

---

# Conversion to New Religious Movements: Reassessment of Lofland/Skonovd Conversion Motifs and Lofland/Stark Conversion Process

Keishin Inaba

---

There is now a considerable body of literature on conversion to NRMs. Among them, the most cited conversion process model is that of Lofland and Stark (1965), while a model by Lofland and Skonovd (1981) is well known as the conversion motifs model. By presenting case studies of two NRMs, this paper will explore the varieties of conversion processes and the motives for conversion along with a reassessment of the Lofland/Skonovd conversion motifs and the Lofland/Stark conversion process. In this study, conversion is considered as a process over a period of time rather than a single event. The approach is descriptive in order to seek what actually happens in conversion processes and explore the varieties of processes of conversion and the motives for conversion.

**Key words:** conversion, Lofland/Skonovd conversion motif, Lofland/Stark conversion process

---

## 1. Introduction

There is now a considerable body of literature on conversion to New Religious Movements (NRMs). Among them, the most cited conversion process model is that of Lofland and Stark (1965), while a model by Lofland and Skonovd (1981) is well known as the conversion motifs model. By presenting case studies of two NRMs, this paper will explore the varieties of conversion processes and the motives for conversion along with a reassessment of the Lofland/Skonovd conversion motifs and the Lofland/Stark conversion process.

One of the NRMs discussed in this paper is the Jesus Army, a Christian group officially known as the Jesus Fellowship Church, founded in 1969 by Noel Stanton. It has its origins in the charismatic renewal of the Baptist Church in Bugbrooke, a small village in Northampton in the UK. It makes particular efforts to evangelise those in need, especially homeless young people, those involved in drug or alcohol abuse, prisoners and ex-prisoners. The Jesus Army describes itself as 'an orthodox evangelical Christian church, upholding the universally accepted creeds of the Christian faith: the Apostles' Creed, the Nicene Creed and Athanasian Creed.' The main act of worship takes place on Sundays, and it includes Bible teaching, communion, dancing and the singing hymns and songs. Although the members of the Jesus Army live simply, they are not entirely opposed to technology. They have adopted modern

dance music, house music, and drum machines along with media technology such as film, video-graphics, computerised music, sound and lighting for their worship. Today there are about 2,500 members of the Jesus Army in the UK and about 700 live in the community houses. They run various businesses, such as farms, health food shops, and garages.

The other NRM discussed is the Friends of the Western Buddhist Order (FWBO), which was founded in 1967 by Sangharakshita (Dennis Philip Edward Lingwood). The FWBO claims that since its foundation it has been committed to developing ways of practising Buddhism which meet the needs of people in the modern Western world. The FWBO draws on various Buddhist traditions such as Theravada and Tibetan Buddhism for its doctrines and practices. The FWBO focuses on both individual development and spiritual fellowship, emphasising concern for the welfare of others, and the members try to obtain enlightenment, the perfect wisdom and compassion. Through meditation, they try to obtain strengthened feelings of universal loving-kindness as well as immediate benefits such as handling stress. There are now about 80 FWBO centres around the world, 30 of them in the UK. These centres usually run introductory meditation classes for the public, which give a basic grounding in the principles and practices of Buddhism. Weekend retreats in the country provide conditions for meditation and reflection, in which people can try some aspects of Buddhism. There are residential communities and 'right livelihood businesses' around most FWBO centres, whose communal living is considered to offer a supportive environment for spiritual practice to transform members through Buddhism. According to the FWBO, it has several thousand regular participants and about 500 ordained members in the UK.

There are some significant dissimilarities between the Jesus Army and the FWBO. The Jesus Army and the FWBO are derived from different religions, Christianity and Buddhism respectively. The members of the Jesus Army believe that everything is a gift from God and they need God's endorsement of their social life, while the members of the FWBO have the ideal that more aspects of society are positively influenced by Buddhism. A survey conducted in 1998 (Inaba, 2000) shows that the members of the FWBO are more liberal in their views on sexuality than the members of the Jesus Army. In the case of the Jesus Army, the teachings prescribe moral precepts, and its members have a strict moral code. In contrast, the members of the FWBO do not expect the teachings to give instruction in the sexual and moral attitudes, even though they value ethical life, accepting the teachings of karma, cause and effect, which requires full responsibility for their acts. These dissimilarities provide the opportunity of seeing whether there are differences in conversion motivation and its process between the members of the two NRMs.

## **2. Conversion Theory**

There are two distinctive approaches to definitions of conversion: the normative and descriptive approaches (Rambo, 1993: 6). Within the normative approaches, conversion is formulated according to the theological convictions of a particular tradition, whereas the

descriptive approaches seek what actually happens in conversion processes. This study is descriptive and will explore the varieties of processes of conversion and the motives for conversion. The working definition of conversion employed is: conversion is a process of religious change which transforms 'the way the individual perceives the rest of society and his or her personal place in it, altering one's view of the world' (McGuire, 1997: 71).

Experiencing deprivation may motivate people to join religious groups (Glock & Stark, 1965), while the beliefs or ideology of NRMs may play a central role in mediating between the NRMs' external circumstances, their organizational rationale and their members' ways of accounting for their conversion (Beckford, 1978). Lofland and Skonovd (1981) present six motifs of conversion: intellectual, mystical, experimental, affectional, revivalist and coercive. Although real conversion experiences, as Dawson (1990) points out, are likely to be of a mixed type, Lofland/Skonovd's model of conversion seems to be useful in identifying the different experiences and themes of various types of conversion within the study of NRMs.

Bainbridge (1992) gives two alternative sociological theories to explain religious conversion: strain theory and social influence theory. According to strain theory, people join a religion in order to satisfy conventional desires that unusual personal or collective deprivations have frustrated. In other words, in joining a religion, the person adopts an ideology about life that transforms deprivation into a virtue. According to social influence theory, people join a religion because they have formed social attachments with persons who are already members and because their attachments to nonmembers are weak. As Bainbridge himself remark, a combination of both of these theories is probably the best explanation and the Lofland/Stark (1965) conversion model encompasses both of the theories.

Lofland/Stark (1965) conversion model has been recognized as an important step towards a new conversion paradigm by focusing on the process of conversion. Richardson (1985) points out that the old or traditional conversion paradigm, with its deprivation and strain assumptions about the passivity of human beings, is giving way partially to a new paradigm. The new or alternative conversion paradigm stresses humans as volitional entities who assign meaning to their action and to the actions of others within a social context (Kilbourne & Richardson 1988). According to the Lofland/Stark conversion model, a person must (1) experience enduring and acutely-felt tensions, (2) within a religious problem-solving perspective, (3) which results in self-designation as a religious seeker, and the prospective convert must (4) encounter the movement or cult at a turning point in life, (5) wherein an affective bond is formed with one or more converts, (6) where extra-cult attachments are absent or neutralized, and (7) where the convert is exposed to intensive interaction to become an active and dependable adherent.

Although Lofland (1977) employed the activist analysis to note that the Lofland/Stark model embodies a thoroughly passive actor, the Lofland/Stark model seems most useful for elucidating the conversion process, because the model encompasses all the possible stages of this process and an activist view of human beings to some extent as well as

perspectives within a social context (see Richardson, 1985; Ito, 1997). On the other hand, a study of conversion to the Nichiren Shoshu Buddhist movement in the U.S.A. by Snow and Phillips (1980) provides little empirical support for such components of the Lofland/Stark model as personal tension and religious seekership. Moreover, a study among Dutch adolescents by Kox, Meeus and Hart (1991) shows the Lofland/Stark model is inadequate as a model for the process of conversion. These results mean that the model should not be understood as being cumulative; rather, it offers a set of conditions for conversion.

### 3. Religious background and the first encounter

In 1998, questionnaires were distributed to all the members of the Jesus Army and the FWBO attached to their headquarters in London. In total, there were 108 usable returns of the 210 questionnaires distributed, amounting to 51.4 per cent of the sample. With a view to finding out the previous religious affiliation of respondents of the Jesus Army and the FWBO, they were asked in the questionnaire, 'Before joining this movement, did you regard yourself as belonging to any religious movements or churches?' As Table 1 shows, for over half of the Jesus Army and the FWBO samples, affiliation to their movement was not a conversion from other religions but was their first religious affiliation.

Table 1. *Religious background %* (N= 38: the Jesus Army; 70: the FWBO)

	The Jesus Army	The FWBO
Christianity	47.4	24.3
Buddhism	0.0	2.9
Other	0.0	4.3
None	52.6	67.6

52.5 per cent encountered the Jesus Army through family, friends, casual acquaintances, or work colleagues (Table 2). The equivalent figure for the FWBO sample is 45.8 per cent. Both cases confirm the view expressed by Clarke that 'personal contact between the evangelizer and the potential recruit accounts for a majority of the conversions in the case of many new religions' (Clarke ed., 1987: 7). Although social networks play an essential role in conversion to the NRMs, there are other factors. 23.7 per cent in the Jesus Army sample first encountered the Jesus Army through a member on the streets. 42.9 per cent in the FWBO sample first encountered the FWBO through the movement's own literature or publicity.

Table 2. *First encounter %* (N= 38: the Jesus Army; 70: the FWBO)

	The Jesus Army	The FWBO
Family	18.4	8.6
A friend	28.9	28.6
A casual acquaintance	2.6	5.7
A work colleague	2.6	2.9
A member on the streets	23.7	0.0
Literature or publicity	7.9	42.9
An event	10.5	2.9
Other	5.4	8.4

This is remarkably high, compared with the 7.9 per cent in the Jesus Army sample. Wilson and Dobbelaere (1994: 49-50) note that ‘a movement sponsoring a relatively impersonal technique of mental therapy, such as Scientology, is likely to put more emphasis on literature and publicity than on personal introductions.’ Although it seems that the FWBO is not very keen on evangelisation, it attracts a large number of people through its literature and publicity on meditation and Buddhism.

#### **4. Conversion Motifs**

The author carried out 60 interviews with the Jesus Army and the FWBO in 1997-1999, taking care to ensure the sample of interviewees had a diversity of characteristics through a quota sample method. The mean age of 30 interviewees of the Jesus Army was 32.1 years old, while that of 30 interviewees of the FWBO was 38.0. The interviews took place in one of the guest rooms or a living room at one of each movement’s community houses at an arranged day and time. Interviewees in this paper are given fictitious names and numbers such as J1, J2 and J3 in the case of the Jesus Army and F1, F2 and F3 in the case of the FWBO.

The ways in which people first encounter NRMs elucidate the character of the NRMs, while the motivations for conversion elucidate the character of the converts. Now we will see where the conversion motifs of members of the Jesus Army and the FWBO fall in the model presented by Lofland/Skonovd (1981). The first motif is intellectual conversion. The ‘intellectual’ mode of conversion is where people pursue alternate theodicies, and seek personal fulfilment by reading books, watching television, attending lectures and in other impersonal ways. As we saw previously, the FWBO attracts a large number of people through its literature and publicity on meditation and Buddhism. Table 3 shows 86.7 per cent of the FWBO sample of interviewees had been intellectually attracted to the movement. 72.9 per cent of the FWBO sample in the questionnaire survey had obtained first or higher degrees, and this high ratio explains the corresponding level of intellectual conversion. In the Jesus

Army sample of interviewees none fell into the intellectual category of conversion motif, while 36.9 per cent of the Jesus Army sample in the questionnaire survey had obtained first or higher degrees.

Table 3. *Lofland/Skonovd motifs of conversion %*  
(N= 30: the Jesus Army; 30: the FWBO)

Motif	The Jesus Army	The FWBO
Intellectual	0.0	86.7
Mystical	37.0	6.7
Experimental	48.1	76.7
Affectional	66.7	23.3
Revivalist	29.6	0.0
Coercive	0.0	0.0

The second category is mystical conversion, which is generally a sudden burst of insight such as visions, voices, or other paranormal experiences. 37 per cent of the Jesus Army sample and 6.7 per cent of the FWBO sample fell into this category. The third motif is experimental, which comes from active exploration through trial and error of religious options. 48.1 per cent in the Jesus Army sample and 76.7 per cent in the FWBO sample fell into this category. The fourth, 'affectional' conversion motif stresses interpersonal bonds such as the personal experience of being welcomed by members of religious groups. 66.7 per cent of the Jesus Army sample and 23.3 per cent of the FWBO sample are the examples of affectional conversion.

The fifth, 'revivalist' conversion motif involves crowd conformity to induce new behaviour and beliefs together with emotionally powerful music and preaching. 29.6 per cent of the Jesus Army sample and none in the FWBO sample fell into this category. The last conversion motif presented by Lofland and Skonovd (1981) is coercive, which involves intense and coercive pressure on the person to participate. None in the sample of the two NRMs fell into this category.

## 5. Conversion Process

As we have seen, the Lofland/Stark (1965) conversion model has seven stages: (1) tension, (2) religious problem-solving perspective, (3) seekership, (4) turning point, (5) affective bond, (6) weak extra-cult attachments, and (7) intensive interaction. While Machalek and Snow (1993) divide the causes of conversion into two categories: individual attributes and contextual influences, similarly the Lofland/Stark model is divided into two categories: predisposing conditions ((1), (2), and (3)) and situational contingencies ((4), (5), (6), and (7)). The predisposing conditions are attributes of potential converts, and the situational contingencies turn a potential convert into an actual convert.

### *Tension*

The first predisposing condition presented by Lofland and Stark is tension. For conversion a person must experience enduring, acutely-felt tensions. The Jesus Army evangelises homeless people experiencing tensions on the street. As seen previously (Table 2), 23.7 per cent of the sample actually encountered the Jesus Army on the street. Scott, 27 years old, met one of the members while he was living as a homeless person on the street when he was fifteen years old. He recalls 'I had just left Scotland and ended up homeless on the streets of London. I met the Jesus Army on the street' (J17). Howard, 32 years old, also encountered the Jesus Army on the street, when he just cried out 'God if you are there, you have got to help me, because I am going to die. I've got no food and I've got no money, and I can't take this any more' (J11). 51.8 per cent of the Jesus Army interviewees had been experiencing tensions when they met the Jesus Army (Table 4).

Table 4. *Lofland/Stark process of conversion %*  
(N= 30: the Jesus Army; 30: the FWBO)

	The Jesus Army	The FWBO
Tension	51.8	46.6
Perspective	81.5	90.0
Seekership	81.5	90.0
Turning point	33.3	10.0
Affective bond	96.3	76.7
Weak extra-cult attachments	88.9	63.3
Intensive interaction	92.6	80.0

Ellen, 41 years old, encountered the FWBO through one of her friends with whom she was doing Tai Chi. The friend suggested that she should try meditation. At that time she was under much stress as a computer programmer. She had headaches and had been ill for a few years. She was looking at all sorts of alternative therapies to try to get well. Sabina, 36 years old, encountered the FWBO through her brother. At that time her brother lived in Norwich, and he had done a meditation course at the Norwich Buddhist Centre. Sabina says, 'I suffered quite a lot from stress and anxiety and he said that meditation was good for that and I could learn it here [the London Buddhist Centre], so I came along' (F12). Glen, 28 years old, also had been experiencing tensions when he met the FWBO. Glen recalls:

I was definitely looking for an end to confusion. I was quite confused in my mind about who I was and what I wanted to do. I had a lot of anxiety. I just wanted my mind to calm down, because I was getting in too much of a state. Also another significant thing is that I had had quite a lot of involvement in drugs before then, so I think that had messed my mind up quite a bit. It caused quite a lot of confusion and paranoia (F15).

46.6 per cent of the FWBO interviewees experienced enduring tensions. The ratio is almost the same as that of the Jesus Army sample, and about half of the sample converted to the NRMs without tensions.

### *Religious Problem-Solving Perspective and Seekership*

In addition to the experiences of tension, Lofland and Stark (1965) point out that potential converts hold a general propensity to impose religious meaning on events. Whatever the reasons are, potential converts seek for solutions within a religious problem-solving perspective. Subsequently, they become religious seekers who search some satisfactory system of religious meaning.

Meg, 23 years old, encountered the Jesus Army through one of her friends, who became a member of the Jesus Army when Meg was already a Christian, having left a Christian rehabilitation centre for drug and alcohol abuse. She was looking for a church and 'tried the Jesus Army'. Drusilla, 41 years old, encountered the Jesus Army at a campaign in Willesden in 1993. At that time she was searching for something in life, the meaning of life. She recalls, 'there had to be something more because I felt an emptiness inside, and that my life was without purpose, there had to be something deeper, a reason why we were living. Since I have found Jesus I do feel that there is purpose in my life, and the feelings inside are different' (J3). Duncan, 43 years old, was also searching for something deeper when he encountered the Jesus Army. He has been a member of the Jesus Army for five years, before that he was connected with the Church of England, but Duncan says, 'my wife and I were looking for something deeper for ourselves and our two children. We were longing for greater spiritual depth' (J1).

Many converts to the FWBO were initially interested in meditation and then gradually took an interest in Buddhism itself. Caroline, 36 years old, is one of them. She used to go to church twice a year when she was child. She went to India in the spring of 1988 and met people who were meditating. Caroline decided to learn to meditate. When she came back to England, she saw an advertisement for a meditation course run by the FWBO in Covent Garden. She was first interested in meditation and carried on meditating, but gradually became more interested in Buddhism as well. She looks back on the past and says:

I was most aware of experiencing quite a lot of fear and anxiety. At the same time I was also investigating psychotherapy and exploring alternative medicine, like homeopathy, working with massage and so on. I wanted to work more with my body and mind and to change my experience about fear and anxiety. I thought that meditation would help with that. Also my stepmother had died about a year earlier, so I had also had an experience of grief, which I think was also a factor making me want to explore what life was all about (F11).

Michael, 58 years old, working at the North London Buddhist Centre, contacted the FWBO in 1989 through an advertisement. He says, 'because I was just interested in

Buddhism and I always had an interest in what was happening in Tibet, the political situation there and I decided that I would find out a little bit more about Buddhism' (F18). He attended an 'Introduction to Buddhism' course, and then an 'Introduction to Meditation' course.

Laura, 46 years old, is another example of seekers who encountered the FWBO. She says:

I was aware that in my lifetime I wasn't really going where I wanted to go. I wasn't very happy and I was looking for some sort of change in my life. I had the idea that I needed to take more responsibility because I felt I was drifting into things and out of things and being influenced in a rather random sort of way by pretty well anything that moved. I was looking for something but I wasn't clear at that stage what it might be. The meditation class seemed a good thing to try (F10).

Over all, 81.5 per cent of the Jesus army sample and 90.0 per cent of the FWBO interviewees had such predisposing conditions for religious problem-solving perspective and seekership (Table 4).

### ***Turning Point***

The predisposing conditions examined above are personal attributes before the pre-converts encounter the NRMs. We now turn to the situational contingencies which turn a potential convert into an actual convert. The first of these presented by Lofland and Stark (1965) is 'turning points'. Turning points are situations in which old obligations and lines of action are diminished, and new involvements become desirable and possible. Pre-converts perceived as a turning point in their lives shortly before or concurrently with their encounter with the NRMs are likely to convert (Lofland/Stark, 1965: 870). This study, however, does not provide much empirical support for this component of the Lofland/Stark model. Only 33.3 per cent in the Jesus Army sample and 10.0 per cent in the FWBO sample of interviewees were perceived as turning points in their lives at the time of their encounter with the NRMs (Table 4).

### ***Affective Bond***

Lofland/Stark identify three additional stages of the contact between pre-converts and members of religious groups. The first step, 'affective bond' is 'the development or presence of some positive, emotional, interpersonal response' (Lofland/Stark, 1965: 871). Although a potential convert might have some initial difficulty in taking up the new perspectives of the NRMs, affective bonds facilitate acceptance of them.

Meg, 23 years old, encountered the Jesus Army through one of her friends. Meg says, 'I thought it was a bit strange at first. The way the Jesus Army worshipped was a bit odd at first, the lights and weird music was not the sort of church I was used to. But I soon got used

to it' (J7). She recalls its attraction, 'What really attracted me was the sincerity of the people, and the obvious love and bonding that they had with each other. I wanted to be part of it and the life that I could get from it' (J7).

Lee, 33 years old, encountered the FWBO through one of his colleagues in 1988. Lee was not interested in Buddhism at all at first, but he just went to learn how to become more positive and calmer through meditation. He attended a number of meditation classes and one day he read a book of Buddhism. Lee found it interesting and decided to do a six-week Buddhist course. After the first session, he thought the members in the centre were crazy. It was a course on The Wheel of Life - the realm of the gods and the realm of the animals. After that week, he decided he would not go back. However, he thought about all the people he knew there, and he recalled what a great time he had with them. Subsequently he turned up for the rest of the course. He says, 'the people there were so nice. I also started to get a little feel for the Buddha and began to like him. I read a few more of the books about the Buddha and I began to think I was a Buddhist' (F17).

Over all, affective bonds facilitated conversions of 96.3 per cent of the Jesus Army interviewees and 76.7 per cent of the FWBO interviewees (Table 4).

***Weak Extra-Cult Attachments and Intensive Interaction***

According to the Lofland/Stark (1965) model, once potential converts encounter the NRMs and form affective bonds, their attachments to outsiders are getting weaker and subsequently the converts are exposed to intensive interaction to become active and dependable adherents. Of the members of the Jesus Army in the survey, 78.9 per cent did not have any family members in the movement and in the case of the FWBO it was 84.3 per cent (Table 5).

Table 5. *Proportion of family members in the movement %*  
(N= 38: the Jesus Army; 70: the FWBO)

	The Jesus Army	The FWBO
None	78.9	84.3
Very few	18.4	14.3
About half	2.6	1.4
The majority	0.0	0.0
All	0.0	0.0

Table 6. *Proportion of close friends in the movement %*  
(N= 38: the Jesus Army; 70: the FWBO)

	The Jesus Army	The FWBO
None	28.9	0.0
Very few	21.1	1.4
About half	7.9	28.6
The majority	28.9	60.0
All	13.2	10.0

60.0 per cent of the FWBO sample reported that the majority of their close friends were in the movement (Table 6). As noted previously (Table 2), 28.6 per cent converted through their friends in the FWBO, which means that 71.4 per cent did not have any friends in the FWBO when they encountered it. Hence, it is obvious that most of the respondents in the FWBO sample did not retain old friendships with outsiders and that they established close friendships among the members in the FWBO after they joined it. Thus both of the movements have a high proportion of individuals who have no family members involved and most of them established close friendships among the members in the group after they joined it.

Moira, a 20-year-old student, has grown up in one of the community houses of the Jesus Army since the age of eight. Before that her parents were Christians and went to a Baptist church. Her parents divorced when she was seven and she lived with her mother and sister for about a year before they moved into one of the community houses of the Jesus Army. Moira talks about the first impression, 'Lots of people, a big house. I suppose because my mum and dad had just split up I felt quite upset about it. There were lots of children there that were about my age and that helped me then' (J15). It was not her choice to join the Jesus Army. She recalls, 'I just came because my mum came. I don't remember thinking I had a choice, but I didn't mind. I was happy about it, because it was where my friends were and I wanted to be with my friends. But I don't remember thinking I had any option at the time' (J15). However, it was not automatic for her to become a covenant member. She says, 'When you get older you make your own decision. When I was fifteen I began to think about what I did want, why I was here. I decided that even if my mum weren't here I would still want to be' (J15). She was baptised at the age of fifteen and is still an active member living in the community in spite of the fact that her mother have left the Jesus Army.

Flora, 40 years old, had her first contact with the Jesus Army at the of eighteen, when she was a student and involved with the Christian Union at university. Before that she had visited many churches such as House Fellowships, Baptist churches, United Reformed, Pentecostal and others, but she did not join any of them because she did not feel at home. She was looking for a radical church which was really committed. She says, 'I had felt that as a Christian I wanted to be a whole hearted Christian, not a lukewarm Sundays only sort of

Christian' (J4). Flora recalls, 'I was a student at that time and a friend of mine at university recommended the Jesus Army, so I came for my first visit about that time' (J4). After she finished her university course she decided to move into one of the community houses of the Jesus Army. Flora talks about its attraction at that time: 'The spiritual power that I felt here, also the sense of family, the brotherhood. When I came here I thought that this was the church for me, because it is a church which has that commitment' (J4).

Glen, 28 years old, encountered the FWBO in 1993. Glen recalls, 'I was searching for another means of transformation which would work for me, where drugs hadn't. So there was a superficial reason, but also a deeper searching for something' (F15). What attracted him at first was friendship with members and seeing that 'there was a real connection with the Dharma and the Buddhist teaching and a very strong resonance of the truth of that' (F15). Glen says, 'I just thought these people seemed to be doing it right. The Buddhist ideals were being lived out here to enough of an extent. That made me feel they were genuine and effective in what they were doing. I think the key thing is friendship. I started making friends here as well' (F15). Consequently, he started living in a flat with other members and became an active member as a manager of a FWBO centre.

Over all, 88.9 per cent of the Jesus Army interviewees and 63.3 per cent of the FWBO interviewees' attachments to outsiders got weaker and 92.6 per cent of the Jesus Army interviewees and 80.0 per cent of the FWBO interviewees were exposed to intensive interaction to become active and dependable adherents (Table 4).

## **6. Conversion as a Process**

It can be stated that conversion is not always a single event, rather a process over time in many cases. Helen, 30 years old, encountered the Jesus Army in a night-club, where members of the Jesus Army washed people's feet, prayed with people and talked to those who wanted to talk. Helen took the telephone number of one of them and later phoned him and attended a Sunday night meeting. She says, 'I came maybe the next Sunday night, and then I wouldn't come for a few weeks. Then I would come for a few weeks again, then I wouldn't come for a while again. It was very spasmodic. Slowly I came more and was away less' (J22). It took a long time for Helen to get involved in the Jesus Army. Nevertheless, she continued to visit the Jesus Army. What made her keep contact with them? Helen says:

The Holy Spirit is here. The people are very loving and very caring and very accepting of you. You don't have to change to come here in any way, you come as you are, and you are accepted as you are. A lot of young people, as well as old, come here. It is a very charismatic and alive church (J22).

As noted previously, 86.7 per cent of the FWBO interviewees have been intellectually attracted to the movement. However, the encounters with the members in the Buddhist centre of the FWBO were their drives to go deep into the FWBO. Michael, 58 years old,

recalls, 'I liked the individuals whom I met. When I got to know them, and it took a little while, I liked their honesty, their openness and their warmth. I suppose the fact they had something specific in their life. So, that attracted me, once I got to know them' (F18). Thus, Michael saw an advertisement and visited the FWBO without any relationship with its members, because he was intellectually motivated. However, what really attracted him was the characters of its members. Human contact is an important factor for new converts.

Sabina, 36 years old, encountered the FWBO through her brother in 1993. Sabina says, 'I suffered quite a lot from stress and anxiety and he said that meditation was good for that and I could learn it at the London Buddhist Centre, so I came along' (F12). She gradually became interested in Buddhism, and then she attended the Introduction to Buddhism course at the London Buddhist Centre. However, at that time she did not read books about the teachings very much. What attracted her was the members of the FWBO. She was most affected by the way that they were; she says, 'There were people I admired and wished I could be more like. People who were generous and kind made me feel there was an opportunity to change and to be more like that' (F12). It was not straight forward for her to become an active member. Sabina recounts:

I did feel quite divided about it. On one level I felt very strongly that that was what I wanted to do, but I also was quite afraid as well. I was afraid of being sucked into a big group and losing myself and who I was. So on the one level I decided quite quickly, but another part of me was slower (F12).

Conversion is indeed a process of long time in many cases. As Stark and Bainbridge (1985, 308, 309) suggest, the decision to become full-time members come only after a long period of interpersonal bonding and intensive interaction with NRM members.

## **7. Conclusion**

For over half the respondents of both movements, affiliation to their movement was not a conversion from other religions but their first involvement in a religion or religious movement. This study also shows that conversion is basically a gradual process and primarily consists of the establishment of relationships with other members.

Half of the respondents of the Jesus Army encountered the movement through family, friends, casual acquaintances, or work colleagues, thus personal contact is the most important for conversion into the Jesus Army. Many interviewees mentioned the friendliness and love they felt when they visited the Jesus Army. As Richardson and Stewart (1977) point out, it is the case that individuals with high needs for affective ties and possible other basic needs such as food and shelter may have converted to the Jesus Army although they had no basic congruence with it. On the other hand, some interviewees said that they were searching for something in life and the meaning of life, others said that they were religious seekers and that had been to various churches before. Over all, many cases of the Jesus Army fell into the

'mystical' , 'affectional' and 'experimental' conversion models presented by Lofland and Skonovd.

While half of the respondents of the FWBO encountered the movement through family, friends, casual acquaintances, or work colleagues, another half encountered the movement through its literature or publicity. Many interviewees said that they approached the FWBO because of the interest in meditation. They had everyday concerns such as headaches and distress and tried meditation and Buddhism. In this sense, these cases are the 'experimental' conversions of Lofland and Skonovd. Having read the publicity for meditation or Buddhism, they visited the FWBO centres without any personal recommendation or any relationship with a member, since they were intellectually motivated, as Lofland and Skonovd describe the 'intellectual' motif of conversion. Thus, Lofland and Skonovd' conversion motifs are useful for mapping NRMs.

Although there are several significant differences of the motivations for conversion between the two NRMs, when it comes to the process of their conversion their answers are similar. The reasons why these converts became more involved in the movement were primarily the quality of the relationship with members, and the friendship shown to them by existing members. In other words, the attributes of existing members were crucial to their further involvement in the NRMs. Wilson and Dobbelaere discovered the same pattern in their study of Soka Gakkai International in the UK (1994). These stages are classified into the 'affective bond' and 'intensive interaction' process of conversion presented by Lofland and Stark. This study, however, did not provide much empirical support for such components of the Lofland/Stark model as tensions and turning points. These results mean that the Lofland/Stark model should not be understood as being cumulative; rather, it offers a set of conditions for conversion. In summary, the analysis suggests that the conversion process and its motivation may vary and that the interactive process is essential for conversion to the two NRMs.

One of the future directions of research on conversion could be to encompass the examination of the extent to which conversion varies across NRMs differing in teachings, practices and organizational features.

### **References:**

- Bainbridge, William Sims, 'The Sociology of Conversion', in H. Newton Malony & Samuel Southard (eds), *Handbook of Religious Conversion*, Religious Education Press, 1992.
- Barker, Eileen, *The Making of Moonie: Choice or Brainwashing?*, Hampshire: Gregg Revivals, 1984.
- Beckford, James, 'Accounting for Conversion', *British Journal of Sociology*, 29(2), 249-262. 1978.
- Clarke, Peter B. (ed.) *The New Evangelists: Recruitment Methods & Aims of New Religious Movements*, London: Ethnographica, 1987.
- Dawson, Lorne, 'Who Joins New Religious Movements and Why', in Lorne Dawson (ed.) *Cults in Context: Readings in the Study of New Religious Movements*, New Jersey: Transaction Publishers, 141-146, 1998.
- Dawson, Lorne, 'Self-Affirmation, Freedom, and Rationality: Theoretically Elaborating "Active" Conversions', *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 29(2), 141-163, 1990.

- Glock, C.Y. & R. Stark, *Religion and Society in Tension*, Chicago: Rand McNally, 1965.
- Hall, Deana, 'Managing Recruit: Religious Conversion in the Workplace', *Sociology of Religion*, 59(4), 393-410, 1998.
- Inaba, Keishin, *A Comparative Study of Altruism in the New Religious Movements: with special reference to the Jesus Army and the Friends of the Western Buddhist Order*, PhD thesis at King's College London, 2000.
- Ito, Masayuki, 'The Sociology of Conversion: A Critical Appraisal', *Japanese Sociological Review* (Shakaigaku Hyoron), 48(2), 158-176 (Japanese), 1997.
- Kilbourne, Brock & James T. Richardson, 'Paradigm Conflict, Types of Conversion, and Conversion Theories', *Sociological Analysis*, 50(1), 1988.
- Kox, Willem et al. 'Religious Conversion of Adolescents: Testing the Lofland and Stark Model of Religious Conversion', *Sociological Analysis*, 52(3), 227-240, 1991.
- Lofland, John & Rodney Stark, 'Becoming a World-Saver: A Theory of Conversion to a Deviant Perspective', *American Sociological Review*, 30, 862-875, 1965.
- Lofland, John & Norman Skonovd. 'Conversion Motifs', *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 20(4), 373-385, 1981.
- Machalek, Richard & David A. Snow, 'Conversion to New Religious Movements', in David G. Bromley & Jeffrey K. Hadden (eds), *Religion and the Social Order Volume 3B: The Handbook on Cults and Sects in America*, London: JAI Press, 53-74, 1993.
- McGuire, Meredith B. *Religion: The Social Context*. Fourth edition, California: Wadworth Publishing Company, 1997.
- Rambo, Lewis R. 'Conversion', in Mircea Eliade (ed.), *The Encyclopedia of Religion Vol.4*, New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 73-79, 1987.
- Rambo, Lewis. *Understanding Religious Conversion*, Yale: Yale University Press, 1993.
- Richardson, James, 'The Active vs. Passive Convert: Paradigm Conflict in Conversion/Recruitment Research', *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 24(2), 119-236, 1985.
- Richardson, James & Mary Stewart, 'Conversion Process Models and the Jesus Movement', *American Behavioral Scientist*, 20(6), 819-838, 1977.
- Snow, David & Cynthia Phillips, 'The Lofland-Stark Conversion Model: A Critical Reassessment', *Social Problems*, 27(4), 430-447, 1980.
- Stark, Rodney & William Sims Bainbridge, *The Future of Religion: Secularization, Revival, and Cult Formation*, California: University of California Press, 1985.
- Wilson, Bryan & Karel Dobbelaere, *A Time to Chant: The Soka Gakkai Buddhists in Britain*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994.

---

## 新宗教への回心

稲場圭信

多数存在する新宗教への回心研究において、もっとも頻繁に引用・参照される古典的な理論である Lofland/Skonovd の回心動機論と Lofland/Stark の回心過程論を二つの新宗教の事例研究をもとに再評価する。本研究では、一回起的な回心ではなく漸次的回心として記述的にその過程を分析している。  
キーワード：新宗教、回心

---

*Human Sciences Research*, Vol.11, No.2, 33-47, 2004  
Faculty of Human Development, Kobe University, Japan

*Received June 30, 2004*  
*Accepted October 2, 2004*