

Experiences of Affiliation to the Italian Soka Gakkai: An Analysis According to the Rambo et al. Integrated Model

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ABSTRACT: This paper deals with the Rambo, Farhadian, and Haar Farris multidisciplinary theoretical framework of conversion. It studies religious change by using a heuristic model of conversion consisting of seven stages: context, crisis, quest, encounter, interaction, commitment, and consequences. The Rambo et al. model serves as a framework for integrating research based on different approaches, and providing a fuller understanding of the multilayered processes involved in conversion. Applying this model to qualitative interviews to people affiliated to the IBISG (the Italian branch of Soka Gakkai), I concluded that data confirm the Rambo et al. theoretical framework. In particular, the decision to join the IBISG is an active, complex, and dynamic process. It depends either on intrapsychic or interpersonal and social factors. Moreover, the conversion is characterized by the peculiar aspects of the movement and the strategies used in order to recruit followers. In conclusion, my underlying assumption is that conversion is a process of religious change that takes place within a dynamic field, involving people, institutions, events, ideas, and experiences. The study of conversion must take into account not only the personal dimension, but also the social, cultural, and religious dynamics in which the convert is embedded.

KEYWORDS: Soka Gakkai, Religious Conversion, Psychology of Religion, Religious Transformation, Religious Crisis, Lewis Rambo, Lewis Rambo's Seven Stages of Conversion.

Introduction

Soka Gakkai International (SGI) is a community-based Nichiren Buddhist organization that promotes its goals of “peace, culture and education,” which are centered on the respect for the dignity of life. Its core daily practices involve chanting the phrase “Nam Myoho Renge Kyo” (“I devote my life to the law itself”) and reciting excerpts of the *Lotus Sutra*. SGI members reside in 192 countries

and territories around the world, with about 90,000 members in Italy alone (Introvigne and Zoccatelli 2019). IBISG (Istituto Buddista Italiano Soka Gakkai) is the Italian branch of SGI.

I interviewed thirteen people who had joined and left the following groups: IBISG, Damanhur, the Church of Scientology, and ISKCON. I then extrapolated the data from these interviews by using the multidisciplinary theoretical framework on conversion elaborated by Lewis R. Rambo, Charles E. Farhadian, and Matthew S. Haar Farris (Rambo 1993; Rambo and Bauman 2012; Rambo and Haar Farris 2012; Rambo and Farhadian 2014). This paper takes in consideration only five interviews: the affiliation experiences of five current and former members of the IBISG. They appear to partially confirm the theoretical framework of Rambo, Farhadian and Haar Farris.

Stage Model Conversion

I used the Rambo et al. model as it integrates the psychoanalytic, behaviorist, experimental, humanistic and transpersonal, and social-holistic research methods. The model also provides for a more complete understanding of a person's conversion process by utilizing a heuristic model consisting of seven stages: context, crisis, quest, encounter, interaction, commitment, and consequences (Rambo 1993, 16–9).

It is important to note that the stages do not always follow each other sequentially, and can even interact reciprocally. For instance, I observed the simultaneous presence of concepts and factors of different stages upon examination of the subjects' answers. Nevertheless, for the sake of simplicity, my paper follows the model's order.

Methodological Choice: The Interviews

I used structured interviews with the five informants as the primary survey tool. Each structured interview, which lasted from 20-25 minutes and contained fifteen questions, was recorded and transcribed. These questions primarily dealt with the phase of affiliation and permanence, falling within one of seven categories:

1. First meeting with the movement
2. Reasons that led them to adhere permanently
3. Initial expectations
4. Evaluation of the relationship between expectations and results obtained
5. Degree of importance of the movement in each individual's life
6. Negative aspects found in the movement
7. How social groups of reference (such as family and friends) reacted to the affiliation of the individuals to the group.

The interview's questions and their order were chosen as they allowed for a better qualitative understanding of the causes of a certain behavior, as well as the connections between individual behavior and beliefs. The overarching objective of these interviews was to determine the meaning that each subject attributed to their experience of affiliation with Soka Gakkai, as well as to ascertain the replicability of the model by Rambo et al.

Comparing the Interviews

Upon comparing the interviews, I tried to verify whether one could find there some of the elements described in Rambo's studies and, if present, whether these could help to understand the choice of affiliating with a new religious movement. The analysis of the results is preceded by a summary description of each stage.

Context, Crisis, and Quest Stages

The examination of the subjects' answers highlighted the various factors and elements present respectively in Rambo's first three model stages.

Context: One cannot talk about a person's psyche adequately without first contextualizing it. The matrix in which a religious and spiritual transformation takes place includes four dimensions: personal, social, cultural, and the religious environment (Rambo 1993, 20–43; Rambo and Bauman 2012, 882–83).

Crisis: Conversion scholars generally agree that a crisis precedes conversion. Such crises can create disorientation, but may also create opportunities for

personal transformation, energy mobilization, and revitalization of myths, rituals, and symbols (Rambo 1993, 44–55; Rambo and Bauman 2012, 883–84).

Quest: A process in which we seek to create meaning and purpose in our lives. Classic psychology of religion literature portrays converts as passive, given that any number of factors may motivate them. Modern psychologists and social scientists, however, recognize that just as these factors may change over time, so too do their motivations, suggesting that converts actively create personal meaning, and choose their religion from any number of options (Rambo 1993, 56–65; Rambo and Bauman 2012, 884–85).

Answers that appeared in more than one of these three stages simultaneously were categorized into one of three dimensions:

— *Personal (Tendencies)*: By “tendencies,” I mean the personal dispositions, preferences, desires and conditions of discomfort that the five subjects attributed to themselves in their autobiographical reconstructions at the time when religious affiliation occurred. Three groups of tendencies were identified as “Self-improvement,” “Disorders, physical and/or psychological,” and “Desire for independence and alternative interests.”

Four of the subjects linked their affiliation to a period of personal difficulties due to health problems, psychological distress, tragic events, and dissatisfaction. Two reported having undergone psychotherapy and psychoanalysis immediately preceding affiliation. Only one subject credited the affiliation with the desire to become independent from a Catholic, conservative, politically right-leaning father.

— *Socio-cultural (Society)*: What Rambo calls a “macro context” (Rambo 1993, 21–2) is the larger environment generally designated as “society.” These are influences coming from the social and cultural environment that, according to the subjects, influenced their choice to become affiliated.

Since a society is a dynamic entity, when a crisis begins in a macrocontext, a process that Anthony Wallace (1923–2015) calls “revitalization” takes place (Wallace 1956, 265–66). The crisis occurs largely because the myths, rituals, symbols, goals, and standards for the individual or society cease to function well, and eventually are destroyed. These are then reconstructed, and at this time the personal conversion and transformation process of an individual, when shared by the devotee with others, can spread and give rise to a transformational movement

of the culture.

Regarding the reconstructions of my five subjects' experiences, and how they described the contexts in which their conversions took place, Wallace's idea seems to be confirmed at least to some extent. Two of them made their choices in a militantly anti-Catholic environment, one was involved in politics, and the other two did not provide relevant information on this aspect. All five unanimously attributed their motivation to affiliate with the group to the leader's innovative ideas they perceived as revitalizing, which then extended to the whole movement (Wallace 1956, 266–68). This is the case for Daisaku Ikeda in relation to the Soka Gakkai, for Oberto Airaudi (1950–2013) in relation to Damanhur, for L. Ron Hubbard (1911–1986) when it comes to the Church of Scientology, and for Swami Prabhupada (1896–1977) for the ISKCON (Hare Krishna). Moreover, although all the subjects described the leader very positively and expressed profound admiration for his teachings, contrary to popular ideas none considered their relationship with the leader as a decisive factor in their affiliation or conversion.

— *Family*: The environment closest to the subject, such as family, friends, ethnic group, religious community, neighborhood, etc. that can powerfully influence the conversion process is what Rambo calls the “micro-context” or what I call, in the broader sense, “family.”

In each subject's history, only the personal family was mentioned as the environment. Four subjects affiliated with the Soka Gakkai reconstructed their times of crisis by remembering the difficulties they experienced due to physical and/or psychological disorders occurring within their family relationships. According to Rambo's model, their conditions during the affiliation period correspond to what Robert Jay Lifton calls the “protean” personality (Lifton 1968, 17). The protean personality is “a self that is malleable by its sociocultural situation. Because our cultural context fosters a great deal of change, he suggests, people within this context experience much fluctuation of identity and self-definition. The fragility of the self that Lifton describes can be a powerful motivation for conversion” (Rambo 1993, 31).

In my case, they joined Soka Gakkai because it represented a sure point of reference with defined and stimulating values, helping the individuals to emerge from the moment of difficulty while also giving a proactive direction to their existence, thus strengthening their basic trust in the group with a consequent

reduction of personal discomfort. Furthermore, subjects who had attempted psychological therapies unsuccessfully stated that the doctrine and practice of Soka Gakkai satisfied the deeper need of realizing their “spirituality.”

Encounter Stage

The encounter stage involves contact between the potential convert and the “advocate,” or missionary for the movement. Just as followers need leaders, leaders need followers. Rambo identifies four main components in the missionary’s strategy: the level of emphasis placed on proselytizing (*degree of proselytizing*), the strategic style (*strategic style*), the method of contact (*mode of contact*), and the possible benefits for the convert (*potential benefits*) (Rambo 1993, 66–101; Rambo and Bauman 2012, 885–87).

In the Soka Gakkai, the *degree of proselytizing* is understood as a practice done in the service of others and as an active exercise of compassion; practicing only for oneself, even if the simplest choice, is not the true way to enlightenment, as one needs to share the truth. The Buddhist texts, from which the Soka Gakkai derives its doctrine, describe two main methods of exposing the truth: *shoju*, which consists of sharing the Buddhist vision of life without directly questioning the beliefs of others, and *shakubuku*, which consists of a more resolute affirmation of the truth and challenges visions that “do not respect life.” This data is consistent with the characteristics of this movement, in which great importance is given to the work of convincing non-practitioners who are motivated to know the teaching of the fundamental truths of Buddhism, i.e. that anyone can obtain Buddhahood and has the right to be happy.

A *strategic style* may influence the outcome of the encounter, one such style being charisma. Like conversion, charisma is an interactional phenomenon involving not only the affective, intellectual, and cognitive needs, expectations, and hopes of the potential convert, but also those of the advocate. Whatever the strategy, however, the encounter occurs within a dynamic field, in which both advocate and convert should be understood as active agents (Rambo and Bauman 2012, 886).

Regarding the *mode of contact*, in the experiences of all of the subjects interviewed by me (thirteen people who had joined the following groups: IBISG,

Damanhur, the Church of Scientology, ISKCON) there was indeed a consistent differentiation with respect to how each of them came into contact with the movement. All five Soka Gakkai members traced their first approach back to an already affiliated person, who spoke about the movement enthusiastically and encouraged them to attend a first meeting. It is also interesting to mention the case of Antonella, who declined the invitation to participate in an introductory meeting despite having received it from a relative who was already a member of the Soka Gakkai, but later agreed to do so after she was invited by a friend. Her testimony confirms what Rambo, based on the studies of David A. Snow and others, points out in his model: conversion also depends on how the missionary presents himself, as well as the situation in which the prospect is approached at the moment of contact (Snow, Zurcher and Ekland-Olson 1980, 798).

Rambo also distinguished the *potential benefits* of joining the group into several fundamental categories. Two are found in the subjects' answers:

(1) The system of meaning, which includes benefits at the cognitive level. The possibility of understanding the human enigma, the origin, and the destiny of the world are all strong incentives to conversion. This is found in the narratives of all the subjects interviewed, although in a different way, illustrating the "tendencies" dimension.

(2) The emotional gratifications that the religious group can offer, such as a sense of belonging, relief from guilt, the development of new relationships, the enthusiasm of the discovery, and the novelty of the journey undertaken. This element is clearly present in the interviews of the affiliates of the Soka Gakkai, a movement able to offer strong emotional gratifications to its members through personal meetings and moments of spiritual sharing.

Interaction Stage

If people continue with the group after the encounter, the interaction intensifies. In this stage, the potential convert learns more about the teachings, lifestyle, and expectations of the group. The group provides various opportunities, both formal and informal, for people to become more fully incorporated (Rambo 1993, 102; Rambo and Bauman 2012, 887).

At this stage, Rambo identifies some factors that are found in the converts'

experiences. One such factor, studied by Arthur L. Greil and David R. Rudy, is called “encapsulation,” which typically takes place inside new religious movements (they labeled these as “Identity Transformation Organizations”) (Greil and Rudy 1984, 260). At this stage, the group, through particular strategies, acts to modify the ideas and behaviors of the members in order to ease them into the movement. The three forms of encapsulation—*physical*, *social* and *ideological* (Greil and Rudy 1984, 264–68)—were only partially detected in the description of my subjects’ experiences. These were sometimes present simultaneously and with different degrees of intensity.

No subjects felt “isolated” from society in a *physical* sense because of their affiliation with the group; in fairness, the Soka Gakkai and the other movements taken into consideration do not have the peculiar characteristics of closed groups. They operate to rigorously pursue their own objectives, and their strategies include encouraging members to align their identities with the choice they made and not to confuse them with the outside world, with which they however should still interact.

Regarding *social* encapsulation, the subjects reported that, because they dedicated much of their free time to carry out activities in the movement, the consequences included reducing their relationships with non-affiliated people. However, none of them perceived this partial “deprivation” of social relations as an imposition from the movement, or as a negative element of their experience. On the contrary, it was evaluated as a direct consequence of the choice made, consistent with their objectives.

The subjects revealed *ideological* encapsulation when they remembered having been strongly encouraged by the leaders and other members to commit themselves to perfecting their knowledge, in order to achieve spiritual growth while also ensuring that they are fully aware of making this choice. Rambo calls this element “rhetoric,” in that it provides an interpretive system that guides the potential converts to attribute new meanings to their existence, and create new forms of coexistence for the common good (Rambo 1993, 108).

Beyond these forms, encapsulation also has four components, two of which clearly emerged in the subjects’ answers: *relationships* and *rituals*.

Relationships

Three Soka Gakkai subjects reported very similar experiences and emotions, emphasizing the human and relational component experienced in the movement, using expressions such as, “feeling at home with fellow companions who share the same values and with whom it is possible to achieve values,” and “believing in the same thing and be motivated.” The other two interviewees did not place a particular emphasis on the importance of personal relationships regarding their decision to join. The nature and intensity of the relationships developed in the movement. The degree of encapsulation was identified primarily through the responses that focused on the reactions of the family and friends after the affiliation, and included how the potential convert had faced, solved, or had been unable to solve the conflict between antagonistic social groups.

Regarding the reactions of family and friends to their affiliation, it is clear that, while conflict certainly occurred, it was also resolved quickly. In most cases, the conflict resolved after the parents agreed to visit the movement attended by their sons and daughters, and found positive elements in that environment. Afterward, some parents and friends even joined the group.

Rituals

Members of the Soka Gakkai attribute great importance to rituality as a factor that has influenced their choice to adhere to the group. All highlighted the importance of Buddhist practice and participation in meetings as a determining element of being a member, even though each gave their own personal interpretations of codified ritual experiences. For Antonella, “the practice does not end with the prayer, the true practice is the action ...”; for Davide, “the most important thing is the quality and value of that practice ... the work you do every day is stratified, you don’t lose it even if, when you work, you do so reluctantly”. Elisabetta said, “The fact is that if you recite Nam-myoho-renge-kyo you move in an energy that also goes to highlight the problems that are there, stale inside your heart and your soul ...” Michela stated, “At the beginning I thought they were coincidences, then I said: it doesn’t hurt me anyways, so let’s see if it works, and I have found some benefits”. Flavia said, “The practice is something that goes beyond what is rational, and therefore is not analyzed but is lived in the moment.” Their testimonies highlight the fact that, although a given religious practice can

be codified, every individual will experience it differently and receive different benefits by internalizing it in a creative and original way.

Rambo extends the Greil and Rudy model (Greil and Rudy 1984), and specifies that the degree of pressure exerted by groups on new members depends on three factors: the *status of the movement* in the society, its *doctrine*, and the *motivations* it can satisfy (Rambo 1993, 104–5).

The interviewees are all aware of the “deviant” *status* of the movement to which they have adhered, in that it is “different” from the broader social context, but this is considered an element of enrichment and creativity, not a “negative” aspect.

The degree of encapsulation is also influenced by the *doctrine* of the group. Because Soka Gakkai doesn’t see the world as the “domain of evil,” the movement doesn’t seek to isolate and separate members and potential converts from the world.

Regarding the *motivations*, taking as a reference the Lofland and Skonovd model (Lofland and Skonovd 1981), Rambo affirms that in intellectual and experimental conversions, such as those of my subjects, the encapsulation takes place in a non-coercive way. My examination of the subjects’ “tendencies” show that they already favored affiliation before joining.

Rituals may also be a part of the later commitment stage, because they are powerful methods by which new learning takes place. Requirements to modify one’s clothing, diet, or other patterns of behavior can also serve this same function of reinforcing the rejection of old patterns and behaviors and incorporating new behaviors into a person’s life. Thus, this stage of interaction culminates in the next stage of commitment. Here converts clearly, and often solemnly and publicly, declare their choice to become affiliated and become involved, more or less actively, in the activities of a specific new religious movement.

Commitment Stage

In the earlier encounter stage, the converts adopt the story of the new group as their own, whereas in the commitment stage the story is more fully appropriated, so that a convert undergoes an experience of biographical reconstruction. Although attribution theory (Spilka, Shaver and Kirkpatrick 1985) may explain

the journey, all of ordinary human life can be seen as a subtle process of reorganizing one's biography. In religious conversion and spiritual transformations there is often a requirement, implicit or explicit, to interpret life through new metaphors, images, and stories (Rambo 1993, 124; Rambo and Bauman 2012, 888–89).

In the commitment stage Rambo lists three factors, two of which are found in all five of our subjects' answers: *decision making* and *motivational reformulation*.

Decision making does not represent a point of arrival for the subjects. The reasons that have favored the decision, already indicated in the context phase, are still subject to continuous revisions, confirmations, or transformations. This is an aspect that Rambo emphasizes, as a “change is the essence of conversion” (Rambo 1993, 2–3). All affiliated subjects described the decision as definitive even if it was not intended as a completed goal. Here are some examples of answers: “The more I move forward, the more I improve this thing ...” (Antonella); “The more you do, the more you realize that there is stuff to do” (Elisabetta).

The decision to affiliate is also linked to *motivational reformulation*, in that it can be perceived as a benefit for society. It is useful to mention that highlighted in the responses of the subjects is a greater emphasis on the decision to adhere to the spiritual philosophy of Soka Gakkai than in other groups. The organization acted as an intermediary and a vehicle, while interpersonal relationships, although important, were less relevant in the decision-making process that led to the affiliation.

Consequences Stage

The consequences of conversion are determined, in part, by the nature, intensity, and duration of the conversion process. Many contemporary scholars believe that authentic conversion is an ongoing process of transformation. The initial change, while important, is only but the first step in a long process. An examination of the answers of my subjects appears to confirm this idea. Some questions still remain, however, such as: how many aspects of life are affected by the conversion? How extensive are these changes? To what extent are converts alienated from or reconciled to the wider world? (Rambo and Bauman 2012,

889). Though beyond the scope of this paper, these are worthwhile questions for future researchers of psychology and religion.

Importance of the Movement

To encourage insights on the importance of the movement in the convert's life, a question asked the currently affiliated members, "What would happen if Soka Gakkai disappeared tomorrow?"

Of the fifteen questions, this is the only one to which all the subjects still affiliated answered in the same way. They agreed that if the movement to which they adhere disappeared, then they would suffer. They would immediately try to "rebuild" or "continue" it, so as to continue living the initial experience in the movement.

For all, the commitment undertaken is seen as a final decision no longer linked to the organization, but now firmly embedded in their life. Should the movement cease to exist, the meaning, values, and purpose of the experience can still be "recreated," "rebuilt," and "re-founded" in other experiences. What matters most is the "content" of values and the "meaning" lived in the movement rather than the organizational structure.

Therefore, the "inside-out" dichotomy or the opposition to the external world as if it was an "enemy" does not emerge. Instead the propositions of an "idea," "dream," "project," "value," and/or "philosophy" appear to those committed to persevere in that life choice, despite its perception as a "deviance" by those who do not share it.

Conclusion

Conversion is a process of religious change that takes place in a dynamic field involving several persons, institutions, events, ideas, and experiences. In particular, the decision to join the IBISG is an active, complex and dynamic process, which depends on both intrapsychic and interpersonal or social factors. Moreover, the conversion process is characterized by the peculiar aspects and strategies the movement uses to recruit followers.

From the point of view of the psychology of religion, conversion and spiritual transformation are viable and valuable subjects. However, to fully grasp them, psychologists must join with researchers in other fields to develop methods and theories worthy of these complex subjects. Any study of conversion must account not only for the converts' personal dimensions, but also their social, cultural, and religious features, as seen through these seven stages.

APPENDIX: STRUCTURE OF THE INTERVIEW

1. For how long have you been part of Soka Gakkai?
2. How did you meet Soka Gakkai?
3. Why did you decide to attend your first meeting?
4. Why did you decide to attend the following meetings?
5. What did you expect from Soka Gakkai?
6. What did it give you?
7. What it *did not* give you?
8. If you were asked, what *did not* work for you in Soka Gakkai, what would you answer?
9. What you believe you may do to remedy what is not working, if anything?
10. What do you think Soka Gakkai could give you in the future?
11. What would be your reaction if tomorrow Soka Gakkai would disappear?
12. Were there any moments when you thought about leaving the group?
13. What reaction did your family have when you joined Soka Gakkai?
14. And right now, what is your family's reaction about it?
15. And your friends' reaction, both when you joined and now?

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