CHAPTER EIGHT

CONVERT, REVERT, PERVERT

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If a conversion is seen as a battle taking place along the boundaries of systems of religious belief, then it can be studied not only as a process involving individuals in their relationships with those who succeed in convincing them to “change sides” in terms of their faith, but also as an indicator of a conflict going on inside and outside a given system of belief. This conflict is about the endurance of the symbolic boundaries that a system is strongly interested not only in marking, but also and above all in defending in order, on the one hand, to state the superiority and authenticity of the truth that it claims to possess over that of other religions, and on the other to ensure that the symbols of the verum that it defends cannot circulate freely beyond its borders. These symbols are consequently no longer the distinctive elements of a bonding capital. They become signs of a willingness to cooperate with other religions or spiritual traditions, drawbridges let down between different symbolic capitals, and the foundation blocks of a bridging capital (Putnam 2000). In a way, a far more complex and differentiated socio-religious environment seems to develop along the boundaries laid down and protected by a system of belief, where individuals can perceive that there are other ways of believing that differ from the religions they were assigned at birth (Rambo 1993).

If, on the other hand, we analyze conversion starting from a systems theory of religious belief (Luhmann 1990, 1991), then the relevant issue from the sociological standpoint is not only to reconstruct the processes inducing a person to change faith (the subjective dimension) and trust (the social dimension, i.e. the social networks and conditions facilitating the change), but also to analyze the relationship between the system of belief and the environment, between what—for the sake of brevity—we might call an established religion (with its doctrines, its temples, its body of specialists, its devotions adopted by the various social classes, and its rituals) and what is, by definition, the surplus sense that individuals always tend to attribute to their actions when they think they are acting religiously. In fact, there is a discrepancy between the sense created
by organized systems of belief and the sense spontaneously attributed by individuals on the strength of their specific (individual and social) biographical features, and this discrepancy is one of the areas worth exploring in a comparative sociological study of systems of religious belief (Pace 2008). In the relationship between system and environment, conversions to another religion can be interpreted as a given system of belief proving unable to dominate the surplus sense produced in the environment. People who change religion are basically individuals who no longer feel entirely at home with the set of beliefs and rites of their previously given or chosen religion.

Various salvation goods (Stolz 2007) may circulate in a person’s social environment, relating to different systems of belief, so they cannot be represented as exclusive goods over which the systems are able to wield absolute control. As a result, the less the different systems of belief succeed in defending at least the boundaries delimiting their own salvation goods, which they can use to support their claim to be different and (in many cases) superior to the others, the less the individuals will see these boundaries of difference as impassable in the socio-religious setting. Moreover, if individuals tend to share certain socio-religious practices (funerals, weddings, births, festive practices during the main festivals on the various religious calendars), then the divergence—between the sense established by a system of belief on the one hand and the consent it is given in social practices on the other—will tend to increase, a fact that emerges from numerous case studies on societies historically characterized by religious pluralism (for instance, sub-Saharan Africa, Brazil, Japan and India). Conversion is therefore basically a battle that takes place along the symbolic boundaries between systems of belief that happen to coexist in the same social environment. If a person converts, it is as if one of the systems had lost the battle to keep the person convinced and convincingly within its own boundaries.

In systems of belief that function on the basis of the law of quantitative growth (the more we are, the merrier—in that the numbers of our faithful are proof in itself that we are on the right and true path), a few conversions pose no great threat. They are not taken as seriously as real mass transfers of people to other religions or systems of belief. Take the case, for instance, of the large numbers of Brazilian, Mexican and Guatemalan people who switched from the Catholic religion to various Evangelical, Pentecostal or charismatic churches. In all these cases, it was more a case of a massive than of a mass conversion, since there was no longer a prince or king wielding his power to oblige his tribe or people to embrace a given