

The Rise of Christianity

*A SOCIOLOGIST
RECONSIDERS HISTORY*



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In the early 1960s John Lofland and I were the first social scientists to actually go out and watch people convert to a new religious movement (Lofland and Stark 1965). Up to that time, the most popular social scientific explanation of conversion involved the pairing of deprivation with ideological (or theological) appeal. That is, one examined the ideology of a group to see what kinds of deprivation it addressed and then concluded (*mirabile dictu!*) that converts suffered from those deprivations (Glock 1964). As an example of this approach, since Christian Science promised to restore health, its converts must disproportionately be drawn from among those with chronic health problems, or at least those who suffer from hypochondria (Glock 1964). Of course, one could as plausibly argue the reverse, that only people with excellent health could long hold to the Christian Science doctrine that illness was all in the mind.

In any event, Lofland and I were determined to watch people go through the process of conversion and try to discover what really was involved. Moreover, we wanted to watch conversion, not simply activation. That is, we wanted to look at people who were making a major religious shift, as from Christianity to Hinduism, rather than examine how lifelong Christians got themselves born again. The latter is a matter of considerable interest, but it was not our interest at the time.

We also wanted a group that was small enough so that the two of us could provide adequate surveillance, and new enough so that it was in an early and optimistic phase of growth. After sifting through many deviant religious groups in the San Francisco Bay area we came upon precisely what we were looking for—a group of about a dozen young adults who had just moved to San Francisco from Eugene, Oregon. The group was led by Young Oon Kim, a Korean woman who had once been a professor of religion at Ewha University in Seoul. The movement she served was based in Korea, and in January 1959, she arrived in Oregon

to launch a mission to America. Miss² Kim and her young followers were the very first American members of the Unification Church, widely known today as the Moonies.

As Lofland and I settled back to watch people convert to this group, the first thing we discovered was that all of the current members were united by close ties of friendship predating their contact with Miss Kim. Indeed, the first three converts had been young housewives, next-door neighbors who became friends of Miss Kim after she became a lodger with one of them. Subsequently, several of the husbands joined, followed by several of their friends from work. At the time Lofland and I arrived to study them, the group had never succeeded in attracting a stranger.

Lofland and I also found it interesting that although all the converts were quick to describe how their spiritual lives had been empty and desolate prior to their conversion, many claimed they had not been particularly interested in religion before. One man told me, "If anybody had said I was going to join up and become a missionary I would have laughed my head off. I had no use for church at all."

We also found it instructive that during most of her first year in America, Miss Kim had tried to spread her message directly by talks to various groups and by sending out many press releases. Later, in San Francisco the group also tried to attract followers through radio spots and by renting a hall in which to hold public meetings. But these methods yielded nothing. As time passed, Lofland and I were able to observe people actually becoming Moonies. The first several converts were old friends or relatives of members who came from Oregon for a visit. Subsequent converts were people who formed close friendships with one or more members of the group.

We soon realized that of all the people the Moonies encountered in their efforts to spread their faith, the only ones who joined were those *whose interpersonal attachments to members overbalanced their attachments to nonmembers*. In effect, conversion is

not about seeking or embracing an ideology; it is about bringing one's religious behavior into alignment with that of one's friends and family members.

--This is simply an application of the highly respected control theory of deviant behavior (Toby 1957; Hirschi 1969; Stark and Bainbridge 1987; Gottfredson and Hirschi 1990). Rather than asking why people deviate, why they break laws and norms, control theorists ask why anyone ever does conform. Their answer is posed in terms of *stakes in conformity*. People conform when they believe they have more to lose by being detected in deviance than they stand to gain from the deviant act. Some people deviate while others conform because people differ in their stakes in conformity. That is, some people simply have far less to lose than do others. A major stake in conformity lies in our attachments to other people. Most of us conform in order to retain the good opinion of our friends and family. But some people lack attachments. Their rates of deviance are much higher than are those of people with an abundance of attachments.

Becoming a Moonie today is an act of deviance, as was becoming a Christian in the first century. Such conversions violate norms defining legitimate religious affiliations and identities. Lofland and I saw many people who spent some time with the Moonies and expressed considerable interest in their doctrines, but who never joined. In every instance these people had many strong attachments to nonmembers who did not approve of the group. Of persons who did join, many were newcomers to San Francisco whose attachments were all to people far away. As they formed strong friendships with group members, these were not counterbalanced because distant friends and families had no knowledge of the conversion-in-process. In several instances a parent or sibling came to San Francisco intending to intervene after having learned of the conversion. Those who lingered eventually joined up too. Keep in mind that becoming a Moonie may have been regarded as deviant by outsiders, but

it was an act of conformity for those whose most significant attachments were to Moonies.

During the quarter century since Lofland and I first published our conclusion—that attachments lie at the heart of conversion and therefore that conversion tends to proceed along social networks formed by interpersonal attachments—many others have found the same to be true in an immense variety of religious groups all around the world. A recent study based on Dutch data (Kox, Meerus, and 't Hart 1991) cited twenty-five additional empirical studies, all of which supported our initial finding. And that list was far from complete.

Although several other factors are also involved in the conversion process, the central sociological proposition about conversion is this: *Conversion to new, deviant religious groups occurs when, other things being equal, people have or develop stronger attachments to members of the group than they have to nonmembers* (Stark 1992).

Data based on records kept by a Mormon mission president give powerful support to this proposition. When missionaries make cold calls, knock on the doors of strangers, this eventually leads to a conversion once out of a thousand calls. However, when missionaries make their first contact with a person in the home of a Mormon friend or relative of that person, this results in conversion 50 percent of the time (Stark and Bainbridge 1985).

A variation on the network proposition about conversion is that successful founders of new faiths typically turn first to those with whom they already have strong attachments. That is, they recruit their first followers from among their family and close friends. Thus Muhammad's first convert was his wife Khadijah; the second was his cousin Ali, followed by his servant Zeyd and then his old friend Abu Bakr. On April 6, 1830, the Mormons were founded by Joseph Smith, his brothers Hyrum and Samuel, and Joseph Smith's friends Oliver Cowdery and David and Peter Whitmer. The rule extends to Jesus too, since it appears that he began with his brothers and mother.

A second aspect of conversion is that people who are deeply committed to any particular faith do not go out and join some other faith. Thus Mormon missionaries who called upon the Moonies were immune, despite forming warm relationships with several members. Indeed, the Moonie who previously had "no use for church at all" was more typical. Converts were not former atheists, but they were essentially unchurched and many had not paid any particular attention to religious questions. Thus the Moonies quickly learned that they were wasting their time at church socials or frequenting denominational student centers. They did far better in places where they came in contact with the uncommitted. This finding has received substantial support from subsequent research. Converts to new religious movements are overwhelmingly from relatively irreligious backgrounds. The majority of converts to modern American cult movements report that their parents had no religious affiliation (Stark and Bainbridge 1985). Let me state this as a theoretical proposition: *New religious movements mainly draw their converts from the ranks of the religiously inactive and discontented, and those affiliated with the most accommodated (worldly) religious communities.*

Had we not gone out and watched people as they converted, we might have missed this point entirely, because when people retrospectively describe their conversions, they tend to put the stress on theology. When asked why they converted, Moonies invariably noted the irresistible appeal of the Divine Principles (the group's scripture), suggesting that only the blind could reject such obvious and powerful truths. In making these claims converts implied (and often stated) that their path to conversion was the end product of a search for faith. But Lofland and I knew better because we had met them well before they had learned to appreciate the doctrines, before they had learned how to testify to their faith, back when they were not seeking faith at all. Indeed, we could remember when most of them regarded the religious beliefs of their new set of friends as quite odd. I recall one who told me that he was puzzled that such nice

people could get so worked up about "some guy in Korea" who claimed to be the Lord of the Second Advent. Then, one day, he got worked up about this guy too. I suggest that this is also how people in the first century got themselves worked up about someone who claimed to be the Lord of the First Advent. Robin Lane Fox suggests the same thing: "Above all we should give weight to the presence and influence of friends. It is a force which so often escapes the record, but it gives shape to everyone's personal life. One friend might bring another to the faith. . . . When a person turned to God, he found others, new 'brethren,' who were sharing the same path" (1987:316). Peter Brown has expressed similar views: "Ties of family, marriages, and loyalties to heads of households had been the most effective means of recruiting members of the church, and had maintained the continued adherence of the average Christian to the new cult" (1988:90).

The basis for successful conversionist movements is growth through social networks, through a *structure of direct and intimate interpersonal attachments*. Most new religious movements fail because they quickly become closed, or semiclosed networks. That is, they fail to keep forming and sustaining attachments to outsiders and thereby lose the capacity to grow. Successful movements discover techniques for remaining open networks, able to reach out and into new adjacent social networks. And herein lies the capacity of movements to sustain exponential rates of growth over a long period of time.

Some readers may suspect that the rapid rise in the absolute number of new Christians between 250 and 350 would require mass conversions even though the rate of conversion remained constant at 40 percent per decade. Admittedly, exponential growth curves are counterintuitive and easily seem incredible. Nevertheless, the *dynamics of the conversion process* are not changed even as the absolute numbers reach a rapid growth stage along an exponential curve. The reason is that as movements grow, their social surface expands proportionately. That

is, each new member expands the size of the network of attachments between the group and potential converts. As noted above, however, this occurs *only* if the group constitutes an *open network*. Thus if we are to better understand and explain the rise of Christianity, we must discover how the early Christians maintained open networks—for it would seem certain that they did. This last remark sets the stage for a brief discussion of the appropriate scope of social scientific theories and whether it is possible even to apply propositions developed in one time and place to other eras and cultures.

ON SCIENTIFIC GENERALIZATION

Many historians believe that cultures and eras verge on the unique. Thus in his very thoughtful response to my use of the network theory of conversion to discuss the success of the mission to the Jews (see chapter 3), Ronald F. Hock noted that I seem to think that networks, for example, are not "all that different from period to period, society to society" (1986:2–3). He then pointed out that

the networks utilized by Mormons are those consisting of a member's family, relatives, and friends, but are ancient networks the same? Ancient cities are not modern ones, and ancient networks that were centered in aristocratic households included more than family and friends: domestic slaves, freedmen, and perhaps parasites, teachers, athletic trainers, and travelers. In addition, urban life was lived more in public, so that recruitment could proceed along more extensive and complex networks than we find among Mormons in our more nuclear and anonymous cities and suburbs.

I am certain that Hock is correct, but I am unrepentant. What he is noting are details that might tell us how to discover networks should we be transported to ancient Antioch, but