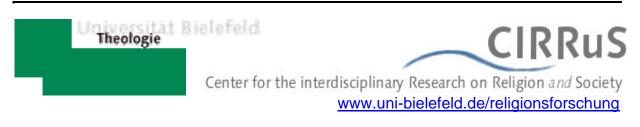# Biographical and Religious Development in Christian-Fundamentalist Converts and Deconverts: A Narrative Approach

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Biographical and Religious Development in Christian-Fundamentalist Converts and Deconverts: A Narrative Approach

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This article presents the results of a qualitative study initiated by the Enquete Commission of the 13th German Parliament on 'So-called Sects and Psychogroups.' Narrative interviews with members and ex-members of Christian-fundamentalist groups in Germany were conducted, selected according to the rule of maximal contrast, and interpreted using sequence analysis and narrative analysis. Our study yielded the following results: a typology of Christian-fundamentalist biographies, including an unexpected type which we have called 'accumulative heretic;' insights into the motivational impact of specific life themes which lead to, or impede, a certain 'fit' between the convert and the intellectual, ritual and moral setting of the respective group; and discernment of the indication of transformation and development during and after membership in Christian-fundamentalist milieus. A framework of religious styles is suggested to understand the formation and transformation of fundamentalist orientation.

The majority of empirical research in contemporary, fundamentalist and new religion (see the reviews of research by Richardson 1985; 1995; Lilliston & Shepherd 1999) is quantitative. However, one of the limitations of the quantitative studies is that they present a one-time portrait of a focus group and fall short in providing information about individual long-term effects. A majority of results provide empirical evidence of a "positive association with measures of health and mental health" (Richardson 1985; cf. 1995a), of an absence of any unusual degree of psychopathology (see e.g. Galanter 1989; 1999) or even of "potential stress-reducing and coping features" (Lilliston & Shepherd 1999) and thus contradict anti-cultist assumptions. Nevertheless, there is a need to

further testing of these results. One of the best approaches would be the carrying out of longitudinal studies. Though this has often been suggested (e.g. by Paloutzian et al. 1999) and though there are some exceptions, e.g. of Hare Krishna devotees (Ross 1985) or former Shiloh members (Taslimi et al. 1991; Goldman 1995), such studies are by and large not available.

Another method of inquiry into the long-term effects and developments of involvement in fundamentalist and new religions are qualitative, biographical studies; but such research design is not used frequently. Without ignoring the qualitative perspective in working with interviews (e.g. Kriegman & Solomon 1985; Lilliston 1985; 1995), the body of research which is based on in-depth interviews (Richardson et al. 1979; Berger & Hexel 1981; Klosinski 1985; Wright 1987) appears to be relatively small.

When the Enquete Commission "So-called Sects and Psychogroups" of the 13th German Federal Parliament (13. Deutscher Bundestag) had to decide on including evidence from empirical research about biographical effects and developments, the Commission was well advised to prefer the methodological approach of qualitative research with narrative interviews. Here I present the results of the project on Christian-fundamentalist biographies which among others[1] has been initiated by the Enquete Commission under the heading "Drop-outs, Converts and Believers: Contrastive Analyses on Why Individuals Join, Have a Career and Stay in, or Leave 'New Religious' and Ideological Contexts or Group."[2]

METHOD

The aim of this study was to compare and contrast biographies or careers of members and ex-members of Christian-fundamentalist milieus and organizations. The project took a qualitative approach and followed the method of biographical-reconstructive research, which means that from the data (narrative interviews with an average length of approximately two hours) the biographies in various dimensions are reconstructed. The sample included members and ex-members from the Neuapostolische Kirche (New Apostolic Church), Zeugen Jehovas (Jehovah's Witnesses), and a series of local fundamentalist and charismatic groups which are not globally organized . Of the 22 interviews conducted, 12 were contrastively selected for analysis.

The rule of maximal contrast, which was applied as far as possible in the selection of interviews, indicates that the methodological design of the project has adopted principles of the Grounded Theory (Glaser & Strauss 1967; cf. Dey 1999). In this tradition of research, the interview analysis followed reconstructive-hermeneutic methods (cf. Jüttemann &

Thomae 1998) in combination with U. Oevermann's (Oevermann et al. 1979; cf. Garz & Kraimer 1994) and F. Schütze's (1977; 1981; 1983; 1984) methodological approaches. Therefore, the first step in interview interpretation was sequence analysis of passages from the transcribed interviews resulting in a case structure hypothesis; these interpretation sessions in small groups were tape-recorded and thus integrated carefully into the evaluation process. In a second step, narrative analysis was used to interpret the narrative segments and to account finally for the narrative dynamic of the interview as a whole. The narrative analysis deserves recognition as a tool for identifying the deep biographical-developmental factors in the subjects' biographical past and, more importantly, the follow-up processes of transformation and development within and after deconversion.

Since both methodological approaches, that of Oevermann and that of Schütze, aim at an inclusion of latent structures, our methodological design permitted access to dimensions of latent structures in the interview text which may otherwise have remained less visible and sometimes repressed or distorted in the self-reflective dimensions and parts of the text: spontaneous selection of words, the micro-structural 'logic' in spontaneous speech, and especially the narrative dynamics of spontaneous biographical story telling yield insights into the latent structures of social reality and into the biographical dynamics and transformations. Spontaneous autobiographical story-telling subverts to a large degree the control of reflection. The narrative analysis in particular therefore allows one to reconstruct the plot of life-history and its dynamics in the most comprehensive way possible (Schütze 1983: 285). It thereby draws attention to time, to narrated time, to diachronicity, and therefore to development in its retrospective / archeological and in its prospective / teleological dimensions. Thus the focus of our analytic attention and the expected result of our approach was a comprehensive analysis of the complex relation between the religious career and the biography - a relation which can be investigated in two directions: in the biographical retrospective on the motivational conditions and 'life themes' or 'themata' (Noam 1985; 1988a; 1988b; 1990; 1991) which might be of special influence on conversion, involvement and deconversion; and in biographical prospect, i.e. in narrative reconstruction of the biographical consequences, whether these may have resulted in compensation, transformation, or decompensation. Attention was paid also to the question of satisfaction with life in the narrated time and in the present, to the need for and the development of coping strategies in respect to the crises of deconvertion, and especially to the question of personality change and identity with regard to eventually deep-reaching processes of conversion, transformation and deconversion related to joining, remaining in and leaving the respective milieu or group.

RESULTS

Themata

In our analysis of life themes, we did not find (what some in the Enquete Commission had expected us to find) a single typical 'sect biography.' We could identify neither a single typical biographical pattern of fundamentalist converts or deconverts, nor a typical bundle of motivational factors. Certainly, we did search the biographical narratives for motivational factors, for 'themata,' which our interview partners were dealing with in their fundamentalist orientation; and there we identified especially childhood traumata, childhood anxiety or an unsatisfied hunger for love and acceptance. But in our interview sample, we found only such motivational factors that could be found in non-fundamentalist biographies as well.

In spite of these negative findings, there were also positive results. One of the important findings was the confirmation of the assumption that the force of affinity and attraction toward fundamentalist affiliation is due to 'themata' which obviously have not been acquired during membership, but derive from earlier experiences and thus belong to a biographically older layer of the person. Interview analyses indicate and confirm that the converts bring these themata with them into the fundamentalist milieus.

Further, we found that the strength of affinity towards the group, and therefore the stability of membership, appears to be the effect of a 'fit' between the themata which the persons bring along with them and the resonance that these themata find in the mental, ritual and moral setting of the respective group. If such a 'fit' does not emerge or fades away for whatever reason, disaffiliation (and often the search for a new group) is the most likely consequence.[3]

Typology[4]

There is a variety of religious careers leading to conversion and deconversion. Contrastive comparison of the cases allowed us to locate them in a typology. Three types of fundamentalist biographies or 'careers' could be identified:

a. 'type governed by tradition' who, innocent of alternatives, has been born into or grown into a fundamentalist orientation

b. the 'mono-convert,' who converts as it were once in life-time into a religious orientation which he or she did not have before, and

c. the 'accumulative heretic'[5] whose biography is a tour through different religious orientations and who could possibly represent a new type of religious socialization.

Biographical Dynamics and Developments

Our analysis of the interview material included a special focus on the biographical dynamics and developments, the biographical consequences. We analyzed indicators of transformation and decompensation. Despite the subjects' struggle with often traumatic themata and despite some signs of decompensation, the case material also revealed problem-reducing effects, or indications of developmental transformation. During his journey through a variety of religious milieus, including charismatic fundamentalists and Scientology, e.g. Thomas (one of the cases) underwent a transformation which finally enabled him to cope better with his unrelieved desire for unconditional love.

Finally, we found that transformation and decompensation are not distributed equally among the cases, but that there are differences between the three types: The tendency could be demonstrated that, at the one end, the 'types governed by tradition' suffer more negative consequences and, in some cases, decompensation, while at the other end, the 'accumulative heretics' more often and more easily develop transformation.

DISCUSSION

One cannot expect quantitative results from a qualitative study based upon a relatively small number of narrative interviews; rather, the expected result is a comprehensive typology which hopefully does not miss an occurrence (cf. e.g. Fuchs-Heinritz 1998). Narrative analysis yields a typology of biographical trajectories which follows from comparative evaluation (maximal contrast) of 'process models' of typical life-courses (cf. Schütze 1983: 288). Using such a procedure, new types of biographical trajectories could be identified and included. In our typology, the 'accumulative heretic' appeared as new contrastive type which invites further investigation.

The findings that conversion and deconversion in fundamentalist and new religious groups may have problem-reducing effects and may result in transformation contradicts the public opinion and the anti-cultist proposition that conversion to new religious movements causes psychic decompensation; however these results are in agreement with evidence from other empirical research (see reviews mentioned above). Our finding that the 'accumulative heretic' type fundamentalists develop more easily into progressive transformation can be related to Kilbourne's and Richardson's (1985) observation about such effect in 'social experiementers' and Beaudoin's (1998) portrait of Generation X religious development. Because of the small size of the sample this aspect should be investigated in further research.

The explanation of developmental transformation rests upon and reconfirms a theoretical framework of religious styles (Streib 1997a; 2000)

which is derived from structural-developmental theory (Fowler 1981; 1996; Oser & Gmünder 1984) and which, as a revised framework that allows accounting for regression, can be applied to fundamentalism (Streib 1997b; 2000). In this framework, fundamentalist orientation can be explained as a domain-specific mix or 'dislocation' of styles. This dislocation of styles can be discerned more specifically as revival and prevalence of the instrumental-reciprocal (or 'do-ut-des'-) style[6] or the subjective style in certain crucial dimensions of religion and existential questions, despite and within the already achieved mutual or individuative systemic styles. Positive biographical development thus could be identified when transformation of religious styles has taken place and when the 'dislocation' of styles has been moderated or healed, whereas the actual style of either mutual or individuative-systemic orientation has come to cover more ground. It is very likely that such positive development is due to the fact that the person has found a way to work on and to cope with the 'themata' which eventually had lured him or her into the revival of biographical earlier styles.

Although there is some research on the ego development of fundamentalist (Weaver et al. 1994) and some research on the domain specificity of religion in fundamentalist thinking (cf. Hunsberger et al. 1992; Hunsberger et al. 1993; Hunsberger et al. 1994; Hunsberger et al. 1996), a developmental perspective has to my knowledge not been applied before as an explanatory framework for understanding the development of fundamentalism itself. Its usefulness for interpretation in our qualitative study suggests its inclusion in future research where it can be tested and elaborated further.

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NOTES

[1] The Enquete Commission has initiated and funded also three related projects which used comparable approaches, but had different foci: members and ex-members of new religious groups with Eastern influence (Schöll 1998), New Age and psychogroups (Fuchs-Heinritz et al. 1998), and spontaneously developing Christian groups (Veeser 1998).

[2] Our project has been implemented as research project (Drittmittelprojekt) at the University of Bielefeld.

[3] This result is the more valid as it is in agreement with the other biographical studies mentioned in Note 1.

[4] I am aware that 'typology' in its proper meaning refers to an intellectual schema that helps to order thought, but I use it here in the meaning which has adopted in the methodology of biographical research (Schütze; Fuchs-Heinritz): a set of categories into which – at least theoretically – all subjects can be sorted.

[5] 'Heretic' is not supposed here to imply devaluation of deviating religious orientations, but the necessity to choose, the *Heretical Imperative* as Peter Berger (1979) has defined the term. 'Accumulative heretics' are the type of people who accumulate a variety of religious experiences (religious orientations which 'I had in the past'). Most common is the sequential accumulative heretic who repeatedly converts and deconverts and thus accumulates religious orientations and the experiences he/she had during membership. But increasingly we find 'simultaneous accumulative heretics' who do not feel the need to leave a religious group when they find themselves attracted to another.

[6] The revival of the instrumental-reciprocal or 'do-ut-des- style which we expect to develop around the pre-school years is especially characteristic of fundamentalist orientation, since, in this style, literal understanding, legalistic and hierarchic authority orientation and a strong relation between obedience and well-being are established.