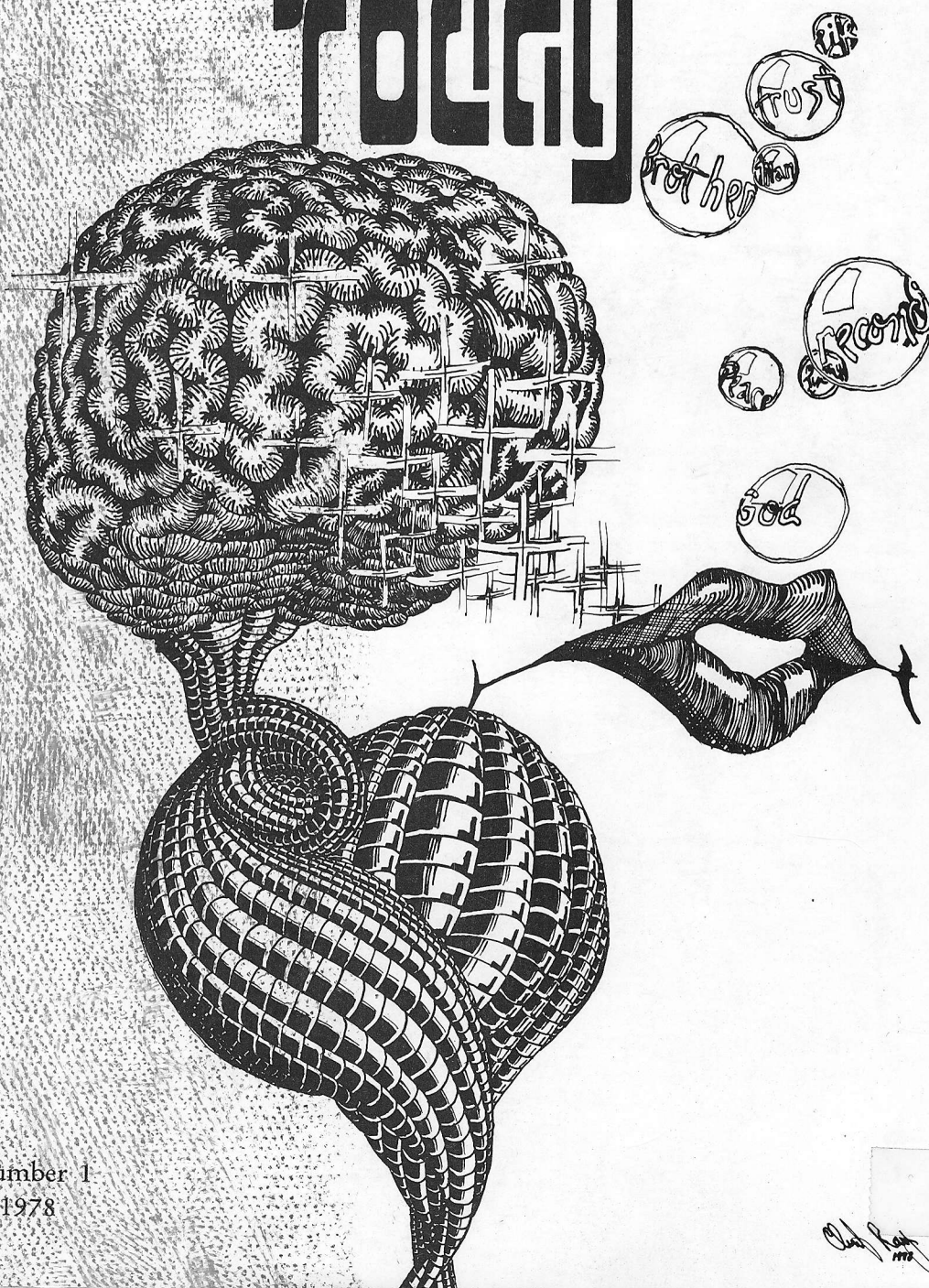


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ON RETAINING CONVERTS

by

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The goal of religious communication is to influence the transformation of personal identity in a uniquely religious sense. Christian religious communication is the process of influencing others in such a way that the Christ who lives in the Christians and in their message will be formed in the lives of others.¹ The purpose of this article is to explore the role of friendship patterns in this transformation process. Specifically, it will show the importance of new church friends for the membership stability of converts.

People tend to act in ways consistent with their self-image and self-image is largely a product of identification with others.² Positive and negative reference groups may influence self-image even when an individual is not actually a member of those groups. However, membership groups and primary groups are probably more important influences on self-images. Membership groups are organizations which a person actually joins in some formal sense. Primary groups involve face-to-face interaction such as in the family or among close personal friends.³ An individual with whom one identifies in a primary group has been called by various names: alter ego, reference other, reference person, reference individual, role model, direct other, and significant other.⁴ (Mark well the term "significant other." It is crucial to the ideas to follow. Eds.) Changes in self-image are associated with changes in patterns of identification with reference groups, membership groups, primary groups—but most of all with significant others.⁵

The study of religious conversions, according to Shibutani, is especially useful since such conversions "throw some light upon the manner in which behavior patterns, self-conceptions, reference groups, and significant others are related."⁶ Conversion to a particular religious group obviously involves identification with that group as a reference group at the denominational level and as a membership group at the congregational level. Such conversions, however, also involve the identification by the converts with members of the congregation as new significant others.⁷ Conversion involves a displacement of the previous pattern of reference group and membership group influence.⁸ A displacement of significant others, however, may be even more important. According to Shibutani, "The initial phase of conversion is the gradual alienation from significant others."⁹ When an individual, in the process of religious conversion, changes his pattern of reference group and membership group influence, some change of significant others is needed as reinforcement. As Shibutani expresses it:

The new meanings and self-conceptions are reinforced by a new set of significant others with whom more cordial interpersonal relationships are established. Since any conception of reality is a social process, a new way of approaching one's surroundings is likely to be transitory unless it wins the support of others whom one respects. It is through the constant comparison of experiences that consensus

emerges and is reaffirmed. The sympathetic support of other people is a crucial part of all conversions.¹⁰

Continuing this stress on the role of new significant others to support the new pattern of reference group and membership group identification, Shibutani writes:

The displacement of perspectives is both preceded and followed by changes in interpersonal relations, usually with different individuals as significant others. Each person forms a conception of himself by acquiring the perspective of the various groups of which he is a part, but such participation is always in the company of specific people. A person is not likely to redefine himself without a change in perspectives, and a displacement of reference groups is not likely to occur unless the significant others representing the points of view are also replaced. A convert not only develops a new self-conception, but may also assume new interpersonal roles more congenial to his personality. . . . Being accepted within some primary group is a matter of crucial importance for all men. Personal stability rests upon reasonable satisfaction with oneself, and it is difficult for anyone to accept himself without the affection and respect of significant others.¹¹

There is additional support for the belief that some change of significant others is needed as reinforcement for a change in any pattern of reference group and/or membership group identifications. Backman, Secord, and Peirce found that there was less change of a subject's self-image when there was a high degree of consensus among the significant others in the subject's primary reference groups supporting the subject's original self-image.¹² Mannheim found that an unstable reference group pattern was associated with greater changes in the self-image than what was found with a stable reference group pattern.¹³ According to Jackson, "A person's attraction to membership in any group will vary directly with the amount of interaction the person has with other members of the group."¹⁴ Jackson further states that "the more highly valued a person perceives himself to be by others in his group, the greater will be his attraction to that group."¹⁵ According to Hartley, "The more successful a new group is

perceived to be in meeting the personal needs of an individual the more likely he is to accept it as a reference group."¹⁶

If it is true that some change in identification with significant others is needed as reinforcement for a change in reference group/membership group identification, then it should logically follow that changes in group identification would be more lasting supported by appropriate changes of significant others. As applied in the area of religious communication, the hypothesis would be that a new convert will be more likely to remain faithful and less likely to drop out of the congregation if he has significantly changed friendship patterns so as to drop former friends who are not members of the congregation and to develop new friendship patterns with people who are members of the congregation.

Method

As a part of a much larger study of persuasion in religious conversion, 48 local congregations of the Church of Christ were selected for in depth analysis--16 each from the top, middle, and bottom 20% in regard to net growth rate (defined for this study as the number of adult converts per year per 100 members minus the drop-out rate of those adult converts). In each of these 48 congregations there was a random selection of five recent converts and five people who had converted recently but then had dropped out of the congregation soon after their conversions. The 240 converts and the 240 drop-outs were asked to identify their closest friends before their conversion and to identify their closest friends at the time of the interview. Each subject was assigned a score indicating the degree of change of friendship patterns. In that score, one point was added for each former friend who was not a member of the Church of Christ who was no longer a close friend. An additional point was added for each new friendship formed between the subject and a member of the Church of Christ following his or her conversion. In the obtained data these scores ranged from zero to nine.

One problem with comparing converts and drop-outs on this variable was that the drop-outs might have formed fewer friendships with members of the Church of Christ simply because of the fact that they dropped out and thus did not have the same opportunity to form such

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3. Tamotsu
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4. Raymond
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5. Alfred
Strauss, *Social Ps*
and Winston, 196
Schmitt, "Major
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friendships as did the converts who did not drop out. In order to control for this, it was necessary to match converts and drop-outs for the length of time they were active members of the local congregation. For example, converts who were interviewed six months after their conversion were matched with drop-outs who were active members of the congregation for six months before they dropped out. It was not possible to find such a match for all converts and drop-outs. There were, however, 50 converts whose length of membership matched that of 50 drop-outs. This comparison, therefore, was limited to these 100 subjects.

Results

It is evident from the obtained data that the more subjects replaced their former

significant others with members of the Church of Christ as new significant others the more likely they were to maintain their affiliation with the Church of Christ as a new reference group/membership group. Subjects who did not change their patterns of identification with significant others were much more likely to drop out. The study showed that all subjects who had less than three changes in friendship patterns were in the drop-out category and all who had more than six such changes were in the category of the converts who remained faithful and active members. These findings lend strong support to the contention of Shibutani and others that some change of significant others is needed as support for a change in a pattern of reference group/membership group identification. They also offer a very practical suggestion about an important aspect of religious communication.

FOOTNOTES

1. Flavil R. Yeakley, Jr., *Why Churches Grow* (St. Louis: Anderson's, 1977), p. 9.
2. Charles Horton Cooley, "Primary Group and Human Nature," in *Symbolic Interaction: A Reader in Social Psychology*, 2nd ed. Jerome G. Manis and Bernard N. Meltzer eds. (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1972), pp. 159-160.
3. Tamotsu Shibutani, *Society and Personality* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1961), p. 404.
4. Raymond L. Schmitt, *The Reference Other Orientation* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1972), pp. 41-44.
5. Alfred R. Lindesmith and Anslem L. Strauss, *Social Psychology* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1968), pp. 579-607. See also Raymond L. Schmitt, "Major Role Change and Self Change," *Sociological Quarterly* 7 (1966): 311-322; and Shibutani, pp. 523-533.
6. Shibutani, p. 523.
7. Shibutani, pp. 527-528.
8. Shibutani, p. 582.
9. Shibutani, p. 525.
10. Shibutani, pp. 527-528.
11. Shibutani, pp. 531-532.
12. Carl W. Backman, Paul F. Secord, and Jerry R. Peirce, "Resistance to Change in the Self-Concept as a Function of Consensus Among Significant Others," *Sociometry* 26 (1963): 102-111.
13. Bilah F. Mannheim, "Reference Groups, Membership Groups, and the Self Image," *Sociometry* 29 (1966): 265-279.
14. Jay M. Jackson, "Reference Group Process in a Formal Organization," *Sociometry* 22 (1959): 327.
15. Jackson, p. 308.
16. Ruth E. Hartley, "Personal Needs and the Acceptance of a New Group as a Reference Group," *Journal of Social Psychology* 51 (1960): 350.

"The English have an extraordinary ability for flying into a great calm."

Alexander Woolcott

"Do whatever you can, with all you have, wherever you are—but do it!"

T. Roosevelt