

## **RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE: A SOCIOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE**

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The usual idea of a religious experience is conceived in largely individual terms. It is generally seen as an uninduced, unanticipated and most probably sudden sense of some force, power, or mood which transcends everyday comprehension, and which is beyond ordinary empirical explanation. Where an explanation of such phenomena is attempted, the tendency is to seek to understand them in essentially psychological terms. What I wish to suggest is that, although this is the common understanding of what is implied by the term “religious experience”, in fact by no means all such experience is of a purely psychological kind. Many people, who would not claim to have encountered such a numinous sense of a force or a presence, would certainly claim to have acquired new religious insight by quite different means and in what would usually be quite different circumstances. These are people who have been introduced into a context – a congregation or a community – in which a special religious awakening is not only expected but which may even be canvassed. Its very form, sequence and effect, and even the occasion of its occurring, may indeed be well understood in advance. Although it is not involuntary, and is almost (to employ a metaphor) a ready-made experience, such a religious sensation is none the less valid for all that, and its effects, since it occurs in a much more structured context, may indeed be very much more influential and enduring.

The archetypal situation in which such experience is sought is, of course, the religious revival. Such revivals appear to have occurred relatively spontaneously in past history, when large numbers of people within a community experienced what they certainly took to be divine impulses. In the 19th century, revivalists turned professional and the thesis was advanced that it was unnecessary to wait in ardent prayer for the Holy Spirit to commence its work, but that a revival could be induced, could be planned and systematically organized. And whilst the actual awakening that people felt was certainly still accorded to the power of religious agencies, and in particular to the Holy Spirit, and was certainly credited as being an objective supernatural force by those affected, revival now became a planned event – the result of a deliberate and systematic publicity campaign.

Revival campaigns became a feature of 19th century Protestant countries and the technique of stimulating revival is still in use, of course, although today revivals are less common, reach fewer people, and are less characterized by dramatic manifestations by those undergoing what are claimed to be profound religious experiences.

The fact that revivals were group occasions, with often large numbers of people attesting to a sense of religious awakening, and with startling performances as people were affected, should not lead us lightly to dismiss these phenomena as in any sense less real, authentic, or valid, than the religious experiences which individuals undergo in isolation and without premeditation. Contemporary observers were divided about them. Wesley, whose preaching inspired spontaneous outbursts of deeply-felt emotions, was uncertain about how

to evaluate them, but eventually decided to discourage them. The more calculating revivalists of the 19th century – Charles Finney, Dwight Moody, or Reuben Torrey – had little doubt: they preached precisely to affect their hearers and to induce a religious experience, and the outward and audible signs were to them confirmation of the inward and spiritual processes that they believed were in progress. Other observers of 19th century revivals came to different conclusions. Thus Mrs Trollope, mother of the novelist, visiting Ohio (then virtually a frontier society of the United States) in the early 1820s, wrote:

It was in the course of this summer, that I found the opportunity I had long wished for, of attending a camp meeting ... I had heard it said that being at a camp meeting was like standing at the gate of heaven, and seeing it opening before you; I had heard it said that being at a camp meeting was like finding yourself within the gates of hell; in either case there must be something to gratify curiosity ...

She relates how the camp was arranged, and the sequence of activity:

One of the preachers ... assured us of the enormous depravity of man ... and of his perfect sanctification after he had wrestled sufficiently with the Lord to get hold of him. The preachers came down from their stand ... and, beginning to sing a hymn, called penitents to come forth. As they sang ... the voices of the multitude jointed in chorus. This was the only moment at which I perceived anything like the solemn and beautiful effect which I had heard ascribed to this woodland worship.

There followed an exhortation by the preachers at which, as Mrs Trollope describes it,

... above a hundred persons, nearly all females, came forward, uttering howlings and groans, so terrible that I shall never cease to shudder when I recall them. They appeared to drag each other forward, and on the word being given 'Let us pray' they all fell on their knees; but this posture soon changed for others that permitted greater scope for the convulsive movements of their limbs, and they were soon all lying on the ground in an indescribable confusion of heads and legs. They threw about their limbs with such incessant and violent motion that I was every instant expecting some serious accident to occur. But how am I to describe the sounds that proceeded from this strange mass of human beings? Hysterical sobbings, convulsive groans, shrieks and screams the most appalling burst forth on all sides. I felt sick with horror ... At length the atrocious wickedness of this horrible scene increased to a degree of grossness that drove us from our station; we returned to the carriage at about three o'clock in the morning and passed the remainder of the night in listening to the ever increasing tumult.

However, we may set aside the negative evaluations of Mrs Trollope, devoted to a very proper and conventional view of religion, and who was shocked later to discover that the sort of revivalism that she had been prepared to regard as a barbaric and essentially American phenomenon could – indeed did – occur in England too. As a sociologist, I do not consider that evaluations are part of my business. What I draw from such accounts as Mrs Trollope's, and of the many subsequent and more analytical studies of ecstatic religion, is that there is a wide spectrum of religious activity in which spiritual experiences can be induced and the response to it can be learned. The most contemporary form of religious ecstasy – glossalalia, or speaking in tongues, such as is encouraged in Pentecostal sects and in charismatically disposed churches – involves a learning process, and the evidence suggests that even more profound experiences, such as trance states, are learned. To say this is not, let me repeat, to deny the authenticity of these phenomena in the terms in which that validity is claimed, but only to recognize that religious experience occurs in a social context, that those who undergo this experience are social products and that their learned culture penetrates their inner experiences and in considerable part moulds them.

Revivals, which I have taken as the archetypical phenomenon in which religious experience is induced, are episodes of limited duration. The classical revivals of the 18th century were

phenomena which lasted months rather than years, likewise the Welsh Revival of 1905. The planned revivals that occur in response to a systematic campaign, which are conspicuous as socially induced occasions, rarely outlive the period of deliberate campaign organisation. But revivals are not the only agencies which facilitate the incidence of profound religious experience. Some stable and enduring organizations also canvass the possibility, and perhaps the desirability, for adherents to encounter profound spiritual realities. The very concept of conversion implies an expectation that a postulant will undergo a process of inner change. Whilst theoretically this prospect exists in many (if not all) Christian movements, the major churches tend to conventionalize such an expectation and most are somewhat suspicious of those who claim more than a normal, and perhaps nominal, form of religious commitment. The situation is different among sectarian movements, however, since sects are generally characterised by their intensity of belief and their sense of their own distinctiveness and their separation from the wider society. It is, then, to sects that I turn to exemplify a pattern of religious experience which, whilst for the individual often profound is also manifestly social. Generally, this experience is required as a prerequisite of acceptance into membership.

Sects, in their pristine form, are groups of voluntary believers. The individual members have made a choice to belong. They do not become members merely by being born to sectarian parents. There is always a test of merit. That test might be a heart-experience, an occasion on which a commitment is made to Jesus and when the individual proclaims to have had a born-again experience. In other sects, the test of merit might be a proof of knowledge of true doctrine, or the proof of a moral life. Whatever combination of proofs of election are demanded, the sectarians claim a unique and personal conviction and commit themselves to exclusive allegiance to the movement. That commitment is marked by intensity: in the fully-fledged sect, in the period before any process of slackening rigour occurs, there are no half-hearted converts. The voluntary decision to seek membership is a sacrificial commitment – a decision to relinquish worldly activities and ambitions. The proclamation of faith is usually a public matter. It may, in some sects, be marked by a dramatic act of adult baptism. It may be a public declaration. It might entail a confession of past sins. Whatever the form, the reception of the new convert is a public occasion, and the very procedures by which the new member is embraced makes the possibility of subsequent renunciation of allegiance all the more difficult. The new adherents affirm that they have, in one form or another, experienced enlightenment and have made what is strongly affirmed to be an irrevocable choice.

Since sects are strict organizations which make strong demands, it follows that what is being required and agreed is total allegiance to the movement and its precepts. Generally, members are expected to attempt a virtuoso moral performance, to live in accordance with the prescriptions for the new self that they have acquired, and to maintain a blameless life. To this end, they put themselves under discipline, notionally a discipline enjoined by God and exercised usually by sect elders in the name of the entire community. Their virtue must conform, however. They need not – indeed must not – make gratuitous gestures: the sect's requirements are not only sufficient for their lives as people seeking (perhaps claiming) salvation, but exclude the possibility of adding personal claims to additional moral worth over and above the set demands of the movement. Thus it was that, before the temperance movement gained ground in the last century, tee-totalism was regarded with suspicion by some nonconformist movements, and two candidates for the Methodist ministry in 1840 were not acceptable because of the weight they attached to temperance, which appeared in some sense to derogate from the all-saving power of Christ. Likewise, it would be a work of

unacceptable supererogation in one of the Exclusive Brethren to proclaim vegetarianism, or for a Christian Scientist to claim visions or personal revelations.

Sects, then, set objective criteria for the forms of experience and comportment which they require. Obviously, these differ from one sect to another. By no means all sects emphasize the type of emotional demonstration which was expected, and so powerfully proclaimed, by the sponsors of 19th century revivalism. Religious experience need not be confined to this one intense manifestation of emotional turmoil. Sects differ in the extent to which emotional expression is regarded as necessary, desirable, permissive or prohibited. By no means all sects expect would-be converts to undergo the sense of being born-again. For many – Jehovah’s Witnesses, Christadelphians, most conspicuously among them – religious experience is couched in intellectual terms. What candidates for admission must show is that they have studied and learned and understood a range of doctrinal propositions: their religious experience has been a steady, cumulative learning process, undertaken often with the help of sect elders, until candidates have mastered certain central tenets which qualify them for membership. The candidates have to learn quite consciously what they must do, and how they must henceforth comport themselves, since their experience must be sustained and their intellectual grasp of what the sect teaches must be constantly nourished by recurrent and continuous exposure to basic texts.

What I am suggesting is that the religious experience that leads to, or accompanies, conversion is not necessarily of the type that conforms to the recorded account of Paul’s conversion on the road to Damascus. The stereotype of Christian awakening built on that narrative assumes that conversion must be sudden, dramatic, emotional, and the result of the operation of an external agency operating on the convert. It is seen as a single life-changing event, the effects of which are expected to last the entire span of the individual’s lifetime. As a consequence of the experience, it is assumed that there will be a total transformation in the attitudes, dispositions and behaviour of the individual. This is the model followed in the revivals – except of course that, in those instances, the individuals concerned had deliberately placed themselves in a situation where a life-transforming experience was awaited and for which the community prayed. In the planned revivals of the 19th century, the camps, tents or buildings in which the campaign was conducted often had a designated area, sometimes known as the “anxious seats”, to which were invited those most earnestly concerned about the conditions of their souls and their prospects of salvation. Despite these organizational stimuli, it was still assumed that conversion was sudden and entirely the work of the Holy Ghost. But given the nature of revival campaigning and the planning by which it was promoted, it becomes clear that this type of religious experience was in fact socially induced. This is not to say that the Holy Spirit did not act, but only that if It did operate, then It did so by invitation to a public which was consciously waiting to receive Its ministrations.

The religious experience that leads to conversion is an experience the character and implications of which are generally well-known to the individual who undergoes that experience. And it is true even when that event is marked by profound emotional reactions visible to the observer, and by the strong sense of a unique and deeply personal trauma for the individual concerned. The explicit differences between the ways in which people get converted to different sects are certainly manifest, but the underlying factors and, in particular, the fact that converts are aware of “just what it takes” to be converted indicate a certain similarity in the process which should not be overlooked. Prospective converts generally know how conversion is achieved in the terms of the group to which they have affiliated themselves, and what they have learned to expect shapes what they do indeed

experience. The terms in which the experience is described, the overt manifestations to which the occasion gives rise and the social contexts in which the individual is persuaded, may differ from one type of sect to another, but we are justified in recognizing a common phenomenon beneath these apparently distinctive patterns of behaviour.

It follows, from the differences in the way in which conversion is conceived and experienced between different sectarian groups, that sectarians of diverse kinds will both account for their experiences and will recount those experiences, in distinctive terms – terms indeed that would be neither appropriate nor recognizable to sectarians of a different persuasion. Equally, the points chosen for emphasis in the consequential significance of conversion also differ. Thus, the Pentecostalist, whose conversion experience approximates that of those awakened by the revivals of the 18th and 19th centuries, and who may, indeed, have undergone their conversion in a modern revival campaign, will recall the sense of overwhelming presence, the anguish, the guilt, the surrender and the relief, and perhaps the sense of redemption and sanctification. Since the occasion is conceptualized as one distinct once-and-for-all event in the individual's life, the pre-existing circumstances, the actual context, the accompanying emotions and the specific time will all be noted and remembered, and in frequent subsequent testimonies in the meetings of their congregation all of this will be recounted. The recurrent rehearsals of the testimony will etch the episode deeply in the mind and recital of its character may often induce (for the narrator) new if usually derivative and repetitive religious experiences of an emotional kind. Not uncommonly, when Pentecostalists recount the circumstances of their being born-again or of undergoing what they often refer to as a "heart-experience", they break down into new ecstatic utterance, speak in unknown tongues and re-live the moment which they have come to see as pivotal in their lives. The recitals usually involve an account of past sins, the enormity of which are acclaimed but which, perhaps in deference to the sanctified occasions on which such testimonies are given, are not usually specified in any detail. The saved individual evokes, where he does not explicitly set forth, a "before and after" narrative, contrasting a wicked past, a redeemed present, and a glorious hereafter. God or the Holy Ghost has acted to transform the subjective self, whose attitudes and orientations have been changed and whose strong sense of dependence is now recurrently expressed.

The Pentecostalist's deeply stirring experience, and also the way in which that experience is retailed, stand in sharp contrast to what has occurred to someone converted to the belief of Jehovah's Witnesses. Among Witnesses there is nothing approaching the "road to Damascus" syndrome: indeed, to claim conversion in the terms suitable to Pentecostalism would create the powerful suspicion that the speaker was totally deluded. For Witnesses, salvation depends on an understanding of the Bible and on persistent application to it through the media of the Watchtower Society's publications. There is no moment when this conversion experience is marked by a qualitatively different sense of things. Rather there is a slow, accretive growth of understanding in the way in which things fit together, until the convert becomes the recruit and decides that he must now undergo baptism as a mark of his commitment. The experience is intellectual rather than emotional, and to recount the conversion is really to take the auditor through the stages of learning that have brought the outsider to his present allegiance.

When Witnesses talk about their conversion they, too, tell a "before and after" story but that story is not one in which God or the Holy Spirit wrought a transformation in a sinner, but the story of how an individual achieved a new sense of things, and came to understand God's purposes in the world. Their tales are more articulate and invoke neither mystical imagery nor a repertoire of emotive recollections. Let me give an example – the account,

given in an interview, of a married, semi-skilled manual worker in his mid-40s, who had had earlier contact with Jehovah's Witnesses but had fallen away. He said of his conversion:

I'd been wondering about things and wondering if there was a God. Suddenly, the world situation became tense – with the Arab oil business, and things were getting worse, and suddenly I could see it. So I came to Kingdom Hall and asked for a Bible Study; I was unhappy, my marriage was dodgy. I was chasing women, leading a worldly life, everything others would do, terrible things – encouraged by TV. You become detestable to yourself. You look at society and ask where it is going ... I feel a lot better for looking forward to a new system of things. I'm motivated to do things. I did things out of selfishness before: now there's no greed. It doesn't worry me any more ... the money will be worth nothing. I've always wondered why we are here. You see people dying. Why are we here? They are told – 'Evolution', but if they examine it carefully and the teachings of religion, when I studied with Jehovah's Witnesses, I could see for myself. God has a purpose. You are being used at present. If you lead a nice life at present – you've got to work nine hours a day. What is there? Too much materialism. Man is bogged down with factories and is not really free.

I had difficulties: the opposite sex. You have to watch your eyes, your thinking and what you read. You don't have to go for girlie magazines. These things give me a bad conscience and a bad life ... the Scriptures tell me how to be forgiven, providing I don't persist in them ... [But people] don't want to change their ways. If you've found the easy way of making money, you don't want to change. You can understand people not wanting to know. I feel sorry for people who've been deceived [by different religions]. They'll die at Armageddon – we've got to get out and save them. I'm doing no more than I should. I feel so motivated, I've got to tell people what is true. Eventually they may pick up a seed ... Things still trouble me. I even feel I'm not worthy, though one shouldn't feel that way. I'm getting a clean conscience, and I've got to guard it. Jehovah has given me that conscience ... I've become honest. Before I took things I considered perks. I've got a better marriage: I'm not deceiving my wife as I used to. I used to have an inferiority complex (or guilt) ... I feel a better person than I was – no violent temper, which I had. I'm not me no more!

The religious experience of the Witness is not a sudden instance of illumination but rather a steady application in intellectual understanding and moral apprehension. It is not the less a religious experience for being protracted and cumulative: indeed, in terms of consequences, it is perhaps of more profound and persisting importance. Because there is no one occasion on which the Witness recognizes a life-transforming experience, he does not (unlike the Pentecostalist) seek to re-live the moment at which the Spirit is supposed to have struck. Whereas the Pentecostal assembly provides recurrent opportunities for members to re-live their time of blessing, and to do so with a re-enactment of the fervour experienced at that original occasion, Witness meetings offer no occasion for members to recount their testimonies and certainly not to embark on personal disquisitions of how they became converted. The stories would be too regular, too matter-of-fact, too routine, to win the attention of fellow votaries, and they would serve no function in engendering positive emotional response. Pentecostals, in contrast, go on re-living and re-indulging in the recollection of that great encounter, and they from time to time promote new revival campaigns to stimulate new conversions and, once the campaign has actually come to an end, the churches in which such events have been staged not infrequently encourage their members to recall and sustain the revival atmosphere by proclaiming that "the campaign continues" – albeit on a somewhat routinized basis of regular Sunday and week-night services.

I allude to the routinization of post-campaign services, but one must also acknowledge in passing that revival campaigns themselves, in seeking to organize charismatic experiences – experiences of emotional intensity – on a regular and planned basis, run the risk of reducing the charismatic, the other-worldly, the numinous, and the mystical to the ordinary, expectable and the routine of everyday events. If everyone attending such a campaign rally

might expect to feel a supernatural spiritual impulse, and perhaps more specifically a conversion experience, then the sense of wonder and uniqueness may drain away. There is no doubt that some Pentecostals and other evangelical revivalists have exposed themselves to this risk. When all that is required of those attending is that they should slip up a hand to signal willingness to accept Jesus, then it may be doubted whether this gesture is given in full awareness of just what true conversion might entail, or of the way in which a sudden, emotional sense of elation might be transformed into a lifetime of spiritual and moral endeavour.

Those responding to such an offer of conversion may deceive themselves about the nature of the religious experience which induces this response, and it must be said that there are always those in revival audiences whose dispositions are volatile and insecure. I recall an occasion on which I attended a revival campaign being held in a disused cinema in a Yorkshire town. A late-middle-aged man in an overcoat that had seen better days came in out of the cold and sat beside me. As the preacher made the appeal for those seeking Jesus to declare themselves, the piano played "Just as I am, without one plea" and the revivalist urged "every head down, every eye closed", and warned his audience of the possible consequences of postponing the decision to accept Jesus: "Just slip up your hand: no one will see, only I will see it. Don't wait to claim Jesus. Don't wait for your wife – she's waiting for you. Do it now. You could leave this building and be killed by a bus, and lose for ever your chance of eternal life ...". The preacher offered many such cautions and at some point the man next to me raised his hand. But the appeal went on for rather a long time, and the man had time for second thoughts. After a bit, his hand still raised, he nudged me, and said, "Eh: it dun't mean 'al 'ave to go to church, dus it?"

It may, of course, be said that such an episode, indeed such an organized occasion, belies what is meant by a "religious experience", but some of those attending such events may undergo profound change of heart and mind as a result of revivalistic strategies, even if others are only superficially touched. Certainly some of those who have attended such campaigns have declared that they underwent spiritual transformation. Can we doubt them any more than we can doubt those who attest to such peak experiences of a much more spontaneous and unsolicited kind? Conversion is a serious matter and it is not unreasonable to say that, where people get converted, the religious experience that induced that transformation is of more profound significance than the random unique events, no matter how spiritually profound, that lead to no such consequences.

The two divergent cases that I have examined illustrate a difference between the expectation of a transformative subjective feeling, in the case of Pentecostals and other expressive sects, and the acquisition of a new intellectual understanding that allows one to make sense of the world and to effect some reformation of one's behaviour in the light of such knowledge. What is clear is that the individual learns how to interpret religious experiences in the terms of the group to which he belongs. He needs to learn the language of conversion appropriate to that group, and the accounts that are given (whether spontaneously to fellow adherents or when solicited by the sociologist in interview) are typically constituted in accordance with the sect's own expectations. The accounts of conversion and of the religious experience associated with it amount, in effect, not so much to objective reports, but to a transformation of the individual's own self-understanding in the light of these experiences. Whether different personality types are drawn to different sects by virtue of those differences, or whether recruitment to a particular sect moulds certain typical personality traits, I leave as an open question. Certainly, one perceives disparate capacities for self-control and different degrees of general sophistication between various

sectarian bodies, but I would not underestimate the extent to which the sect community itself shapes the expectations and the experiences of its members and socializes them to its own values, norms, assumptions and linguistic usage. If this interpretation of the religious experience of conversion is admitted, how far (one might ask) can and does such socialization go? It may certainly begin before the prospective member is actually converted. If he begins to associate with the members of the group, he will get some initial idea of what it would be like to be converted, and he may, indeed, find himself role-playing, behaving “as if” he were already converted by trying out a new pattern of behaviour for which there are many exemplars around him. Thus, neophytes in the Pentecostal assembly may find themselves prayed over by fervent members seeking to induce conversion or, subsequently, the baptism of the Holy Spirit. Among Jehovah’s Witnesses, interested parties might find themselves assigned to undertake door-to-door evangelism as the companion of a seasoned canvasser. The new prospect is thus drawn in. To win and sustain the affection of their new-found friends might itself be an inducement to do as they do, to speak their language, and make appropriate gestures of friendship and commitment. They will certainly pick up their sense of a radically reorganized understanding of the meaning of life and of personal identity, and they may begin to identify with group purposes and share the prevailing climate of opinion. The phenomenon is one well established in all ideological movements, and there are well-tested devices to promote it that are by no means confined to revivalists or to minority sects. We are most of us acquainted with those hymns the words of which affirm the belief and aspirations of those who join in singing them – “Just as I am without one plea” or “Lead Kindly Light” or “The Lord’s my shepherd, I’ll not want” are serious statements purporting to declare the intentions and dispositions of those who sing – seasoned Christians or new initiates.

The individual learns from the group just what sort of religious experience to expect: its nature is well anticipated. Furthermore, they learn what such an experience means and what it portends for their future life orientation. Even experiences undergone in privacy or isolation have an inevitable social content – otherwise, the individual would not know to label them as religious, since the vital part of what anyone knows about religion is a result of social transmission – of learning. But in the type of case with which I am concerned, the social element is much more immediately pronounced, since the experience of conversion occurs usually in a social setting, and certainly as a result of contemporaneous or previous direct social pressure.

However, although I have given special emphasis to the influence of the social context in the phenomenon of conversion, and particularly to the groups to whose religious orientation the newcomer is converted, let me acknowledge that there are limits to social determinism. Although one might often speak of conversion as a process of self-surrender and, in this sense, as subjection to the group, nonetheless there is always an element of voluntarism in the process. Much as the group might seek to enfold a newcomer, and flattered as he might be by the attention and the affection that are shown to him, conversion cannot be the result only of external persuasion, much less of direct coercion.

This question has arisen most directly in relation to the claim that some religious bodies – most particularly some of the new religious movements that have emerged in western countries in the last three or four decades – have gained converts by a process of “brainwashing”. The slangy quality of the word itself should at once alert us to the dubious status of a concept which lacks scientific rigour and precise specification. In some form or another, however, the charge is not a new one and one prominent physiologist, William Sargant, has drawn analogies between the breakdown that Pavlov induced experimentally in



traumatized dogs and the conversion experiences of some of those who swooned and confessed all under the influence of John Wesley's early preaching. Sargant maintained that "various types of belief can be implanted in many people after brain function has been sufficiently disturbed by accidental or deliberately induced fear, anger or excitement." This mechanistic idea of how a religious experience might be induced eliminates entirely from consideration the predispositions and the conscious will of the subject, and is the theory on which the brainwashing charge is based.

That charge received additional credibility from the unsuccessful libel action brought by the British leaders of the Unification Church – the Moonies – against the *Daily Mail* in the early 1980s. The *Daily Mail* had published material alleging that the Moonies brainwashed their converts, which the Moonies claimed was a libel. The court rejected their plea. Such a court decision in a civil case does not, of course, establish the charges that the Moonies did in fact brainwash their converts – it merely rejected the claim that this was a libel – but inevitably the case induced some people to give credence to the allegation.

There are, then, two questions which might engage us in this regard. First: is the process known as "brainwashing" capable of inducing a religious experience, and one of such power that it results in conversion? Secondly: were the much publicized conversions of young people to the Unification Church – to take this as a recent and controversial case – a result of the techniques of brainwashing?

Brainwashing is a coercive technique which certainly seeks to alter the individual's orientation to the world at large. Compulsion is used to induce individuals to renounce past allegiances and attitudes and to confess what are now represented as errors in the past. The term gained popular currency in the Korean War, when American prisoners of war in Chinese hands were subjected to a variety of measures to convert them to the Chinese perspective on things. To achieve this end, what was required was total control of the individual's life activities, including his intimate needs. The prisoner was kept in a state of uncertainty about his future and of the charges that were levelled against him. He was kept in isolation from the outside world. He might be subjected to mental, and perhaps even physical torture. He was deprived of proper nutrition and perhaps of adequate sleep. The prisoner was subject to periodic humiliation and denial of his dignity. He was harangued by his captors, who never wavered in their assertion of his guilt and in their affirmations that he would eventually have to confess and to change. This conviction was even transferred to the prisoner who saw it as even justifying his captors' treatment of him. Finally, his living conditions were manipulated, with alternating rewards and punishments to induce appropriate response.

This depiction of brainwashing relates to the conditions of the prisoners of war whose treatment first gave rise to the term. It is, I think, immediately apparent that there are few parallels between this procedure of mind control and the sort of religious experience that leads to conversion to a religious movement, even to a movement that organized its adherents into fairly tight-knit and somewhat segregated communities such as were developed in the Unification Church. Allegations were made about the Moonies that they kidnapped young people, practised hypnosis and subjected neophytes to trance-inducing lectures. They were said to maintain a taxing regimen, of early rising from prayer, long hours spent canvassing and selling literature on the streets, with little time for sleeping – circumstances inducing sensory deprivation. Newcomers were exposed to that was called 'love-bombing' as members showered them with affection: subsequently, they might be mesmerized by chanting and bizarre rituals.

Something of such allegations corresponded to the facts, but those facts might be represented in less highly-charged terms. Moonies did invite young travellers to their communities, but this was scarcely kidnapping. Their centres were sometimes relatively isolated, especially in America, but no one was taken there against their will or restrained from leaving. Their lectures might convey strong impressions – but do lectures induce trance? I see no sign of it tonight! Certainly, members get up early to pray – but so do monks. If they work long hours they are not alone in this and, if they stay up late, is that not what young people do? and do so for less idealistic reasons than those which motivate the Moonies? Diet may have been less than wholesome since Moonies often beg for food and allow themselves few luxuries, but they would not be the first religious community to espouse ascetic standards of consumption and to practise tee-totalism. Love-bombing has certainly been a technique used by Moonies in their eagerness to convince newcomers of the worthwhileness of the cause and the support of the group. Yet the crucial difference between Moonie socialization and brainwashing lies in the fact that there is no evidence of coercion. Indeed, one may say that people cannot be coerced, much as they may be influenced and persuaded, into a spiritual experience and a religious conversion.

We know from the excellent study of British Moonies published a few years ago by Dr Eileen Barker that there was no evidence of physical constraint, trances or altered states of consciousness among the very large sample that she investigated. We know from her work that over half the Moonies claimed to have had a conversion experience which was often of a deeply spiritual nature. Those experiences were generally from a few minutes' duration to half an hour, but even more significant was the fact that, although many Moonies claimed that their conversion experience was sudden, many of them also testified to having had a religious experience before becoming acquainted with the Moonies, which suggests that they were people who were predisposed to conversion – were, indeed, often religious seekers.

The negative evidence emerging from Dr Barker's work was no less impressive in disposing of the idea that Moonie conversions were a consequence of brainwashing. Had that been so, Dr Barker asked, why was it that brainwashing techniques were effective with such a very small proportion of those who expressed interest in the Unification Church? Of those who visited a Moonie centre, fewer than one in a hundred thousand was in contact with the movement two years afterwards. Of the still more interested group who attended one of the weekend workshops (seminars and lecture sessions in the context of community living) only 10% remained with the movement for more than a week. If this was brainwashing, it was a very defective technique and not the successfully compelling programme depicted by those convinced that religious conversion must proceed from some skilfully devised process of manipulation and coercion.

Given this convincing evidence that, whatever the socialization techniques employed by the Moonies, they were certainly not brainwashing, and that, beyond this, there is every reason to believe that brainwashing could not work to produce religious conversions, why should this idea have gained currency at all? Apart from the appeal of the brainwashing story to the sensationalist press, there is one particular source which promotes this explanation of conversion to new movements – the apostate member. Defecting members, and particularly those who have left a movement after having been “rescued” (as it is put), have the need for an atrocity story. They need to justify themselves and regain their self-esteem and the esteem of those – relatives and former friends – who opposed their membership of the movement. They need to renounce the group they have left, and this is most easily done by claiming to have been deceived, persuaded against their will, coerced, or even “brain-

washed". These are face-saving devices which provide convincing accounts for the apostates themselves, for their parents and rescuers – and in particular (where they have been involved) for the so-called de-programmers who set themselves up as professional liberators of converts, who can by counter-brain-washing bring the apostate back to normal life and consciousness. By this means, the former converts excuse their conversion as illness, deception, diminished responsibility or innocence. They are thereby absolved, and the family have a ready explanation in blaming the wickedness of others for the deviant and socially stigmatized behaviour of their offspring.

It has been my purpose to argue that social factors play a part in religious experience, which cannot be viewed as a purely psychological or individual phenomenon. More particularly, I have tried to suggest that the social elements inducing such experiences are particularly conspicuous where that experience leads to significant consequences such as religious conversion. However, I have also suggested that the individual is not a merely passive recipient of socially transmitted impression, that there are limits to what can be done to promote spiritual experiences, and in particular – the sensationalism of our popular press notwithstanding – that religious conversion and its attendant spiritual intimations cannot be effected by manipulative and coercive methods.

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#### **THE AUTHOR**

Bryan Wilson was born in 1926 and, after taking 1st Class Honours in the BSc (Econ) degree of the University of London – for which he studied at the [then] University College of Leicester – went on to write a PhD thesis at the London School of Economics. His thesis, on three small sects in contemporary Britain, was awarded the Hutchinson Medal for Research for 1955, and was subsequently published in 1961 in Britain and the United States as *Sects and Society*. At about the same time he began publishing in scholarly sociological journals in the United States, France and Britain.

For seven years he taught sociology at the University of Leeds, including courses on urban sociology, sociological theory, and the social institutions of modern Britain, as well as the sociology of religion. His research work – apart from occasional papers in the sociology of education, and even in criminology – continued to be devoted primarily to topics in the sociology of religion. Whilst at Leeds his time was largely pre-empted by the demands of his duties as Sub-Warden, and subsequently as Warden, of a small hall of residence. Fifty years on, he still has contact with some half-dozen of the students who lived in that hall of residence.

In 1962 he was appointed Reader in Sociology in the University of Oxford, the first senior appointment in the subject at that university, and in 1963 he was elected a Fellow of All Souls, where he continued to the end of his academic career in 1993. In 1996 *Religion in Secular Society*

was published, the subsequent Penguin edition of which brought the sociology of religion to the notice of a wider public. In the following year he edited a volume of papers of his own, and those of his graduate students, entitled *Patterns of Sectarianism*.

Teaching general sociological theory led to his compiling the widely used anthology of essays entitled *Rationality* (1970), and in the same year he published his own volume of social commentary on contemporary problems of adolescence *The Youth Culture and the Universities*, as well as *Religious Sects*, a popular short disquisition on religious movements in various societies, published simultaneously in five languages and subsequently in Japanese. His major work, *Magic and the Millennium*, followed three years later, and a "spin-off" volume, *The Noble Savages*, two years after that. Later books included *Religion in Sociological Perspective*, *The Social Dimensions of Sectarianism* and [with Karel Dobbelaere] *A Time to Chant*, as well as several edited works. *Religious Experience: A Sociological Perspective* (first published December 1996) was originally delivered in London as one of the 1992 Birkbeck Lectures.

Bryan Wilson has held Visiting Fellowships or Professorships at the universities of Ghana, Louvain, Melbourne, Queensland and California, and at Mahidol University, Bangkok. He holds the DLitt from the University of Oxford, and honorary doctorates from Soka University, Japan, and the University of Louvain. In 1991 he was elected the first Honorary President of the Société Internationale de Sociologie des Religions, and in 1994 he was elected a Fellow of the British Academy.

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