

Exes Speak Out, Narratives of Apostasy: Jehovah's Witnesses, Scientology and Soka Gakkai

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The paper presents a study of the trajectories of apostasy from three religious movements, Jehovah's Witnesses, the Soka Gakkai Buddhist institute and the Church of Scientology, through the analysis of a body of autobiographical narratives posted online by Italian apostates. Even more than being the account of a past religious experience, these narratives are the last stage in the gradual articulation of a *voice* with which the disaffected believers publicly express a critical view of the organizations they have left, charging them with using practices of *interdiction* to prevent dissent by their members. The common theme that emerges from these stories is not the loss of faith, but the discovery of a hidden deception, the breach of the implicit pact of trust that bound the narrator to the religious group.

The field of apostasy

Apostasy, together with conversion, is one of the most visible of the life transitions affecting religious identity and mobility. Hence the importance of investigating apostasy in order to understand the specific nature of the contemporary spiritual experience (Hervieu-Léger 1999), where the religious actor is a seeker at large in a pluralistic religious landscape who chooses the religious option that best meets his/her personal needs (Wuthnow 2005; Barro *et al.* 2010). Apostasy, as the moment in which the relationship between the member and the group to which s/he belongs is broken off, is thus played out against the backdrop of a broader socioreligious field (Bourdieu 1971), peopled by a mul-

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titude of religious organizations that the apostate shuttles between, converting and deconverting repeatedly throughout the lifecourse (Gooren 2007).

The actor's mobility within this field is perhaps the aspect that has received the least attention in studies of apostasy (Burnett 2012). The avenues taken by apostates differ. Heinz Streib (2014) distinguishes between disaffiliations that lead the apostate to reconvert to another religious group, either a mainstream organization such as the Church or alternatives such as a sectarian movement, and those that lead to private and mystical religious belief and praxis outside of any organizational affiliation, if not indeed to total withdrawal from any religious participation. In Streib's view, these trajectories constitute a typology of actors' migration within and out of the religious field and between its various segments, which have different degrees of organization. Exploring the field and the migrations of the actors who move from one segment to another sheds light on the specifically social component of apostasy. The abandonment of a religious group always takes place in a public context, which does not remain stable but changes over time as its organizations themselves change.

Exiting from religious groups—like exiting from any other group (Ebaugh 1988)—is a recurrent phenomenon in an individual's life experience. In certain circumstances, however, it can have social significance, especially when leaving is contested, with a dispute arising between the leave-taker and the group of which s/he was a part (Bromley 1998). In a field where religious organizations showing different degrees of tension between each other and with society coexist, David Bromley distinguishes between “defectors,” i.e., those who leave allegiant organizations such as the traditional institutionalized churches with broad social legitimacy; “whistle-blowers,” who come from contestant organizations, or in other words religious associations with a moderate level of coincidence of interests and of tension with the surrounding environment; and lastly, apostates in the fullest sense, who disaffiliate from subversive organizations, or in other words, organizations that show a high degree of conflict with, or even opposition to, the surrounding society. The latter groups' low social legitimacy means that leave-takers can find outside allies who are ready to support the claims against the organization. Whereas in the case of allegiant organizations, the burden of proof of misconduct is often squarely on the claimmaker and leave-taker, here the burden of proof usually shifts to the organizations, who are called upon to defend themselves against the discredit cast by the former members. The control that this type of group can exercise over external intervention in the members' exit process is minimal. Leave-takers tend to negotiate the discursive forms with which they

relate their experience in the terms offered by the external agencies who have joined forces against the group. Their accounts often follow the metaphor of the captivity narrative in order to assign responsibility for the action to the group rather than to the individual. In these stories, the protagonist—the apostate—is the victim of the group’s mental or physical manipulation and degradation ceremonies.

Bromley’s work shows how the leave-takers’ testimony cannot be regarded as neutral or ingenuous accounts of their experience in a religious group, but are socially constructed on the basis of the groups’ reputation and the power relationships between actors in the socioreligious field.¹

Narrating the exit

Accordingly, the apostates’ accounts must be regarded as *critical narratives*, rhetorically oriented discourses that publicly express and support a specific value stance. The narratives become public discourse only if they can secure an audience and thematize issues that are pertinent and relevant to that audience. As Daniel Johnson (1998) points out, the persuasive function of these stories lies, on the one hand, in their ability to justify the narrator’s decision to leave the group, and on the other hand, in whether they depict a scenario that makes the presented sequence of events credible. To satisfy this two-fold need for plausibility and relevance to the audience, the tales of apostasy codify and reproduce specific stylistic commonalities whereby the apostate attempts to pre-empt questioning of their truthfulness, to construct a description whose emotional coloring is created by alternating feelings of fear and risk, and to perform a phatic function by providing entertainment and an air of mystery and fascination, just like any other story. These three properties, which Johnson assigns to tales of apostasy as a distinctive discursive genre, follow from the relationship that they have with their audience and, consequently, are associated with a specifically *political* dimension of the leave-taking narratives that explain their public circulation in the socioreligious field. Information in this field comes from different sources: the apostates, the active members of the religious group, the opposing religious and social groups, and the world of academic research. Naturally, their credibility differs, even though

1. In a similar way Wright defines apostates: “who is aligned with an oppositional coalition in an effort to broaden the dispute, and embrace public claimsmaking activities to attack his or her former group” (Wright 1998, 97). In this article we will use the term “apostate” in accordance to the definitions proposed by Bromley and Wright. Apostasy, from Greek *apostasis* with the meaning of “defection” and “revolt,” is an act of abandonment and criticism of what one has professed, regardless of a subsequent affiliation or conversion to another faith (Cottee 2015, 16).

the experience of apostasy and the religious context in which it occurs are the same. The discourses produced by these four sources of information can be integrated and triangulated, in the knowledge that they differ as a result of a complex of contextual factors regarding the subject of the narrative, what is told about it, and the motives that induced the narrators to speak out. There is an interaction effect that binds and mutually influences the four types of account, an effect that arises as the discourses and information fueling each source circulate. Apostasy scholars formulate their explanations starting from research material that consists for the most part of apostates' narratives; the opponent groups' strategies for action are based on the testimony offered by the apostates and on the researchers' publications; apostates often reconstruct their accounts disingenuously, informed by the scientific, popular or militant literature made available by researchers and opponent groups; the targeted religious groups, particularly those that are most exposed to media stigmatization, roll out defensive tools to seek legitimacy and convey a public image of themselves that takes into account the expectations and pressures from the social circumstances in which they operate (Carter 1998). It is thus quite difficult to claim that these discourses are independent, or to reduce their significance to a problem of internal consistency and structure, ignoring the political and rhetorical connotation that informs the social act through which they are produced and circulated.

This heterogeneity of the discourses produced by the various actors at large in the socioreligious field is found in apostates' tales, giving them their character as polyphonic narratives (Bakhtin 1981). This enables apostasy to be interpreted as the process of articulating a *voice* that organizes the set of discourses available in the broader context in the shape of stories whereby the leavetakers publicly express a critical view of the group they have left. The stories apostates draw on make it possible to reprocess and make sense of their biographies, which are usually fraught with feelings of suffering and the loss of existential references, and to begin reconstructing a new personal identity (Davidman and Greil 2007). For apostates, this means retracing, in the opposite direction, the steps taken at the beginning of their religious career, as they became interested in and converted to the group, learning the stories through which its culture has been built up and is now communicated. Conversion is a question of taking part in these official stories, adopting them to shape one's own personal story (Stromberg 1993) by sharing with the other members in order to vouch for the effectiveness, the validity and the effects of change that faith brings about in the lifecourse (Rambo and Farhadian 1999).

The stories we will analyze in the following pages are autobiographical narratives by apostates who left the ranks of three religious movements, Jehovah's Witnesses, Soka Gakkai and the Church of Scientology², as posted on line on critical websites run by leavers. These three cases are examples of high demand groups in terms of social and identity investment and disinvestment, and they are subversive organizations (*sensu* Bromley 1998) if considered in the Italian context where the Roman catholicism is still the prevailing religion and members of religious minorities amount to 3.2% of population (Introvigne and Zoccatelli 2013).

The ideological orientation and the polemical point of view of these Web sites offer a rhetorical framework in the narrative reconstruction of apostates' autobiographies. Communication on the Web plays an increasingly important role for those who embark on religious disaffiliation, as it is a source of data that can be used for personal contact and comparison, and, not infrequently, is the first channel for acquiring a critical understanding of the religious organizations to which they belong (Wright *et al.* 2011).

Interdictions: The conditions preceding apostasy

Even more than being the account of past events, stories of apostasy are the last step in exit process, a step that performatively enables the apostate to re-process his/her life experience and give a sense and meaning that can be conveyed to others (*sensu* McAdams 2011). Like all autobiographical stories, these too are reconstructed in hindsight, in the light of the situation as it now stands.³

2. The data examined here are part of a larger corpus consisting of 52 autobiographical narratives of disaffiliation from the three religious movements discussed here and from the esoteric community of Damanhur in Piedmont. In addition to the online testimony, these narratives also include in-depth interviews conducted by the authors of this study. The websites were selected on the basis of the number of page views and visitors on the one hand, and on whether they provided first-hand accounts of the religious experience in question on the other. These narratives do not mirror reality but they are sources to reconstruct the *subjective* motives of the apostasy from the point of view of the apostate. The on line accounts were selected by privileging biographical trajectories characterized by very polemical orientation and disaffiliation from the religious group. This criterion meets the definition of apostasy elaborated by Bromley (1998) and Wright (1998), but it does not permit to cover the heterogeneity of the exit trajectories: indeed, leavers who outspoken against a religious movement are not representative of the majority of the ex-members; many leavers maintain good relationship with the former group or do not publicly express a critical view (Lewis and Levine 2010). For a more detailed discussion of the study design, see Cardano and Pannofino (2015, 19–24).
3. The apostate's narratives are analyzed using Riessman's dialogic/performative method

These stories often open with the description of an existential crisis that drives the protagonist to seek and contact a spiritual group (Lofland and Stark 1965). Within this group, the convert not only finds a doctrine to believe in and rely on for support, but also—and above all—is given the opportunity to establish strong social ties, a sort of new family where s/he can build relationships of trust and spiritual brotherhood (Berkowitz 1988). This is what happened in the case of Achille, administrator of the website www.infotdgeova.it, who met a congregation of Jehovah's Witnesses during a period of disorientation in his work and interpersonal life. Achille was attracted by the hope of a future life in the earthly paradise that the group's apocalyptic doctrine holds out for the faithful, and by the warm welcome extended to him by the group's members at the weekly gatherings:

I didn't know then that this way of treating newcomers is what scholars call love bombing and is characteristic of many groups and sects. For the Witnesses, this way of doing things is considered a manifestation of Christian love. In that, they follow the Watchtower Society's directives, which urges them to get close to people who are interested and make sure that they feel well accepted.⁴

In the passage we have quoted here, Achille sets, in counterpoint, the initial favorable impression that the first encounter with the local congregation made on him, against his later awareness that behind this apparently caring attitude lurks a precise strategy used by the Witnesses to co-opt new members. Additionally, Achille labels this strategy as "love bombing," a term he has taken from the press coverage about new religious movements. The different sources of knowledge circulating in the socioreligious field coalesce in his words: what for the Jehovah's Witnesses is a manifestation of Christian love is translated into a more technical parlance by the narrator, who uses a sociological term that strips it of its religious connotation. The underlying script is imposed by the Watchtower Society,⁵ showing how the control structure in the group operates. Only after converting and becoming part of the group did the protagonist begin to come up against the Witnesses' rigidity, and become aware of the problem that will prove to be the greatest impediment to further religious commitment:

(Riessman 2008). This method integrates thematic analysis, "what" is said in the text, its contents; structural analysis, "how" story is told, its form; and interaction analysis, narration as a communicative act in a social setting.

4. Achille, <http://www.infotdgeova.it/esperienze/perchisi.php>

5. The movement's international governing body, located in Warwick, New York.

Once you become Jehovah's Witnesses, after a while, the ability and will to perceive errors and contradictions are almost totally stifled by the constant study of the Governing Body's magazines and publications, study which consists in the passive and uncritical acceptance of everything the Society says. I know that the Witnesses don't like to hear talk about indoctrination, but I can't deny this reality: how many times has one of them been able to freely express criticism of the teachings of the "slave?"⁶

The accusation leveled against the Witnesses challenges the control that the Governing Body exercises over the members, the suppression of the freedom of thought and action, the indoctrination. Implicit here is the theme of the group's coercion and brainwashing of its recruits. The friendly climate encountered at the outset clouds over, with strict control that quashes all possibility of expression. Presented in these terms, the congregation of Witnesses is a *monological* organization where a single authorized voice predominates, the voice of the select group known as the "faithful and discreet slave," which silences alternative expression and competing points of view. This voice demands that it be believed and accepted, and lays claim to authority as the Word from on high, received from the past, the Word of the fathers, of tradition or of God, and as such brooks no discussion and does not admit of translation (Bakhtin 1981). The mechanism at work in this discursive regime is a restriction of meaning (Witten 1992) whereby what is said by the leadership circumscribes the space for commentary and interpretation on the part of the followers. The culture of the Witnesses, in Achille's account, is intratextual, normatively dominated by a single text which takes primacy in all aspects of organizational life (Adam 2009). The faithful Witness is required to enact a form of "symbolic martyrdom" to which members are socialized by hearing stories told that describe the ultimate purpose of religious life as servitude to the congregation and God (Trahan 2013). Given that the organization is believed to be the visible manifestation of divine will on earth, serving the organization means serving Jehovah. Two sub-textual messages are involved in symbolic martyrdom: the individual *per se* counts for nothing—emphasizing individuality is considered sinful—but counts, and is valuable only to the extent that s/he is able to serve the group's means and goals.

Many exit narratives, in describing the gradual loss of freedom that encroaches on them as members of the group, employ the metaphor of captivity (Bromley 1998). For example, Renato complains that:

6. The "faithful and discreet slave" is the term used to designate the organization's governing body. Achille, <http://www.infotdgeova.it/esperienze/perchsi.php>

In the congregation, there was a constant need for judicial committees, and that bothered me a lot. It seemed to me like having or living in a nightmare, as if I was in the Middle Ages at the time of the Inquisition.⁷

Susanna's story is in the same vein:

I've passed the last twelve years or so letting my mind and my life be controlled by absurd rules and principles laid down by an entity that I now like to call *Matrix*. At least at the beginning [...] it was a nice bunch, helpful and very intelligent people who were always ready to put God ahead of everything: I was in Eden!!! But it didn't work... as I moved forward in my "spiritual progress," I moved backward in my ability to reason.⁸

This captivity is the result of the encapsulation (Greil and Rudy 1984; Jacobs 1987) in which the apostates feel they live:

I think one of the main difficulties for those who are "inside"—and which makes it very hard to leave the group—is not being able to see good alternatives to the Congregation: leaving the "sect" is like jumping into the abyss of the "evil world" whose only prospect is to be destroyed. You live in a separate reality, barely touching the real world; and so time goes by, year after year; the "theocracy" is a thing apart, made up of "friendships," social life, relationships you have only among Witnesses (you can't be friends with "worldly people"; the only reasons you see them are for work, school or preaching).⁹

Encapsulation would not be effective, however, if the member did not also develop a corresponding *habitus* that can determine their way of thinking, of acting, and even their bodily practices, and which in some cases can persist after formal disaffiliation (Davidman 2011). The complex of the group's norms thus becomes an interiorized part of subjective behavior, giving structure to it. The doctrinal justification for encapsulation lies in the construction of a dualistic worldview, where the group is radically opposed, on the axiological level, to the surrounding world. In its most clear-cut form, the individual "I" is completely assimilated in the "we" of the group, through a two-fold process of minimizing the intragroup differences between members and accentuating the intergroup differences from outsiders (Tajfel 1974). This in-group, out-group distinction tends to be perfectly superimposed on the good/evil distinction, with the sanctification of everything inside and the demonization of all otherness.

7. Renato, <http://www.infotdgeova.it/esperienze/renato.php>

8. Susanna, <http://www.infotdgeova.it/esperienze/susi.php>

9. Achille, <http://www.infotdgeova.it/esperienze/perchsi.php>

Like the Jehovah's Witnesses, Soka Gakkai also performs a social support function for potential new members, promising concrete solutions to personal problems (Stark and Bainbridge 1980; Snow and Machalek 1983). In the view promulgated by Soka Gakkai, crisis in the life of an individual, though painful, is potentially emancipatory, the starting point for new existential development (Busacchi 2012). Indeed, one of this Buddhist group's main attractions is that it offers a method for achieving tangible benefits, such as the practice of chanting *daimoku*, the mantra *nam-myoho-renge-kyo*,¹⁰ before a consecrated scroll, the *gohonzon* (Maciotti 1996; Dobbelaere 1998). This hope, as Maka Shikan, administrator of the website www.noallasokagakkai.eu, attests, is one of the initial factors in conversion:

If you don't have a good self-knowledge, you're easy prey for con artists. In 1988, after I lost my job (with a wife and daughter to support), where nobody around me was able to understand, or to accept, what I was going through my mind, where everybody refused to give me a job, after various psychiatric issues I'd had in previous years, I wasn't able to be in harmony with myself anymore, and where only in that Soka Gakkai Buddhism you find the only people who give you faith in yourself, you find that following their teachings is the easiest thing in the world, following with blind faith, unfortunately.¹¹

Once in the group, the tasks, responsibilities and demands on the member's time become increasingly burdensome:

Preparation [*to receive the gohonzon*] was pretty rough, I'd get home from work at 6 and at 6:30 I had to go chant on the other side of town (I don't have a car, I use public transport), all same, as soon as I left the office in the evening, I'd rush off to chant. Fortunately this tour de force only lasted a month, then I received my sacred scroll that could give me the strength needed to solve all the problems in my life. I decided to take some time off the week after I received the gohonzon, I realized I needed some rest. The first criticisms started to come, "the gohonzon has priority" "you're not protecting your life" "the practice has priority over your sleep" "rest doesn't give you the same benefits as the practice" and so forth [...]. They were keeping an eye on me, I couldn't have the privilege of adapting the religion to my life, it had to be the other way around and they started reprimanding me more and more.¹²

10. Originally formulated by the monk Nichiren Daishonin in 1253, the mantra combines terms in Sanskrit and Japanese, and means: "Hail to the mystic law of the Lotus Sutra." According to Soka Gakkai doctrine chanting the mantra repeatedly enables the practitioner to fulfill his/her desires.

11. Maka Shikan, <http://www.noallasokagakkai.eu/MSCV.html>

12. Saha, <http://www.noallasokagakkai.eu/SHCV.html>

Notwithstanding the group's official rhetoric, where the emphasis is not so much on the normative dimension of the rules of conduct, as it is on the regularity of daily practice carried out at the individual member's discretion (Barone and Molle 2006), the convert quoted above discovers that the *gohonzon* is not only a cult object that can be used to set goals for oneself and obtain benefits, but is also an inscription (Latour 1986), an artifact that carries meanings, representations and rules shared by a community of practitioners, and which are prescriptive and binding. Receiving and possessing the sacred scroll, as a symbol of belonging to Soka Gakkai, entails specific obligations, one of which is that of constant participation in the group's meetings.

In the case of the Church of Scientology, Bryce illustrates the steps that led him to join and his first doubts in the following words:

At first, Scientology is great, fascinating, exciting, it gives you a “purpose” and it makes you feel more sure of yourself and your abilities. The atmosphere is warm and stimulating. And the material is also—why not? - fun. Slowly, too slowly for you to realize what's going on, it starts asking you for more and more and giving you less and less. There are some victories, that's what keeps you “on board,” but they're no longer as “strong” or “important” as they once were; but the time you spend at the org¹³, the commitment that its various activities requires, and the financial demands all increase. The effort, in terms of money and giving up things for the public, and in terms of time, humiliation and lack of funds for the staff, starts to be a real burden. And it's then, in that moment, that most people start to have doubts, start to want to chuck it all and get out.¹⁴

At first sight, Scientology presents itself as a typical client cult (Stark and Bainbridge 1985) which offers therapeutic services through the sale of courses that practitioners can buy as they feel the need. The Church's profile, at least in this initial stage, does not show specifically religious features. Such features will be revealed gradually, as the practitioner moves up the Bridge to Total Freedom¹⁵ to the higher levels where the group's esoteric teachings are imparted. In Scientology, the spiritual register is combined with the technical register, with its empirical procedures for increasing mental powers (Reitman 2011) in order to cope with the problems of daily life (Hall 1998). For the apostates, the façade of a rational and practical philosophy that promotes human freedom conceals a darker side:

13. Abbreviation of “organization,” i.e., the local centers of the Churches of Scientology.

14. Bryce, <http://www.allarmescientology.it/coraggio.htm>

15. The scale representing the spiritual path, divided into Grades, from the lowest, or pre-clear, to the highest, called Operating Thetan.

Personally I believe Scientology is a total and totalizing philosophy that involves all aspects of its members' past, present and future lives, and strives to exert strict control over every sphere of existence and, consequently, over society in general.¹⁶

Here, the captivity metaphor we discussed earlier becomes the image of the spider's web:

The coercive pressure, physical and mental, increases as you move up the hierarchical ladder: it's at its least on those who receive the services (the public) and is significantly higher on those who work full-time for the Church of Scientology [...] Hubbard's philosophy consists of a large number of dogmas tied closely together by apparently logical passages. These passages create a very broad path, a sort of 360-degree coverage of every aspect of existence. So the scientologist not only has to understand the individual dogmas, but also the logical passages that hold them together. When s/he's reached this "illumination," the spider's web will have encircled every area of his life.¹⁷

Together, these stories depict the religious movements we consider here as self-sealing systems (Lalich 2004), i.e., closed social systems with symbolic boundaries that set up a sharp division between inside and outside, and whose members' actions are enmeshed in a complex network of formal and informal rules that subjugate the faithful to the pervasive control of a leadership that administers knowledge and the relationship with the sacred. The apostates' accounts indicate that a common mechanism for exercising disciplinary power is at work in all three of the movements. Among the Jehovah's Witnesses, this mechanism is known as "progressive understanding":

The Governing Body's most brilliant invention was definitely what they call "progressive understanding." Thanks to this doctrine, the unsuspecting Witnesses swallow—hook, line and sinker—every change in the Governing Body's doctrines, and the continual failures of the "prophesies" about the last days. What until the day before was considered absolute "Truth," solidly based in the Bible, to the point that any Witness who questioned it would have been immediately disfellowshipped and thus destroyed by Jehovah,¹⁸ all of a sudden isn't the Truth anymore, and anybody who wants to remain faith-

16. Martini, <http://www.allarmescientology.it/cosa.htm>

17. Samba-riò, <http://www.allarmescientology.it/txt/etica06.htm>

18. According to the official regulation the disfellowshipping is not immediate: "Two factors—which must coincide—result in the disfellowshipping of one of Jehovah's Witnesses. First, a baptized Witness commits a serious sin. Second, he does not repent of his sin." <https://www.jw.org/en/publications/magazines/w20150415/disfellowshipping-a-loving-provision/>

ful to the earlier “Truth” becomes an “apostate” (the question that springs to mind is, how many “Truths,” logically, can there be?). In its short history, the Governing Body has obliged the Witnesses to believe everything and its opposite.¹⁹

What is described here is a procedure for the suspension of doubt that makes it possible to forestall any objections, impugning the moral competence of whoever raises them. In a stratified organization like the Witnesses, simple members by definition have less sacred knowledge than the Elders at the highest levels of the hierarchy. Consequently, the Elders, who formulate the official version of the doctrine and lay down the rules of conduct, can silence any objections by virtue of the fact that members cannot yet be in a position to understand their scope and meaning, as they do not have sufficient spiritual preparation and knowledge. The member is thus called on to take the Governing Body’s decisions on faith, postponing doubt to some unspecified future when s/he will be spiritually ready. Here, however, the faith that the member is asked to have is not in the Bible, but in the Governing Body as such. With the divine Word (Biblical doctrine) and the organizational word (the interpretation given by the leadership) thus equated, the doctrine of progressive understanding urges the follower to transfer his/her faith from the former to the latter, investing the Governing Body with sacred value. This exemplifies Max Weber’s (1920) distinction between explicit faith and implicit faith, or in other words between faith in a dogma or a doctrine, and the general readiness to submit to a religious authority. Assiduous study of the Bible, on the one hand, and falling in line with the dictates of the Governing Body on the other, are two practices that in some ways would appear to be diametrically opposed. While the former reinforces faith that is explicit, aware and able to reflect on the content of the religious message conveyed by the Witnesses on the basis of biblical text, the unquestioning acceptance of the leadership’s directives requires a strengthening of implicit faith that must at least to some extent disregard the doctrinal content; indeed, this content is precisely what the progressive understanding strategy banishes from the discussion. Explicit faith is built on the implicit faith in the Governing Body’s authority, an authority which in the final analysis relies on the basic assumption that the Word of God is channeled through the word of the organization, while the organization claims to be the sole repository for the legitimate exegesis of the Word. This conflation of Word and word is possible only if the other competing voices and interpretations are suppressed: all members who do not subscribe to this proposition risk being accused of apostasy. The

19. Claudio Forte, <http://www.infotdgeova.it/dottrine/schiavo.php>

group's monologism and hierarchal structure are thus isomorphs, each supporting the other, each reflected in the other. Faith in the doctrine is rationally administered by the organization, which has the power to "disqualify the recalcitrant" (Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca 1958, par. 7): the truth of the professed doctrine commands universal agreement in the community of Witnesses, and those who do not accept the basic propositions are, *eo ipso*, expelled from the select group of authentic believers, inasmuch as they are possessed by the devil. Expulsion is primarily an opportunity for the group to reinforce the sense of belonging and to demonstrate, by making an example of the outcast, not so much what a faithful Witness must believe in, but what s/he must be (Bisha 2011).

In the accounts of the ex-members of Soka Gakkai, this procedure is referred to as "how to label the disappointment":

Labeling the disappointment, or why my desires are not fulfilled:

1. The desire was poorly formulated: it was not clear, it was ambiguous, too big, too small, unobtainable,
2. You practiced badly, or too little, or you haven't been practicing long enough,
3. For long-standing adepts: they are fiercely attacked by the devil,
4. For everyone: they are the last time bad karma comes out before positive karma shows itself,
5. For most people: it shows the protection that the Gohonzon gives to the adept, who does not know that if his/her desire were to be satisfied now, it would be harmful to him in some way,
6. For beginners: the practitioner "is not ready" to have his/her desire fulfilled,
7. For everyone and for that particular desire: the practitioner was not deeply determined, did not desire sincerely,
8. For many: the practitioner did not act correctly, or in other words did not do everything necessary to achieve satisfaction²⁰.

The list includes *ad hoc* explanations (Lakatos 1970), which make it possible to justify the general principle of the effectiveness of chanting *daimoku* contextually, situation by situation. When chanting fails, a range of conclusions are brought forward which may be moral (regarding the practitioner's attitude), metaphysical (regarding the law of karma or attack by evil entities) or formal (regarding the practice's ritual correctness). For a member to grant credence to these explanations justifying the lack of results, i.e., of the positive effects of chanting, s/he must first be willing to accept the group's belief system, as well as his/her own (provisional) personal inadequacy on the

20. <http://www.noallasokagakkai.eu/etichette.html>

spiritual level—though the latter can be improved by following the directives of the doctrine. In either case, the member finds himself delegating the means of executing, interpreting and receiving the results of the practice to the organization. Chanting *daimoku* is thus a sort of total social fact à la Mauss in the Soka Gakkai life-form, in which much of the complex tangle of the group's social, organizational, ideological, practical and moral relationships with its members is reflected and crystallized. Above all, chanting *daimoku* is the symbolic medium whereby the organization obtains legitimate hermeneutic power over the members' self-definition. By joining the Nichiren faith, practitioners set out on a journey of transformation from the "small I" of ordinary life, the ego, to the "big I" of Buddhahood: in this way, they agree to grant the organization full control over the ways and means of this spiritual experience, which must pass the test of public assessment of the evidential meaning of the empirical effects produced by chanting. The overall result hinges on this system's flexibility, whereby the norms and conceptual categories of the doctrine can be adapted as needed, according to the individual practitioner's particular life-history.

The workings of the corresponding mechanism in Scientology are illustrated by Giacomo:

If your life isn't going well, if you were successful before and now you're in trouble, they don't care. It's just your own fault. You're the one who caused your condition. The whole time I was a member, the only way to get something from me was to make me feel guilty, make me feel inadequate, wrong [...]. The feeling I had was always the same: if what you expected from Scientology isn't happening, if, in other words, the auditing "technology"²¹ doesn't yield results, there's a long, ready-made list of formulas that always start with: "The only reason that..." the signature expression used everywhere in Ron Hubbard's writings, that invariably leads back to a responsibility that's yours, with no alternative. The most frequently used "the only reason that..." is that you're a PTS²², or that you're "out-ethics." The idea that Tech doesn't work, or that it doesn't work on you, isn't even taken into consideration. Tech is perfect, you're the one that's imperfect."²³

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21. auditing consists of a session with two participants, an auditor and a preclear (a practitioner who strives to reach a state of Clear, i.e., the status of a person with an analytic mind). The auditor guides the practitioner in recalling traumatic episodes (engrams) in the past or from former lives. The goal is to overcome the pain associated with these episodes and raise the preclear's emotional state and awareness.
 22. Potential Trouble Source: the Church's detractors.
 23. Giacomo Sotgia in Laggia and Gardini (2009, 91–95): cf. Allarmescientology.it/txt/giacomo.htm

The interpretive procedures take advantage of the sense of guilt harbored by the practitioner who is so concerned about overcoming this inadequacy that s/he is willing to acquiesce in the explanations put forward by the Church. Guilt, in fact, as it stems from an unfavorable assessment of one's conduct, combined with a feeling of shame, is a crucial factor in the individual's self-control and self-regulation of behavior (Tracy and Robins 2007). But guilt, shame and inadequacy are also emotional states constructed by the organization to discredit its members' competence and create the conditions that legitimize the exercise of power. Scientology does this from the time the neophyte first makes contact, through the free "personality test," the Oxford Capacity Analysis, offered at the Church's local centers. The test consists of a list of questions intended to describe the respondent's life condition and identify the strong points and weaknesses of his/her personality. In particular, the deficiencies and shortcomings identified through the test are represented as problems that can be solved by signing up for introductory Dianetics courses.

The strategy of suspension of doubt, which we see running through all three cases examined here, is one of the principal forms of control based on *silence*. Silence is one of the social practices whereby the organization manages and regulates internal communication, ensuring the unequal distribution of knowledge, and hence of power, among the members and filters the information flowing across its borders with the outside world. Organizational silence is a means of control that, to be effective, must be accompanied by a concurrent discursive strategy of interdiction. We can identify different forms of silence, all interwoven with each other. There is silence as "secret," i.e., as sacred knowledge guarded and shared by an inner circle of initiates who enter into a pact of mutual trust (Simmel 1906). And there is silence as "deception," or in other words, discourse that intentionally conceals truths that could betray the public image the organization seeks to project. While members could discredit the group as they begin to feel a sense of disappointment and disillusionment, the reputational benefits they enjoy because of their responsible positions in the group not infrequently motivate them to choose another route which leads to a third form of silence: "conformism," or falling in line with the official discourse. In any case, the leadership discourages members from expressing dissenting points of view, which it strives to marginalize by adopting systems of "censorship"—the fourth form of silence—with the threat of sanctions, social stigmatization by the group, and, above all, by means of the rhetorical tool of demonizing doubt. The censorship imposed by the group achieves its goal only when it becomes self-censorship by the individual members themselves, who suppress any objec-

tions they might have because they are convinced that they are not spiritually capable of judging the leadership's action, given that they have suspended their doubts as described above. Indeed, they are convinced that they must make every effort to transform themselves as directed by the leadership, who is endowed with knowledge that is secret but semantically indeterminate, since its content is not freely accessible but managed through *ad hoc* exegetical interpretation strategies. Before voicing their criticisms publicly, apostates may at times produce a "hidden critique," a last form of silence, where opposition to the group is not formulated openly, but is expressed in personal and confidential communication with other members, who can downplay the complaint or refuse to support it if they see fit.

Voices: Apostasy as critical discourse

Apostasy is a voice that breaks the organization's silence and speaks out against the practices of interdiction. Though it might be expected that the dissent that sets the exit process in motion originates from a loss of faith in the doctrine, this is not the case. Generally, reasons for leaving center on the discovery, the awareness, that the pact of trust that binds the members to the group, and to the leadership in particular, has been breached. In the apostates' eyes, the identity projected by the religious organization to which they belongs is revealed as mere theater, deceptively staged to mask non-religious goals pursued at their expense. To use Erving Goffman's (1974) terminology, the official identity is a frame whose vulnerability—and the fact that it is a fabrication—is laid bare by the exit narratives: what goes on behind the curtain belies the part acted out on the stage. From this standpoint, apostasy is a route to secularizing the organization. When the organization's sacred sheen wears off, the symbolic boundaries that separate it from the outside world burst open immediately: the group is accused of pursuing worldly interests, of amassing money, seeking political clout, thirsting for power. In short, the organization loses its sacred status and takes on a temporal, profane tinge.

In the case of the Jehovah's Witnesses, belonging to the congregation means accepting, as an article of faith, that the Watchtower Society is the one true holder of a divine mandate. It goes without saying that this belief is a condition without which the organization is devoid of any and all spiritual foundation. For the Witnesses, it follows that it is decisive to establish the right spiritual interpretation in order to confirm this article of faith that identifies them as the tangible expression of the divine mandate. Accepting this point of doctrine means sacralizing the organization as such, its members and, above all, the Governing Body. According to this construction, the theocratic

structure of the Jehovah's Witnesses is the earthly reflection of the divinely instituted social model:

The Witnesses make two very important claims publicly: that they're the only ones who know the "Truth"; that they base their whole doctrine on the Bible alone. As for the first claim, given that for a real Christian the Truth is Christ himself (I John 4:20, John 14:6), it is precisely the figure and the true teaching of Christ that is particularly distorted and misrepresented, both in the New World Translation and in the doctrines that the Governing Body passes off as the truth to the oblivious Witnesses. As for the second claim, it's false for two reasons: the first and most serious is that the New World Translation is not the Bible, it's only a "tamed" version for providing better support for the Governing Body's doctrines.²⁴

The Bible would appear to be an ambivalent cultural resource, both because Witnesses and apostates alike draw on Scripture²⁵, albeit from radically different vantage points, and because even within the movement, the Governing Body can reinterpret holy writ as and when it chooses. The divine Word is thus semantically indeterminate: its meaning is always one that is socially authorized by the organization, bounded in the space of its possible comments on the basis of the exegetic interpretation that is held to be valid in a given period²⁶. The Governing Body's authority stems from the authority of the Bible, but the text used, the New World Translation, is considered to be erroneous: this is a vicious circle that strips all vestige of legitimacy from the leadership and, at the same time, exposes the underlying swindle concocted against the members' faith. The question, as can be seen, cannot be reduced to a strictly scriptural problem regarding theological content, it is not a matter of incorrect exegesis, but is an indictment of deception, an accusation of an intentional manipulation of scriptural translation, a counterfeit exegesis on which the Governing Body bases its claim to power.

24. Claudio Forte, <http://www.infotdgeova.it/interpretazione.htm>

25. In some cases, leavers show a tendency to reaffiliate with other Christian and Christian-inspired groups, generally cast in the evangelical mold. This indicates that apostates who do not lose their Christian faith are attracted to churches that give them an opportunity to continue with Bible study, but with greater freedom of scriptural interpretation. What they reject is thus the Witnesses's approach to the Bible, not the Bible itself, as ex-Witnesses often continue to believe in its truth. See Holden (2002).

26. The changes to the church's apocalyptic doctrine are emblematic of this situation. Every time the dates predicted for the end of the world have proved to be wrong, the calculation based on the prophetic verses of the Bible has been reformulated by reinterpreting the meaning of certain terms indicating an indeterminate period of time, e.g., "generation" or "days."

For Soka Gakkai as well, the doctrinal dispute is chiefly a transposition of ethical disagreement into religious content. The utilitarian incentive to conversion—with the promise that desires will be fulfilled by chanting *daimoku*—with time becomes part of a broader expressive dimension that involves the neophyte in intense social interactions with other members (Barone 2007):

I joined in 2000, with the enthusiasm of somebody who has always been looking for something “clean” to change the world, and leaving in 2007 with the conformation that, unfortunately, structured organizations always harbor a thirst for power within them. [T]hrough the study of Buddhism, I began to notice the first things that weren’t right, starting from the gross distortion of Nichiren Daishonin Buddhism, which I still practice²⁷.

The aim is not that of peace in the world, but only that of satisfying your personal desires, and so it descends only into material teachings, which are supposed to satisfy your ego.²⁸

[T]his is the sect’s philosophy: a trite cut-and-paste of a lot of other philosophies [...] The sect has nothing original apart from its contradictions in questions of philosophy, politics, economic power and plagiarism²⁹.

For the apostates, once the fraud is unmasked and the religious façade has been penetrated, the official identity is exposed as mere artifice, a staged contrivance where the leadership’s power consists of its ability to set the scene and direct the actors on it. This breaking point inaugurates a change in the apostate’s point of view, and from then on every plan made by the organization is seen as marking a new ruse. Not only does discovering the deception undermine everything else, including the doctrine, but the doctrine itself (like everything else) is then revisited from an ethical perspective. When the philosophy that informs Soka Gakkai is defined, what is emphasized is that it is a “cut-and-paste” job. In other words, what the apostates are complaining about is not the spiritual content of the doctrine, but its plagiarism, which is not judged according to whether it is epistemically true, but whether it is morally right. Once the *ethos* is discredited, the doctrine is discredited as a result.

As regards Scientology, it is instructive to listen to the testimony of two spouses, ex-members both, who later reaffiliated with an independent Hubbardian association:

27. Erika, <http://www.noallasokagakkai.eu/letteradafi.html>

28. Maka Shikan, <http://www.noallasokagakkai.eu/MSCV.html>

29. http://www.noallasokagakkai.eu/10_domande_e_10_risposte.html

[M]ost Scientologists think that Hubbard appointed David Miscavige³⁰ as his legitimate successor and that he delegated the leadership of Scientology to him. Nothing on the face of the earth is farther from the truth [...] No, Hubbard knew perfectly well that Scientology should not fall into the hands of a single person because that would be extremely risky, and so he was concerned with drafting a project and setting up various corporations in order to balance powers and control so that the technology would remain unchanged and so that Scientology could over time achieve the goals he had founded it for.³¹

Not all apostates reject Hubbard's doctrine and teachings. A portion of them retain their convictions even after disaffiliation: in this case, apostasy is specifically the rejection of the religious authority of the Church of Scientology, which is accused of having distorted—knowingly and culpably, in general—the founder's original thinking. This is the view of the “independent scientologists,” former members of the Church who have banded together in autonomous groups such as the Association of Professional Independent Scientologists. Whereas the power of the Church lies in the ability of its leadership to claim to control followers' action because of their willingness to acknowledge the validity of this arrangement and the values on which it is based, it is precisely this validity that is called into question by independent scientologists, who secularize the organization and draft a subversive narrative that undermines the religious institution's power. The apostates thus preserve their faith in the original spiritual teaching, and it is exactly for that reason that they deny the Church's authority, refusing to recognize the institution's charisma of office, and hence its sacred value³². For an independent scientologist, the Church incarnates the deviation away from Ron Hubbard's authentic message. In particular, the idea that Hubbard designated David Miscavige, the current ecclesiastic leader of Scientology, as his successor is regarded as historically baseless. The truth of the message and the authority of the Church no longer go hand in hand: one contradicts the other.

30. David Miscavige is also chairman of the board of the Religious Technology Center in California, the organization that holds the Church's trademarks.

31. <http://indipendologo.wordpress.com/la-strutturale>

32. These organizations can be likened to the quasi-churches investigated by Jamieson (1998). Quasi-churches come into being in order provide a forum for the dissident members of a church, and tend to take on that church's functions and roles to some extent.

Conclusion

For apostates to reach the point where they speak out, publicly and critically, it is not sufficient that they decide to exit from the religious group. Apostasy is a gradual process, where intellectual, emotional and social factors must build up for some time before they finally culminate in actual disaffiliation (Bibby and Brinkerhoff 1974). The stories we have collected speak of the costs of making such a decision—the personal, material and relational costs—that are commensurate with the biographical investment entailed by years of belonging and commitment (Chalfant 2011). Even if the group's doors are physically open, crossing the symbolic border calls for being able to face objective problems, such as those involved in reestablishing the bonds with family and friends that time has weakened. In addition, there are other, subjective, ties. Apostasy means having to put an end to a lifecourse that may have lasted for a considerable time and, for better or worse, has been a significant experience. Though its conclusion is usually accompanied by a sense of failure, there may sometimes be a feeling of success in having overcome tensions that were no longer bearable. By analogy, this final period has several features in common with the end of a marriage and with divorce (Wright 1991).

The authors of these exit narratives describe their experience in stark terms, pulling few punches as they assign blame for this “divorce” to the religious organization. Theirs are “gnoseological” narratives, stories where what changes is primarily in the observer's outlook, in his/her perception of reality (Todorov 1971). The accounts examined in the foregoing pages tell of the discovery of a deception and the moral sanction of those who are said to be behind it. Apostasy is played out at the border between faith in a religious truth and confidence in the organization that preaches it. The leave-takers' trajectory traces an arc that starts from the pole of authenticity, initially believed, and ends at the pole of inauthenticity, discovered later. But in the final analysis, what influences the apostates' decision is their interpretation of the inauthenticity as an attempt to defraud or coerce them on the part of a repressive leadership who pursues aims that are worldly and material rather than spiritual. Thus, although the leave-takers generally dispute the truthfulness of the belief system, the decision to disaffiliate is not simply a matter of recognizing a doctrinal error, but is made when the groundlessness of the spiritual message is seen alongside a failure to uphold moral expectations, or in other words, a breach of the pact of trust that, at the beginning of the story, bound the convert to the group. Thus, though apostasy is conventionally defined as a phenomenon *sub specie fidei*, this does not describe it in full, nor is it only the loss or denial of faith. Leaving is chiefly influenced by other

types of motive, the most frequent of which is irreconcilability between one's role as a member of the group and the roles occupied outside it, between the rules of religious life and those of outside social life, especially when the group demands that its members' entire existence be wrapped within an all-encompassing worldview.

There is another reason that apostasy is not only the denial of faith: after disaffiliation, many apostates retain a personal religious inclination and continue with their spiritual quest. Their migrations in the socioreligious field may lead them to reaffiliate with other similar organizations, as is the case for former Jehovah's Witnesses who join Evangelical groups, or for ex-Scientists who form associations that are independent of the Church of Scientology but like it are based on Hubbard's teachings, or, lastly, for erstwhile Soka Gakkai Buddhists who immerse themselves in the study of Oriental philosophies in order to practice other forms of mediation. In most of these instances, the disappointment and sense of failure are worked through as part of the existential process of building a new identity (Streib 2005; Scharp and Beck 2017) centering on other values that are generally more liberal than those—oppressive, in the apostates' view—that were encountered in the years of activity in the previous religious groups.

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