6</sup>

I shall now investigate the logic (in the loosest possible sense) relating Witnesses' conversion accounts to some features of the social contexts in which they are typically uttered. In particular, I shall concentrate on the mediating role of the ideas they hold about the organizational rationale of the Watchtower Society. The object of this section is to show that Witnesses internalize specific views of their organization and that these views are rationally used by them as resources when constructing their personal and collective experiences of religious conversion.<sup>7</sup>

## THE RATIONALE OF THE WATCHTOWER SOCIETY

One of the abiding themes of Watchtower literature since the late nineteenth century is the explication of organizational rationales. Although the official view has occasionally changed in its substance, there is remarkable continuity in preoccupation with the formal theme. Moreover, this preoccupation is reflected in the salience accorded by ordinary Witnesses to questions of organization in their everyday speech. It is a central element in their world-view and a major point of reference in their evangelism as well as in their private conversation. I shall summarize their views under three main headings:

(a) *The Watchtower Society as God's visible organization*

The official rationale for the complex set of formal organizations composing the Watchtower Society<sup>8</sup> is that it alone represents 'God's visible organization on earth' and is in direct line of descent from a long series of honourable Christian groups which have throughout history 'vindicated Jehovah's name', i.e. they have been privy to God's personal identity and have witnessed faithfully to the steadily unfolding pattern of knowledge about his plans for the world. The proof of the rationale is said to be evident in the Watchtower movement's continuing ability to broadcast its message to an ever larger audience and to recruit more and more active participants.

(b) *The Watchtower Society as a Theocracy*

Since the declaration in June 1938 that the Watchtower Society was a Theocracy under control by Jehovah, an exceptionally clear and firm view of its organizational design has been formulated and propagated. Christ Jesus is now believed to be working at the head of the organization through the medium of its duly-appointed earthly leaders. Departures from its programme of belief and activity allegedly constitute blasphemy and supposedly entail 'everlasting death' following the First Judgement. The widely proclaimed imminence of Armageddon lends urgency and ideological strength to the force of theocratic arrangements.

(c) *The Watchtower Society as the publishers of God's intentions*

'Advertise, Advertise, Advertise the King and His Kingdom' was the theme of the Watchtower Society's first major conference after the disruption of its work in World War I, and it authoritatively established the direction for subsequent development of its organizational design and purposes. The primary task of its ordinary members (significantly called 'Publishers' after 1939) was to disseminate its literature as widely and efficiently as possible. The acceptance of this task meant that criteria of instrumental rationality were officially legitimated and embodied in organizational arrangements at all levels, and the urgent

necessity to be constantly active in service-work (magazine selling; door-to-door preaching; conducting home Bible Studies) is nowadays deliberately instilled in all Jehovah's Witnesses. Their agreement to engage in it regularly is seen by them as a mark of their commitment to the Watchtower Society's purposes.

For the most part, Witnesses not only voice agreement with the official version of the Watchtower movement's organizational rationale but, more importantly, they also use it as a resource when deciding how to voice their personal experiences. That is, it provides a set of guidelines for judging the appropriateness of particular ways of formulating and expressing the meaning of events and states of mind. The official organizational blueprints enable Witnesses to make practical decisions about the significance of their experiences and thereby to account them in distinctive ways. How does this relate to religious conversion? And what is the relationship between the distinctive features of Witnesses' talk about conversion and their knowledge of the Watchtower Society's organizational rationale and design? My answers are summarized under four headings.

## I. PROGRESSIVE ENLIGHTENMENT

The most striking feature of Jehovah's Witnesses' mode of speaking about the processes whereby they allegedly abandoned former world-views, social relationships and activity patterns in preference for a way of life in conformity with the ethos of the Watchtower movement is their denial that a crucial turning-point could be located. They typically talk about their conversion experiences in terms of a steady (if not always smooth) progression of mental states marked by subtle and sequential qualitative changes in outlook and action:

My first reaction was to fight against it. But my mother kept on having Bible Studies at home, and I gradually came to see that there was truth in it.

(38-year-old spinster)

I had always been looking for answers to my questions, but it was only when I started studying with Jehovah's Witnesses that things began to fall into place. I could see where I had been going wrong. . . . The truth gradually dawned on me.

(42-year-old father of two children)

I couldn't honestly say that one day I didn't know what it was all about and the next I did. . . . It was marvellous how it all fitted together piece by piece. But it took a long time with me.

(59-year-old widow)

These representative quotations may seem reminiscent of what has been termed 'the gradual awakening', but there is a major difference.

The Witnesses were not reporting the process of growing into conformity with a model which had been held out to them as an ideal since childhood. Their early socialization had typically been in religious traditions that differed sharply from the Watchtower movement. What their accounts express is the idea that a new and more satisfying view of life eventually emerged in the course of their exposure to Watchtower teachings, personnel and practices.

Respondents confirmed this view of things by asserting that sudden, emotional upheavals in religious consciousness are suspect. The authenticity of such experiences is commonly questioned *ex post facto*:

I think I must have been looking for an illumination, but my study with Jehovah's Witnesses showed me that the truth could only come from correct knowledge.

(36-year-old mother of two children)

I gradually realized that what had happened to me in the Baptist Church at home was only emotional. . . . It took me a while to see that it was not scriptural to be changed overnight.

(38-year-old spinster)

The way in which Witnesses construct and interpret their conversion is closely related to their acquired sense of the Watchtower Society's place in history as the exclusive repository of God's special dispensation to 'spiritual Israelites'. They may reason that, in view of the slow and progressive way in which God has supposedly revealed the secrets of His plans for the World, it is fitting for their personal spiritual development to follow a similar pattern. It follows that experiences which smack of sudden or idiosyncratic illumination/revelation cannot be reconcilable with either the tenor of God's historical practice or the nature of His special Covenant with the Watchtower Society. In their view, it is inconceivable that the God who has contracted into a special and exclusive relationship with the Watchtower Society could also legitimize unilateral arrangements with a privileged individual. The idea of such an arrangement would be condemned as immodest spiritual pride. In this way, Jehovah's Witnesses can draw upon their knowledge of the organization's formal rationale when seeking to make practical sense of the conditions under which their conversion allegedly took place. This knowledge serves partially to constitute their own experiences as a form of appropriate conversion.

## 2. 'BY TRUTH ALONE'

A second major feature of the Witnesses' conversion accounts is their insistence that the acquisition of knowledge of God, His purposes and His plans is the major (though not sufficient) condition of conversion. Not surprisingly, their speech is permeated with expressions reflecting

the predominantly cognitive orientation of the movement's doctrines and ideology. The most common way of referring to committed members, for example, is to describe them as being 'in the Truth', while prospective members are 'Truth seekers'. The whole gamut of beliefs, teachings, practices, plant, property and personnel is frequently referred to as 'the Truth'. The counterpart to this cognitive hegemony is the Witnesses' extreme cautiousness concerning the intrusion of emotional factors into their practice of religion.

Although very, very few reports of conversion among Witnesses make reference to the classic before-and-after syndrome, it is admitted that changes in emotional state do occur. In some cases the long-term experience of emotional and material benefits is actually taken as confirmation of the authenticity of conversion in the absence of more immediate or more remarkable signs.

I found after a while that I had lost my bad temper and could get on better with my family.

(53-year-old father of three children)

The Truth really pays off, you know, I'm sure that it helped me to cope with niggling little problems. . . . My wife didn't like Jehovah's Witnesses but she had to admit that they had made me a better person to live with.

(42-year-old father of two children)

These features of Witnesses' conversion accounts are closely related to the official rationale of the Watchtower Society which emphasizes that God progressively revealed true knowledge of His plans to His faithful Witnesses. It follows that the Bible and a correct understanding of its meaning are seen as central to religious truth. In view of this emphasis on knowledge and of the Watchtower Society's self-proclaimed commission to disseminate it on God's behalf, it is not surprising that the Witnesses judge the authenticity of religious experiences in terms of perceived correspondence with Scripture. There can be no better criterion for them. And since the standards of scriptural truth are those established by the Watchtower Society, the conversion accounts of its members revolve almost exclusively around matters of truth, falsity, scripture, evidence and proof.

## 3. 'CONVERSION AS ACHIEVEMENT'

An allied feature of Jehovah's Witnesses' conversion accounts is that the slow process of cumulative enlightenment and blessing around which they centre is not claimed as the direct result of the purposive agency of Jehovah God or Christ Jesus. In contrast to the pattern of most Christian accounts of conversion, the agency of conversion is usually attributed by Witnesses to no more than two actors: the converting subject and

(commonly) a spiritual guide. There is a strong sense that Jehovah's Witnesses have had to 'work for' their conversion by a methodical confrontation with intellectual obstacles and by a deliberate programme of self-reform. Conversion is not represented as something which *happened* to them: it is framed as something that they *achieved*. Not an event so much as an achievement. But responsibility is commonly shared with the person who acted as the intermediary with the Watchtower movement and who supervised the initial processes of learning and reforming:

At first I resisted. But with the help of [X] I was talked into making a serious study of the Scriptures. . . . I had plenty of objections and was sure that they [i.e. the Witnesses] were wrong, but [X] showed me how the facts of the Bible could not be faulted. . . . There is so much to learn, but I am getting great joy out of learning more and more about the Truth.

(38-year-old unmarried male)

This particular testimony is representative of many in its self-attribution of agency, and the contrast with other types of conversion account is striking.<sup>9</sup>

There is no role for conventional ideas of faith and/or personal salvation in Witnesses' conversion accounts. Rather, the emphasis is placed on a combination of the Watchtower Society's provision of 'The Truth' and the individual convert's capacity to understand and implement it. But the modes of understanding and implementation are not open to personal choice: it is taught that the Truth can only be found in one organization and that the chances of surviving through Armageddon and enjoying the subsequent millennial paradise on earth are conditional upon obedience to the Watchtower Society's instructions. A high evaluation is therefore placed on 'organization mindedness' and a relatively low evaluation on the cultivation of personal spirituality.

#### 4. 'CONVERSION AS ORGANIZATIONAL WORK'

In marked contrast to the practice of other activist, exclusivist, Christian sects, the Watchtower Society reduces the significance of official baptism to a bare minimum. It takes the form of a perfunctory, matter-of-fact ceremony of total immersion in a convenient location. This is often a public swimming pool which is specially commissioned for the purpose, but which is given no special cosmetic treatment. Moreover, hundreds, if not thousands, of Witnesses wearing conventional bathing costumes are baptized in quick succession. And the timing of the event reflects organizational convenience rather than personal preference. The Witnesses' conversion accounts reflect the sect's official views on baptism:

I was told that I ought to symbolise my dedication to Jehovah God by water baptism but I was already very active in the Ministry. . . . No, we didn't do anything special that day, I was working in the kitchen at the Assembly, so I just took the afternoon off to be baptised. . . . It was a miracle of organization. . . . Everything went like clockwork.

(38-year-old-spinster)

I was worried about the total immersion. The brothers, you know, were very good and it was all over very quickly. . . . I didn't feel any different in myself, but I knew that Jehovah was pleased.

(59-year-old widow)

One of the reasons for the low significance attached to the baptismal ceremony is that it often takes place many months, and sometimes years, after the individual has begun attending Watchtower meetings regularly and has even accomplished a large amount of service-work. For it seems to be policy to involve neophytes as quickly as possible in practical work alongside more mature Witnesses. And my impression is that the psychological pressures of door-step preaching and magazine-selling help to crystallize self-identity as a servant of Jehovah and to cement the bonds with fellow-Witnesses.

The de-emphasis of baptism and the emphasis on early involvement in service-work are intimately related to the Watchtower Society's official views of its divinely-ordained purpose. They can be seen as rational in the context of the belief that, while God's grace has been made available to all humans, it can only benefit those who possess correct knowledge of His intentions and who accordingly undertake to rescue as many others as possible from physical destruction at Armageddon. This means complying with the directives of the Watchtower Society since, as we have already seen, it claims to represent exclusively God's visible organization on earth. 'Appropriate' conversion accounts must therefore refer in part to an awareness and acceptance of the terms under which Jehovah's Witnesses are expected to behave in the Watchtower Society.

There is a logic of congruence between, on the one hand, the sect's self-proclaimed status as God's visible organization on earth as a Theocracy and as a Publishing organization and, on the other, its doctrines of sin, redemption and survival through Armageddon. The logic resides in the impersonal, collective character of the covenanting relationship which is posited between God and mankind. It is presented in the form of dispensations applying to vast numbers of people and is therefore only tangential to the sphere of personal faith. Correct knowledge and appropriate practical action are what matter, and they are controlled by the Watchtower Society in its uniquely privileged position. The net effect is to deprive the Witnesses' conversion accounts of much of the intimately personal, emotional, and faith-centred

features which characterize so strongly the majority of conversion accounts in the Christian tradition. Instead, they display an unusual emphasis on cognitive matters and on conformity with practical aspects of membership in the Watchtower Society.

The general argument of this section has been that Jehovah's Witnesses' conversion accounts depart in significant respects from what is commonly thought of as conversion. The Witnesses' accounts do not hinge on a crucial turning-point in an extended sequence of events; nor is the Divine felt to be acting directly upon them. Rather, their accounts emphasize the importance of their own active role in working towards an intellectual conviction of the truth of Watchtower teachings. Emotion is presented as an obstacle to cognitive development, but the assistance of a spiritual guide in the person of a practising Witness is often acknowledged.

#### FROM REJECTION TO INDIFFERENCE

There is agreement among recent commentators on the Watchtower movement's history<sup>10</sup> that before the First World War members of the Watchtower movement had been predominantly drawn from families associated with minor professional, commercial or self-employed occupations. But during the inter-war years, it is argued, large numbers of manual employees and workers in service occupations were recruited. The evidence shows that since the Second World War the membership in Western countries has been drawn from an increasingly wide range of social classes and status groups.<sup>11</sup>

The available reports on the way in which the earliest generations of Watchtower followers accounted for their conversions are not reliable documents for many purposes because they were compiled with a view either to condemning or to defending the Watchtower Society's cause. But it is still possible to distill from the Society's own publications a sense of the rationale attributed to its organization and a view of what it considered appropriate in the way of conversion experiences. The methodological disadvantages of using this material are numerous, but it does provide a good insight into the evolution of Watchtower ideology and is therefore acceptable in the present context.

What the Watchtower literature makes very clear is that the 'favoured' features of conversion experiences have varied with the movement's ideology which, in turn, has varied with its external fortunes. At times when the movement met with little opposition to its message or to its evangelical work, its ideology tended to be eirenic and world-indifferent (as distinct from world-rejecting). This was the case before the First World War and has been so since the mid-1950s in the West. A similar pattern is displayed in the dominant character of the conversion experiences reported in Watchtower literature. Before 1914 and after 1955 the relative emphasis was, and now is, on matters of

inner conviction and peace of mind. In the intervening years, however, it was on the strength of opposition to 'worldly' forces and on the strength of selfless devotion to fighting anti-Watchtower enemies.

The period since the mid-1950s has seen the implementation of a number of schemes for improving the educational standards and, it is presumed, the evangelical effectiveness of rank-and-file Witnesses. At the same time, Watchtower literature has lost much of its formerly acerbic, condemnatory tone and has acquired a concern for the quality of personal life and domestic relationships. Terms such as 'joy', 'love' and 'peace of mind' are now the keynotes. And questions of sexual and social morality are a prominent focus of many articles in contemporary Watchtower magazines.<sup>12</sup>

Zygmunt's<sup>13</sup> interpretation of these changes (and associated changes in organizational structure) is that they reflect a process of coming-to-terms with an increasingly affluent society in the West and with a whole new range of corresponding problems for the sect and for its individual members. He has singled out for special comment what he understands to be two modes of adaptation to the influx of large numbers of new Witnesses after 1960. On the one hand the process of vetting candidates for baptism has allegedly been formalized and made more stringent, while on the other hand there has allegedly been a drive towards the enforcement of more rigorous standards of morality among the Witnesses. He interprets this as evidence of a felt need in the Watchtower movement to preserve its identity as an 'unworldly' contrast group in a decreasingly hostile social environment but, at the same time, to create an image of respectability among outsiders. The search for what he terms 'ethical differentiation' is seen as a way of satisfying both needs at once. This argument is in line with my view that present-day conversion accounts display strong concern with social morality and with a narrow range of spiritual topics. Yet, it must be added that I interpret these changes as outworkings of deeper ideological adjustments to the Watchtower Society's organizational rationale: not as independent changes in the Witnesses' personal experiences.

This view of the present situation is echoed in Wilson's<sup>14</sup> analysis of the information that he recently collected by interview and questionnaire about Jehovah's Witnesses in Japan. He also finds it significant that the Watchtower movement offers practical advice on a very wide range of moral questions and on problems of social relationships in everyday life. Indeed, the accounts that he elicited from interviewees of the things that had originally attracted them to the Watchtower movement and of the blessings that had allegedly followed are full of claims to improvement in states of mind and personal relationships. Leaving aside questions about the reality status of these improvements, as has been the practice throughout this article, it is possible to interpret the Japanese Witnesses' accounts as rational constructions built with knowledge of the Watchtower Society's present-day rationale and

therefore reflecting its own ideological awareness of how conversion and commitment can make sense. In other words, the rationale makes it possible for the Witnesses to account for the experience of conversion and its associated benefits in particular ways.

Accounts of conversion are constructions (or reconstructions) of experiences which draw upon resources available *at the time of construction* to lend them sense. They are not fixed, once-and-for-all descriptions of phenomena as they occurred in the past. Rather, their meaning emerges in the very process of construction, and this takes place at different times in different contexts. In giving accounts of their conversion, Jehovah's Witnesses indirectly rehearse the Watchtower Society's rationale (amongst other things) because it is this which rationally provides the grounds for constituting their experiences in a way which is known to them to be appropriate. Their talk about 'how I was converted' only makes sense in the context of what they know about the Watchtower Society's rationale. But, as I have just indicated, the rationale and its wider ideological setting have not remained static; they have evolved partly in response to external contingencies. And Watchtower literature is effective in conveying to Jehovah's Witnesses the subtle changes in ideology as they occur.

It might seem to follow that there would be marked generational differences among the Witnesses in their preferred ways of accounting for conversion. But there is actually a high degree of homogeneity in their accounts because even the longest-serving Witnesses draw upon the present-day rationale of the Watchtower Society and in this way tend to conceal the actual period of their conversion. The highly obtrusive influence of official ideology in this sect is one of the conditions that serve to ensure homogeneity in the conversion accounts of all its members as well as in other aspects of their performance.

#### CONCLUSION

The main point of this article is that Jehovah's Witnesses' conversion accounts should be treated as skilful accomplishments of actors who have at their disposal the official version of their movement's rationale. The Witnesses are able to draw on this rationale and thereby make practical decisions about what to include and what to omit. The result is an intentionally persuasive, but implicit, statement about the allegedly common-sensical feasibility of becoming a Jehovah's Witness. That is, Witnesses explain by implicit reference to the movement's rationale that it makes sense to have experienced certain things in the way that they claim to have done.

The argument goes beyond the commonplace that converts often reproduce a rehearsed script, for it implies that the processes may be subconscious and that there is a logic of congruence linking the features of the conversion account to, amongst other things, the group's ideo-

logical rationale. In the case of the Watchtower movement the links are in my opinion quite clear because the ideology is highly obtrusive in its literature, activities and organization.

Taken to its logical extreme my argument implies that there are severe problems in the conventional sociological practice of looking for individual converts' motives, predispositions, attractions, etc., in their accounts of conversion. Some would even argue that the rhetoric of motivational explanation is merely a device for concealing or mystifying the essentially 'amateur' nature of sociological explanations.<sup>15</sup> I do not share this view but I do appreciate the usefully critical light which its advocates have thrown on conventional ways of treating conversion accounts as objective reports on a fixed reality.

I have chosen to limit the implications of this argument to the point where, instead of asking questions about recent changes in the pattern of factors accounting for conversion to the Watchtower movement, I am content to ask what kind of meaningful connection exists between Watchtower ideology and Jehovah's Witnesses' conversion accounts. I have tried to show that the character of the connection has undoubtedly changed since the mid-1950s.

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#### NOTES

1. See for example, J. T. Richardson, M. Harder and R. Simmonds, *Organized Miracles*, New York, Transaction Books, forthcoming 1978.

2. A. Rigby and B. S. Turner, 'The Findhorn Community, Centre of Light: a sociological study of new forms of religion', *A Sociological Yearbook of Religion in Britain*, vol. 5 (1972), pp. 72-86; and R. Robertson and C. B. Campbell, 'Religion in Britain; the need for new research strategies', *Social Compass*, vol. 19, no. 1 (1972), pp. 185-97.

3. B. Taylor, 'Conversion and Cognition: An area for empirical study in the microsociology of religious knowledge', *Social Compass*, vol. 24, no. 1 (1976), pp. 5-22.

4. The material reported here was collected in the early 1970s by means of intensive interviews lasting several hours with a random sample of fifty-five adult members of two units of an urban Watchtower congregation in central

southern England. It is part of a wider project on which several reports have already been published. See in particular J. A. Beckford, *The Trumpet of Prophecy. A Sociological Study of Jehovah's Witnesses*. Oxford, Blackwell. New York, Halsted Press, 1975(a); and 'Organization, Ideology and Recruitment: the Structure of the Watchtower movement', *The Sociological Review*, vol. 23, no. 4 (November 1975[b]), pp. 893-909.

5. D. L. Wieder, *Language, and Social Reality: The Case of Telling the Convict Code*, The Hague, Mouton, 1974.

6. But it is no less important to situate the hearer's actions as well, i.e. to make the point that I, as a sociologist trying to understand social phenomena, am also engaged in practical reasoning. Its main aim is to display competence in the application of available rules and typifications for making sense of observed social behaviour. I am no less subject to rules than are the subjects of my research.

The criteria for judging the adequacy of my account are therefore internal to the world of sociological reasoning, but this does not necessarily imply total paralysis from cultural relativism. For me, it simply calls for an admission that the sociologist cannot enjoy privileged access to an independent realm of truth and a recognition of the socially situated character of my reasoning. In sum, the witnesses' accounts of my activity are constructed under the same formal constraints as are my accounts of their activity. What is different between the two cases is the set of substantive criteria for determining adequacy and meaningfulness.

7. For an insightful application of this approach to the study of non-religious organizations, see E. Bittner, 'The Concept of Organization', *Social Research*, vol. 32 (1965), pp. 239-55.

8. This is a convenient, short-hand way of referring to a highly intricate network of interlocking chartered organizations which collectively control Jehovah's Witnesses. For a brief summary of its major components, see J. A. Beckford, 'Les Témoins de Jéhovah à travers le Monde', *Social Compass*, vol. 24, no. 1 (1977), pp. 5-31; and J. F. Zygmunt, 'Jehovah's Witnesses in the USA: 1942-1976', *Social Compass*, vol. 24, no. 1 (1977), pp. 45-57.

9. A recent study of conversion experiences among French Catholics, for example, has shown that the convert '... presents the change without specific reference to his own powers... but by reference to an event and, through it, to the divine who is represented in turn as the initiator or author.' A. Billette, 'Se raconter une histoire... Pour une analyse révisée de la conversion', *Social Compass*, vol. 23, no. 1 (1976), pp. 47-56. (My translation.)

10. See Beckford, *op. cit.* (1975a); A. Rogerson, *Millions Now Living Will Never Die*. London: Constable, 1969; and T. White, *A People for His Name*. New York: Vantage Press, 1967.

11. But for a different opinion on the situation in the Netherlands, see Q. J. Munters, 'Recruitment as Vocation: the case of Jehovah's Witnesses', *Sociologia Neerlandica*, vol. 7, no. 2 (1971), pp. 88-100.

12. See Beckford, *op. cit.* (1975a), pp. 160-80; and White, *op. cit.*

13. *Op. cit.*

14. B. R. Wilson, 'Aspects of Kinship and the Rise of Jehovah's Witnesses in Japan', *Social Compass*, vol. 24, no. 1 (1977), pp. 97-120.

15. See, for example, A. Blum and P. McHugh, 'The Social Ascription of Motives', *American Sociological Review*, vol. 36, no. 1 (1971), pp. 98-109.

## BOOK REVIEWS

### **The Form of Sociology: Paradigms and Crises**

S. N. Eisenstadt John Wiley 1976 xvii + 386 pp £12.75

### **Sociology as an Art Form**

Robert Nisbet Heinemann 1976  
145 pp £1.80

### **Towards a Critical Sociology: An Essay on Commonsense and Emancipation**

Zygmunt Bauman Routledge & Kegan Paul 1976 115 pp £2.50

### **Sociology as Social Criticism**

T. B. Bottomore Allen and Unwin 1975  
217 pp £4.25 (£2.10 paperback)

These four books are very different and their sociological contributions and value as texts for students vary considerably. Their only common feature is that each, in its different way, is a response to the subject's current crisis. But that is probably a good enough reason for reviewing them together. I shall start by discussing what is, in my view, the weakest and least valuable of the four, that by Eisenstadt and Curelaru.

*The Form of Sociology* is concerned with two problems: first, 'it tries to evaluate the present state of sociological theory and analysis in the light of major trends in its historical development'; and second, 'it attempts to relate past trends and present possibilities to the structure of the sociological community'. An ambitious project, one which would surely require more than 386 pages for an adequate treatment. It is hardly surprising that what we are offered is, on the whole, superficial, abstract and formalistic. Moreover, given the organization adopted by the authors, the book

is unnecessarily and tediously repetitive. They do manage to convey a sense of sociology as an emerging discipline, striving to gain a national and, latterly, international organizational framework, and to establish a tradition of continuous, theory-oriented research, but they fail to penetrate the depth of the various pre-sociological and sociological developments and issues that they touch on. Above all, their book is naïvely eclectic and, for all their stress on conflict as a ubiquitous fact of social life, consensualist regarding sociology in its current phase.

There is some use, perhaps especially to sociologists of the younger generation, in pointing out, as Eisenstadt and Curelaru do, that the current crisis is not a totally new predicament for sociology but a situation which, from the outset, has been inherent in and, indeed, constitutive of, the attempt to gain firm social knowledge. But one is not given here a sociologically adequate analysis of the subject's origins and subsequent development through successive 'paradigms and crises'. Given that, it is not surprising to find their conclusion stressing the possibilities for synthesis in the present situation or to learn that the synthesis they envisage proposes little more than some kind of *rapprochement* between micro- and macro-sociological approaches and between the so-called 'conflict' and 'consensus' schools.

*Sociology as an Art Form* is a better book. It is well and clearly written, and provides a lively, scholarly discussion of the similarities between art, philosophy and science, together with the suggestion that the dominant themes of sociology—development, change, structure, order, alienation, anomie, progress, decay, etc.—all tended to be anticipated in the