CHAPTER NINE

CONVERSION AS A NEW LIFESTYLE:
AN EXPLORATORY STUDY OF SOKA GAKKAI IN ITALY

Luigi Berzano and Eliana Martoglio

Sociological interest in the phenomenon of religious conversion remains quite high, above all in modern societies characterized by marked pluralism. The phenomenon refers, on the one hand, to conversions to new religious movements that have recently fragmented the religious landscape, on the other hand to the high religious mobility characteristic of these societies and the consequent identification of believers in one or another established religion with elements of new religions.

Today, forms of conversion involving less radical and final choices are increasingly more frequent; due to the character of religious nomadism and circularity they can be defined as conversion as a new lifestyle. They do not any longer affect the religious identity of an individual—one's primary ethnic belonging—but they reflect the identifications an individual may make with specific practices, beliefs or moral norms of another religion, different from the one with which one historically identifies. In this latter case, conversions regard the lifestyles of a person—the individual, while not renouncing an original religion, adopts a lifestyle typical of another religion, sometimes even repeating this pattern for more than one religion. The most frequent form of conversion—in particular regarding those religious movements that do not exclude multiple belonging—is indeed the adoption of a lifestyle typical of a religion to which one does not belong, different from one's primary identity.

This chapter does not, therefore, analyze conversions as they have been conceived in the historic period of the centrality of monotheistic religions—the Christian, Hebrew, or Muslim religions. In that historic phase, conversions involved the individual in radical choices and represented a turning point in the biography of a person. They regarded the individual identity and prescribed the renunciation and cancellation of the entire “cultural and symbolic capital” around which the person organized a previous religious biography.

From this point of view, Buddhism is a particularly representative case.
In the Italian context of the last twenty years, Buddhism has been one of the fastest growing religious traditions. In this religious environment, it appears that forms of religious identification not foreseeing the abandonment of one’s primary religious identity have been increasingly spreading. Therefore, “Catholics in Buddhism,” referring specifically to Soka Gakkai, will be considered here as an exemplary case of conversion as a new lifestyle. We will thus analyze, in actual cases, the practices through which this type of conversion and consequent identification develop, and the cognitive strategies utilized to place this identification inside a different religious identity.\(^1\)

This first section examines the notion of a post-secular society—a society in which secularization has encouraged new religious and culturally significant phenomena to manifest themselves because of their connections with the secularized world and religions. The second section reintroduces the classic four-cell typology of conversion: vertical conversion, processual conversion, interactionist and horizontal conversion, coercive conversion. In the third section, an additional type of conversion is hypothesized: conversion as a new lifestyle. Finally, we report data collected through field work conducted in the city of Torino (Turin) in 2007 by way of interviews and accounts of people converted to Soka Gakkai.\(^2\)

**Conversions in Post-Secular Society**

The current condition of the contemporary Areopagus, which with its pluralism and syncretism characterizes even religious systems, favors new interest and interpretative hypotheses concerning the phenomenon of religious conversions. This phenomenon differentiates itself more and more because of the reasons that produce it, the social forms it takes on, its duration, and the biographical involvement of converts. Today’s Areopagus is fostered by three major factors: the enfeeblement of religions ascribed at birth, the failing conviction that there is one true religion, and the current post-secular phase.

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\(^1\) The text of the chapter as a whole is by Luigi Berzano, except for the detailed research report, which is by Eliana Martoglio.

\(^2\) As of July 2008, Soka Gakkai in Torino had 3,413 members: 2,332 women and 1,081 men. In Italy there are 49,456 members. Comparable data for the North American context can be found in Coleman (2008) and Geekie (2008).