

Title: Choosing and leaving a spiritual community. Paths of change and personal development

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Introduction

This paper is intended to make a contribution to the psychological study of the process of joining and leaving minority religious and spiritual groups, which fall under the typology of New Religious Movements. In the expression "New Religious Movements," the adjective "new" is not to be understood so much in its "temporal" sense as in its meaning of "different" from the majority religion in a given context. The term "movement" indicates an aspect common to these aggregative forms, which is that of their dynamism and transformative capacity, while the adjective "religious" should be understood in its more general connotation that refers to those systems of thought that manage to provide answers to the ultimate questions about the origin and destiny of the human person, regardless of whether there is a belief in a personal God in them (Introvigne and Zoccatelli, 2016). Finally, in these groups the religious or spiritual connotation gives rise to systems of thought shared by a number of people that result in the formation of relatively stable organizations with defined and recognizable structure and purpose. Since some of these organizations are sometimes included among "sects" (cults), a term used in a criminological sense in the media, as a result, the decision to affiliate with one could also be interpreted differently than within mainline religious organizations. This paper aims to explore this issue.

Objective

The objective is to develop an interpretive hypothesis of the process of affiliation/disaffiliation with these groups, which is based on data obtained through field research. The hypothesis of this work is that the process in question is, on the one hand, the product of the internal dynamisms and needs that the individual feels when he or she is in the situation of "search for meaning," and, on the other hand, the acceptance of the proposal to join organizations that present certain characteristics, capable of satisfying his or her needs and aspirations. The synoptic examination of a number of experiences made it possible to identify some common factors and constructs useful for understanding the genesis and outcomes of religious choice change.

Approach and Methodology

The perspective chosen to examine, interpret and evaluate the data collected is that of the psychology of religion, which aims to observe the psychic act in its concrete intentional exercise (Milanesi and Aletti 1973). The chosen methodology is, therefore, one that studies the individual's religious conduct starting from his or her experience and autobiographical reconstruction, in relation to the particular type of religiosity or spirituality to which he or she adheres or decides to abandon. This methodology is also important to safeguard the neutrality of the psychologist when proposing psychological data and interpretations of religious conduct (Vergote 1993).

One of the most suitable instruments, in relation to these purposes, is the interview, which is able to reach high levels of depth, going so far as to detect the reasons for behavior and the links between an individual's

behaviors and beliefs. This instrument was used with 25 adult or young-adult subjects, of both sexes, in order to detect the meanings they attach to their experience, based on their autobiographical reconstructions. The subjects are affiliated with and/or disaffiliated from these six movements: Soka Gakkai Italian Buddhist Institute, Damanhur, Church of Scientology, Hare Krishna, Jehovah's Witnesses, and Archeosophical Association.

A synoptic examination of the interviews revealed, despite the diversity of the groups considered, some common elements, which seem to confirm the findings of a large body of research in the field of psychology. In particular, the data collected were interpreted in light of the multidisciplinary model developed for the study of the affiliation/disaffiliation process, by Lewis Rambo, and of other contributions and insights, including in the sociological field (Bromley 2004; Introvigne 2004; Streib et al. 2009, 2014; Rambo 1993; Rambo and Bauman 2012; Rambo and Haar Farris 2012; Rambo and Farhadian 2014; Wright, 2014).

Target audience

The possible recipients of this work are many, starting with all those who are personally, culturally, and socially interested in deepening their scientific understanding of a complex phenomenon, such as the one that is the subject of this work, which involves issues related to personal and family dynamics aroused by the change in religious choice, family and social conflicts, and, more generally, human rights, personal and associational freedoms. The potentially interested audience is broad, including students, teachers, trainers, members of institutions, jurists, etc.

Privileged target audiences are: researchers interested in expanding this field of study, community psychologists and all those in society involved in primary prevention both in the community (as counseling and training), in small groups (as dissemination of skills to cope with foreseeable crises) and secondary (referring to early interventions implemented on individuals considered "at risk" or at the first onset of symptoms of psychological distress), professionals engaged in psychological counseling for whom understanding the phenomenon in relation to the treatment of all forms of psychological distress and mediation in cases of family and social conflicts is essential.

Structure: The text is divided into two parts, devoted to Affiliation and Disaffiliation from the groups named above. While the second part is entirely unpublished, in the first part some already published studies are systematized and synthesized in an organic and logical way, to which other data collected but not yet published will be added.

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Curriculum and Publications

Raffaella Di Marzio holds a degree in Psychology from La Sapienza University and the Pontifical Salesian University in Rome, a degree in Historical Religious Sciences from the Faculty of Letters and Philosophy at La Sapienza University in Rome, and a Magisterium in Religious Sciences from the Pontifical Lateran University. He received his Doctorate in Psychology from the Salesian Pontifical University with a thesis entitled "Affiliation and Disaffiliation from the New Religious Movements. Presentation and critical analysis of the integrated model of Rambo et al."

She has been a lecturer in the Psychology of Religion course at the Faculty of Education "Auxilium" in Rome. She is currently a lecturer at the Level I Master's degree program in: Terrorism, Prevention of Subversive Radicalization, Security and Cybersecurity. Policies for interfaith and intercultural integration and deradicalization (a.y. 2021/2022). She has been a lecturer at the Level I Master's Degree Course in Prevention of Terrorism Radicalization and Policies for Interreligious and Intercultural Integration (a.y. 2017-2018), Level II Master's Degree Course in Terrorism, Prevention of Radicalization and Interreligious and Intercultural Integration (a.y. 2019-2020), and the Advanced Training Course in Immigration and Interreligious and Intercultural Integration sponsored by PRIMED and MIUR, organized by the Department of Law, University of Bari Aldo Moro. She has been a lecturer at the Level I Master's degree sponsored by the Adventist Institute of Florence on the topic: Religious Freedom, Freedom of Conscience, Rights and Geopolitics of Religions (a.y. 2020/2021). She was a member of the Board of Directors of the Italian Society for the Psychology of Religion (SIPR) from 2005 to 2017, of which she is currently a member. Founder and Director of the Freedom of Religion Belief and Consciousness Study Center (LIREC).

She has collaborated and is currently collaborating on and updating three encyclopedic projects:

- Introvigne Massimo, and PierLuigi Zoccatelli (under the direction of). 2013. Encyclopedia of religions in Italy. Elledici, Turin.

- Introvigne, Massimo, and PierLuigi Zoccatelli (under the direction of). 2020. Religions in Italy.
- Melton, Gordon J., and Martin Baumann. 2010. Religions of the World: A Comprehensive Encyclopedia of Beliefs and Practices. 6 vols. ABC-Clio, Santa Barbara (California).
- Bromley, David G. (ed.). 2018. World Religions and Spirituality Project (WRSP). Virginia Commonwealth University.

She is author and coauthor of the following texts:

- Di Marzio, Raffaella, and Massimo Introvigne. 2008. ABC of the New Religious Movements. St. Paul's Editions, Turin.
- Di Marzio, Raffaella. 2010. New religions and sects. Psychology in the face of new forms of worship. Edizioni Scientifiche Ma.Gi, Rome.
- Di Marzio, Raffaella. 2016. New Religious Movements. An educational challenge. Passioneducative, Benevento.
- Di Marzio, Raffaella. 2020. Studying the Soka Gakkai: Five Texts, edited by PierLuigi Zoccatelli, Centro Studi sulle Nuove Religioni, Turin.

He has published more than one hundred articles in many journals including Psychology of Religion e-journal and The Journal of CESNUR.

All publications: <http://dimarzio.info/it/articoli/chi-sono/400-pubblicazioni2.html>