This essay treats the convert as as social type with four spec-
ifiable formal properties: biographical reconstruction;
adoption of a master attribution scheme; suspension of ana-
logical reasoning; and embracement of the convert role.
These properties are derived from the talk and reasoning of
converts to a culturally transplanted Buddhist movement
and from accounts of other proselytizers and converts. We
conclude that it is the convert's rhetoric rather than institu-
tional context or ideological content that denotes the con-
vert as a social type.

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THE CONVERT
AS A SOCIAL TYPE

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The widespread appeal of numerous religious and personal growth movements during the past decade (Lande, 1976; Richardson, 1978; Robbins and Anthony, 1979; Wuthnow, 1976) has stimulated considerable discussion and research about the phenomenon of conversion. Heirich (1977) has suggested that an understanding of conversion requires consideration of both its nature and its causes. To date, however, the bulk of the research has concerned itself with the causes and stages of conversion (Balch, 1980; Bromley and Shupe, 1979b; Lofland, 1978; Lofland and Stark, 1965; Richardson and Stewart, 1978; Snow

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and Phillips, 1980). Although this research has helped to specify the relative influence of various social, psychological, and situational factors in relation to the conversion process, conversion itself is vaguely conceived. Just how one might identify the convert is never clearly explained. Instead, the characteristics of the convert are typically taken for granted. This is a serious oversight, especially since an understanding of the conversion process presupposes the ability to identify the convert.

In this chapter, therefore, we propose a more formal and explicit theoretical explanation of the convert. Specifically, we treat the convert as a social type with identifiable formal properties. Following Simmel (Wolff, 1950), we focus on "the typical characteristics of a person when engaging in various sorts of interaction" (Levine, 1965, p. 101) in order to delimit the properties of the convert as a social type. Rather than deriving the properties of the convert from the overt behavior of religious group members and participants in other movements, however, we focus on their talk and reasoning. In keeping with Simmel's formal sociology, we listen not only with an ear for the content of conversion claims but with an ear for the characteristic form of conversion rhetoric. Hence we argue that it is by the form of converts' talk and reasoning that they can be distinguished from other social types.

This line of analysis was suggested during the course of an ethnographic study of the Nichiren Shoshu Buddhist movement in America.[1] As a participant observer of the movement for a year and a half, the senior author had numerous opportunities to observe and informally converse with movement members in various situations.[2] After a period of time it became clear that the talk and reasoning of some members varied considerably from the rhetoric of others. Further investigation revealed discernible patterns in this talk and reasoning. These observations provided the impetus for our study. Our analysis is thus grounded in and illustrated throughout by the talk and reasoning of members of Nichiren Shoshu of America (NSA). These accounts are supplemented with examples drawn from other proselytizing movements and from the biographical accounts of both proselytizers and converts.

We begin by evaluating existing conceptions of conversion. We then propose four formal properties of the convert as a social type.

Finally, we discuss the theoretical and methodological implications of the formulation.

Common Conceptions of Conversion

Travisano (1970, p. 600) has suggested that the convert is recognizable by his *piety*. While this may be true, we are still left with the problem of recognizing piety. There are, however, a number of other characteristics used by laypersons and social scientists as a basis for identifying converts. Since these common conceptions have serious deficiencies, it is necessary to examine them critically.

Physical Aberrations. Some would have us believe that the convert has a characteristic phenotype, a sort of Cain's mark. Delgado (1980, p. 22) cites several adjectives used by psychiatrists, psychologists, and other observers to describe those who convert to cults—autistic-like, zombie-like, programmed, glass-eye stare, fixed facial smile, and stereotyped, robot-like responses. Hargrove (1980, p. 20) reports similar adjectives—a glassy-eyed thousand-mile stare, for example. Many laypersons too believe that converts can be detected by such physical attributes. As an irate parent of a member of the Unification Church was heard to comment at an anticult rally in Dallas in 1976: "You can tell if someone has been brainwashed by looking in their eyes. Haven't you noticed how Moonies seem to look right through you?" However vivid such descriptions, there is little scientific basis for using them as indicators of conversion. Moreover, as Cox (1978) has warned, such beliefs have frequently functioned historically to sanction religious persecution.

Group Membership or Participation. A second line of thinking equates conversion with membership or participation in new or fringe groups. If one is a member of such a group, whatever the criteria of membership, one is thereby regarded as a convert. Probably for purposes of convenience, social scientists often treat membership, especially in "deviant" religious groups, as an indicator of conversion (Enroth, 1977; Harrison,1974; Heirich, 1977; Lofland and Stark, 1965; Richardson, Stewart, and Simmonds, 1978). To equate membership and conversion, however, strikes us as a questionable assumption. It ignores the sociological axiom that people can be members of the same group or movement in different ways and with varying degrees of

commitment (Etzioni, 1975; Kanter, 1972; Turner and Killian, 1972). Evidence also suggests that membership in religious groups is much too heterogeneous to justify its use as a reliable indicator of conversion (Bultena, 1949; Fichter, 1954; Ebaugh, 1977). As Nock (1933) observed some time ago, people often participate in religious rituals and activities without fully adopting the group's value orientation.[3] Balch's (1980) recent study of a millenial UFO cult similarly indicates a tenuous link between participation and conversion. Such observations thus suggest that while membership may be necessary for conversion, it is seldom, if ever, a sufficient condition.

Demonstration Events. A third factor commonly treated as an indicator of conversion is the demonstration event. A demonstration event is essentially a social display of conversion. It may be institutionalized and routinized, as in the case of confirmations and testimonies, or it may be spontaneous and dramatic, as in the case of glossolalia and other ecstatic utterings and trances. Whatever its exact nature it is thought to symbolize what Lang and Lang (1961, p. 157) call the moment of awakening. It is partly for this reason that many religious proselytizers and groups place a premium on demonstration events. Such events ostensibly provide them with a benchmark for distinguishing the novitiate from the convert.[4]

Social scientists also frequently rely on demonstration events to identify converts. Zetterberg (1952, p. 159), in his study of a fundamentalist revival group, identified the convert as one who had openly confessed communion with God or had pursued the same. More recently, Heirich (1977, pp. 660–661) operationally defined the Catholic Pentecostal convert as one who not only avowed membership but who also reported receiving the baptism of the Holy Spirit. On the other hand, some social scientists have urged caution about relying on demonstration events as valid indicators of conversion. Noting that religious groups frequently apply considerable normative pressure, often in emotionally charged situations, for potential converts to demonstrate a conversion experience, Clark (1958, p. 204) has observed that many avowed converts show very little permanent behavioral evidence of personality change. Berger and Luckmann (1967, p. 158) have similarly observed that a conversion is nothing much: "The real thing is to be able to keep on taking it seriously; to retain a sense of its plausibility."

Many religious proselytizers also harbor skepticism about taking demonstration events too seriously. Rather than relaxing their vigilance after the prospective convert's spiritual awakening, the more successful proselytizers try to reinforce the demonstration experience with a social infrastructure. John Wesley, the principal founder of Methodism, seemed keenly aware of the fragile relationship between a demonstration event and a sustained conversion. One of Wesley's biographers (Doughty, 1955, p. 57) observed that "from the outset he realized the comparative futility of merely preaching to a miscellaneous crowd of people and leaving the matter there. He realized that individuals needed to be befriended, shepherded, instructed, and encouraged, and hence arose the societies which became the nuclei of the Methodist church."

George Whitefield, an eighteenth-century Calvinist, similarly spent much of his life preaching in England, Scotland, Wales, and the United States. Whitefield was content merely to preach and hope for the best; Wesley, however, declined to preach where it seemed impossible to consolidate his evangelical efforts. When writing from Haverfordwest in August 1763, for example, Wesley noted: "I was more convinced than ever that preaching like an apostle, without joining together those that are awakened and training them up in the ways of God, is only begetting children for the murderer [the devil]" (Doughty, 1955, p. 57). Whitefield ultimately realized the genius of Wesley in this regard. Toward the end of his life Whitefield admitted: "My brother Wesley acted wisely. The souls that were awakened under his ministry he joined in class, and thus preserved the fruit of his labor. This I neglected, and my people are a rope of sand" (p. 57).

Like Wesley, many contemporary religious proselytizers seem suspicious about the connection between demonstration events and sustained conversion. They also seem to have grasped the importance of establishing a *plausibility structure* (Berger and Luckmann, 1967, p. 158) in order to secure and stabilize conversion experiences. The leaders of the Unification Church, for example, make certain that such experiences are immediately succeeded by a series of workshops during which an intensive study of the theology of the movement is pursued, "thus allowing a firm intellectual faith to support the insight of the first moment" (De Maria, 1978, p. 110; also see Bromley and Shupe, 1979a, and Lofland, 1977, 1978). Nichiren Shoshu leaders are equally

skeptical about the value of a demonstration experience in the absence of sustained interaction with authentic converts. As one leader explained:

> It's fairly easy to do Shakubuku [proselytizing] and get a person to attend an NSA discussion meeting. And that person may decide to receive his Gohonzon [sacred scroll] and start practicing. But the real test comes after he receives the Gohonzon and starts practicing. The important thing is whether the individual can at least grasp a little of the significance of chanting. This is why attending NSA meetings on a regular basis is so important.

A theological understanding of conversion is not a social scientific understanding. Nevertheless, if the devotees of a religion are reluctant to accept at face value a demonstration event as a valid and reliable indicator of conversion, we think the social scientist may be well served by exercising equal caution.

Conversion as Radical Change. If there is one point about which students of conversion seem virtually unanimous, it is that conversion involves a radical change in a person's experience. James (1958, p. 162), for example, described conversion in terms of new or peripheral ideas that come to "form the habitual center of [one's] energy." Others have referred to it as a "drastic transformation in behavior patterns" (Shibutani, 1961, p. 523), "a complete turnabout in central values" (Lang and Lang, 1961, p. 153), and "a fundamental and wholehearted reversal of former values, attitudes, and beliefs" (Turner and Killian, 1972, pp. 388–389). Some scholars would reserve the term for sudden changes, others would include gradual changes, and still others would include multiple or serial changes (Clark, 1958; Parrucci, 1968; Richardson, 1980; Richardson and Stewart, 1978; Zetterberg, 1952). Nonetheless, the idea of radical change is at the core of all conceptions of conversion.

Taken by itself, the view of conversion as radical change is not particularly helpful. Two problems are immediately apparent. First, to argue that the conversion must be drastic, complete, or dramatic does not specify, either conceptually or operationally, how much change is enough to constitute a conversion. Several students of conversion have

implicitly addressed this problem by proposing continua for distin-
guishing radical and comprehensive changes. Travisano (1970, p. 598)
separates conversions from alterations, which he defines as reversible
and less drastic: "Complete disruption signals conversion while any-
thing less signals alternation." Similarly, Gordon (1974) distinguishes
conversion, "a radical discontinuity in the person's life," from less
extreme identity changes.[5] While these conceptual distinctions may be
useful in defining what conversion is not, they provide no unambigu-
ous criteria for identifying complete disruptions or radical discontinui-
ties. Hence the refinements proposed by Travisano (1970) and Gordon
(1974) are no more satisfactory than the earlier discussions of
conversion.

　　If we were to solve the problem of designating the degree of
change required for conversion, we would be left with a logically-prior
question: Exactly what is it that undergoes radical change? Is it beliefs
and values, behavior and identities, or something even more funda-
mental that changes? A simple declaration of conversion as radical
change in belief or behavior does not solve the problem. Questions
pertaining to the kinds of belief or behavior that change, the direction
of change, and the indicators of change still remain. To raise these
questions is not to take issue with the basic conception of conversion as
radical change. Rather, it is to insist that the character of that change
be specified.

　　Conversion and the Universe of Discourse. To the extent that
conversion is viewed as a radical change, we propose that it is the
universe of discourse which changes. As "a system of common or
social meanings," a universe of discourse provides a broad interpretive
framework in terms of which people live and organize experience
(Mead, 1962, pp. 88–90).[6] It constitutes the source of what has been
variously referred to as one's sense of ultimate grounding or root reality
(Heirich, 1977, pp. 553, 674–676), one's center of energy (James, 1958,
p. 162), or one's paradigm (Jones, 1978). To experience a radical and
fundamental change in one's universe of discourse is therefore no
casual change of attitude, opinion, or belief. It is not merely a matter of
rearranging the trivial elements of one's consciousness as one rear-
ranges furniture. Rather, it entails the displacement of one universe of
discourse by another and its attendant grammar or rules for putting

things together. Perhaps this is why Jones (1978) finds it useful to compare conversion to Kuhn's (1962) idea of paradigm shift.

If it is the universe of discourse that undergoes radical change during conversion, can that change be specified? In short, what can be said to characterize the talk and reasoning of the convert? In the following pages we propose four key properties by which to define the convert: biographical reconstruction, adoption of a master attribution scheme, suspension of analogical reasoning, and embracement of a master role.

Properties of Conversion

Biographical Reconstruction. In *The Varieties of Religious Experience* James (1958, p. 177) observed that when one undergoes conversion "a complete division is established in the twinkling of an eye between the old life and the new." While not all conversions occur in the twinkling of an eye, there seems to be little question but that they all involve a division between the old and the new. This division involves the dissolution of the past, on the one hand, and its reconstitution on the other. The dismantling process is clearly illustrated by the Italian writer Ignazio Silone's account of his conversion to communism in the 1930s: "My own internal world, the 'middle ages,' which I had inherited and which were rooted in my soul . . . were shaken to their foundations, as though by an earthquake. Everything was thrown into the melting-pot, everything became a problem" (Crossman, 1952, p. 87). But the past is not only shattered; the disjointed pieces are reassembled in accordance with the new universe of discourse and its grammar. Some aspects of the past are jettisoned, others are redefined, and some are put together in ways previously inconceivable. One's biography is, in short, reconstructed. As Silone went on to note, "Life, death, love, good, evil, truth, all changed their meaning or lost it altogether" (p. 87).

James is not the only student of conversion to have alluded to this process of biographical reconstruction. In fact, it is the one property of conversion that is acknowledged with some frequency in the literature (Beckford, 1978; Berger, 1963; Berger and Luckmann, 1967; Burke, 1965; Gordon, 1974; Jones, 1978; Shibutani, 1961; Taylor, 1976,

1978; Travisano, 1970). Perhaps this is because it is such a prominent feature of the talk and reasoning of converts. Converts seldom seem to tire of reminding others of how they have changed, how their life has improved, how they not only see things more clearly now but also differently. Moreover, from the convert's viewpoint such changes are rendered reasonable and understandable by two "facts" about the past. First, the convert's former understanding of self, past events, and others is now regarded as a misunderstanding. Following the formula "then I thought . . . now I know" (Berger and Luckmann, 1967, p. 160), previous motives, feelings, and evaluations are regarded as misguided or erroneous. As the following comments of Nichiren Shoshu converts illustrate, converts talk as if they suffered false consciousness if not actual blindness:

> *Male, white, single, under 30:* At the time I joined I was involved in a hippie-type philosophy, and consequently I felt that I had no need for any material belongings in order to attain happiness. It seems unbelievable now, but because of my erroneous concept of a happy life I was totally blind to my actual condition, which was miserable.

> *Female, white, single, under 30:* Chanting has cleared up my mind enough to see that in the years before I chanted I had many misconceptions about life. . . . I avoided looking at this until chanting brought out the wisdom that could help me see such problems.

> *Married couple, white, 30–40:* Where we thought we were happily married before, we found that there were many barriers between us, many illusions hiding our true selves from ourselves and each other.

Gripped by the realization that preconversion interpretations were erroneous, the convert comes to redefine the past "correctly." Old facts and aspects of one's biography are thus given new meanings. Not only are former identities evaluated negatively but the course and character of the convert's life history is typically reconstructed as troublesome, misdirected, even loathsome. The talk of Nichiren Shoshu converts abounds with examples of this process:

Female, white, single, under 30: Approximately a year ago [before conversion] . . . I was going around screaming and protesting for what I thought was the right cause. Little did I know that I wasn't making the right cause and that I was creating so much antivalue in my life.

Female, white, single, 16: Before discovering NSA I almost flunked out of school. All I ever thought about was the weekend, the guy I was going out with, and getting high with my friends. I was really a bum. . . . What I thought was the real cool way to be was really very phony.

Male, white, single, 29: Once I began to chant I came to realize that sometimes behind what seems to be a completely happy person there lie problems and limitations that even the person himself is unaware of. Now, after thirteen months of practice, I can look back and see what the true state of my life was.

That converts can look back and see the "true state" of their lives prior to conversion is understandable considering that the past is viewed from the vantage point of the enlightened present. Since the present functions as the final arbiter of truth about the past, biographical reconstruction may even involve the fabrication and insertion of events "wherever they are needed to harmonize the remembered with the reinterpreted past" (Berger and Luckmann, 1967, p. 160). In this regard, Heirich (1977, p. 658) has suggested that the converts he studied tended to exaggerate their preconversion sinfulness to increase the power and value of their conversions. The senior author's association with a number of Nichiren Shoshu converts revealed that their biographical reconstructions too are frequently laced with exaggerations and fabrications. To point to such observations, however, is not to suggest that exaggerations, fabrications, and denials are intended to deceive. The convert is not perpetuating fraud but aligning the past "with the truth that, necessarily, embraces both present and past" (Berger and Luckmann, 1967, p. 160). Ironically, the convert is not privileged to a nonpartisan knowledge of his or her past. Conversion as biographical reconstruction denies one an undistorted recall of the past. This situation is not restricted, of course, to converts. It is virtually axiomatic in

phenomenology and in Mead's (1932, 1938) philosophy of the present
that personal biographies and identities are continuously redefined in
the light of new experiences. For the convert, however, this everyday
phenomenon is greatly amplified and intensified; the fact of conver-
sion represents the dominant feature of the convert's consciousness. It
provides the point of view in terms of which both life before and life
after conversion are interpreted. Hence the old and the new may bear
slight resemblance indeed to each other.

Adoption of a Master Attribution Scheme. The second formal
property of conversion involves the adoption of a master attribution
scheme. Attribution refers to the cognitive process by which people
form causal interpretations of the behavior of self and others and the
events in the world around them. Specification of the nature, causes,
and consequences of the attribution process has been a major objective
of much social psychological research and theorizing during the past
several decades (Jones and others, 1972; Shaver, 1975; Wegner and Vall-
acher, 1977, pp. 39–88). Although there are several distinct models of
the attribution process (Heider, 1958; Jones and Davis, 1965; Kelley,
1967, 1971), each rests on a number of common assumptions and obser-
vations that are germane to the argument being presented. First, attri-
bution is regarded as an everyday cognitive phenomenon deriving from
people's need to make sense of the world around them (Kanouse and
Hanson, 1972, p. 47; Shaver, 1975, pp. 4–5, 58). Second, it is assumed
that the causes of most behavior are attributed to internal or external
factors. To attribute responsibility to internal factors is to assume that
there is something about the actor's personal qualities and dispositions
that cause the action. To make an external attribution, on the other
hand, is to account for the action in terms of the environment, includ-
ing the actions of other persons. Third, it has been observed that attri-
butions tend to vary with differences in available information,
self-interest, and change in role and situation (Jones and Nisbett, 1971;
Shaver, 1975; Wegner and Vallacher, 1977). Fourth, attribution theo-
rists assume that people are basically rational problem solvers (Shaver,
1975, p. 58). People are seen as constructive thinkers searching for the
causes of the events confronting them in a logical way (Jones and
others, 1972, p. x). Kelley (1972) has cautioned, however, that causal
attributions are not merely a function of one's perceptual and logical
faculties. He argues that they are also circumscribed by *causal*

schemata—the general conceptions people have "about how certain kinds of causes interact to produce a specific kind of effect" (p. 151). Kelley suggests that there are different causal schemata and that people typically draw on a number of these types when searching for causes.

Kelley's argument, in many respects, is consistent with Mills's (1940) contention that causal attributions are largely derived from *vocabularies of motive.* According to Mills, the motives people avow or impute in response to questioned conduct or events are organized into vocabularies that have currency only in certain social situations or groupings. Hence different vocabularies of motive may come into play in different situations and with different sets of actors.

In sum, then, the foregoing observations suggest that inferring the causes of behavior is an invariant component of the interpretive process, that the direction of causal inferences depends on role and situation, and that attributional analyses are fairly rational but are circumscribed by causal schemes or vocabularies of motive.

If these assumptions are correct, then we would argue that conversion involves the adoption of a master attribution scheme. By this we mean that one causal scheme or vocabulary of motives informs all causal attributions. A single locus of causality is simultaneously sharpened and generalized. Feelings, behavior, and events that were previously inexplicable or accounted for by reference to a number of causal schemes are now interpreted from the standpoint of one pervasive scheme. Interpretive options are thus inhibited. Consequently, causal inferences remain constant despite variation in situations. There is neither equivocation nor negotiation with respect to the cause for the behavior or event under scrutiny. The cause is known beforehand. Hence nothing is ambiguous or fortuitous. A master attribution scheme is thereby substituted for a series of multiple attribution schemes that were used previously. All this is clearly illustrated by Arthur Koestler's discussion of his conversion to communism in 1931. In *The God That Failed* (Crossman, 1952, p. 19), Koestler writes: "By the time I had finished with *Feuerbach* and *State and Revolution,* something had clicked in my brain which shook me like a mental explosion. . . .The whole universe [fell] into pattern like the stray pieces of a jigsaw puzzle assembled by magic at one stroke. There [was] now an answer to every question, doubts and conflicts [were] a matter of the tortured past."

This process is similarly represented in the talk and reasoning of Nichiren Shoshu converts. Consider, for example, the following statements:

> *Male, white, married, 28:* If you think a woman has no fortune or a certain man has no fortune, who do we blame? We look outside and say it's society's fault, or the woman says it's man's fault. The black man says his condition is the white man's fault. Russia says it is America's fault, and we say it's Russia's fault. Somebody at work told me about a TV program on the correctional system in California. The criminals say that they've been in jail too long and that this system doesn't work. So they blame the system for their problems. In other words, it's always someone else's fault—the system's fault, the country's fault, the environment's fault, the spouse's fault. Actually, the only one or thing at fault is ourself.

> *Male, black, single, 25:* My karma used to be really bad. It was apparent to most everyone but me. I bounced from one job to another and was really irresponsible. Only I didn't know it then. It was always somebody else's fault, or at least I thought so. It is only recently that I have come to realize that I was having these problems because of me. There is no blaming others now.

Apart from illustrating the extent to which conversion involves a sharpening and generalizing of a single causal scheme, these statements suggest that the process is frequently accompanied by a shift in causal locus. Whereas many Nichiren Shoshu converts previously attributed blame for their preconversion problems to other individuals or to some structural arrangement, they now internalize causality and avow personal responsibility. The following testimony of a twenty-year-old Nichiren Shoshu convert further illustrates this switch: "Before joining Nichiren Shoshu I blamed any problems I had on other people or on the environment. It was always my parents, or the school, or society. But through chanting I discovered the real source of my difficulties: myself. Chanting has helped me to realize that rather than running around blaming others, I am the one who needs to change."

Inspection of the attributional talk of converts to other movements suggests that a switch in causal locus is probably a frequent

concomitant of conversion in general. As a well-known television per-
sonality explained when discussing her involvement in est (Erhard
Seminar Training): "I took est training and . . . it helped me in terms
of accepting responsibility. I used to spend a lot of time assigning fault
to other people. There is no fault. I'm responsible."

These illustrations have been drawn from the talk of converts to
religious and personal growth movements. In each case the shift in
causal locus has been in the direction of internalizing blame and
responsibility. Since personal transformation constitutes either the
primary goal or the major means of changing the world for most
religious and personal growth movements, effecting a shift from an
external to an internal locus of control seems to be a necessary step in
conversion to such groups. Certainly in the case of such groups as
Nichiren Shoshu and Transcendental Meditation, chanting makes no
sense until such a shift is made. But a shift in the perceived locus of
causality is not unique to religious and personal growth movements. It
is also frequently a constituent element of conversion to movements
that seek change by directly altering sociopolitical structures. In the
case of politically oriented groups, however, the shift involves a change
from an internal to an external locus of control—that is, from self-
blaming to structural-blaming, from victim-blaming to system-
blaming. The importance of this switch in relation to political action
is well documented in the annals of movements for sociopolitical
change. In discussing the unemployed workers' movement of the 1930s,
Piven and Cloward (1979, p. 49) emphasize that people did not begin to
demand relief until they realized that "it wasn't they who were to
blame, but 'the system.'" Along similar lines, Morrison and Steeves's
(1967, p. 427) study of the differences between National Farm Organiza-
tion (NFO) members and nonparticipating midwestern farmers
revealed that fewer NFO members regarded "their difficulties and those
of other farmers as due to individual inadequacies of effort, talent, or
resources. . . . Fewer NFO members blame themselves for their difficul-
ties, and more blame certain features of the farm marketing system. . . .
And just as structural blame rather than self-blame characterizes NFO
members, hope in an organizational structure designed to bring
changes in the features of the larger system perceived as faulty, rather
than self-hope, is their trademark."

Students of the feminist movement have similarly noted that the
mobilization of women has been contingent on the realization that

their grievances and problems are not personal and idiosyncratic but systemic and thus political (Deckard, 1979, p. 460). Changing the locus of blame is one of the main functions of women's consciousness-raising groups. The primary purpose of such groups, as Bird (1969, p. 216) has noted, is to get women "to recognize the political nature of complaints that are conventionally dismissed as personal."

In emphasizing that mobilization for political action frequently involves a shift in attributional orientation, we do not mean to imply that participants in politically oriented movements necessarily have undergone conversion. We would, however, argue that when conversion does occur, whether the universe of discourse is religious or secular, it not only involves the adoption of a master attribution scheme but may involve a switch in causal locus as well. Hence converts reinterpret their past by redefining some aspects of it as problematic, but they also come to discover the "correct" source of blame for these recently acquired or more acutely defined troubles.

Suspension of Analogical Reasoning. To understand the third formal property of conversion, we must first consider the logic of metaphor. A metaphor is a way of describing something in terms of something else. It "involves a transfer (*metaphora:* carrying over) of one term from one level of meaning to another" (Brown, 1977, p. 80). It is literally an inappropriate application of a concept to a domain. The unfamiliar is made familiar in terms of the already familiar. Since metaphors are fundamental linguistic tools for constructing reality and communicating experience, it is reasonable to expect that metaphor would occupy a prominent position in the talk of converts. Our observations suggest, however, that converts rely only sparingly on metaphorical reasoning. While they may employ iconic metaphors, they typically suspend use of analogical metaphors when talking about their beliefs and practices.

Analogical metaphors demonstrate the ways in which one thing is like another; iconic metaphors portray the uniqueness of a thing. In Brown's words (1977, p. 115), iconic metaphors "picture what things are, rather than how things are alike." Recent Christianity, for example, has embraced as its favorite iconic metaphor "God is love." Similarly, the iconic metaphor "born again" has become a cliché in the evangelical movement. Converts have no aversion to this kind of metaphor. Using iconic metaphors can establish the uniqueness of the

group or its world view. Analogical metaphors, on the other hand, are resisted because they violate the convert's position that his or her world view is incomparable to other world views.

   If iconic metaphor affirms the authenticity and sacredness of conversion, analogical metaphor threatens to invalidate and profane it.[7] Consider the following example of a Nichiren Shoshu *recruit's* use of analogical metaphor to understand the movement's recruitment practice referred to as Shakubuku: "Doing Shakubuku as a follower of Nichiren Shoshu is just like witnessing as a follower of Jesus Christ. Shakubuku is just like proselytizing; it's just another word for what the Hare Krishna and Jesus people do in the streets." Upon hearing this, a Nichiren Shoshu *convert* of several years turned around and exclaimed: "Shakubuku and proselytizing aren't the same! Shakubuku is to tell somebody about Nam-Myoho-Renge-Kyo! It is a great act of mercy and compassion, whereas to proselytize is to put pressure on people and force them to come to meetings. The two aren't the same." By denying the validity of the novice's analogy, the convert laid claim to a certain incomparability regarding Nichiren Shoshu. She asserted the uniqueness of Shakubuku. A social scientist might be quick to point out the functional equivalence between Shakubuku and witnessing. A convert denies precisely this "carrying over" of the term *proselytizing* from other religious contexts to that of Nichiren Shoshu. It is thus that converts suspend analogical reasoning when describing their world view.

   The suspension of analogical reasoning repeatedly manifests itself in the talk of Nichiren Shoshu converts. Just as converts to other contemporary religious movements claim that theirs is the One Way, so Nichiren Shoshu converts insist that only they have The Answer to enlightenment, peace, and happiness. As one member proclaimed, "Nichiren Shoshu is unlike any other group in American society. Only Nichiren Shoshu has the means to change the world." Similarly, Nichiren Shoshu converts assert the incomparability of the movement's leadership. Consider these comments extracted from the senior author's field notes:

   While talking with a middle-level leader following a chanting-conversion meeting, the topic turned to Daisaki Ikeda, the movement's formal president and

inspirational leader or "Master," as members refer to
him. Having observed and experienced the highly emo-
tional response Ikeda's presence elicits from members, I
indicated that he struck me as being a charismatic indi-
vidual. In response, the middle-level leader with whom I
was speaking bristled and emphatically stated that
"Ikeda is not a charismatic individual. President Ken-
nedy and Martin Luther King were charismatic, but Pres-
ident Ikeda is not. He is an extraordinary man, but he is
not like other major figures and leaders. You can't com-
pare President Ikeda with them. He's unique."

Sociologically, the suspension of analogical reasoning by con-
verts should come as no surprise. Durkheim ([1915], 1965) has provided
a powerful clue for understanding this property of conversion. For
Durkheim it is nothing less than the radical distinction between the
sacred and profane that defines religion. The sacred is both logically
and emotionally antithetical to the profane. The sacred is, in Otto's
(1973) words, "the wholly other." It does not admit comparison to the
profane; it is ineffable. The sacred is possessed of a uniqueness that
defies all efforts at comparison to the profane. It is literally unknowa-
ble and inaccessible in terms of the profane. This helps explain the
convert's resistance to analogical comparison between his or her reli-
gion and others. For the convert, other meaning systems reside in the
realm of the profane. Therefore, "carrying over" the particular from
another (profane) meaning system in order to explain the particulars of
his or her (sacred) meaning system would be unthinkable. As such,
relying on analogy to other religions to explain one's own conversion
is more than merely inaccurate and imperfect communication. Rather,
it is an affront to the sacred itself. Analogical metaphor is transformed
from a linguistic convenience to utter profanation.

Suspending analogical reasoning thus allows converts to assign
incomparable value to their world view. By removing other belief
systems from the status of eligible competition, a virtually impermeable
boundary is established around the convert's world view. The convert's
sacred commodity is thereby exempted from the pressures of the free
market. Thus the convert is protected from the profaning effects of
analogical comparison.

Embracement of a Master Role. The final property of conver-
sion, discernible in both the behavior and the rhetoric of converts, is

constituted by the generalization, rather than compartmentalization, of the convert role and its embracement by the convert. Role compartmentalization has long been regarded as part and parcel of modernity (Durkheim [1893], 1964), functional rationality (Mannheim, 1940), and bureaucratization (Weber, 1947). Nevertheless, not all roles are compartmentalized or situation-specific. Hughes's (1945) distinction between master and subordinate statuses suggests that some of our statuses are more central than others both to our behavior and to the way we view ourselves and the way others view us. Banton's (1965) threefold classification of roles based on their differentiation and generality similarly suggests that basic roles determine the allocation and performance of other roles in a wide range of situations. Our observations indicate that the convert role functions in a similar manner but with several crucial distinctions. First, whereas the assumption of a basic role or master status is typically a function of ascription (Banton, 1965), altercasting (Weinstein and Deutschberger, 1963), or labeling (Becker, 1963), the convert role is typically volitional and achieved.

A second and perhaps more significant difference is that the convert role, unlike most master statuses or basic roles, comprises a kind of representative role. While Parsons (1951, p. 100), who coined the term *representative role*, restricts its usage to leadership roles having to do with affairs external to the collectivity, any group or movement role that leads one to act as a functionary in extragroup activities and relations can be called a representative role. Drawing on this concept in his discussion of ideology and conflict, Coser (1956, pp. 113–114) notes that "in the Marxian labor movement . . . any active member, whether or not he had a leadership role in the organization, was expected 'to represent' the movement to the outside world." In a similar vein, all Nichiren Shoshu members are expected to act at all times, in the words of one member, as "representatives of the movement, as ambassadors of President Ikeda." They are constantly instructed by their leaders and the movement's newspaper that in whatever they do, collectively or individually, whether in the context of family, work, school, or leisure, it is to be done with the interests of the movement in mind. As a major leader explained before a gathering of over five thousand members: "The relationship of NSA to the other people in society with whom we work, live, and meet every day is very important. We should keep in mind that how we live our daily life is

an exact image of the entire movement. We should become people of whom others will say, 'The members of NSA are really great.' To do that is to advance our cause. Therefore, in every action you make and in every activity you participate, you can be carrying out the movement's mission."

To be sure, not all religions, causes, or movements are as "greedy" (Coser, 1967) as Nichiren Shoshu; nor do all members act in accordance with such demanding expectations and directives. But some movement members appear to consider their group's interests and expectations in the construction of their lines of action in nearly all extragroup activities and domains of life. But unlike many incumbents of traditional representative roles, converts do not view themselves as mere functionaries whose commitment is based primarily on instrumental or extraneous considerations (Becker, 1960). Instead the convert fully embraces the convert role.[8] Not only do converts introject and see themselves in terms of the convert role, but it governs their orientation in all situations. Daily activities and routines that were formerly taken for granted or interpreted from the standpoint of various situationally specific roles are now interpreted from the standpoint of the convert role, which is seen as the embodiment of the movement's interests and mission. Hence the convert does not act merely in terms of self-interest but in the interest of the cause or mission. Daily routines are infused with new meaning and added significance. As a Nichiren Shoshu convert, who aspired to be a nationally ranked tennis player, explained: "Before I started to chant, I had no concrete purpose in playing tennis. I used to think of all the troubles other people had and tennis seemed like a joke. But at those last two tennis tournaments I felt like I was playing for world peace." In a similar vein, a born-again Christian who turned down a $400,000 professional basketball contract in favor of playing for Athletes in Action, the athletic arm of Campus Crusade for Christ, recounts: "As I stand at midcourt during halftime at the AIA games, giving my personal testimony to God's love, my heart swells with the joy of being a Christian. . . . Most people spend their lives investing for retirement. I spend mine investing for eternity."

A third distinction between the convert role as a master status and traditional master statuses, such as race and sex, is that converts enthusiastically announce their identity in nearly all situations. In fact, the convert seldom lets others forget this role identity during the course

of interaction. It is worn like a uniform and is continuously on display (sometimes literally as in the case of Krishna devotees and sometimes figuratively as in the case of converts to Nichiren Shoshu and Christianity). Perhaps this is another reason why conversation with a convert is often a halting and exasperating affair. As the parents of a convert to a Jesus commune lamented when discussing their relationship to their daughter: "It is not so much the fact that she has become what some people call a Jesus freak that bothers us. At least she's not into drugs or some crazy political group. What is bothersome, though, is that when we see each other we can't just sit down and talk without everything being related to Jesus or her communal brothers and sisters." Or as the parents of a Nichiren Shoshu convert similarly noted: "In many ways [our son] is more pleasant to be around since he joined Nichiren Shoshu. He smiles more and he is not so argumentative. But he has this irritating habit of relating just about everything we say or do to karma or chanting."

Finally, embracement of the convert role gives rise to what Travisano (1970, p. 605) calls the *ubiquitous utilization* of the identity associated with the convert role. Metaphorically, it is not merely a mask that is taken off or put on according to the situation. Rather, it is central to nearly all situations. For the convert, such role identities as father, mother, brother, sister, student, and so on pale in comparison to the role identity of the convert. That is because, to paraphrase Hughes (1945), all role identities are subordinate to the identity that flows from the master role of the convert.

Summary and Conclusions

At least since the time of Simmel, the identification of social types has been regarded as an important objective of sociological analysis. In keeping with this tradition, we have denoted the convert as a social type. Identifying the convert as a social type helps to refine current conceptualizations of conversion, most of which designate little more than a radical personal change. The precise nature of that change is rarely specified. We argue that the change pertains to the universe of discourse. Furthermore, we have identified and described four properties of conversion observable in the talk and reasoning of converts: biographical reconstruction, adoption of a master attribution

scheme, suspension of analogical reasoning, and embracement of a
master role. The display of these rhetorical properties indicates the
displacement of one universe of discourse by another. The convert is
thereby discernible by his or her talk and reasoning.

Several theoretical and methodological implications are sug-
gested by our analysis. First, it suggests that conversion is best concep-
tualized as the process by which a new or formerly peripheral universe
of discourse comes to inform all aspects of a person's life. In short, it
involves the ascendance of a universe of discourse to the status of a
primary authority. The universe of discourse need not be new but can
shift from periphery to center. In the case of religion, for example,
conversion need not be restricted to acknowledging only religious
migration (the Orthodox Jew becomes a fundamentalist Christian) or
the sounding of a religious chord among the previously unreligious
(Madelyn Murray O'Hair's son is born again). Moreover, the backslider
or prodigal son who reaffirms commitment to a religion from which he
strayed can qualify as a convert. Similarly, the citizen of a community
of faith may come by a radical redefinition of how God works and
apprehend an old and familiar religious belief with a new intensity and
clarity of vision. Nominal belief thus becomes True Belief. What was
peripheral to consciousness now becomes central.

Second, in arguing that this transformation of consciousness is
indicated by the talk and reasoning of those who experience it, our
analysis provides the researcher with empirical guidelines for locating
the convert. To identify with confidence a transformation of con-
sciousness is an elusive matter indeed. It is in this regard that a focus on
language becomes invaluable. Inasmuch as language is practical con-
sciousness, it stands to reason that transformations of consciousness
necessitate transformations of language. Thus, by noting the presence
of the four rhetorical features discussed here, we mark the occasion of
conversion. It is thereby no longer incumbent on the researcher to
guess who has undergone the consciousness transformation that typi-
fies him or her as a convert.

Third, our analysis refines the distinction between converts and
other members. While a few scholars such as Nock (1933) have empha-
sized that adhesion to a religious group is no guarantee of conversion,
rarely have such distinctions been noted or pursued. Following Nock,
we argue that membership avowal, actual membership status, and par-

ticipation are inadequate indicators of conversion. Instead, our obser-
vations suggest that it is the rhetoric of converts that sets them apart
from fellow group members. It is their talk and reasoning that is symp-
tomatic of the consciousness transformation that makes them unique
among their peers.

Fourth, our observations raise serious questions about much of
the research concerned with the causes of conversion. The bulk of this
work has relied largely on converts themselves for data. If conversion is
the process through which a universe of discourse comes to function as
a primary authority, and if biographical reconstruction is a crucial
feature of this process, then converts' accounts of their life and motiva-
tion prior to conversion become immediately suspect. Since observa-
tions about the past are always refracted by the prism of one's universe
of discourse, a change in universe of discourse provides a different
vantage point from which to view one's life. Thus the medium through
which the convert's retrospective vision passes is far from transparent.
Rather, it is colored by the spectrum of understandings and meanings
that attend conversion. Far from being trusted sources of information
about their past, converts are uniquely denied impartial knowledge
about the factors that might have precipitated conversion. Hence stud-
ies that rely only on converts as sources of background information
about conversion are faced with the peculiar paradox of being unable
to explain a phenomenon because of a fundamental characteristic of
the phenomenon itself.

Finally, we suggest that this portrayal of the convert as a social
type is by no means restricted to religion. It is neither institutional
context nor ideological content that denotes the convert as a social
type. Some of the examples of conversion presented in this essay
pertain to politics; others could be found, with equal justification,
in the social realms of occupation, psychotherapy, and life-style. It
is the form, not the content, of claims to truth that betrays the con-
vert as a social type.

Notes

1. Nichiren Shoshu of America (NSA) is a noncommunal,
proselytizing Buddhist movement that seeks to change the world by
changing individuals. It was introduced into the United States in 1960

as a foreign extension of Sokagakkai—a Japanese Buddhist movement that emerged as a significant religious and political force in post–World War II Japan. At the time of its establishment in 1960, NSA claimed fewer than five hundred followers, nearly all of whom were Japanese brides of American G.I.s. By 1975 the movement claimed more than 200,000 variously committed adherents, over 90 percent of whom are Occidental and most of whom have joined since 1966. For a detailed examination of the movement's ideology, goals, and operation in America, see Snow (1976, 1979).

2. The role of participant observer demanded the devotion of considerable time and energy to the movement—receiving daily phone calls (at all hours) from members, attending meetings on the average of three nights per week for over a year, accompanying members on recruiting missions in public places, visiting other members in their homes, even giving "an experience" (testimony) when called upon during recruitment/conversion meetings. Although the senior author attempted to be as honest as possible about his sociological identity, neither this identity nor the purposes of the research were announced in every situation. The senior author's association with the movement was thus participatory and intense, and overt and covert, at one and the same time. For further discussion of this research, see Snow (1976, pp. 1–38; 1979).

3. Nock (1933, pp. 6–7) coined the term *adhesion* to denote participation in religious group activities and rituals without taking a new way of life. Unlike conversion, adhesion is characterized not by a crossing of religious frontiers but by "having a foot on each side of the fence." Adhesion involves an acceptance of new worships as "useful supplements and not as substitutes."

4. Demonstration events may function even more importantly as commitment-building activities (Gerlach and Hine, 1970; Kanter, 1972; Shaffir, 1978; Toch, 1965). A public profession of faith, for example, brings into play powerful social forces that help anchor the individual's identities and overall self-conception in the group. As Turner and Killian (1972, p. 33) have noted in this regard: "When the individual goes on record in support of a movement, he becomes committed because persons around him are inclined to treat him as an adherent and to expect continued adherence from him."

5. Gordon (1974, pp. 165–166) refers to these less radical types of identity change as alteration and consolidation. Thus we have Berger

and Luckmann (1967, pp. 157–158) proposing alternation in lieu of conversion; Travisano (1970) contrasting alternation and conversion; and Gordon distinguishing alternation (conversion) from alteration and consolidation. One is left wondering if, as Berger (1967, p. 177) once observed, definitions can amount to more than matters of taste.

   6. Travisano (1970) too employs the concept of a universe of discourse in his thoughtful discussion of conversion. He found that concept to be useful because it "emphasizes that meanings are established and exist in symbolic interaction" (pp. 594–595). Mead's expression appeals to us for a different reason. It is less the symbolic interactionist qualities of the term and more the concern with language that makes it attractive for our purposes. For much the same reason, we prefer the concept of a universe of discourse over similar terms such as *meaning system* (Berger, 1963, 1967), *informing point of view* (Burke, 1965), and *sacred cosmos* (Luckmann, 1967).

   7. We do not mean to suggest that some converts never employ analogical metaphors. Close inspection reveals, however, that occasional reliance by converts on analogical metaphor finds them avoiding other meaning systems (particularly if institutionalized) as the points of analogical reference. Rather, naturalistic phenomena such as a birth, panoramic views, and explosions are the points of comparison. Physical sensations such as sudden warmth, a sense of energy, or the perception of sudden illumination are frequently used in analogical comparison. In most instances, naturalistic phenomena and physical sensations are not serious competitors of religious meaning systems.

   8. "To embrace a role is to disappear completely into the virtual self available in the situation, to be fully seen in terms of the image, and to confirm expressively one's acceptance of it" (Goffman, 1961, p. 106).

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