When There Is No Conversion: Spiritualists and Personal Religious Change

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Introduction

The French sociologist of religion, Danièle Hervieu-Léger (1999), observes that even as religious institutions are losing their regulatory power in society, conversion is on the increase. The author goes on to propose three types of conversion, including that from unbelief to religious belonging and belief, from one religious affiliation to another, and "reconversion" or a shift from nominal affiliation to lived practice and belonging within the same denomination (Hervieu-Léger 1999:120-129). The Montreal Spiritualists whom I have studied for some years do not easily fit any of these types, nor do their changes of religious belonging correspond easily to the models of conversion proposed by many other researchers. They do not proselytize, nor do they think of themselves as having converted from their previous religious affiliation, usually Catholicism for those in the study presented here. What can such a group tell us about conversion?

Despite the fact that conversion as usually defined— a ritually-marked adoption of a new religious belonging—is absent in this group, I suggest that the religious biographies of its members offer rich material for understanding shifts in religious identities and practice. Here I am inspired by the approach of the phenomenological psychiatrist, Wolfgang Blankenburg's (1991) study of schizophrenia. seeking to perceive how the schizophrenic experiences the social world, and the distinctive aspects of this mode of experience, the author bases his approach on interviews with patients who manifest few symptoms of the illness. Apart from the fact that these patients were capable of interaction, unlike those more severely afflicted, Blankenburg argues that "weaker" cases offer the further advantage that the clinician-researcher is less likely to be distracted by symptoms than they would be with more acute ones.

In a similar way, one might argue, highly ritualized instances of conversion may lead the researcher to confuse the social externals of certain types of conversion with the more fundamental personal transformation that they signify. My aim here is to examine certain aspects of Spiritualists' religious biographies, particularly the changes they see as a result of their involvement in the Spiritualist group that is the focus of the study and how they see their religious belonging. Before describing the research and its methods, let us take a brief look at some the issues surrounding conversion and religious identity transformation.

Conversion and Religious Identity

Many recent discussions of conversion note the complexity of the issues involved. The sociologist James T. Richardson (1998) has noted the polarity between, on the one hand, deterministic perspectives focussing on the "psychopathology" of potential converts and the "brainwashing" techniques imputed to religious groups; and on the other, what one might call "agent-centred" approaches based on an "activist," volitional view of the convert (Lofland 1978; Lofland and Stark 1965; see for example Ng's [2002] study of Chinese converts to an American Reformed Church). A number of researchers suggest that conversion is more a process than an isolated event, may have multiple causes, and variable consequences for social behaviour (Lofland and Stark 1965; Rambo 1993). Travisano (1970) defines conversion as involving "drastic changes in life" and "negation of some former identity," a "change of allegiance from one source of authority to another." However, Downton (1980), who studied followers of Guru Maharaj Ji, suggests that conversion and commitment may be evolutionary in their development (see also Long and Hadden 1983; Richardson 1985). Furthermore, much of the theoretical discussion on the subject suffers from an excess of particularism; models of "conversion," its causes and its consequences, are often shaped by the researcher's own experience and the group studied (Rambo 1999).