

BECOMING BELIEVERS: STUDYING THE CONVERSION PROCESS FROM WITHIN

by Aaron C.T. Smith and Bob Stewart

Abstract. Employing an extended case method ethnography (Burawoy 1998), the researcher joined five new members forming a spiritualist's group under the leadership of an experienced advocate. Over a period of eighteen months, the researcher attended all the group's activities and events. Data were collected to reflexively interrogate the process theory of conversion proposed by Lewis Rambo (1993). The data revealed conversion to be a multifaceted and dynamic process of cognitive change, mediated by structural, and contextual forces. The results provide a reconceptualization of Rambo's theory, presenting a theoretical expansion of the model emphasizing its mechanisms of action. The paper details the composition of the "Interaction-Commitment" mechanism, operationalized within four submechanisms emanating from Rambo's roles, rituals, rhetoric, and relationships. This longitudinal study shows that most of the hard work toward conversion occurs before any formal interaction with a conversion advocate. Conversion operates most effectively under conditions of cognitive economy wherein the belief path follows a path of least cognitive expenditure.

Keywords: psychology of religion; religious studies; spiritual transformation

One evening, toward the end of my time with a group committed to "humanitarian and spiritual" development, I channelled a spirit. Our group sat in a circle and discussed spiritual issues before conducting rituals to initiate contact with the departed. Eyes closed in a candle-flecked room, I apparently allowed myself to "channel" a spirit. When finished, as on previous occasions, I tried to convince the group that there had been no spirit involved. However, the group leader insisted that I had not only channelled a spirit who had provided poignant insights, but had also demonstrated remarkable talent as a spiritual "medium." At the end of the session, another group member confessed that there had been no spirit involved in her "channelling" either. "Do you think any of this is real?" she asked.

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More than 50 years ago, Eric Hoffer (1951) pointed out in his landmark book, *The True Believer*, that many who join a rising revolutionary movement will find attractive the possibility of spectacular change. Equally, given the preeminence of spiritual or religious beliefs in the lives of so many, understanding the processes of religious conversion has relevance to both science and religion. Around 80 percent of the world's population holds some form of religious conviction (Barrett, Kurian, and Johnson 2001). In addition, according to David Hay (1990) and Bernard Spilka, George Brown, and Stephen Cassidy (1992), approximately one-fourth to one-third of American and British citizens, respectively, report meaningful religious experiences. Three percent described their experiences as an intense mystical episode (Beit-Hallahmi and Argyle 1997). While most religious adherents maintain the denominations of their upbringings, around 10 percent convert to another faith (Lamb and Bryant 1999). Of this number is it unclear how many embraced wholesale an alternative doctrine, or how close the new belief set was to the original. In general, however, conversion appears to be uncommon and mysterious, even to those who have undergone the process (Rambo 1999; Rambo and Farhadian 1999). Moreover, while religious belief might be widespread, the composition of individual belief varies. For example, D. Jason Slone (2006) demonstrated that divergences between an individual's religious beliefs and the doctrine endorsed by the group to which they belong are commonplace. Belief seems to be common, but belief content is parochial, perhaps even individual.

One important position on religious conversion was offered by Lewis Rambo (1993). Like Hoffer, he observed that stable, resilient environments will contain few members receptive to conversion, whereas those in crisis will contain more; the duration and intensity of contextual change affects receptivity. Rambo predicted that first, marginal members of a group or society are more likely to convert as they have little to lose; second, the more consistent and consonant the old and new cultural systems, values, and symbols, the more probable that conversion will transpire; third, interaction between advocates and potential converts is dynamic, the relative power differential relevant to the process; and fourth, motivations vary between those who convert early to a movement and those who do so when it has become established. Rambo's approach is fluid, emphasizing susceptibility, and cognitive economy where new beliefs closely align with an existing set. He also advocates in-depth and long-term approaches to studying religious conversion.

Our study employed a longitudinal ethnography where one researcher acted as an extended case participant in a newly formed group within a spiritualist educational foundation. A second researcher provided analytical support for data interpretation. The study aimed to explore the process of conversion through numerous in-depth cases where all participants

were exposed to the same experiences. The study takes conceptual guidance from the work of Rambo (1993), Rambo and Farhadian (1999), and Davis and Rambo (2005), which identify a seven-stage model of conversion conferring central importance to rituals, relationships, roles, and rhetoric. Our study specifically sought to explore the mechanisms underpinning Rambo's conversion framework through an extended case method (Burawoy 1998). Accordingly, observations were employed over a lengthy period where data were used to conduct a series of successive theoretical revisions of Rambo's framework. We suggest some cognitive mechanisms that underpin a key part of the conversion process, and recommend their further testing.

Our research tries to capture reality in its context by exploring the experiences of participants from the inside rather than from the outside. We seek to expose aspects of the conversion process by understanding participants' experiences rather than measuring them. As a result, our research procedures produced descriptive data, including participants' own reports of their experiences. One advantage of this approach is that it focuses on participants in an environmental context, encouraging interpretations, and meanings, as well as a deeper understanding of their worlds. On the other hand, exploratory work such as this raises issues about data reliability. In this case, the protocol called for one of the research team to become involved, assuming an active role in the experiences of participants. While the purpose was to challenge and extend a theoretical position on conversion, data could be viewed as subject to response bias and therefore lack internal validity. In addition, the sample size in this study represents a limitation and generalization would be inappropriate. We address the methodological approach and its implications in detail in the third section of this paper. Our results and conclusions constitute theoretical propositions to be tested under rigorous empirical conditions.

In the next section, we introduce prominent approaches to conversion and their perspectives on belief transition. In the subsequent sections we explain the research design, profile the research site, discuss the results, and present a model of belief conversion. The final section offers concluding comments and highlights some implications for further study.

CONVERSION AND BELIEF TRANSITION

The term conversion refers to the inward, psychological experience of individuals, their spiritual disposition, or even public affiliation. Although a distinction between inward and outward displays of conversion remains helpful, differentiating singular events from an ongoing process might prove more insightful. For example, Ilkka Pysiainen (2002) described three forms of conversion, the first a sudden event driven by an emotional response, the second also sudden but structured by doctrinal content, and

the third a gradual cognitive process. We define conversion here to be the personal adoption of, or investment of faith in, a particular group of rituals, relationships, roles, and rhetoric, which represent an individual's system of cognitive meaning (Davis and Rambo 2005). While emotional and doctrinal variables play significant roles in the conversion process, this definition emphasizes a cumulative and emergent process. The term cognitive refers to mental information processing including, for example, attention, perception, learning, memory, and decision making (Eysenck and Keane 2005).

Religious belief has been tackled from numerous research perspectives. First, psychological theories of mind and agent causality explain the social application of religious beliefs and rituals (e.g., Pyysiainen 2005). Second, social and cultural forces offer explanations for the uptake and spread of religious ideas (e.g., Durkheim 1961 [1915]; Geertz 2000). Third, the role and importance of memory in religious belief transmission has been established (e.g., Whitehouse 2004). Finally, emotional response affects the adoption and transmission of religious beliefs (e.g., Thagard 2005). Of course, the decision to adopt a religion and its practices may not be unidimensional. Religious adherents may be inculcated early in life and make few decisions about their religious practices unencumbered by external pressures. Nevertheless, most theories of religious belief emphasize one variable.

A good example can be found in the observations sociologists and anthropologists have made about the impact of "supernatural sanctions" as tools for behavioral coercion and to defer defection (Durkheim 1961 [1915]; Johnson and Kruger 2004; Johnson, Stopka, and Knights 2003). Similarly, Walter Burkert (1996) like Emile Durkheim (1961) argued that religion's power derives from an overriding fear of death. More recently, Jeff Greenberg, Sheldon Solomon, and Tom Pyszczynski's (1997) Terror Management Theory claims that cultural beliefs serve as a shield from existential fear. In experiments, Ara Norenzayan and Ian Hansen (2006) heightened subjects' "mortality salience" by getting them to think and write about their own deaths. Data revealed that awareness of death motivates religiosity and belief in a higher power.

Another theory proposes that religious belief accompanies the transposition of existential anxiety away from parents and toward a deity. Driven by Sigmund Freud's (1990 [1913]) psychoanalysis, as parents are exposed as inadequate physical and emotional protectors, young minds search for alternative, more robust guardians. Neuropsychologist Michael Persinger (1997) similarly regards the belief in God as an innate psychological compulsion driven by the desire to replace the parental security of childhood.

In summary, conversion models and theories offer a divergent range of explanations including (1) socio-cultural theories emphasizing contextual

pressures (Huntington 1996; Roland 1996); (2) spiritual theories focusing on doctrinal truths (Renard 1996); (3) attribution theories relying on existential imperatives and meaning creation (Norenzayan and Hansen 2006); (4) ritual theories specifying a conversion medium (Lawson 2005; Lawson and McCauley 2002); and (5) affective or attachment theories conferring a decisive role to emotional responses (Whitehouse 2000, 2004). Other theories range from neural preconditions (Persinger 2001) to the importance of narrative, identity, and psycho-dynamic variables (Freud 1990 [1913]; Green, Strange, and Brock 2002; Jung 1968). Process models of conversion tend to include the most variables, factors, and forces influencing belief change (Rambo 1999).

Process theorists view conversion as dynamic, relying on synergistic, contextual, and time-relative elements, as seen in beliefs about the existence of Santa Claus (Taylor 2004). John Lofland and Rodney Stark (1965) conceived the earliest process theory, defining conversion as a diminishment of interpersonal ties in one social network and an intensification in another. Later work by Lofland and Skonovd (1981) differentiated six conversion “motifs” emphasizing key types of conversions, and the common process connecting diverse individual experiences. Building on the motifs by grafting a cognitive-behavioral emphasis to a process model, the Transtheoretical Model of Change marries an escalating, linear process of belief modification with distinguishing behavioral categories (Prochaska, DiClemente, and Norcross 1992). In short, conversion creeps along incrementally, but can be distinguished by subtle and constant behavioral changes.

Process theories portray conversion as a cognitive transition where individual agency mediates structural constraints (Pitt 1991). While contextual factors play a powerful role, individual choice holds sovereign, as exemplified in Rambo’s seven-stage model of conversion, which reflects overtones of Lofland and Stark’s (1965) groundbreaking work:

- (1) Context: The environment in which change occurs including macro factors such as the relationship between an institution and government, as well as family and friends.
- (2) Crisis: The catalyst—either internal or external—stimulating an individual to seek change or become placed within a context of change.
- (3) Quest: The active pursuit of change by an individual already in the context of change.
- (4) Encounter: The meeting of the potential convert and an advocate for the new beliefs or movement.
- (5) Interaction: The new convert’s interaction with their belief system or movement including participation in rituals, changed relationships, the use of specific rhetoric and jargon, and the assumption

of new roles or services within the group often demanding greater leadership.

- (6) Commitment: The convert's public pronouncement of his or her transformation.
- (7) Consequences: The ramifications for the convert's lifestyle after the conversion process.

Process theorists like Rambo do not see conversion as sudden. Rather, it entails a lengthy process stimulated by crisis and distress, characterized by incremental change, and only occasionally punctuated by dramatic and decisive emotional experiences. At the same time, converts are likely to view their transformations as more profound and rapid than their advocates or mentors (Rambo 1999). Conversion may even be understood retrospectively when an individual reconstructs their experiences in the context of a conversion. Rambo sidesteps the issue of who defines conversion by describing the conversion process rather than the religious and ideological substance. Accordingly, under process models of conversion, the progression of belief change holds greater importance than its content. Rambo argued that his seven stages may manifest through different sequences or multiple cycles, but avoids suggesting that they have universal application. Instead, the stages are seen best as a cartography of analytical options or heuristics (Rambo 1993). Despite Rambo's concessions, his model has enjoyed empirical support (e.g., Kahn and Greene 2004). This study aims to deepen our understanding of these analytical heuristics by examining the conversion process *in vivo*, and reporting on the cognitive and behavioral mechanisms underpinning change.

RESEARCH DESIGN

The extended case method departs from conventional ethnography, which tends to consider data as an independent reality, largely insulated from context, space, and time. Michael Gluckman (1970) and his successors (Ahlstrand 1990) sought to change the focus of participant observation. No longer were unique conditions and occurrences to be considered without an external frame of reference. In this sense, the case was "extended" from its isolation. The extended case method (Burawoy 1998, 2003) emphasizes engagement rather than detachment. "Reflexivity" requires a staged triumvirate of dialogues to develop explanations about phenomena. Dialogue begins between the observer and participants, becomes embedded in the dialogue between local processes and extralocal forces, and finally filters through a dialogue with theory. Data, context, and theory represent a fluid set of interrelationships to be examined concomitantly. Dialogue remains the key where first, intervention should

not be avoided but exploited; second, social process has greater relevance than situational knowledge; third, external context has a two-way impact; and fourth, theory is not to be grounded or confirmed, but challenged and reconstructed. As a result, the extended case method emphasizes practical codification where the observer becomes an engaged, “interrupting” participant. Lengthy observations are essential to the series of successive approximations necessary in order to challenge theory. The researcher vigorously engages with the setting and its players, compiling evidence with which to deconstruct and then rebuild the theoretical framework. Here, we rebuild Rambo’s theoretical framework incorporating explanations for the key process variables.

Burawoy regards the process of reconstructing theory as continual during the fieldwork itself. Anomalies or observations that contradict the predictions and expectations of the theory do not immediately lead to falsification. Theory is reconstructed rather than rejected. As a result, the extended case method does not seek to reduce cases to instances of general law, but rather to make each case work in its connection to other cases. Such connections constitute a general mechanism. When employing the extended case method, “generalization” is replaced by an iterative process reconstructing a theory explaining the common processes in the cases. As a result, the method is particularly suited to cases that deal with a sequence of events over a long period and where the same actors are engaged in a series of situations (Mitchell 1983). Furthermore, the extended case method revolves around uncovering process, and where the analyst wants to trace how events link. Accordingly, the method aligns with the assumption that ethnographic fieldwork should uncover mechanisms and processes (Lamont and White 2009).

Every week for eighteen months, one researcher worked, philosophized, and “channeled” spirits with the spiritualist “circle.” The group comprised inductees who had joined the “Association” within a few weeks of each other, having responded to newspaper advertisements or recommendations from friends. The group met once per week for between two and three hours. It organized charitable activities and engaged in philosophic discussions and spiritual rituals and practices. The group also met at least once a month to participate in social activities linked to the Association. Detailed notes, including transcriptions of selected conversations and informal interviews, were taken before meetings and *in situ*, and observations recorded within twenty-four hours of each working session. Other participants in the group were aware of the study, as was the Association’s management. Consistent with Burawoy’s approach, the researching participant did not conceal the study’s purposes or remain detached from the group’s activities. On the contrary, the extended case method demanded involvement to facilitate dialogue and uncover the data needed to interrogate theory.

As with all research, the extended case method incorporates techniques for improving data validity. Burawoy (1998) recommended the practice of “researching the researcher,” where attempts are made by other researchers to provide corroboration of the data interpretations made by the field researcher. In this study, a second researcher assumed a role as an external analyst, interrogating the findings and conclusions made by the field researcher. The role operates analogous to an external coder in interpretive approaches.

Research Cases and Site. The “Association” legally began as a not-for-profit incorporated association in 2001. It seeks to advance humanitarian understanding, holistic (defined as mind, body, soul) health, and “spiritual progress,” interpreted within a spiritualist ideology. This mission is pursued through charitable fundraising, philosophic education, light exercise and health programs, meditation and relaxation sessions, spiritual discussion groups, “circles” for mediumship practice, and sing-alongs, chanting, drumming, and other social entertainment.

The group consisted of five members plus the researcher. Participant one is a thirty-year-old, unmarried, female disability worker. University educated with an undergraduate degree, participant one held no doctrine-based religious beliefs when she started with the group. However, from a Chinese father, she had inherited an interest in Eastern traditions, especially in the notions of invisible forces in the body and the potential for direct, mystical insight. For example, she expressed a desire to study acupuncture, but had been encouraged toward a more Western services-based profession by her German mother. Participant two is a fifty-five-year-old married, male public sector administrator with English parents. Educated with undergraduate and master’s degrees in arts and management, respectively, participant two arrived with no active religious interests, but had been brought up Baptist. He expressed no conviction in the Bible or in Christian church doctrine. However, he believed at the outset of the group’s activities, that “there must be something else.” Participant three is a forty-eight-year-old divorced, female receptionist. Most notably, participant three had recently suffered the loss of her mother. Despite being raised as Greek Orthodox by Greek parents, participant three claimed “no faith,” but held firm on the presence of God. She had not attended a church service since childhood and had married and started a family shortly after completing secondary school. Similarly, participant four is a forty-two-year-old married, female home worker who left secondary school before graduating. She expressed an interest in nontraditional medicine, including homeopathy and “natural therapies,” along with a strong view that the body’s health is determined by the mind’s disposition. Although raised without religion, participant four had traveled to India numerous times and described a “connection” to the people and its spiritual values. Despite

a European ancestry, participant four reported that her grandmother had traveled extensively to the Asian subcontinent, and had been a notorious storyteller. Finally, participant five is a thirty-one-year-old unmarried, male teacher educated to a master's degree level in applied science and brought up without religious influence by agnostic parents with English/Irish ancestry. At the beginning of the group's activities, participant five described himself as "spiritual but not religious."

The Association's literature emphasizes humanitarian concerns, but its core beliefs align with spiritualism. Spiritualists believe that the deceased visit the corporeal world as "spirits" and can be contacted by spiritually sensitive "mediums." Connections to the afterlife hold a fundamental position within spiritualist belief. Moreover, spirits possess information and knowledge inaccessible to living humans. In one public forum, the group leader summarized the Association's position: "When a person dies, they have lost an opportunity to progress. That is all. But, the lesson continues after physical death. We therefore wish to make it clear that while death may be painful for those remaining, still trapped in the confines of a selfish physical life, for those liberated by love and the truth, death is merely a transition."

The central spiritualist source of inspiration and guidance comes from personal contacts with spirits, and in particular, spiritual "guides." The Association contends that: (1) all life is spiritually interconnected through invisible energies, (2) the human mind contains vast untapped powers for communicating with spirits, (3) mind and spirit are identical, (4) high levels of personal control and self-determination are fused with intuition and inspiration, (5) rationalism and material logic are limiting and flawed concepts, and (6) the meaning of life is found in spiritual progress, where today's sacrifices will yield returns in the afterlife. These axioms permeated all aspects of the group's activities, and flavored the remarks of the group's leader at the outset of every session. She declared: "Our mission is love without condition or restraint for our fellow creatures. Unfortunately, the search for happiness only destroys the physiological mechanisms which power us. You see, love must precede happiness, not the other way around."

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

We began with Rambo's seven-stage conversion process, and built our analysis through a series of theoretical interrogations. Rambo's organizing framework gives equal weight to each stage. However, we emphasize Rambo's fifth and sixth stages, Interaction and Commitment, because our data indicate that these stages enact conversion. Davis and Rambo (2005, 162) described conversion as a "dynamic interaction that takes place in a set of interlocking systems." We argue that the key to understanding

belief conversion lies with the mechanism behind “dynamic interaction”: the Interaction-Commitment cycle. By mechanism, we mean the cognitive, affective, and behavioral processes through which new beliefs are imparted, reinforced, and demonstrated. Despite the power of the conversion mechanism, previous evidence suggests that comprehensive belief “swaps” are rare. Ideas tend not to adhere to unwilling minds. Rather, powerful ideas reinforce those already present, seeded, or dormant, in the mind of a recipient. Context is as important as content, as the story of conversion begins before any of the group had contact with the Association.

Context. Conversion needs a facilitating context, acting as a necessary but insufficient condition. Over eighteen months, the researcher questioned each group member about his or her personal history and the events leading to his or her arrival. Further to Rambo’s conversion context, we noted two additional variables. First, the context acted as a kind of cognitive priming, increasing readiness by shaping receptivity. Second, the most powerful priming took the form of discontent or dissatisfaction. Although each individual detailed a unique history, they all shared forms of discontent. For example, one participant claimed that “We have lost our way as a society,” while another lamented that “Everything is about greed and money and getting more even though there’s plenty for everyone.”

Six shared beliefs help to explain the impact of priming. First, the group’s perceptions of world affairs were negative, focusing on social degeneration, war, and conflict. Second, the group claimed that economic priorities emphasizing materialism and capitalism undermine social welfare. Third, the group felt disaffected by the policies of the national government. Fourth, the group held concerns for the natural environment, along with the expectation of further deterioration and potential catastrophe. Fifth, the group had experienced unsatisfying and/or superficial personal relationships with partners, family, friends, and co-workers at least over recent years and for most longer. Sixth, and finally, the group felt marginalized and separated from those holding decision-making power in society. The disaffection and marginalization common to members of the group provided the foundation for their personal crises of meaning.

Crisis. Discontent alone does not create conditions ripe for conversion. For the group members, Rambo’s crisis stage took the form of despair; disaffection and marginalization transformed into alienation and withdrawal. The conversion process is less likely to ever begin for the happy or content. Participant two related his mindset at the time: “I was past frustrated. I merely waited and wondered. Emotionally, I was tired of hoping . . . for something. I had come to expect that it won’t happen . . .” Uncertainty and discontent was countervailed by the hope for

a better future, creating a tension that proved pivotal to action. A common characteristic of all the participants' histories was an overarching belief that "there has to be something more to life than this." Without tension to create dissonance, potential converts will likely remain inert.

Quest. According to Rambo, potential converts want to experience pleasure and avoid pain, maintain a conceptual system, enhance self-esteem, establish gratifying relationships, and attain a sense of power and transcendence. While the group members indicated that these ambitions were present during their questing stage, the promise of power and transcendence was the most potent. Participant four observed: "I want to make sure my life means something and I can make a difference to the world." Given that their crises had proven sufficiently strong, accompanied by the tension of hope, the group moved toward an active pursuit of change. Group members suggested that they had experienced feelings of greater proactivity and personal responsibility, while becoming more action oriented. They were steeling themselves for action and accountability, a disposition addressed by the group's leader in the information session prospective members attended prior to joining: "I must provide you with a warning prior to your commitment to undertaking this journey. A journey which, by the way, may at times be arduous and even boring, but I assure you if you want the outcomes, the pain, metaphorically speaking of course, is worth enduring."

Up to and including this third stage, the group members had not met or had any contact with the other Association members. Context, crisis, and quest represented conditions met by individuals, out of the hands of organizations and their advocates. Based on their oral histories, we surmise that each group member had cycled through these three stages numerous times previously without any tangible outcomes, new commitments, or changed beliefs. As a result, the three stages represented a repetitive cycle, only broken when the right encounter precipitated an exposure to the new belief set. It was not a matter of emotional, intellectual, or religious content that had caused previous quests to fail, but the absence of an encounter with an advocate who could progress it. Progression for this group meant providing an answer to the question of meaning through service. As participant five put it: "What I want out of this life is to make a positive impact in some manner or another. In short, I want to help people."

As a result, Rambo's fourth stage, the encounter, represented a pivot point in the conversion process. Participants were looking for someone to show them another path that aligned with their conceptualization of the world and its problems. Through this process, they hoped to change themselves, as participant one reflected: "I felt that there had to be a better way. I've always known there is something else to life, beyond life, but it's

always been there floating around in the back of my head and I didn't know what to do with it to realize my potential as a human."

Encounter. The encounter stage delivered a first exposure to the new belief set via an advocate, in this case the group's leader. Personal histories of group members suggested that previous unsuccessful encounters can undermine the conversion process as potential converts view advocates with greater cynicism. Timing is also crucial, coinciding with an active quest and thereby aligning susceptibility with opportunity. As participant one observed about the time since her first encounter with the advocate: "If I have learned anything over the past eight months it is that things in my life happen for a reason." The point was reinforced by the advocate in the group's opening session: "You are right in suspecting that everything happens for a reason." In this case, the group was entirely self-selected, their preparatory work already done without any direct intervention. We emphasize again the significance of a rudimentary belief platform and the role of priming through the tension of hopeful discontent. While questing reflected a desire to discard an unwanted self, successful encounters led to imitation. Although each group member experienced a unique encounter, there were important commonalities. All members reported that the decisive encounter had been with the group leader, irrespective of the specific events leading to the meeting, including exposure to promotional materials or attendance at an information session. They had all decided to join because the leader's message had struck a chord. Participant four said of the advocate's performance at the information session, "I remember thinking that last night marked the most significant turning point in my life so far."

The group leader's conversion approach was minimalist, eschewing proselytism in favor of subtlety. Because the Association promotes spiritualist principles, the leader argued that the teaching provided by spirits through mediums could never be in question. As the advocate claimed: "Remember, we are dealing with beings here of a loving capability in excess of our imagination. They devote their energy to helping others, and they don't tire easily. The ultimate success of this undertaking is a mere formality to them, and I have learned that trusting them is a wise action. I remind you that we will not abandon this effort simply because it is difficult or troublesome. We will continue as long as you remain receptive to the outcome . . . I know that your resolve has not been diminished." Indeed, the advocate was correct. She had stimulated in the group a powerful sense of control over their own spiritual destinies, proclaiming that nothing could stand in their way other than their own doubts. Participant five commented: "There is no question of trust, merely a question of how, in my mind anyway. Well, it seems it is my mind itself that is the hurdle . . . that is for me to determine."

The leader's approach worked effectively because she never broached the veracity of the messages, instead focusing on interpretation and elaboration. Since the group members acted as spirit mediums, they provided their own conversion content, in so doing giving voice to their preexisting, and perhaps even desired, beliefs. As a rule established by the leader, no member was permitted to channel a personally relevant spirit. Instead, members offered guidance to each other, or at least acted as conduits for spirits who provided the content. In this respect, the role of advocate shifted subtly from the leader to spirit "guides," although it was often the leader's guide who provided decisive information. For example, the leader "channeled" the following message: "The word guide is misleading, but we accept the term to be more of a way of representing our theme rather than our actual work. The most important aspect of our work is to ensure that you maximize your spiritual fulfillment while in your present life, and we work with you from our side to ensure your potential is achieved." In turn, the presence of spiritual guides stimulated great excitement for members eager to be guided. In the words of participant five: "The outcome of this realization has been an exciting breakthrough. In the last few days, they have been trying to speak through me, rather than placing the thoughts in my mind. They sounded as though they were having difficulty using my muscles around the mouth and tongue. It was as if they were learning how to speak again."

Group members were instructed about the salient issues in life and death by unseen authorities, communicating from beyond the grave where the legitimacy of their wisdom could not be questioned. Central to this process was the leader's self-declaration as an "advanced" medium. She channeled the departed and other entities from "higher spiritual planes," but only provided commentary on the messages while in her "normal" state. A cycle of teaching and interpretation unfolded where group members received only the information channeled. As we note later, group members over time assumed new roles as channelers as well, reinforcing the same messages. As confidence in the idea of channeling grew, group members began to deliver messages during ritualized practice. Participant two offered the following report of his first channeling experience.

Immediately my body was forced upright and I sat with my back perfectly straight. I also experienced a relaxing, joyous feeling of serenity. I could also feel a slight smile on my face. At first, I heard the words in my head before they came out of my mouth. Then the person asked whether I wanted them to speak using my own voice. I said or thought "yes." The surprise came when he spoke through me. Within a few words my voice was taken over and went at least another octave deeper. It was amazing. There is no way my voice could ever reach that depth naturally. It was as if I was speaking into a microphone that was attached to a synthesizer that made me sound like Darth Vader.

Multiple encounters were carefully paced and controlled; potential converts received their tuition on the schedule of the spirits. For example, contact with deceased relatives and friends of the group led to emotional gratification. On several occasions, the researcher's own relatives provided advice through other members of the group, sometimes about being more "open-minded." On several prominent instances, this led to a paradox where the researcher noted that the spirit in question was unlikely to be the (living) relative whom they claimed to be. The bulk of information from spirits via the group took the form of commentaries on the importance of various life choices and the spiritual meaning of ostensibly prosaic events. Guides described the nature of spiritual progress, which appears to operate a little like a spiritual espionage agency, on a "need to know" basis. The leader's guide observed: "It is difficult to describe the hierarchy of spiritual evolution, particularly as I remain 'in the dark' on many issues as well. Nevertheless, I can tell you that there are beings of what I can only describe as love and light who endeavor to help us evolve. They advise me on my duties concerning my own as well as your progress."

At one point toward the end of the study, the researcher ostensibly "channeled" a spirit. Although the researcher tried to convince the group that there had been no spirit involved, the group leader insisted that remarkable talents as a spiritual "medium" had been demonstrated. At the end of the session, a fellow group member confessed that there had been no spirit involved in her "channeling" either. "Do you think any of this is real?" she asked. To this skepticism, the leader responded: "They provide the energy to initiate contact with you on the physical world. They therefore deserve the opportunity to be rewarded with their faith in us by our consideration of the magnitude of their gift." The researcher was also advised by the spirit guide of participant three: ". . . we are pleased with your resolution to accept our instructions and guidance. We would never ask that it is without question, but realize that we cannot always provide the answers. And, in the event that the answers do not satisfy you, we still insist that you undertake your obligations as we have set them out."

THE ENGINE OF CONVERSION: INTERACTION–COMMITMENT

According to Rambo's model, when the quest fails or the encounter proves unsatisfying, the process returns to the self-reinforcing cycle of context, catalyst, and quest. Once an encounter has transpired, a potential convert must make a minimal commitment before interaction can stimulate belief change. We found commitment to be a precursor to interaction as well as a corollary, despite Rambo's linear order. We further argue that the reciprocal and escalating relationship between the fourth stage of interaction and the fifth stage of commitment comprises the "engine" of conversion. This engine represents the critical mechanism driving conversion where

rituals, roles, rhetoric, and relationships all converge to produce a fuller commitment where beliefs transition.

Potential converts engage with the new belief system including participating in rituals, experiencing changed relationships, employing specific rhetoric and jargon, and assuming new roles within the group, often demanding greater leadership or authority. Interaction, however, does not work in isolation. Our evidence indicates that interaction works in a tandem, pulsating form with commitment, amplifying converts' connection with, and ownership of, the belief set. Members needed to make a commitment before escalating from the encounter's cognitive experience to interaction's more affective and behavioral features.

Interaction, as Rambo theorized, records through four channels—rituals, roles, rhetoric, and relationships—each possessing a different cognitive-behavioral balance. The interaction-commitment cycle answers the question, "What is it that changes when a person converts?" To the spiritual guides channeled through the leader, an individual's entire identity undergoes change: "You will generate great satisfaction from helping other people, both alive and dead, by passing on messages and highlighting the truth of the continuation of life following physical death. It will also, of course, provide you with an abundance of wisdom and knowledge at your fingertips. Your life will be rewarding and meaningful in a way that you could never have imagined."

Over a year into the process, several of the group dropped out, realizing they could not relieve the anxieties that had drawn them to the Association. For example, participant three dropped out when it became clear that she would not personally be able to communicate with the spirit of her deceased mother, even though it seemed as though others could: "I'm so confused that I don't know what to believe." Nevertheless, for those who remained, the need for belonging and group solidarity provided a strong compulsion to stay. In the following section, we propose four mechanisms underpinning the interaction-commitment cycle, the engine of conversion.

MECHANISM 1. RITUALS-MEANING

Interaction represented a lengthy period of enculturation. Contrary to Rambo's predictions, we discovered that behavior preceded belief. Socialization of the potential converts operated like an apprenticeship. Commitment offered a fulcrum for the change process because a decision to participate in pivotal rituals conveyed an acceptance of the beliefs they reflected, even though many group members had not yet internalized the beliefs. Thus, the turning point came with a decision to physically enact rituals rather than observe them. Being passively complicit or undecided from the sidelines seems easy, but on the field of play there can only be commitment or cognitive dissonance. The obligation to

participate in formalized rituals therefore served as a switching point. One participant explained how it precipitated their departure: "I have nothing to corroborate the messages I have received. Are they the truth? Am I supposed to believe them blindly? Everyone at some point needs some evidence and I have come to the end of blind faith. I need more before I can pretend to be doing this myself."

Roy Rappaport (1979, 1999) and Pascal Boyer and Pierre Lienard (2006) suggested that rituals comprise intuitively recognizable, stereotyped, rigid, and repetitive behavior characterized by an absence of rational motivation. We noted several features distinguishing the rituals of the group that align with this perspective on rituals. First, action in the group's rituals was separated from normal behavioral expectations. The most powerful ritual invoking contact with spirits began in a candle-lit room, with the group holding hands seated in a circle, and reciting an incantation inviting the presence of "higher beings of light." This embedded, symbolic process contained encoded meanings. For example, typical characteristics included standardized speech, repetition and redundancy, and numerous resource-intensive actions serving to strengthen the ritual's communicative power. Once the incantation was completed by all members, the leader would recite a formulaic declaration to the unseen spirits, proclaiming the sincerity of the group, and its desire to foster "unconditional love."

Second, the rituals were mandatory in certain situations, despite the lack of explanation as to why or their impact. For example, no explanation for the need to hold hands or employ group incantations was given, despite the expectation of carefully scripted action. At the same time, deviation was viewed as noncompliance. In fact, the rigid ritual process contradicted the messages received from spirits, who claimed through their hosts that they were always present.

Third, the rituals exposed participants to novel, but controlled, environments and required behavior ordered differently to that expected in everyday experience. Just as nonritualized behavior features unpredictable patterns of interaction, ritualized behavior is strongly predictable. For example, group meetings were conferred with additional gravity when conducted in the ostentatious confines of a candle-lit room infused with incense and other artifacts associated with spiritualism. Some of these symbolic artifacts were dramatic and theatrical, such as nineteenth-century styled candelabras, paintings, and furniture.

Group members surrender their uncertainty when participating in rituals. The more personal, physical performances involved in a ritual, the greater the impact on belief change. For example, where group members were spectators at the encounter stage, they became active participants in mediumship rituals during the interaction-commitment stage. Even though some group members felt uncertain about the legitimacy of mediumship, and hesitant about their capacities as mediums, the rituals

demanded that they attempt to channel spirits personally. Participant five observed the following when asked about his experiences in the previous meeting: "On Sunday, we went through some more fun and games, with the guides giving me messages about every ten or fifteen minutes. Most were rubbish, they admitted later, and the point was that they wanted me to resolve to trust them no matter what nonsense they seemed to be saying."

Those yielding to the rituals received acceptance and encouragement from the leader, senior members of the Association, and other groups. For the group members unwilling to engage in the rituals with conviction, a crisis of meaning occurred, leading to either acquiescence and acceptance, or dissatisfaction and departure from the Association. The guides implored participants to continue: "You see, it is not enough that you trust us and follow our instructions and guidance when it matches your rational judgment. You must also be prepared to trust us in times when your rational judgment would have you act in a different way."

The capstone ritual required group members to provide "readings" for other members of the Association external to the group by contacting a spirit and passing along a personal message. Group members were encouraged to do their best, even if they felt no spirits were involved. For some, the pronouncement of great spiritual "gifts" can be seductive and was employed as a powerful reward for performing the required rituals, particularly when delivered from a guide: "I feel it is necessary to warn you that you may become a minor celebrity. Some people may view you as a messiah of sorts. Few people can handle this attention without letting it go to their heads."

As the group began to act out the belief system, changes in their thinking became apparent. The more formalized, doctrinal belief system was acquired later as participation in rituals functioned as a cognitive rehearsal for future beliefs. For example, the group performed three distinctive kinds of rituals: rule-reinforcing rituals, belief-demonstrating rituals, and connection-eliciting rituals. These led to behavioral commitment incorporating rehearsal, symbolic representation, and emotional response, respectively. The relationship between rituals and meaning constitutes the first element of the interaction-commitment conversion mechanism that we propose. Rule-reinforcing rituals emphasized doctrine and repetition. For example, the Association's charter was read aloud prior to every meeting. Belief-demonstrating rituals focused on individual member commitment to the group. For example, at regular charity auctions organized by the Association, members competed for inexpensive objects with inflated bids. Members who won the bids often located the outrageously expensive items prominently in their homes or personal areas in the Association premises. The most influential and popular rituals stressed group connection and personal insight. For example, members engaged in meditation,

mediumship, and group singing. Prior to a meditation session, the leader's guide commented: "The purpose of this particular meditation is to develop your spirit link. By this I mean your ability to tune into our dimension. This sounds vague, I know, but it is a necessary preparation for you to be able to deal with the volume of spirit that will wish to communicate via you when you can hear." These sessions elicited strong emotional responses in personal moments of "mystical" experience, sometimes culminating in hugging, crying and declarations of love, loyalty, and solidarity. Collectively, the performance of rituals provided a tangible form within which beliefs and meaning took structure.

According to Harvey Whitehouse (2004), successful concepts within belief systems take advantage of two particular aspects of memory in order to enhance recall and subsequent transmission: repetition and arousal. Repetition leads to better recall, but also delivers a semantic memory, which is generic and context nonspecific. Arousal is important because emotional stimulation enhances memorability. Arousal produces episodic memory, which is highly specific and context driven. For example, when reciting the Association's charter, the ritual reinforces unchanging codified knowledge, and a "doctrinal mode" is at work. In contrast, when rituals stimulate memory through distinctive, emotionally charged episodic activity, then an "imagistic mode" engages, such as when a group member channels a consoling message for their colleague from a once close, now departed relative.

In our cases, rituals provided the railway tracks for new beliefs, laying down the behavioral guides that encouraged cognitive acceptance. With retrospective analysis, rituals may well offer a rich diagnostic window into deeper beliefs, but from a conversion perspective, rituals tend to precipitate beliefs. Ritual performance amplified belief. In order to avoid cognitive dissonance, nonbelievers had to either change their beliefs or stop engaging in rituals. The composition of the beliefs held by individual group members were affixed to their most avid hopes, reflecting a strong preexisting need for the resolution of existential anxiety and personal loss. For example, the researcher recorded the following field note about a fellow group member: ". . . she is convinced I can channel her mother. The worst part is that I know exactly what she needs to hear as would anyone with a semblance of sensitivity." Other members did dutifully provide consoling messages from her mother. At other times, more somber messages were delivered, such as "[name] will pass in eight months from cancer."

Belief developed commensurate with ritual performance, particularly when the beliefs embedded in the practices overlapped with those already held by the practitioner. Absorbing beliefs through repeated exposure to rituals involved an internalization process. Sosis (2003) argued that belief is bolstered by four features of ritual practice. All were readily observable. First, the three B's, or behaviors, badges (symbols), and bans that provide

signals of commitment to a group are physical in nature, compelling adherents to demonstrate a commitment with their bodies. Standing in front of an audience offering a spiritual reading is a powerful physical commitment. Second, many ritual activities were performed publicly; the more widely observed the greater the internal group pressure for conformity. Public performances were common for more experienced members of the Association. Third, the three B's are delivered formally. Performance was compulsory and serious. Finally, rituals employ repetition, requiring an ongoing demonstration of commitment. In Rambo's dramatic words, rituals are the "choreography of the soul." In this study, rituals enacted belief change through new roles and identification as exemplified in the second mechanism we propose.

MECHANISM 2. ROLES-AGENCY

The roles-agency relationship represents a second component in the interaction-commitment conversion mechanism. As special roles were allocated and accepted, group members assumed the cognitive content required to fulfill them. For example, group members authored promotional literature about upcoming events, recording key principles discussed in the group. In turn, the cognitive dimension of role identity reinforced the behavioral aspects of the role, leading to a loop of progressive belief acceptance. Certain roles confer special status, and the most revered within the Association were spiritual rather than service orientated. No higher duty existed than offering oneself as a conduit for a spirit's personal message to another member. Members of the group began to channel their own guides, who reinforced the already well-known principles of spiritualism: "... the point of physical life is to provide the owner of a body with a set of experiences which are bound by finite limits and boundaries. These limits provide a person with an opportunity to transcend them, and experience the limitless nature of freedom."

Performing roles demanding specific belief structures has implications for commitment, particularly when group members generated inferences about the thoughts and beliefs of others. This was particularly relevant because participating in pivotal roles on behalf of the Association meant representing and transmitting its beliefs. Group members were forced to conceptualize the views of both insiders and outsiders. For example, in the face of criticism from outsiders skeptical of spiritualism, group members were expected to defend the Association and its beliefs. The occupants of central, leadership roles in the Association were messengers who had realized that they would be connected personally to the messages they delivered.

Role and agency lead converts to form heuristics that help in making decisions about their responsibilities and others' behaviors. A new role can

profoundly impact behavior by creating powerful expectations. The new role brings with it a revised self-perception, empowering new actions, and behaviors. In addition, the new behaviors strengthen the corresponding beliefs. As participant two observed, "Depending on how open you are, the results will be successful or unsuccessful." For example, group members were expected to ultimately become group leaders. As a result, and as part of the preparation, each member led public relations exercises. Articulating the values of the Association in a public forum forced members to assume the countenance of an organizational leader, irrespective of whether their actual beliefs matched those they were expected to defend and propagate.

Gradually, as the messenger rehearsed the message and its defense or elaboration, it became part of their permanent script. Message delivery was also modified with imagined responses from different audiences and the inferences that audience members might make about the beliefs of Association members. These inferences represent a form of agency attributed to others. The most powerful agency was reserved for the messages group members delivered on behalf of their own spiritual guides. Whether consciously or not each member gave a voice to the contents of their spiritual guide's mind, including personal recommendations and advice: "Consider how this will affect your relationships and your chosen work." However, several participants perceived their guides as external agents controlling the impression of novel thoughts. Participant one described the process of channeling: "Typically, I relax and try to allow myself to fall into a deep state of relaxation where after a short period, I feel a strange tug and twitch or jerk, and then I become aware that he is occupying my body. It's a crude explanation, but he can control my movements and can even speak through my own voice box. . . . If he wants to speak then I have to actually voluntarily speak the words myself."

The attribution of agency is consistent with Alan Leslie's (1994, 1996) Theory of Mind, and Daniel Dennett's (1987, 2006) notion of intentionality. Both assume that minds treat objects and phenomena in the world as agents with specific motivations and sufficient logic to systematically pursue their goals. To Jesse Bering and Dominic Johnson (2005), a theory of mind cognitive mechanism provides inferences about intentional states that influence the behaviors of others. When a member took on a new role, they also adopted a new set of assumptions about what others, including their own spiritual guide, thought about them. In the same way a person must realize that children will think about them differently when wearing a Santa Claus costume, wearing a new role demands a new identity. In time, conversion might be said to have occurred when the new costume fits more comfortably than the old.

MECHANISM 3. RELATIONSHIPS-BELONGING

Emotional bonds to the group are created and consolidated through the relationships-belonging mechanism. Group dynamics influence the acceptance of beliefs, but this associative effect is conditional upon an investment, hence the importance of understanding the reciprocity associated with interaction and commitment. Belief change (or exchange) was also relationship change, both between members of the group, and between the group and its leader. A changed social network introduced a safety net for belief uncertainty, like a support group for mutual reinforcement. An emphasis was placed on the rewards for perseverance, as one participant's guide announced: "Escape from the barrier of self and the bars retreat leaving the entire universe . . . where nothing is separate and distinct."

In the face of disappointing results, the leader would reinforce the spiritual lessons of failure and the importance of resilience. As with all the interaction-commitment elements, relationships and belonging work as mutual reinforcement. For relationships to affect beliefs, personal sacrifice was required. When commitment was demonstrated overtly through sacrifice to the group, relationships and belonging were strengthened. Members acted in the best interests of the group, but at a personal expense, thereby demonstrating a commitment to the group's sovereignty. By the nature of the voluntary work being performed, any form of participation marked commitment. Those who never failed to attend and undertook additional work enjoyed the leader's praise as committed members. Commitment markers included doing the dishes after coffee, visiting with elderly or sick members, and making extravagantly generous donations to the Association. However, the most powerful cost signals were associated with faith and investment in the wisdom emanating from the guides. Participant one recounted her "commitment trial," which involves a rationalization for some factually incorrect information provided by the leader's guide: ". . . they wanted to create a situation wherein it was difficult for me to trust them, and still complete their directions. I had to decide whether I would still do as they said despite the fact that they were overtly deceiving me. This was also a test for the future of course, as they were trying to see whether I could handle following instructions that did not make any sense to me. As far as I can tell, I have passed this test and learned the appropriate lesson to their satisfaction."

Sacrifice introduces commitment or cost-signaling theory, a central anthropological perspective in the study of ritualized behavior (Dow 2006). Cost-signaling assumes that group cooperation and trust increases when costly sacrifices are made for the group (Sosis 2003). According to the theory, a system of costly signaling reduces deception and enhances social cohesion (Dow 2006). The more costly the behaviors and commitments required the greater the resulting commitment and social cohesion.

Cost-signaling provides an explanation for why humans engage in behaviors that cost them in time, energy, and resources, as well as physical and emotional trauma. William Irons (2001) suggested that costly behaviors are hard-to-fake signs of commitment to a group. They also discourage insincere members from joining in order to receive the group's collective benefits. Richard Sosis (2006) argued that the costs an outsider would have to endure in order to gain the rewards of membership are too high unless accompanied by belief. For example, participant one observed in reference to the group's spiritual guides: "... they wanted to test my preparedness to do as they instructed despite emotionally trying circumstances."

MECHANISM 4. RHETORIC-COGNITIVE OPTIMALITY

The fourth and final conversion submechanism, rhetoric-cognitive optimality, helps to generate an interpretive system offering guidance and meaning. Rhetoric refers to the ways members interpret their lives, and the tools they employ to make interpretations, common language being the primary instrument. Belief systems can offer a guiding lens through which experiences and events are viewed. A new interpretive lens begin with a vocabulary guiding shared meanings that exclude outsiders. As participant four explained, "Chakras are the primary non-physical energy centers of the body, encompasses the physical body like a perimeter of light, and is roughly the same as a magnetic field is to the magnet." Furthermore, a common vocabulary leads to common concepts and stories, where only some are sufficiently memorable to be propagated.

The common rhetoric appeared in concepts intrinsic to the Association's belief set, thus providing a common, unique, and exclusive language accessible only to insiders. In addition to numerous individual terms, the most successful concepts were transmitted in stories and narratives, typically of individual cases. For example, the group leader's personal spiritual journey was repeatedly told in a series of anecdotes and aphorisms where misfortune, adversity, uncertainty, and despair were overcome with tenacity, unexpected and portentous lessons with retrospective meaning making, as well as timely interventions by observing spirits. A simple illustration may be found in a story told by the leader where she felt disinclined to travel with a particular individual who subsequently crashed his car on the trip. The decision not to travel was attributed to the intervention of her spirit guide who influenced her intuition. Such counter-intuitive elements within frequently repeated stories may be relevant in the context of Pascal Boyer's (1994, 2001) theory of cognitive optimality.

According to Boyer, the most memorable beliefs contain an unexpected element; a counter intuitive concept embedded in an otherwise plausible set of concepts. Boyer's cognitive optimality hypothesis predicts that certain patterns in concepts can have a dramatic impact on their memorability and

subsequent transmission. Moreover, the most successful concepts align with thought and memory. Boyer's thesis hinges upon the importance of "minimally" counter intuitive ideas. These ideas violate intuitive expectations about the world and its contents. For example, spirits are normal humans in terms of their psychological content and personal agency, and can be expected to act like humans. However, spirits violate the natural expectation that a physical mind is necessary for thought. In a simplistic way, a good story becomes memorable when it contains an unexpected twist. Perhaps as John McClenon (2002) claimed, connecting with a spiritual archetype may feel like we are living a myth, playing a predetermined role as part of a larger ensemble.

Notwithstanding the potential importance of counter intuitive content, the role of narratives in the conversion process remains ambiguous, although some evidence suggests they occupy a central place in the way humans think, remember, deal with emotions, and even become persuaded. Arthur Graesser, Susan Goldman, and Paulus van den Broek (2002, 240) wrote: "Perhaps it is because there are more vivid mental images, or a more elegant composition of the conceptual structures." Similarly, Jeffrey Strange and Elihu Katz (2002) concluded that individuals' beliefs can shift dramatically following the exposure to a narrative, even when demonstrated to be fictional. Our results align with Ines Jindra's (2008) research that shows a close affinity between an individual's personal conversion narrative and the focus of their religious judgment. For example, participant one lauded the group leader: "She has opened my eyes, and for that I shall always owe her a debt of gratitude. Where others may have failed, she has succeeded. Not by persuasion. Not by coercion. Not even by logic and rationality. It's because of her sincerity and her preparedness to tell her story."

CONSEQUENCES

Conversion impacts the convert's lifestyle, reflecting the nature, intensity, and duration of their conversion. Consequences, in Rambo's terminology, are what happen when beliefs change. Consequences forge tangible expressions of attachment and sincerity. Perhaps more importantly, consequences express a nontemporary change in the cognitive treatment of a belief set, even when behavioral changes have already been enacted. New behaviors are not reliable indicators of conversion, despite being a necessary condition. In fact, new behaviors precipitated belief or dissonance, the latter either folding into belief or escalating into a rejection of the prospective belief set. All group members experienced some belief changes during their time with the Association, although for the unconverted the changes were probably subtle or temporary. For example, participant two left the Association believing in the presence of spirits, but felt that the

communications he had experienced were specious. After demanding an explanation as to why the information he had received from the leader's guide was demonstrably inaccurate he reached the following conclusion: "The explanation eventually came that they were (again) testing my reactions and judgment under a cloud of emotion. In short, they were attempting to make me angry in order to see whether it would change my decision-making. I did not become angry; merely further disillusioned."

Three kinds of belief changes and consequences were observed. First, for some the experience led to belief repositioning. This occurred in the case of participant two who claimed that he had once considered the Association's beliefs plausible, but had concluded that they were, at least in part, specious: "All I know is that I am growing tired of being deceived and misled for my 'own good.' I sometimes feel like a puppy whose nose has been rubbed in its own mess, to teach it a lesson." This member departed without undergoing conversion. Second, there were those for whom the immersion in the organization led to a belief transition. This happened for two of the group members, participants four and five. Like a smorgasbord, each accepted selective aspects of the beliefs on offer. For one, the beliefs consumed were sufficiently satisfying, but for the other they did not satiate a fickle appetite. Neither of these two members accepted the Association's belief system comprehensively, but both continued their involvement on a limited and sporadic basis. For example, participant five accepted the presence of spiritual guides, the centrality of spiritual growth, and the importance of becoming an advocate for a "spiritual life." At the same time, aspects of spiritualism proved disconcerting enough to allow him to drift away from the group: "It seems my job is to spread the word that there is continuation of life . . . If this is true, it would explain why I have made this connection with spirit while I am still young; the spiritualist churches are full of old ladies . . . it may explain why I have always had an interest in the supernatural."

Finally, two of the group might be classified as converts, who remained with the Association and progressed to more advanced levels of responsibility. Participant three concluded, "It is not like a tap which can be shut off once turned on." For participant one, the new belief set provided a structure for her uncertainty to be relinquished: "There is still much I do not and probably cannot understand. I have chosen to accept that that is the way it must be, and not to dwell on it. I will continue to work hard developing as I am. I will continue the exercises I currently undertake and consider any further ones suggested by my team of guides."

CONCLUDING COMMENTS

Conversion is not an all or nothing phenomenon. In this case, the group members had cycled through context, catalyst, and quest numerous times

before they experienced a sufficiently compelling encounter leading to an initial level of commitment. It is a small jump to imagine the role of a charismatic leader in this next stage, although previously poor encounter experiences will handicap the conversion process. The encounter is the most vulnerable period in the conversion process where potential converts are most likely to drop out. Once involved, however, leadership transitioned to unseen spiritual guides, and eventually, to the group members themselves as they channeled their own spiritual advisors.

Group members inductively used their experiences to confirm preexisting hopes about the afterlife and its inhabitants. Despite the unique nature of individuals' belief sets, a suite of generic values were quickly shared and accepted as common truths. The most significant point of differentiation between the two members of the group who converted, the two who transitioned, and the two who rejected the beliefs of the Association, was their starting beliefs. For the two eventual converts, the belief set of the Association was closer to their joining set than for the others.

As depicted in Figure 1, Rambo's conceptualization of conversion was developed around what our data suggest are the critical component of the process: the interaction-commitment cycle. Consistent with Rambo's claims, our data show conversion as a multifaceted and dynamic process of cognitive transition mediated by structural and contextual forces. Our supplemental findings emphasize the "engine" of conversion, the Interaction-Commitment stages, which we operationalized through four mechanisms: ritual-meaning, roles-agency, rhetoric-cognitive optimality, and relationships-belonging.

The hard work toward conversion occurs before an advocate arrives. Potential converts who do convert were already primed in that their transposed beliefs remained aligned with their preconversion set. A kind of cognitive economy seems to be at play here and would be worthy of further investigation. Our findings also reinforce the importance of emotional coherence as an important variable. Lawrence Barsalou et al. (2005) proposed that cognitive representations of concepts have a corresponding set of simulated unconscious experiences. The visual, tactile, auditory, and kinesthetic senses all produce responses to conceptual representations in the same way that for some, the mere thought of a large, hairy spider is enough to produce a range of powerful physiological reactions. The addition of sensory modalities to cognition helps to explain how emotion might assume a larger role in the process of conversion. In fact, embodied expressions of emotional states serve to stimulate the emotions they signify. Moreover, the acquisition of religious commitment may be influenced by the emotional benefits it delivers. All decision making contains an emotional dimension, as in fact does every form of thinking (Damasio 1999, 2001; Fazio 2001). From this premise, Thagard (2005) proposed that consistency between thought and action is not just about diminishing logical tensions between

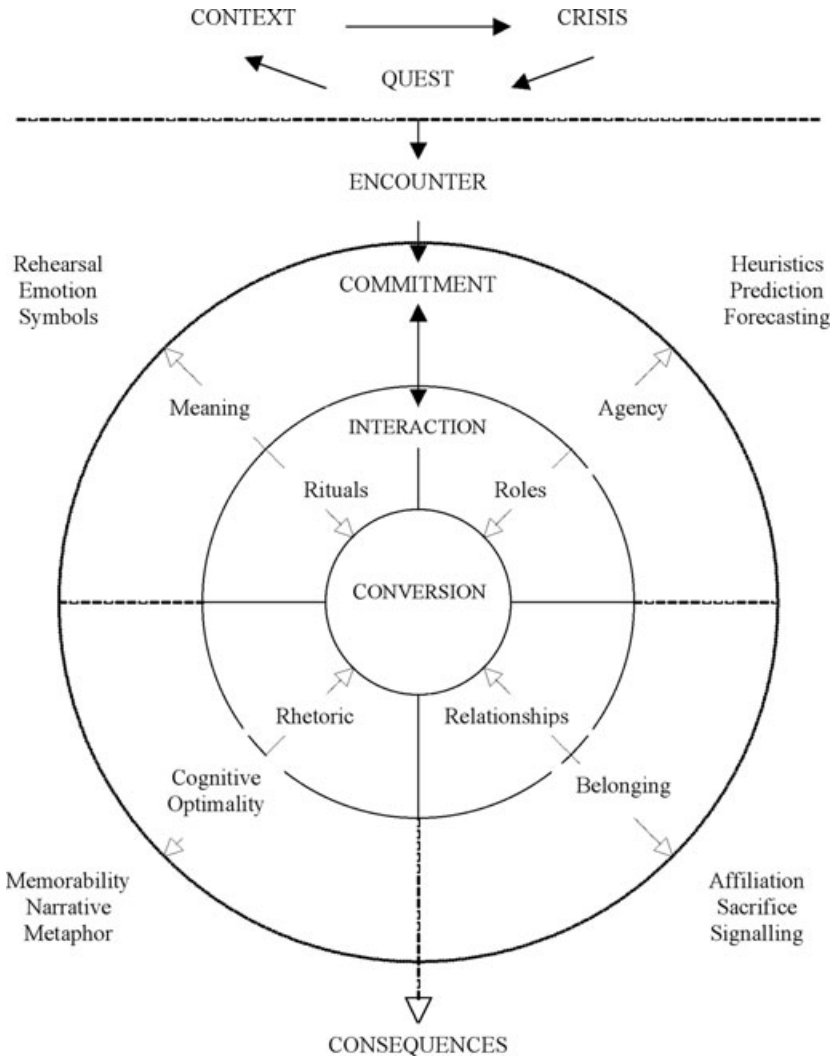


Figure 1. A Conceptual Model of Belief Conversion

beliefs, but is also about constructing a system of intellectual commitments that lead to emotional coherence.

The use of unsubstantiated and unfalsifiable ideas is likely to be a central condition in developing powerful communal belief, identity, and solidarity. Avoiding verification of key concepts is a part of the group's process of collusion, a little like a collective version of the emperor's new clothes. The whole process is strengthened through overt and embedded symbols that are meaningful to members of the group. Symbols in turn serve as

anchors linking their conceptual representations to sensory memory. In this way, the mere thought of a symbol used in a ritual is enough to elicit a physiological outcome and a corresponding emotional experience.

Our data-collection procedures focused on the personal experiences of individuals exposed to a potential religious conversion. As a result, our expansion of Rambo's conversion framework should be seen as suggestive and should not be generalized. Equally, the four mechanisms we describe offer possible theoretical vehicles for the further elaboration of a religious conversion process. For example, our model suggests that rituals play a pivotal role, not just in the transmission of religious concepts, but also in the process of attuning cognition for ongoing receptivity to religious concepts. Ritual content may transgress material verification. Participants cannot appeal to logic or rational assessment in order to affirm the symbology inherent in a ritual. Their only recourse for demonstrating solidarity with the practicing group is to attest through experience. Religious practices, such as the ones associated with conversion, involve the transmission of complex, culturally diverse ideas that end up stretching practitioners' cognitive tools. In this respect, reflective thought (Barrett 2004) can be replaced by a convenient, ready-made doctrinal explanation.

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