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Choosing to be Stigmatized: Rational calculus in religious conversion

Abstract:

Starting with an empirical study of several Jehovah's Witnesses[1] congregations we aim to highlight the social mechanisms of religious conversion and the phases an individual passes through before becoming a Witness. By applying Lewis Rambo's systemic stage model of conversion we are able to identify a series of elements that characterize the conversion to this religion in Romania, such as: social filtering, delegitimation of the previous religion, and incipient identification with the Witnesses' group. The article asserts that the Witnesses' decision to convert implies the deliberate assumption of the others' disapproval and even social stigmatization. Nevertheless they opt for this religious status because the immediate benefits brought by the religious community and the future benefits of the earthly Heaven offer them sufficient motives for becoming Witnesses.

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Religious conversion – approaches to the phenomenon from the perspective of the social sciences

Religious conversion or the change of one's religious affiliation is significant not only to theology and religious studies but also to psychology, sociology, and anthropology. More than the adhesion to a different religious group, conversion also implies the assumption of a new set of norms and values and even the adoption of a new lifestyle that may lead to the stigmatization of the individual by social groups.[2] The social sciences have approached the religious behavior of men since the classical stage of their development. Conversion was, at the beginning, a distinct chapter in the empirical and theoretical studies of psychology and psychiatry. Early approaches – highly influenced by theological explanations – regarded conversion as an individual rather than social phenomenon. Even though he insists upon the uniqueness of conversion experiences, William James' approach should be seen as a metaphorical comprehension of a psychological phenomenon – through a sociological fact that stresses the social elements in conversion (Leone, 2003).[3]

In the 1960s, within the context of the unprecedented development of New Religious Movements, American sociologists focused their attention on conversion and

tried to explain the adherence of young people to Oriental-based religious groups. In 1965, when John Lofland and Rodney Stark published *Becoming a World-Saver: A Theory of Conversion to a Deviant Perspective*, they were exploring virgin territory. This model was developed based on the analysis of the first group of members of the Unification Church in the United States (Richardson, 1985).[4]

Lofland and Stark (1965) emphasized six factors that are crucial in order to transform a prospect into a verbal convert and then into a full convert.[5] According to their research, the path to conversion usually involves passing through an experience likely to make him feel a certain tension (relative frustration), having a religious perspective on solving problems, being/seeing himself as a religious seeker,[6] and finally meeting the members of the Divine Principles group[7] at a turning point in life. The recruit develops social bonds with one or several members of the group. The latter are trying to minimize the recruit's involvement with people outside of the religious group. In brief, a potential member is exposed to intense interaction with the group (Lofland, Stark, 1965). While trying to apply this model, other researchers discovered its limits. Some stages could not be applied to certain religious groups while new elements appeared that were not to be found in the model. Establishing affective bonds with the members of the group and frequent interaction with them seem to be the only preconditions essential to conversion in general, as shown by Greil and Rudy (1984); the other elements are variable.

The theoretical trend opened by the two authors led to the drawing up of at least three stage models of religious conversion: the model proposed by James Beckford in his work *The Trumpet of Prophecy. A Sociological Study of Jehovah's Witness* (1975), which analyses the Jehovah's Witnesses' conversion in England; the model of conversion to the occult proposed by Frederick R. Lynch (1978); and the systemic stage model proposed by Lewis Rambo (1993). Even if they are visibly different in content such models may be included into what some authors name the active paradigm of religious conversion (Richardson, 1985).[8] These models stress the active role played by the individual in his own conversion. Individuals are volitional beings who opt for a specific religion without being compelled to do so.

Conversion as a religious and social option

The title of our article, *Choosing to be stigmatized*, suggests the voluntary nature of the resolutions made from the moment someone decides to carry out a Bible study with the Jehovah's Witnesses until he begins to preach from door to door the message of this religious group and in spite every contestation and the opposition of his family, friends, and everybody he approaches in order to 'preach the Truth.'[9]

At the level of Romanian public opinion, the conversion of an Orthodox Christian to another religion is viewed from the perspective of several prejudices. This is particularly true in the case of a highly visible religious group which is frequently engaged in doctrinarian disputes with other groups. A series of interviews with students from the Faculty of Theology allowed us to highlight some of the prejudices that accompany, as a rule, the interpretations regarding someone's religious conversion.[10]

> I think that the only thing that attracts people to these sects is money (...) they don't know the doctrine the others preach (...) they want something new that

would make them happier (...) they don't look for something consistent... to guide them in their lives, like principles... [a student at the Faculty of Theology, Patrimony section, first year, male].

More than other religious groups, the Jehovah's Witnesses are subjected to negative social reactions because they actively contest the official religion, priests, and Orthodox doctrine. Door-to-door preaching, characteristic of the Witnesses, exposes them to a greater extent to negative social reactions and even to social stigmatization.[11] Someone's opting for this religion is not a strictly personal affair but has consequences for his social relations, consequences that are often negative. Nonetheless, paradoxical as it may seem, some of the people approached by the Witnesses will opt for this religion and for the way of life it involves.

Explicative models of Jehovah's Witnesses' conversion

Starting with the systemic stage model of religious conversion proposed by Lewis Rambo (Rambo 1993; Rambo, Farhadian 1999), we shall try to provide an answer to the following question: *why does a person deliberately choose to become a Jehovah's Witness even if he understands ex ante all the shortcomings and social implications of this religious status?*

Conversion to this group is a long process that can take from six months to two years and that demands systematic efforts from the convert in order to study doctrine, to attend meetings, to preach new teachings, and to justify himself in front of his family and friends, etc. During each stage of his evolution towards this new status, a person knows precisely all the risks and advantages of being a Witness and has sufficient time to change his mind.

Most people who begin a Bible study drop out or do not publicly declare their relationship with the Witnesses.[12] Nevertheless, the deeds of those who become Jehovah's Witnesses are often rather surprising from the perspective of what is being preached or the manner in which they justify their beliefs or overcome negative social reactions. Our intention to explain the mechanism of their conversion stems from this phenomenon.

The work of reference with regards to the Witnesses belongs to James Beckford. Written in 1975, *The Trumpet of Prophecy: A Sociological Study of Jehovah's Witnesses* proposes the first explicative model of their conversion. The British sociologist presents a series of conditions whose simultaneous presence makes an individual a likely candidate for becoming a Jehovah's Witness.

Thus, the potential convert will be raised in a Christian family and, prior to his encounter with the Witnesses, he will have participated rather frequently in religious ceremonies. He has a marginal occupation, has not establish any social ties, and the regular visits of the Witnesses gratify him. Young families with children respond favorably to the Witnesses' message out of their need to answer the religious and ethical questions of their children. Most adults converted when they were in their 30s, and as Beckford shows, this renders conversion to Jehovah's Witnesses atypical (1975, 184). Also, people with relatives who are Witnesses are more inclined to respond favorably to their message.

The state of suggestibility, the second stage of the model, refers to a perceived discrepancy between values and reality. This may cause anxiety in individuals and may gen-

erate openness towards an ideology able to explain and/or alleviate the state of psychological discomfort. Also, vestigial dogmatism – the individual believes in a single, absolute truth, accessible to humankind – renders people more likely to accept the explanations provided by the accessible and unambiguous doctrines of the Witnesses (Beckford, 1975).

After critical events, people pass from the latent state of suggestibility to a favorable answer to the evangelization of the Watch Tower Society. House-to-house preaching or incidental witnessing stimulates the emergence of such critical events.[13] Even if before conversion most of Beckford's subjects were not interested in social and political issues, they claimed that the preachers had helped them understand the events of the world in a significant manner (*ibidem*).

Affiliation and induction refer to the process by which newcomers are initiated into the doctrines, values, and practices of the Watch Tower Society and to the manner in which they are integrated into the new group. These follow a standard pattern. Throughout all the stages of conversion, the learning process takes place within the group. Although the newcomer spends a lot of time reading the literature of the sect, he is always oriented towards further discussions within the group.

In time, the potential convert begins to know the Witnesses quite well and this close relationship with them strengthens trust and respect for what they uphold. Contact with the Witnesses is maintained and intensified by taking part in their meetings, events, and Bible studies and results in the redefinition of the individual's previous situation according to the new ideology (Hamilton, 2001).

The positive evolution of the convert-congregation relationship depends upon maintenance of adhesion to the group's beliefs and upon taking part in preaching activities. Long-term commitment develops as the convert is 'promoted' to positions of responsibility at the level of a local congregation – a mutual relationship of stimulation exists between the commitment to the Witnesses' ideas, on the one hand, and the integration into the network of social relationships of the sect, on the other (Beckford, 1975).

In a recent work, *Jehovah's Witnesses: Portrait of a Contemporary Religious Movement*, Andrew Holden depicts in a synthetic manner this mechanism of conversion supported by the individual's integration into the group. Those who convert to the Watch Tower Society are gradually resocialised into a new way of life. This involves the reshaping of their identity so that it becomes consistent with what is considered appropriate by other devotees. Group support is particularly important if this transition is to be successful. The bonds provided by any world-renouncing religious community affirm the new self and belief system as new recruits gradually withdraw from their previous social relationships. The individual's belief system is socially acquired and supported by a wide range of activities through interaction with other members (Holden, 2002, 58).

The systemic stage model of religious conversion – Jehovah's Witnesses case study

A general theoretical model of conversion with great explicative qualities and a higher degree of generality is that of Lewis Rambo (1993). Taking into account certain adjustments of his model according to the socio-cultural context of post-communist Romania, we think that it can explain rather well the conversion of Orthodox Christians who became Jehovah's Witnesses.

In brief, the stage model of conversion comprises seven stages: *the context, the crisis, the quest (religious search), the encounter with the religious group, the individual –*

religious group interaction, the commitment (making the religious relationship public), and *the consequence of conversion.*

Context is not a stage per se; it refers to the medium in which religious change takes place. Yet it influences the overall process of conversion. In order for the conversion to take place, the individual should have had previous experiences able to make him receptive, to some extent, to the message, style, promises or orientations of the sect, or he should be attracted by the example of its members, or he should be fascinated by the idea of association or by the atmosphere of the sect (Wilson, 2000: 138). Emotional, structural, intellectual, and religious availabilities of a person depend upon the context of conversion (Rambo, Farhadian, 1999).

In accordance with someone's degree of involvement in the social and religious activities of his previous religious community, it can be assessed that he possesses a smaller or greater amount of religious capital that he will try to maximize.[14] Thus, the change of religion, particularly in the case of those who dispose of a considerable religious capital, materializes in the abandonment of a series of investments made in time in order to accumulate that capital. This is why an individual who was brought up within a religious group and possesses a consolidated position within his community is not likely to change his religion, because he will want to maintain the religious and social (relational) capital acquired within that religion/community.

It is interesting to notice that most of the Witnesses interviewed were people with consistent religious capital before they were converted. It was their interest in religion that allowed them to initiate first contacts with the new religion. Because they were interested in discussing religious matters, they were intellectually available for conversion. In some cases, the lack of integration into the community also generated a certain emotional availability for visits and discussions with the Witnesses.

Crisis is the second stage of the systemic stage model of conversion. It is "a rupture in the taken-for-granted world" (Rambo, Farhadian, 1999, 23). Crises can be triggered by certain social disorders, political oppression, and also by dramatic personal events that lead to the quest of religious solutions for solving problems. To the same extent, a seemingly ordinary fact can generate an individual crisis likely to lead the individual towards religious conversion (ibidem).

According to the interpretation proposed by Rambo, crisis is the factor that triggers the religious quest and predisposes individuals to convert after having encountered a religious group. In the case of the Witnesses who were interviewed, crises took place following discussions with preachers and materialized in a gradual deligitimization (calling into question) of Eastern Orthodox dogma.

> First, I learned what God is going to do in the future. Then I began to take lessons in customs and traditions, to see if they're approved or not by God (...) It was very hard for me... because I used to be very dogmatic, I used to go to Church very often and I used to organize burial feasts (...) This was easier to understand... It was harder to learn about the Cross... The Bible says that we shall not make idols and that we shall not pray to images, but I used to think that I was not worshipping them; I was keeping them in my house to remember God... But later I understood that God was not there, neither was Jesus Christ (...) I was very disappointed when I heard... about what I hadn't known before (...) about the false teachings I'd acquired and the beliefs I'd upheld before. And, with each study I read, the verses I read with her, I analyzed the context. Sometimes, I used to stay up till midnight to analyze the context... I was afraid that the verses she gave me could have been something else... [woman, born in

1951, baptized in 1996, divorced, 4 children (2 Witnesses)].

In the case of people with much religious capital, superior knowledge and commitment to the doctrines of the Orthodox Church result in the accompaniment of the abandonment of Orthodox dogma by a series of active quests. Although the logical arguments of the Witnesses are accepted, they are sometimes associated by a feeling of distrust generated by the tension caused by the erosion of familiar doctrinal positions. This is why the potential convert requests supplementary arguments.

Moreover, the disqualification of previous experiences and life standards is central to any conversion experience. From the perspective of the convert and of the group that receives him, the change of religion is seen as a passage from an inferior religious tradition to a superior one, as a passage from darkness to light (Taylor, 1999).

Delegitimization is a constant feature throughout the whole process of the Witnesses' conversion. Interest in religion was already present and the crisis of delegitimization (psychological discomfort, disappointment towards a failing cultural investment) leads to greater involvement, to an active search of the new religion, and to stronger commitment to the new group and religious system.

The systemic stage model supports the idea that the stage of religious quest is triggered by a crisis. In the case of the Jehovah's Witnesses, the temporal evolution of conversion does not support this argument. *The context* predisposes the individuals to accept a dialogue with the Witnesses (an encounter with the religious group) and to begin a *Bible study*.[15] The latter can be considered the equivalent of the *religious quest* stage in Rambo's model. As a result of the religious quest, a *crisis* is triggered, which leads to the intensification of the *interaction between the potential convert* and the group of Witnesses and, in some cases, to an official *commitment*.

Even if in some subjects the quest/orientation towards religion was anterior to the moment they met the Witnesses, after the encounter with this religious group and the acceptance of the study, the quest[16] takes the form of the progressive acquiring of the new doctrine, is based on standardized materials, and is carried out systematically.[17] The choice to begin the Bible study[18] is not always motivated by a crisis but can be triggered by curiosity, by family pressure, by the interest in a specific aspect, or by the wish to be polite.

The discomfort someone feels as a result of the delegitimization of his cultural investments (religious knowledge, etc.) is one of the reasons why a person drops out of the Bible study. Beyond doctrinal aspects and extramundane rewards that are important in a religion (Stark, 1996b), the group of the Witnesses represents – for the potential convert – a structure of plausibility able to confirm the newly acquired cultural elements. Those who do not perceive the immediate benefits of the Witnesses' group (making friends, receiving answers to questions related to one's religion, etc.) or who consider the costs of attending the group to be too high usually leave the Bible study. As we have already mentioned, only one out of 6 people who begin the Bible study becomes a Witness.

The next stage is the *encounter with the religious group*. In our case, we should make a distinction between the first contact with the Witnesses and the contact with the religious community. The positive evolution of the individual Bible study is usually accompanied by the invitation to attend the weekly meetings of the congregation. If interaction with one Witness, in the case of those who carry on the Bible study, stresses the doctrinarian aspects of the organization, interaction with the religious group stresses the community-based dimension that plays a central part in the conversion process.

The attention paid to the newcomer, the care and interest shown to him, the

warmth and support offered by the community are only some of the elements that have a great impact upon those who visit the congregation. The community-based dimension becomes much more important, as it is rather poor within the Orthodox Church, particularly in urban areas. While talking about the atmosphere of the congregation, subjects compare it to that of the church and obtain supplementary arguments for the delegitimization of the church-based community. Along with rational arguments, supported by the Bible, affective community-based benefits compensate for the subjects' affective needs and strengthens their commitment to the new community. This commitment sustains the overcoming of the tension generated by the cultural discontinuity resulted from the abandonment of Orthodox Christianity. When they meet the community, some subjects reject the doubts they had about the Witnesses. Thus the structures of plausibility of the previous religion begin to erode and structures of plausibility for the new doctrine are built.[19]

> First, I remember the first meeting I attended; I was impressed by the atmosphere surrounding the Jehovah's Witnesses. When I went to Church I didn't see that. Here, you had (...) a feeling of friendship, they paid attention to you, and everybody talked to you, things that... I didn't notice when I was Orthodox... they're very organized people, (...) here you find everything a man can want from life: friends, a healthy entourage, collaborators, supporters, everything you want... for me this is a beautiful life (...) This is what I'd wanted before I became a Witness, to find people like that [man, born in 1977, baptized in 1993, single].

This is the moment we called *incipient identification*. At the level of actions, the convert begins to attend the meetings of the group on a regular basis and to acquire knowledge of the Bible. In many cases he is enthusiastic about learning new things and wishes to share with his family and friends what he has learned. Some people even begin to practice preaching activities together with an experienced Witness. Incipient identification activates the *social filter* through which the individual clearly sees the costs implied by living as a Witness.[20] He will be faced with the usually negative reaction of his family, friends, and of those he encounters during preaching activities. Moreover, festivities on religious holidays, birthdays, etc., are prohibited, which can cause frustration, especially when it comes to the Witnesses' children. The process of conversion is carried on only if the potential convert considers the social costs of his religious choice, the tension, and even the social stigmatization worth his while.

> ...my parents told me : "Don't come back to us if you carry on this way" (...) "Let Jehovah give you stuff, I'll not give you anything anymore" and I said "Jehovah will give me and will give you too (...) Jehovah gives to everybody because He is our true God." For a couple of weeks I didn't go to their place, but after a while they asked somebody to tell me to go and visit them and not to discuss the Bible anymore... [man, born in 1963, baptized in 1998, married, 2 children].

In the case of those who choose to carry on the conversion process, previous social networks are gradually replaced with the new networks of the organization. For those who did not have a rich social life the congregation becomes a place where they can manifest themselves and develop new relationships – a supplementary argument for adhesion to the organization.

Interaction – the fifth stage of the systemic stage model – leads to the formation

of a new identity, that of a Jehovah's Witness, and ends in the public declaration of this status through public baptism. Four elements of the interaction introduce the person or the group to the new religious affiliation: *ritual, social relationships, rhetoric*, and *roles*. As a result of the interaction of these four, the individual passes through a process of ideological encapsulation that separates him from those who are not Witnesses.[21]

First, the act of developing *social relationships* serves as a network of transformation. Affiliations that are crucial to the learning process may follow the line of the family, friends, or teachers. In general, the closer the relationship between the preacher and the potential convert, the greater the probability of religious change (Rambo, Farhadian, 1999)[22].

Rituals allow people who were converted to experience religion beyond the intellectual level. Through community-based activities such as singing, scripture recital, and prayer, ritual activities consolidate interpersonal relationships and induce a stronger feeling of belonging to the Witnesses' community. Prayer, singing at conventions or in the Kingdom Hall, preaching activities, and community work are only some of the religious activities that strengthen the commitment to the new religious group. Also, these represent confirming experiences (Stark, 1999) and structures of plausibility for the new religious system.[23] Directly experiencing religious events such as a convention or other activities carried out within the group is another element that confirms the truthfulness of the doctrine.

The third element of the interaction with the new group is the *adaptation of the Witnesses' rhetoric*, which includes different linguistic interpretations of the actions, feelings, and purposes of the potential convert. Conversion does not mean merely a change of behavior and relationships but also the conceptualization and interpretation of these changes (Rambo, 1993).

A person's interaction with a new group implies a series of transformations at the linguistic level. This process is more stressed in a religious conversion because words play a central part in religious groups. Throughout the interaction stage, the potential convert learns to speak the language of the group in order to be in accordance with the ethos and the purposes of the movement. Within this framework, metaphor is not only a linguistic tool, but also a vehicle in the transformation of one's conscience.

The language used by the religious group represents the means by which the conscience is formed and transformed.[24] To some extent, conversion takes place through a process of learning the new language and using it in relevant situations (Rambo, 1993). The usage of distinct communication formulas confers a feeling of belonging to the new community and the capability to communicate more easily with the members of the group. The new language, inaccessible to outsiders, also induces a feeling of demarcation from other groups. Expressions such as "friend of God," "New World," "to go to the Hall," "to go on field," "to do the works," "the New World Translation," or "the Knowledge" say nothing to those who are not Witnesses or are not related to them.

Besides the change of metaphors, Snow and Machalek (1984) highlight the changes that take place at the level of the converts' system of attribution.[25] They adopt a new attribution scheme.[26] After having adopted the Jehovah's Witnesses' new rhetoric and attribution scheme a biographical reconstruction occurs; in other words, previous and current experiences are interpreted according to the new ideology.

The fourth component of interaction refers to the adoption of *role expectations* and new behaviors requested by the religious group. Implicitly or explicitly, people who

convert are informed about the changes they must make in order to be received into the group.[27] Through interaction with the religious group the individual actually embraces a new lifestyle opposed to his previous one; he acquires a new language, adopts a new definition of his own individuality and personality and of the social community to which he belongs (Wilson, 2000).

As a result of the tension between the Witnesses and society, *a detachment from the new role* is evident in many situations. This is caused by the contradiction between the new role and previous roles, by the lack of familiarity with the activities requested by the group, or by the negative reactions of other people. Fear of talking with people, embarrassment of preaching, and hiding one's status of a Witness are only some clues in this respect.

> For two months nobody rejected me (...) I was so enthusiastic and so glad! And I used to think when I heard: "oh, I was rejected." I used to say: "you don't know how to speak"... but see what happened on Rozelor Alley (...) a lady comes out and I say: "Hello, ma'am, today I would like to discuss the Scripture with you." "Go away! I don't want to see you here! Get out or I'll throw something at you!" I was petrified. I say: "Ma'am..." Nothing. All the neighbors were coming out of their apartments. "Go away!" Oh, my Lord! I felt, oh... (...) I tried to explain, why were they shouting like that? I didn't say anything bad. I was distressed, how was it possible? (...) I said: I would never go preaching again; that's enough! I went home; I didn't study anymore, I went to the countryside (...) I didn't attend the meetings anymore. Over this period I thought about what I'd studied, about what I'd told people, about how they'd reacted (...) At that time, that's what I told Paul [the Witness with whom he used to study]: Oh, yes! That's nothing! If this didn't happen, it would mean that this isn't the truth (...) He gave me some Scriptural arguments that clearly show: everybody who wants to be dedicated will be humiliated. You must be humiliated (...) [man, born in 1967, baptized in 1992, married, 2 children, his wife is also a Witness].[28]

> Still, at the beginning, I was embarrassed, I couldn't (...) tell that I was a Witness (...) I told them many things from the Bible but I didn't tell them what I was. Well, it was hard for me to say that because I wasn't very sure about what I knew, I didn't know how to explain and then, if I said I was a Witness, then what... Oh! Really? This was the hard part (...) and I often cried and said: "Lord Jehovah, I want to say that I am but I can't... I can't handle these people..." It's been a long time (...) I grew stronger, and all of a sudden I began to tell (...) I didn't beat about the bush anymore (...) whether they talked with me or not. I was just happy to tell [woman, born in 1952, baptized in 1996, married, 2 children, her husband is also a Witness].

In many situations the potential converts expect to encounter negative social reactions. Thus, any reaction of this type becomes a confirming experience and can support the truthfulness of the biblical prophecies in which the Witnesses believe. A fact that would usually inhibit the decision to convert has the opposite effect.

Doctrine becomes the engine of the Witnesses' actions; the help of the Bible allows them to overcome the obstacles they encounter and generates the religious activism that supports the growth of the organization. The fact that detachment from the role of Witness is overcome by giving other meanings to social relations is just another example that shows that doctrine is functioning.

After having carried out the religious quest (Bible study), overcome the social filter, integrated into the Witnesses' group, and limited social relationships outside of the sect, the only thing that still needs to be fulfilled is making the conversion public through baptism. Considered to be a public declaration of the fact that someone wishes to serve God, baptism is purely a public, formal dedication with the purpose of showing to the others the religious option of an individual. The Witnesses do preaching work long before they are baptized; this is why we are inclined to believe that, from a conversion perspective, another moment is more significant than this: the moment when an individual subjectively identifies himself with the organization and dedicates himself to Jehovah in prayer, thus disavowing his previous religion. This is the true moment of the Witnesses' conversion.

Throughout this transformation process, we believe that the potential convert's perception of the expected rewards of conversion is crucial. He carefully weighs both the social rewards (acceptance, respect, love, overcoming fear and pressure) and cognitive benefits (ultimate meanings and solutions to practical problems) delivered by the community of Witnesses and the social or religious losses implied by the choice of leaving the previous religion. Making this decision is not an internal process but an experience of social interaction in which one's group of Witnesses, family, and social groups are involved. The rational choice theory offers a theoretical framework for the comprehension these decisional processes.

Applied on the individual level, the rational choice theory supposes the actors weigh the anticipated costs and benefits of a decision, acting so as to maximize their net benefits. Owing to the uncertainty that surrounds religious goods, their value is established with the help of statements delivered by reliable sources, such as one's religious community (Iannacconne, 1997, Stark, Iannaconne, 1993) or the Bible.[29]

> "Have you ever thought about what you are going to do in Paradise?" "I'll probably build bridges, houses, roads; I'll help my Brothers to transform the Earth into a Paradise." "Why bridges, houses, roads and not something else?" "Well, don't think we would cross the rivers by boat. Maybe we'll also cross them over bridges. I learned and (...) I was talking to a Sister who is a physician and I told her: Sister, you'll be unemployed in Paradise because there we won't see doctors anymore, Jesus Christ will be enough. But I hope I'll be very busy as a construction worker" [man, born in 1975, baptized in 1992, married, his wife is also a Witness].
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> Sir, I... I didn't say I thought it would come. I say I'm convinced that we're living in the Last Days right now... it's so simple because... when Lord Jesus was asked: Tell me, when will Thy Kingdom come and what signs will there be? Lord Jesus answered: Concerning that day and hour nobody knows, neither the angels of the heavens nor the Son, but only the Father, but I can give you some signs! It is said that the Last Days will be tough times, difficult to endure. Men will be dishonest, untamed, and vile; they'll love pleasure more than God. I want to say that when you look at people living today, in general, you realize that things are just like the Scripture tells, and there's also written that there'll be earthquakes, epidemics, wars, famine (...) I myself went through two devastating earthquakes and since I know myself wars have continued and never end. See... before I was born, or to put it this way, since 1914, there's been the First World War, the Second World War and there hasn't been one minute of peace (...) Economy is disastrous. Need for divine intervention is felt. People can't suffer poverty, famine, diseases anymore (...) conditions are met; I talk about the conditions described by Jesus, those that must be met by the times that define the End. (...) we pray that End come (...) Thy Kingdom

> come (...) we have prayed that the Kingdom of God come for 2000 years (...) At that time, Lord Jesus said: The Kingdom draws near. If then it was so close, then how is it now? I firmly believe I have the chance to pass to the New System of Things without seeing Death (...). I can tell you only partially what there'll be after Armageddon, because man is not capable to understand the blessings there'll be immediately... afterwards... God - it is written - God will destroy those who spoil the Earth. (...) They will disappear and there'll actually be a... What Adam and Eve actually did when... They had to (...) make Eden bigger. Well, this will happen in the Kingdom of God (...) step by step, all the Earth will be turned into a paradise that will harbor all those who were resurrected [man, born in 1949, baptized in 1991, his 2 children and wife are also Witnesses].

For the Witnesses, religious concepts are almost never uncertain. We can talk about the Witnesses' biblical realism, meaning that they literally accept everything the Bible says. The previous interview fragment also emphasizes a standard formula of the arguments through which the truthfulness or biblical truth and its applicability in everyday life are demonstrated for and by the Witnesses.

Main premises: Citing biblical arguments

[...the Last Days will be tough times, difficult to endure. Men will be dishonest, untamed, and vile; they'll love pleasure more than God....]

'Proofs': Citing facts observed in real life that confirm biblical prophecies

[...when you look at people living today, in general, you realize that things are just like the Scripture tells...]

Supplementary premise: Biblical prophecies have been fulfilled

[conditions are met; I talk about the conditions described by Jesus, those that must be met by the times that define the End....]

Conclusion: Armageddon is coming soon.

[I firmly believe I have the chance to pass to the New System of Things without seeing Death]

From the perspective of formal logic, this argumentative structure is correct. However, we are dealing with a material error related to the meaning of the terms employed and the acceptance of premises. This is not so unusual, because logical truth is eluded by all religions that propose a type of logic of salvation. Witnesses act according to principles that are similar to those of other religions: to offer a better life in another world, to save the world, etc. What sets them apart are the different premises they adopt and, obviously, the different manner in which they act. Someone who goes to church every week, who fasts, and who gives alms to the poor in order to "receive in the afterlife," and a Witness who preaches the Bible from door to door, follow similar purposes but use different means.

Our conclusions support Stark and Finke's (2000) hypothesis that the Witnesses do not pay the great costs of adhesion out of fanaticism or ignorance. We are dealing with decisions that were deeply deliberated upon. From the first contact with the

Witnesses up to baptism there is a period of time when the potential convert analyses the advantages and disadvantages of affiliation. The future Witness is involved in the way of life he prepares for (he does preaching work, observes people's reactions) and decides if these costs are worth while. Possible reactions or negative reactions of friends or family are weighed and, according to the result of this calculation, the convert decides whether he should go on or not. There are several moments when a person can decide to end the relationship with the Witnesses (he does not want to give up religious holidays, does not want to argue with those close to him, does not want to upset his parents or family, etc.). The potential convert is asked to be actively involved in order to move ahead towards conversion. It is not enough for him to agree about doctrinal aspects. This is why we support the idea also emphasized by the article's title: the Witnesses deliberately choose to preach and to be subjected to social pressure or even to be stigmatized according to a sort of logic of salvation or deliverance different from that of other religious groups.

Subjective rationality – proposed by Raymond Boudon (Hagen, 2000) – is in our opinion the most appropriate way to define this type of rationality, specific to religious conversion, in which costs and benefits are subjectively assessed. Far from suggesting that those who convert make an explicit, direct assessment of these facts, the idea of a cost/benefit analysis made by the potential convert concerning his situation aims to show that the person who converts is an active agent, author and negotiator in his own experience of conversion.

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Notes:

1 In 1882, Charles Taze Rusell founded the religious organization known today by the name of Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society, the official name of the Jehovah's Witnesses organization. Renowned for its extraordinary international expansion, the organization counted 44,080 members in 1928, 6,035,564 in 2000 and 6,613,829 in

2005. A Stark and Iannacone estimate (1997) shows that in 2020 there will be 12,475,115 members world-wide. The following beliefs are representative for the Jehovah's Witnesses: they worship only God, while Jesus is the Son of God and God's first creation; the Witnesses reject the doctrine of the Holy Trinity, blood transfusions, and religious symbols (the cross, icons, etc.). They do not believe in life after death and do not have religious holidays such as Easter or Christmas. Jehovah's Witnesses also believe that Armageddon is coming soon and that an earthly Paradise will follow it.

2 According to the definition given by Lewis Rambo, conversion is a complex, multidimensional process that involves personal, cultural, social, and religious elements. Even if conversion may be triggered by a particular event and in some cases lead to very sudden experiences of change, for most people it takes place over time. People change for a multitude of reasons; change may be permanent or temporary (Rambo, 1993). The array of approaches to conversion makes impossible the consensus on its definition. In the article on Conversion from *Gale Encyclopedia of Religion*, Rambo and Farhadian present several theoretical orientations, each shedding light on different aspects and processes involved in conversion: personalist theories (psychoanalytic, archetypical, attribution, and attachment theories), social/cultural theories (multicultural, postcolonial, identity, intellectualistic, and narrative theories), religious theories (theological and translation theories), convergence models (process theory of conversion, feminist theory, Christianization, or Islamization theory) (Rambo, Farhadian, 2005).

3 The destabilization of the self – stage in the model of conversion proposed by James – is represented by the loss of social identity as a result of the fact that the group the individual belongs to lacks the capacity to socially integrate individuals (Leone 2003).

4 Traditionally, conversion was approached by theologians and focused on the exemplary conversions of biblical characters or of significant characters in religious life (the prophets in the Old Testament, Saul of Tarsus, Augustine of Hippo, etc.). The study of primitive populations in ethnology and anthropology implied not only an approach to the religions of these populations, but also the first recordings of conversions to Christianity. These matters were further developed by the first sociologists – it is sufficient to mention Émile Durkheim's *Elementary Forms of Religious Life* or the work of Marcel Mauss and Max Weber. Psychology deserves the historical merit of having approached religious conversion as a distinct religious experience. We note here the contributions of William James (*The Varieties of Religious Experiences*, 1905), Edwin Starbuck (*Psychology of Religion*, 1915), George Jackson (*The Fact of Conversion*, 1908), or Sigmund Freud (*A Religious Experience*, 1927).

5 Verbal converts are those who profess faith and are considered to be sincere by the leaders of the group but who do not play an active role in the religious movement; full converts are those who manifest their engagement by making donations and also by preaching (Lofland, Stark, 1965).

6 "Religious seeker" (Lofland, Stark, 1965) is an expression describing people with a cognitive approach to religious issues who base their beliefs on their own readings and researches.

7 Divine Principles is the fictitious name proposed by the authors in order to respect the anonymity of Unification Church members.

8 Theories that see the individual as passive in conversion are a constituent part of what Richardson named the 'old paradigms of religious conversion'. This category includes: theological models of conversion (e.g. the prophets of the Old Testament, Saul of Tarsus, and Augustine of Hippo), scientific models inspired by psychiatry, psycho-

analysis, and the relative frustration theory, models based on 'brainwashing', and the first stage models of conversion. The predominant role in conversion is played by an external factor: the omnipotent divinity in theological models, unconscious psychological influences in psychological models, or social factors whose presence would inevitably determine the conversion. Such deterministic models suppose a passive subject and are seen as predestinations (from a theological point of view), predispositions (from a psychological point of view), or situational determinations (in sociology) (Richardson, 1985).

9 The quotation marks underline an expression frequently used in the speeches of interviewed Witnesses. The authors of this article are not defending the religious meaning or the truth of quoted excerpts and/or of the Jehovah's Witnesses' doctrine. We are only interested in the mechanisms that result in a number of people opting for a religious status that implies a certain amount of social stigmatization.

10 "(...) Romanians are known to be poor people (...) poor people are bought with minimum material means" [student, Faculty of Theology, Theology-Social Work section, fourth year, female]. "...their success is due above all to the lack of religious education... poverty (...) moral liability (...) spiritual indolence, which is moral procrastination" [student, Faculty of Theology, Patrimony section, third year, male].

11 In Western countries, during the 1950s, the Witnesses were the most contested new religion. Together with the Mormons, the Witnesses were targeted by most anticult movements owing to their strong doctrinal deviances from official religions. Their aggressive proselytizing and their refusal to salute national flags or to participate in patriotic activities led to their prosecution and even to their imprisonment (Lewis, 2001). Researchers of religious phenomena were also interested in the Witnesses. For example, it was observed that their success is particularly visible in the countries were Protestantism has not succeeded (Wilson, 1992). The success of the Witnesses – about whom Rodney Stark and Laurence R. Iannacone said that they were the religious movement with the fastest growth – is materialized in an annual average growth of 5% worldwide between 1923 and 1997 (Stark, Iannacone, 1997).

12 For several reasons, individuals may quit the Bible study or may study the Bible without converting. This is proved by the disproportion between the great number of Bible studies carried out (an average of 14,018 per year between 1992-2000 in Romania) and the small number of baptized people (2,642 on average) – an estimate of one baptism in every six Bible studies.

13 *Incidental witnessing* is the expression used for the situations where proselytism is not the primary interest but provides unexpected opportunities to preach: meetings in transportation terminals and in restaurants or specific literature distributed in public places. These can be seen as critical events because they focus the convert's attention on models of thought and action that would not have been adopted otherwise (Beckford, 1975).

14 When we are socialized in our own culture, we invest in it, we spend time and make efforts to learn, understand, and remember its cultural resources. For example, people brought up to be Christians have accumulated substantial amounts of Christian culture: doctrines, prayers, hymns, rituals, and memories (Stark & Finke, 2000). The concept of 'religious capital' could be seen as a sub-species of cultural capital. Pierre Bourdieu, who made famous the concept of 'cultural capital,' designates by it the ensemble of resources an agent disposes of and that can be capitalized to his benefit in his efforts to gain superior positions in a given social field (Stănciulescu, 1996). At the level

of common sense, this logic is to be found in the following behaviors related to the religious life of a community: a person invests (offers) resources (time or money) in current religious activities or in the erection of a church, etc., with the implicit purpose of obtaining immediate rewards (social prestige, recognition of his merits by the leadership, etc.) or future rewards (rewards in the 'afterlife'). According to an understanding of various doctrinal aspects of the Orthodox Church and to actual practices of religion, our sample can be divided into 3 categories: *people with much religious capital* (women who go to church on a weekly basis and who are actively involved in their own or in their family's religious life), *people with average religious capital* (people attached to the traditions of the Orthodox Church, even if they do not lead an active religious life), and *people with little religious capital* (particularly young people who lack both the doctrinal basis and actual involvement in the religious life).

15 The Bible study refers to regular meetings with a potential convert or someone interested in learning about the religious doctrine of the Witnesses. Its purpose is to discuss and analyze each element of the doctrine. Successive discussions about traditions, religious symbols, and religious holidays lead to the delegitimization of the structures of plausibility of Orthodoxy.

16 The notion of "quest" is based on the supposition that individuals try to maximize the meanings and purposes in their lives, to eradicate ignorance, and to solve inconsistency. In abnormal or crisis situations, this quest becomes imperative – people are actively seeking resources for solving problems. Quest is an on-going process, but it is intensified during periods of crisis (Rambo, 1993).

17 We refer here to bimensal magazines of the Witnesses (*Awake!* and *Watchtower*) and to a series of publications dealing with the main doctrinal aspects of the group: *All Scripture is Inspired of God and Beneficial, What does God require from us?* etc.

18 Conversion and the initiation of the Bible study usually have complex motivations that involve emotional, intellectual, and religious features. For instance, a person yearning for relationships may find a proselytizer's friendship a wonderful balm; this friendship could then be the beginning of the conversion process (Rambo, Farhadian 1999, 27). Also, someone who is intellectually attracted to religion or a very religious person may convert due to individual motivations that make them disposed toward conversion. This is why we talk about structural, intellectual, emotional availability in order to stress the fact that religious change may be triggered by a wide array of factors.

19 In *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* Peter Berger stated that social reality and systems of signification need structures of plausibility in order to survive and be seen as real (1967). In this way a religion becomes real in the eyes of its supporters. In the case of the Jehovah's Witnesses, the social support of the group delivered during meetings becomes the structure of plausibility for the new ideology. We understand this if we think about the positive effects (enthusiasm, desire to preach) the meetings have on the new converts. Through interaction with the group, a person learns how to integrate himself into the role of Witness and how to adopt a new lifestyle.

20 By *social filter* we refer to all the mechanisms by which individuals who accept the costs of conversion are selected. The incipient identification of a potential convert with the Witnesses takes place when his group of friends and his family are informed of the fact that the convert studies the Bible with the Witnesses. The social filter is formed by the reactions that may convince the convert to quit the study. The choice to

carry on the study is often accompanied by the suspension of relationships between the individual and his family and friends.

21 Arthur Greil and David R. Rudy (1984b) make a distinction between physical encapsulation (wherein individuals are isolated in monasteries), social encapsulation (wherein individuals wear clothes or other distinctive signs in order to show their identity), and ideological encapsulation (which is also present in the case of the Jehovah's Witnesses).

22 To support the same idea, Stark and Bainbridge (1980) show that the door-to-door preaching of the Mormons has a success rate of 0.1%. However, if a Mormon friend or if a relative offers his house as a place where missionary contact can be initiated, the success rate reaches 50% (Stark, 1997).

23 For the Witnesses, the fact that their organization bears the proper name of God is a proof that they represent the only true religion. The fact that preaching work and all other activities (organization of conventions, construction of the new Kingdom Hall) are volunteer-based is also a proof in this respect (a confirming experience). Other aspects the Jehovah's Witnesses insist on are using the Bible as a source of the knowledge they offer and the lack of traditions or rituals in their ways of praying. The empiricism of the Witnesses' doctrine, the feeling of belonging to a strong community, the feeling of belonging to the people of God and of respecting His wills, the belief in the imminent arrival of Armageddon and the inauguration of a Kingdom of God that will solve the problems of humankind are the constitutive elements of a logic of salvation – a mentality specific to the Jehovah's Witnesses. These elements, combined with the biblical legitimation of the Witnesses' leaders and of the group's activities, deliver security, firmness, and authority. Metaphorically speaking, we can assert that the Witnesses offer certitudes based upon the "word of God." It is this certitude that offers resources for the individuals to overcome the social filter, to endure the experience of stigmatization.

24 The Witnesses use language and images to set up social boundaries and to stress, with their help, the difference between members and outsiders. Images with positive connotations promote the millenarian doctrine while negative images warn about the presence of evil in the world (Holden, 2002).

25 Attributions represent the process by which individuals give meaning and motives to their own actions and to the actions of others.

26 Feelings, behaviors, and events previously interpreted according to a series of various causal schemes are now interpreted through the official attribution scheme of the religious organization. In general, the convert's interpretation transcends the perspective of ordinary experiences and imagines life as a dramatic struggle between good and evil (Rambo, 1993).

27 Giving up smoking, celebrating birthdays or religious holidays, and refusing to salute state symbols (the flag, the national anthem, etc.) are only some of the key elements of the new behavior and system of values to which the new adept must conform. The convert interiorizes the new role and sees himself according to the features of this role that help him orient in all interactive situations (Snow, Machalek, 1984).

28 In this quotation, three mechanisms are to be noticed: social filter (the negative reaction triggered by the Witness), detachment from the role ("I would never go preaching again"), and overcoming this detachment through a biblical interpretation of the negative social reaction ("if this didn't happen, it would mean that this isn't the truth"). This fragment also illustrates the four mechanisms that take place before the event of baptism: *incipient identification* (preaching), *social filter* (inducing a certain

detachment from the role), *overcoming detachment from the role* (by giving a different signification to the events), and finally *total identification with the role of Witness* (making the religious status public). First, the failure of the potential convert generated a separation from the community and could have led to the decision to break with the Witnesses. The intervention of a close Witness and the biblical explanation of a social reaction allowed the process of religious conversion to be continued.

29 In fact, the reliability of the Witnesses' message before the potential convert is built both throughout the individual Bible study and through social activities (weekly meetings, conventions). All these converge towards making the potential Witness assimilate the proposed doctrine as an absolute and indubitable truth.