

Being Jehovah's Witnesses: Living in the World Without Being Part of It

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ABSTRACT: This paper aims at furnishing some useful interpretative keys to understand, on the one hand, the decision to become Jehovah's Witnesses and, on the other, the consolidation of this choice through identification with an organization that stands in a unique position within society. The chosen reference framework is the multi-disciplinary model, which Lewis Rambo and others developed to study the conversion/affiliation process, within the reference framework of the psychology of religion. Through bibliographical research, it was possible to single out studies that explore these converts' characteristics and the kind of relationship-identification that forms between each member of Jehovah's Witnesses and the religion they have affiliated with. Differently from what some have argued, becoming Jehovah's Witnesses does not mean to "isolate" oneself or oppose the world, but rather to relate to the world as evangelizers, who aim to motivate those "on the outside" to share their doctrine, intended as a possible way to salvation for anyone who accepts it.

KEYWORDS: Jehovah's Witnesses, Religion/Affiliation, Religious Conversion, Conversion: Psychological Models, Lewis Rambo.

Approach and Reference Framework

The conversion process of those who decide to become Jehovah's Witnesses can be understood by virtue of dynamics that have been extensively studied by the psychology of religion, which has applied psychological constructs and processes—such as cognitive reformulation, attribution, coping, biographical reconstruction, transformation of self, encapsulation—to the study of conversion processes (Hood et al. 2009). Rambo's holistic model (1993), which is the reference framework of this paper, has the merit of valorizing previous scholarly literature, thus giving new impetus to the development of a multi-disciplinary approach to research on conversion (Rambo and Bauman 2012; Rambo and Haar

Farris 2012; Rambo and Farhadian 2014). Within the ample bibliography centered on Jehovah's Witnesses, the results of previous studies exploring the characteristics of these converts and the kind of relationship that develops between them and the organization have been examined in view of the chosen model. Further, in examining the seventh stage of the model—the one concerning the *consequences* of conversion—, special attention has been given to the way Jehovah's Witnesses relate to society; an aspect that is strictly connected with the doctrine and practice of this religion. Though not being “of” the world, yet they live and work “in” the world (*John* 17:14). The implications of this aspect will be better analyzed later.

The Conversion of Jehovah's Witnesses in View of the Model by Rambo et al.

Although Jehovah's Witnesses form a religion well-rooted in the social fabric, and there are families that have been following it for several generations, the focus of this paper is on the conversion of adults who used to have other religious ideas or were nonbelievers. Rambo's model approaches the study of the conversion process by outlining seven stages. The first four refer to the first phase of conversion: the potential convert's personal and social *context*; the *crisis*, that is, a condition of discomfort or dissatisfaction preceding conversion; the *quest*, namely, an action undertaken as an attempt to overcome dissatisfaction or fill one's “emptiness”; and, finally, the *encounter*, that is, the contact with a missionary who presents and proposes a new spiritual way. The last three stages, *interaction*, *commitment*, and *consequences* refer to the phase in which conversion consolidates, and to the personal and social consequences deriving from it (Rambo 1993).

The “Context,” “Crisis,” and “Quest” Stages

In this phase, the role of some factors that are crucial to the inception of the conversion process emerges, such as the social context, one's inclinations and motivational frame that act dynamically to favor adherence to such a religious organization as the Jehovah's Witnesses, which stands out from other organizations because of its peculiar doctrines and practices.

Context, the first stage of Rambo's model, plays a crucial role, because it is the environment in which the conversion process takes place. To understand better what influence is exerted by the *context*, the author distinguishes the environment in general (macro-context) from the micro-context, that is, the environment most closely related to an individual: family, friends, ethnic group, religious community, and neighborhood (Rambo 1993, 21–2). Particularly, the results of further exploratory research carried out by the writer of this paper on members of other religious groups (Di Marzio 2016a, 2020a, 2020b) reveal that the context exerting the greatest influence on one's choice to convert, for very diverse reasons, is the convert's family environment.

An important contribution to this research field is the study by Namini and Murken (2008), which puts in relation precocious family experiences and coping in religious affiliation (Di Marzio 2016b). There is a vast array of studies on the relationship between affiliation and coping, the latter term meaning the whole of cognitive and behavioral strategies an individual enacts to cope with a stressful situation. The role of faith in connection with coping was studied by Pargament, who views religion as an example of those orientation systems that are useful in assessing stressful situations, and facing them by a concrete application of religious beliefs to the specific situation experienced by the believer (Pargament 1997, 300–8).

From a longitudinal study started in 2003, Namini and Murken extracted data relating to three religious groups that were considered somewhat deviant in Germany, so much so that conversion to one of them was also commonly considered “deviant.” Concerning Jehovah's Witnesses, often labeled a “cult,” the authors focus on the debate going on in Germany at that time as to whether or not this organization was due the same rights as the Roman Catholic Church and the Lutheran Church enjoyed. The issue was solved in 2006, when Jehovah's Witnesses were officially recognized as a “corporation under public law” (Namini and Murken 2008, 88).

Examined individuals had recently shown interest in one of the three selected groups, or they had become members less than two years earlier: twenty-one members of a Pentecostal Church belonging to the Bund Freikirchlicher Pfingstgemeinden (BFP), twenty-eight members of the New Apostolic Church, and twenty-two Jehovah's Witnesses (Namini and Murken 2008, 88–90). Based on former research results, which had shown that certain religious groups

perfectly fit some characteristics of those affiliating (for example: Poling and Kenney 1986), the authors aimed to see if this correspondence occurs not just for what generally concerns the convert's needs, but also in conjunction with three specific variables related to childhood and juvenile experiences, which could affect one's choice to affiliate with a given group: the makeup of one's family of origin, particularly the loss of one or both parents; the number of siblings; and their order of birth.

As concerns the first variable—the loss of one or both parents—the authors found that a high percentage of those who converted to two out of the three examined groups, the Apostolic Church and Jehovah's Witnesses, had lost their father in childhood or when they were young. From a psychological viewpoint, this fact would corroborate the hypothesis, worked out in the "Attachment Theory" context, that religion, and especially faith in a personal God, have a compensative function as an "alternative support figure" for lost attachment-related figures (Kirkpatrick 1992). New Apostolic Church teachings exalt the figure of God the Father, who is loving and merciful toward his children, by means of a preaching filled with affective metaphors. This community has the highest percentage of members who lost their father in childhood (43%), four times higher than that of the German population; this one, instead, coincides with the percentage observed in the Pentecostal community (10%), whereas Jehovah's Witnesses stand in an intermediate position between those two organizations (23%). God is viewed as a loving Father among Jehovah's Witnesses as well, but differently from the New Apostolic Church: Jehovah is also a teacher; his role as an authority is emphasized to a greater extent, as are the cognitive elements and doctrinal knowledge (Namini and Murken 2008, 94).

As concerns the variable related to the presence of siblings in the families of converts to the three groups, it was found that most individuals came from large families. This figure refers above all to Jehovah's Witnesses, and the authors interpreted it as a situation that could predispose them from infancy to accept and conform to group standards, thereby facilitating adaptation to a community like that of Jehovah's Witnesses, whose doctrines and religious practices call for one's conforming to elders' authority, and the observance of rules set out on the basis of Scriptural teaching. Based on the results of this research, the authors' conclusions amount to a confirmation of their hypothesis: coping aspects connected with the loss of one's father and with the number of siblings may be

more important than others in favoring the choice to affiliate with a certain religious group.

In his argument concerning the second and third stages of the model, *crisis* and *quest*, Rambo integrates the psychological approach that has gained the greatest consensus among scholars, which approach considers religion as a system of meaning that responds to basic needs (Paloutzian 2014). As to the *quest* stage, the author highlights the importance of “motivational structures,” which help understand to what extent an individual is active in pursuing religious change or is vulnerable to proselytism. He starts his argument by using Epstein’s theory, called Cognitive-Experiential Self-Theory of Personality (CEST), which identifies four basic motivations for human action: the need to experience pleasure and avoid pain; the need for a conceptual system; the need to enhance self-esteem; and the need to establish and maintain relationships (Epstein 1985).

Rambo applies these needs to religious conversion, but the author adds two more that he believes were disregarded in scientific literature: power and transcendence. As concerns the latter, by referring to well-established theories on developmental psychology and other studies on how one’s longing for transcendence impacts one’s choice to convert, he posits that a human being’s tendency to develop through stages of cognitive and moral maturation proves that there is an innate longing for transcendence, which would move humans to go beyond their own developmental stage and, consequently, to convert (Rambo 1993, 63-4).

This configuration seems to be confirmed by the results of a study by Jindra, which included some Jehovah’s Witnesses (Jindra 2008). The author proved that there is a relationship between the transformations in the developmental stages of religious judgment and the experiences of conversion or apostasy. By extracting from an ampler study the data regarding interviews with four Jehovah’s Witnesses, the author includes these individuals under a category that also comprises persons who converted to Islam and to other Christian groups, since they held in common their having chosen religious groups that are characterized by strict moral standards and a complex doctrinal system.

Interviews with Jehovah’s Witnesses featured very similar descriptions of a family context with strict religious rules that they had accepted forcibly and whose sense they did not comprehend. Subsequently, they had converted to a group that

equally demanded the observance of restrictive religious standards whose sense and value, however, they came to understand fully. According to Jindra, the four cases examined in this study display individual transformations that can be referred to Oser's theory on the development of religious judgment (Oser 1991), and to Fowler's theory on the developmental stages of faith (Fowler 1981).

Particularly, interviewee "Mr. Smith" reported having been raised in the Catholic Church and having had an unstable childhood because his family was often on the move. Whenever he had doubts on what the nuns taught him, he asked questions that remained unanswered. For example, when he inquired about the Trinity, a nun answered that once in Heaven, he will understand that mystery. When he was 21 years old, by now married, he opened the door to one of Jehovah's Witnesses: during his meetings with the preacher, he was able to grasp many truths contained in the Bible and decided to accept and share a clear and simple teaching that helped him overcome his feeling of inadequacy. As a youth, he had asked himself many questions on how to conduct oneself during engagement, in sexual matters, and in the family, but he had found clear answers only in Watch Tower Society literature; so he had successfully got rid of the uncertainties he felt when faced with important decisions. The very moment he resolved to become one of Jehovah's Witnesses was when he learned that God has a name, which is Jehovah. At 25, after he quit smoking, he became part of the religious community.

In this as well as in other cases, contrary to what the author had posited, the intense and effort-demanding study required of the converts had not affected the individuals negatively. On the contrary, it was these activities that had helped them to cope with and overcome the uncertainty and the chaos that, for very diverse reasons, they were experiencing in their life. Another element in Mr. Smith's reconstruction is the disappointment he had felt as a child by observing his parents' inconsistent behavior, as they were practicing Catholics only when attending Mass on Sundays (Jindra 2008, 208-11). Dissatisfaction with the previous religious experience can frequently be found in other studies as well (for example: Dobbelaere and Wilson 1980, 102).

In her conclusions, Jindra states that an examination of data enabled her to confirm the close relationship between transformations in religious judgment and the experience of conversion, through which an individual unwittingly shifts from one stage to the other, at times even radically modifying their way of relating to

God, to the world, and to moral standards. A very similar frame can be observed in a subsequent study (Jindra 2014), which examines interviews with nine Jehovah's Witnesses, all of them from a generally disorganized family, social, and cultural background that fostered their search for a more close-knit and theologically more structured group, often with the purpose of having a religious experience in stark contrast to the former one. For these peculiar characteristics, the author views conversions to the religion of Jehovah's Witnesses as a particularly interesting typology, since it can furnish useful information on the causes for religious continuity or discontinuity, namely, why some individuals convert by remaining within the religion in which they were raised, but in a different and more informed manner, while others decide to leave and embrace another one (Jindra 2014, 68–80).

The latter is the case of another interviewee, “Carlo Johnson,” who defines his own life before becoming a Witness as “chaotic and disoriented”: the choice to become a Witness was motivated by his knowing to be ignorant in religious matters due to his distant parents, who gave him a poor Catholic education. During his Bible study with a friend who was a preacher, he fully understood previous beliefs such as God's existence, and the fact that Jesus is God's Son but is separate from Him. Carlo also appreciated the educational and practical framework of this Bible-based school and stated that the study helped him understand that “the key to gaining [everlasting] life is to have knowledge” (Jindra 2014, 99).

Jindra underscores how this convert's reconstruction, similarly to the reconstruction of other Witnesses, is expressed by the language and categories set out in the organization's teachings, an aspect that was brought out in former studies (Beckford 1978, 251). Moreover, Jindra's interviews confirm the results of two studies focusing on the reasons for the success of Jehovah's Witnesses in Japan (Wilson 1977) and in Belgium (Dobbelaere and Wilson 1980).

In the first case, Bryan Wilson (1926–2004) identifies the characteristics of Japan, a context featuring uncertainty on issues such as marriage and the raising of children, and where an individual cannot rely on any stable authority, as one factor that favored the success of Jehovah's Witnesses, who, on the contrary, offer clear rules issued by an appointed authority (Wilson 1977). In the case of Belgium, a Catholic majority country, the authors start from the 1930s, when among converts there were many immigrants or people who felt isolated because

they had recently moved there from other places. Becoming Jehovah's Witnesses enabled these ones to overcome isolation, and find a reference community more welcoming and supportive than the Protestant communities or the Catholic Church, from which the converts came (Dobbelaere and Wilson 1980, 108).

"Encounter" Stage

In the fourth stage, the potential convert comes into contact with the missionary, with whom an interpersonal relationship is formed: the missionary "initiates" the potential convert, and furnishes due support in approaching the group. In Jehovah's Witnesses' conversions, some components of the missionary strategy identified by Rambo can be found:

1. The *degree* of proselytizing is set as a continuum, which extends from a maximum of proselytizing activities, as in Jehovah's Witnesses, to a minimum, as in Judaism and Hinduism (Rambo 1993, 79). Groups that are active on the continuum to a maximum degree exert themselves by investing many resources to recruit and keep members within the organization, and they stimulate everyone to spread the doctrine, with the purpose of achieving a large number of conversions. These movements have a vast array of publications designed to train missionaries, where indispensable information is found regarding the nature of conversion, the motives a missionary should cultivate, and the method to be used in proselytizing (Barrett 1988).

2. The *strategic style* can be of two kinds, which can also be placed on the extreme ends of a continuum: diffuse or system-oriented and concentrated or personalistic (Heise 1967). The latter especially refers to individuals who, for different reasons, are not fully integrated in their social context, and feel the need for a group to adhere to and belong with. These individuals are often the first ones to convert to a new religion (Rambo 1993, 79), as was also revealed in the above-mentioned studies (Wilson 1977; Dobbelaere and Wilson 1980; Jindra 2014).

3. The *mode of contact*. Snow et al. (1980) identify two modes of contact: the first one mediated by public and private communication channels, the other one favoring face-to-face encounters between the individual and the missionary, who invites the potential convert to take part in meeting sessions or offers a home study. The latter is the mode whereby Jehovah's Witnesses stand out, even

though other types of communication channels are used, and do have a bearing on the mission's positive outcome. As concerns the missionary's typology, numerous studies prove that social networks can facilitate conversion even in cases of more cognitively motivated conversions such as the ones characterizing affiliation with Jehovah's Witnesses. To give just one example: in a study on nine Belgian congregations, Dobbelaere and Wilson found that 60% of the individuals had become Jehovah's Witnesses because of a relative's proselytizing work (Dobbelaere and Wilson 1980, 101).

4. The *benefits of conversion*: the three types of benefit that Rambo identifies at a general level also appear in the experiences of Jehovah's Witnesses.

At a *cognitive* level, the first category of benefits is strictly connected with learning the specific language used by the missionary to facilitate the potential converts' assimilation of the new doctrinal system, through which they will be able to attribute to their own lives a definite sense and purpose that will become an essential part of their personal identity. In the case of Jehovah's Witnesses, the stress placed on the study and practice of Bible precepts makes "language" a predominant aspect during the conversion process in comparison with other religious groups (Rambo 1993, 81–6; Beckford 1978, 254–55).

The second category—*emotional* benefits—, though present to some extent, is not particularly emphasized in Jehovah's Witnesses' reconstructions, and it usually refers to the positive effects an individual has experienced after beginning to associate with the religious community, where he has found "friendship" and "solidarity" (Jindra 2014).

Nevertheless, psychological research on "emotion regulation strategies" can be useful in scrutinizing this aspect. Single individuals cope with their own emotional reactions by using what psychology calls "emotion regulation strategies," which come under the ampler theoretical constructs on the regulation and control of Self and are capable of modifying one's and others' emotional experience in a manner that is flexible and adaptable to the different situations (Gross 1998). By applying this construct to religious organizations, it can be argued that a group-specific religious culture, conveyed through doctrine and community life, may be defined and studied also as a peculiar type of emotional environment (Belzen 2015). An interesting study by Ringnes and Ulland (2015) compared the "emotional culture" among Jehovah's Witnesses

and the Toronto Airport Christian Fellowship (TACF). The primary goal among Christians from the Toronto group was to arouse strong emotions in the believers, while among the Witnesses moderation and emotion control were encouraged. The authors concluded that the way the leadership regulates emotions in a religious group heavily impacts the way members regulate their own emotions, and as highlighted earlier when examining the above-mentioned studies, the way they reconstruct their conversion experience.

A further, important contribution in this field is a study on twenty-nine Jehovah's Witnesses active in Norway. The researchers asked the following question: Which group-based emotion regulation strategies are offered to Jehovah's Witnesses' members in this group culture? From a thematic analysis of the interviews, two emotion regulation strategies emerged: social sharing and cognitive reappraisal, which are strictly connected to each other. This study also made it possible to introduce a new concept called "emotional forecasting": the relevance an individual ascribes to possible future prospects is an important emotion regulator *here and now* (Ringnes et al. 2017, 331).

The authors identified three emotion regulation strategies employed by the Witnesses: the conviction of belonging with eternity, the certainty of surviving death, and happiness. To give just one example: faith in the coming Armageddon, along with the promise of future happiness, is an important emotional resource that is capable of affecting the believers' existence at present times, when they are to cope with daily troubles and any needed sacrifices. Furthermore, emotional strategies facilitate conversion because they answer the individuals' existential questions, stabilize their acquired identity, and strengthen the very existence of the community, since the group's success also depends on the degree to which members regulate their own emotions to serve collective ends. When a group's higher goal is that of controlling one's instincts with objectives to achieve in the long term, and at a superior level, religious persons focus on the way things should be in the future, consequently attributing less importance to the immediate satisfaction of one's desires. All Witnesses interviewees stated that they conducted their lives keeping the awaited transcendental future in constant focus. This is an interesting fact that helps understand the psychological implications of the end-of-the-world belief shared by all Christians, albeit with different nuances of meaning (Ringnes et al. 2017).

The third category of benefits is the one that Needleman calls *new ways of life*

(Needleman 1970, 16–8). In their reconstructions, Jehovah's Witnesses often state that before converting, they had a desire to attain human and spiritual maturation, to learn how to pray, meditate, and understand the Holy Scriptures. They attained this aspiration when they became Jehovah's Witnesses (Jindra 2008; 2014; Dobbelaere and Wilson 1980; Beckford 1978, 255–56).

"Interaction" and "Commitment" Stages

Jehovah's Witnesses' missionary work also has a "return" effect, in that such a commitment successfully consolidates the preacher's faith, who through his "door-to-door" activity feels increasingly to be an active member of the community he has affiliated with (Introvigne 2015, 129). This consideration allows us to connect the fourth stage of Rambo's model, *encounter*, with the three subsequent ones, in which the feeling of belonging and the decision to make a steady commitment consolidate with time.

In Jehovah's Witnesses' conversions, the stages Rambo calls *interaction* and *commitment* cannot easily be distinguished. After encountering the preacher and accepting an invitation to study the Bible, the stage Rambo calls *interaction*—which converts to other groups experience as a time of transition and uncertainty (Di Marzio 2016a; 2020a; 2020b)—shapes up indeed as a more or less long phase of consolidation of the conversion. This occurs thanks to the activities that a potential convert is invited to carry out: Bible study, weekly meeting attendance, and the "door-to-door" mission together with other Witnesses. The interviewees' accounts show that active involvement seems to have played an important role in creating the decision and consolidating the conversion process, which fact easily fits into the context of social constructivism theory (Berger and Luckmann 1966), whose tenet is that the consolidation of a new body of knowledge occurs through its practical application and through interaction with the reference community.

Throughout the *interaction* and *commitment* stages, individuals change their relationships, learn new doctrines, and get involved in rituals that enhance their sense of belonging. Interiorization and integration of these changes lead to a biographical reconstruction of transformed self (Hood et al. 2009, 232) and to taking on a new role, in full awareness of the consequences and responsibilities

that come with it, which are shared with the entire religious community (Rambo 1993, 102–41).

In particular, one of the elements marking the *commitment* stage is, according to Rambo, the “testimony,” that is, the way a convert recounts the inward path that led them to the decision of affiliating. Testimony comprises two mutually interacting processes: language transformation and biographical reconstruction (Rambo 1993, 137–39). As regards this theme, the author mentions Beckford’s study on Jehovah’s Witnesses’ conversions, which highlighted that religious groups may request individuals to learn to recount their own conversions so as to strengthen the group as a whole. Based on other testimonies they listen to, the converts learn what is expected from their account and, over time, they begin to see their own life and experiences within that specific reference framework, eventually turning, in a variable time span, into new persons.

For instance, Beckford observed that Jehovah’s Witnesses have a peculiar way of telling about their conversion: unlike the Evangelicals, they do not report a deep sense of sin, of crisis, and of surrender to Christ, but rather an experience of coming to know and discovering the truth, intended as a conquest achieved through the study and work carried out within the organization. It is a gradual process of assimilation of Bible truths as are conveyed according to the appointed authority’s interpretation. In this context, converts are seekers of truth who put themselves at the organization’s service to disseminate its literature and publish God’s will by bearing witness to and announcing it. Further, the author underscores that throughout his observations of the movement, both the organization and the kind of conversion accounts changed over time, since both align to transformations in doctrine (Beckford 1978, 253–58).

Doctrine, above all as concerns Bible interpretation, is guarded and conveyed to the believers by an appointed authority:

today’s Jehovah’s Witnesses hold that the “wise and trustworthy servant” appointed to guarantee the correct interpretation of God’s Word and to provide “spiritual food” to the believers is not a physical person, and not even the whole of the “anointed ones” present on earth, but it is the Governing Body, whose members are anyways all part of the “anointed” (Introvigne 2015, 110).

This aspect, that is, the decisive role of the Governing Body in developing the interpretive strategies that guide the believers in Bible reading, moved some researchers to apply to the Jehovah’s Witnesses’ organization Stanley Fish’s

theory on “interpretive communities” (Fish 1980). An example of these studies is the one by Gilmour, who, based on Fish’s theory, published an in-depth analysis of a commentary edited by the Watch Tower Society and entitled *Revelation—Its Grand Climax At Hand!* (Gilmour 2006).

In the *commitment* stage, the “rituals,” which in the case of Jehovah’s Witnesses take place in religious ceremonies through songs, the study of Scriptures, and Bible talks, take on a strong religious and unitive connotation. In particular, besides the annual Memorial of Jesus’ death, especial relevance is acquired by the rite of baptism, a personal choice one makes after a variable time span (months or years). Before getting baptized, Witnesses must follow a path through which they repent of their sins and begin a “turn-around” process, meaning that they commit themselves to changing their way of life to “dedicate” themselves “to Jehovah,” in prayer and worship, and learn to know Jehovah and to speak about him to their relatives or friends. To get baptized means to show others that “you really want to be God’s friend and to serve him (*Psalms* 40:7, 8)” (*What Can the Bible Teach Us?* 2015, 185–96).

According to Rambo, the *commitment* stage also has an inner facet, which he calls “surrender.” It is one of the aspects of the conversion process that is most difficult to understand, because it is the moment when converts decide to abandon the past and change their lives for good. In the phenomenology of this process, the author identifies five elements that can also be found, to some extent, in those who decide to become Jehovah’s Witnesses:

— The *desire to surrender* the past and any behavior that run contrary to Bible morals is a prerequisite for accepting the new member, for whom long-converted Jehovah’s Witnesses are examples to imitate, as their life testifies the positive and lasting effects of their choice (Rambo 1993, 133–34).

— The *inner conflict* between a desire to start a new life imbued with transcendence and the fear that, by converting, they will lose some liberties. This aspect is more difficult to detect in the individuals’ biographical reconstructions, as in describing their conversion they hardly record the inner conflict accompanying it; also because, by the time they render their testimony, that stage is completely over (Rambo 1993, 134–35).

— The *relief and liberation* following conversion are defined in different manners (Rambo 1993, 135–36). Galanter describes a similar process when

speaking of a “relief effect” the individual experiences upon deciding to affiliate with a given group (Galanter 1999, 81–3). In relation to Mr. Smith’s and Carlo Johnson’s testimonies collected by Jindra, certainty about the existence of Jehovah God and knowledge of his name and of the truths revealed in the Bible strengthen faith and give hope of a happier and restored future. At this stage, converts feel ready to face sacrifices and challenges that previously seemed insuperable.

— The *support of the faith community* helping the new converts to confirm their decision and overcome possible crises (Rambo 1993, 136–37). This factor emerges frequently in testimonies: to many individuals, becoming Jehovah’s Witnesses meant for the first time to feel part of a spiritual fellowship, an aspect that was totally nonexistent in previous religious experiences (Dobbelaere and Wilson 1980, 108; Jindra 2014).

Rambo concludes by underscoring the “fragility of surrender”: the decision to convert is not immune from crises of variable gravity; for this reason, it requires continual re-confirmation and reenactment (Rambo 1993, 133).

“Consequences” Stage

Rambo leaves to the seventh stage, *consequences*, his observations on the psychological appraisal of conversion effects (Rambo 1993, 142–64). There is a significant literature exploring this aspect in connection with new religious movements in general, and specifically referring to movements that anti-cult groups and hostile former members consider “dangerous” and label as “cults,” among which Jehovah’s Witnesses are often included.

Psychological appraisal of an individual’s religious conduct is to be carried out by psychology of religion, which studies conversion by placing a person and a person’s relationships in a central position, employing the same scientific methodology as is used to understand all other modes of behavior: relying on observation, taking in objective knowledge, collecting figures that are accessible, comprehensible, and reproducible on the part of other researchers, to the end of identifying the positive or negative effects that a given religious choice has on the individual.

To do this, a psychologist should employ the same methods used by a cultural anthropologist, that is, studying people's religious behavior in their own cultural context, considering the specific features of the particular form of religiosity under analysis. This methodology is also important for safeguarding the psychologist's neutrality when proposing figures and psychological interpretations of religious behavior (Vergote 1993, 76–85). This perspective underlies the following considerations, which concern some consequences borne from the choice to become Jehovah's Witnesses, both at an individual and a collective level.

Psychological Effects of Conversion

It was shown earlier that the process leading an individual to becoming a Jehovah's Witness is gradual, cognitively oriented, and effort-demanding, as it requires study as well as other activities, the foremost being the preaching work. All converts who were interviewed in the above-mentioned studies state that they made their decision after thorough evaluation, also thanks to the guidance and supervision of those who had the task of studying the Bible with them. Based on these data, and taking into account also the results of many other psychologically-oriented empirical studies on different types of converts (Hood et al. 2009), allegations against the Jehovah's Witnesses organization whereby they would exert forms of "undue influence," "mental manipulation," "deception," or "coercion" on individuals are shown to be totally groundless. The choice to devote oneself to the study of the Bible and to Jehovah's service appears to be free, personal, and conscious.

A large literature on different religious organizations exists which examines how conversion affects mental health. The allegation against groups and movements that are labeled as "cults," whereby they would be harmful to their members' mental health, does not seem to be supported by any empirical evidence, and it contrasts with the orientation and data from a vast array of academic publications on the topic:

As to the relationship between religion and mental health, it is not possible to judge whether a given religion is "healthy" or "unwholesome," beneficial or pathogenic. For neither religion nor mental health exists by itself, as an abstract entity, but solely in an individual's experience (Aletti 2010, 14).

Along the same lines, though from a different perspective, Richardson states that there is no empirical evidence that religion and mental health are associated differently in new religious movements compared to traditional religions (Richardson 1995).

Numerous studies investigated the alleged dangerousness of some religious groups by comparing the converts' mental condition with that of the general population. The results show that there is no significant difference between the two samples. (Buxant et al. 2007; Buxant and Saroglou, 2008a, 2008b; Namini and Murken, 2009; Hood et al. 2009, 435–58).

The study by Namini and Murken is especially interesting for the purpose of this paper, as it is a longitudinal study on the well-being and mental health of converts to some new religious movements in Germany, among which the authors include Jehovah's Witnesses. The first figure to appear is that in converted individuals the sense of well-being was enhanced, whereas the level of social adaptation shows no significant differences compared to control groups from the general population, since the level remained relatively stable in time. Among the many positive aspects of affiliation, those that are more frequently and more extensively linked to mental health and well-being, are one's sense of religious consistency and steadfast attachment to God.

The results of this study, along with other studies, referred to by the authors (Miller and Strongman 2002; Besier and Besier 2001; Ellison 1991), make it possible to confirm that affiliation to religious organizations such as Jehovah's Witnesses does not present a danger to the converts' mental health. Further, the authors specify that Jehovah's Witnesses suffering from mental disorders generally show a good level of adaptation to social life, likely thanks to the supportive action of faith as experienced in a communitarian context (Namini and Murken 2009).

“Religious” Resistance in Concentration Camps

As stated earlier concerning the studies on religious coping, faith enhances an individual's resistance capacity, as if it was a reservoir of energy that the believer draws on to cope with and overcome highly stressful situations (Pargament 1997). This effect of conversion is apparent from the countless cases of

resistance to the persecution suffered by many minorities, at all times and all over the world. As for Jehovah's Witnesses, an emblematic aspect is the role played by faith in enabling many believers collectively to endure while imprisoned in concentration camps. With regard to this, Bruno Bettelheim (1903–1990) stated that Jehovah's Witnesses

not only showed unusual heights of human dignity and moral behavior, but seemed protected against the same camp experience that soon destroyed persons considered very well integrated by my psychoanalytic friends and myself (Bettelheim 1963, 20–1).

From a psychological viewpoint, it is interesting to underscore that the motive for that resistance was essentially religious, that is, based on the Witnesses' immovable will to stand fast to moral principles rooted in their faith. In the face of an alienating condition, though being subjected to brutal violence, they were supportive and helpful not just to one another but also to other prisoners:

It was precisely their principles that enabled the Witnesses to display unparalleled solidarity toward one another and toward other groups of prisoners, which fact deeply affected the morale and, consequently, also physical resistance to privations, as shown by Bruno Bettelheim's and Tzvetan Todorov's [1939–2017] analyses of camp life. For this solidarity, which, for example, resulted in their sharing food and taking care of the sick, the Witnesses often exposed themselves to Nazi violence (Lotto 2008, 301).

Living in a World One Does Not Belong To

To become Jehovah's Witnesses also means to live in a peculiar way the relationship with those who are not part of their denomination—family members, former members, religious and secular institutions, society—. This is a consequence that is only appreciable if put in relation to the doctrine and practice of this religion, which holds that the believers are “in” the world but not “of” the world. Many authors have studied from different perspectives, and in a detailed and exhaustive manner, the seeming ambivalence of this doctrinal system (for instance: Chryssides 2016, 171–73; Introvigne 2015).

This paper specifically aims at seeking to understand the peculiar attitude of Jehovah's Witnesses toward the outside world from a psychological viewpoint. To do so, it is indispensable to try looking at the “world” with Witness “eyes,” that is, starting from the three meanings their doctrine ascribes to the term “world” (*kósmos*):

(1) humankind as a whole, apart from their moral condition or course of life, (2) the framework of human circumstances into which a person is born and in which he lives, or (3) the mass of mankind apart from Jehovah's approved servants (*Reasoning* 2009, 435–36).

When, in their publications, Jehovah's Witnesses ask if the world will be destroyed by fire, or if Satan is the ruler of the world, and what the attitude of true Christians should be toward the world and toward those who are part of it (*Reasoning* 2009), they refer to the third meaning, that is, not to society in general but to human society that is hostile to God, which underlies the quotation of *John* 17:14: "I have given your word to them, but the world has hated them, because they are no part of the world, just as I am no part of the world" (*New World Translation* 2013).

Only after grasping what "world" means in Jehovah's Witness doctrine, and in view of a number of above-mentioned testimonies, is it possible to attempt a psychological assessment of the Witnesses' attitude toward the world of "non-Witnesses," and their degree of social adaptation. It is a general assessment, not considering single cases and possible exceptions, which highlights a peculiar, twofold aspect: though not being "of" the world—a fact that is evident, due to their different doctrines and practices—, Jehovah's Witnesses live and work "in" the world (*John* 17,14), to which they incessantly present and propose a way of community life, with solid religious values and a substantial set of doctrines. The lifeblood of this universal mission is the theocratic doctrine based on the appointed authority's interpretation of the Bible, the study of which is constant, profound, and effort-demanding for each Witness.

In this specific context, the attitude of preachers who go from door to door to carry out their mission is to be interpreted as a way to put oneself at the world's "service," an offer of salvation for all those who would freely accept it. In this case, "separateness" and "difference" do not mean opposition or hostility, but rather consistency of faith and an offer of salvation. Further, it is important to underscore that most Jehovah's Witnesses work without problems with people from other religions. Their children successfully attend school courses with people who have another religion, and, in their work as evangelizers, they speak to people of all religions, if these are willing to listen.

As concerns "spiritual separateness," an interesting consideration stemmed from the study by Wilson, who stated that despite being members of a community

that is somewhat “separated” from society, Jehovah’s Witnesses do not live isolated as individuals. On the contrary, they are

perhaps much less isolated than are many people whose lives are integrated into the normal patterns of social life in the wider society, in which, however, they have relatively few really close ties, and, in modern conditions, perhaps no sense of communal belonging (Dobbelaere and Wilson 1980, 108).

Conclusion

As is true for any conversion, to become a Jehovah’s Witness means to work out an often-radical change in one’s existence both at a personal and social level. As shown in this paper, the holistic and interdisciplinary model for the study of conversion developed by Rambo et al. (Rambo 1993; Rambo and Bauman 2012; Rambo and Haar Farris 2012; Rambo and Farhadian 2014) can be a useful reference framework to understand this as well as other types of conversion.

Using the results of studies that were selected because their methodology was based on the converts’ autobiographical reconstructions, this paper has focused on the personal and social motives behind an individual’s choice to affiliate with an organization which has historically succeeded in “challenging” social customs, and in witnessing a consistent adherence to its principles of faith, unto the sacrifice of life. As mentioned, this attitude can be understood only by considering how the Witnesses relate to the “world,” and by attributing the right meaning to this term in the context of their doctrine.

Critics of Jehovah’s Witnesses sometimes interpret this aspect erroneously, conveying the idea that the Witnesses are asocial individuals, hostile toward society in general. This misunderstanding, for instance, has aroused the wrong idea that the Witnesses’ position as respects the “world” may be harmful to their children in cases of child custody, that the Witnesses have “internal courts” because they challenge state courts, that they do not render military service because they are against the state, and so forth. In some countries all over the world, dissemination of inaccurate news on the Witnesses’ position as respects the “world” has led to systematic forms of persecution, which are still ongoing (Knox 2018), and has moved important international institutions to issue statements of concern (USCIRF 2020).

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