When There Is No Conversion: Spiritualists and Personal Religious Change

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Abstract: This analysis is based on field research on Spiritualists in a Montreal congregation. For most religions that are part of the contemporary scene, conversion marks a transformation of religious identity and is symbolized by special rituals. Although Spiritualism was born in the modern era, conversion is not evident among the spiritualists in the study, and still less, proselytization. I will discuss how Spiritualists experience personal religious change and what light this can shed on more typical changes of religious identity like conversion.

Keywords: religion, modernity, conversion, Spiritualism, identity, Quebec

Résumé: L'analyse présentée dans cet article se base sur une étude de terrain réalisée au sein d'une congrégation spiritualiste montréalaise. Pour la plupart des religions caractéristiques de l'ère contemporaine, la conversion représente une transformation de l'identité religieuse symbolisée par des rituels particuliers. Cependant, bien que le spiritualisme soit né avec l'ère moderne, la conversion n'est pas courante dans cette congrégation, et le prosélytisme l'est encore moins. Nous discuterons donc de la façon dont le changement d'identité religieuse y est vécu et exprimé. Nous montrerons en quoi l'étude de ce cas particulier peut nous aider à mieux saisir les transformations d'identité religieuse plus typiques comme la conversion.

Mots-clés : religion, modernité, conversion, Spiritualisme, identité, Québec

Introduction

The French sociologist of religion, Danièle Hervieu-Léger (1999), observes that even as religious institutions are losing their regulatory power in society, conversion is on the increase. The author goes on to propose three types of conversion, including that from unbelief to religious belonging and belief, from one religious affiliation to another, and "reconversion" or a shift from nominal affiliation to lived practice and belonging within the same denomination (Hervieu-Léger 1999:120-129). The Montreal Spiritualists whom I have studied for some years do not easily fit any of these types, nor do their changes of religious belonging correspond easily to the models of conversion proposed by many other researchers. They do not proselytize, nor do they think of themselves as having converted from their previous religious affiliation, usually Catholicism for those in the study presented here. What can such a group tell us about conversion?[1]

Despite the fact that conversion as usually defined—a ritually-marked adoption of a new religious belonging—is absent in this group, I suggest that the religious biographies of its members offer rich material for understanding shifts in religious identities and practice. Here I am inspired by the approach of the phenomenological psychiatrist, Wolfgang Blankenburg's (1991) study of schizophrenia. Seeking to perceive how the schizophrenic experiences the social world, and the distinctive aspects of this mode of experience, the author bases his approach on interviews with patients who manifest few symptoms of the illness. Apart from the fact that these patients were capable of interaction, unlike those more severely afflicted, Blankenburg argues that "weaker" cases offer the further advantage that the clinician-researcher is less likely to be distracted by symptoms than they would be with more acute ones.

In a similar way, one might argue, highly ritualized instances of conversion may lead the researcher to confuse the social externals of certain types of conversion with

the more fundamental personal transformation that they signify. My aim here is to examine certain aspects of Spiritualists' religious biographies, particularly the changes they see as a result of their involvement in the Spiritualist group that is the focus of the study and how they see their religious belonging. Before describing the research and its methods, let us take a brief look at some the issues surrounding conversion and religious identity transformation.

Conversion and Religious Identity

Many recent discussions of conversion note the complexity of the issues involved. The sociologist James T. Richardson (1998) has noted the polarity between, on the one hand, deterministic perspectives focussing on the "psychopathology" of potential converts and the "brainwashing" techniques imputed to religious groups; and on the other, what one might call "agent-centred" approaches based on an "activist," volitional view of the convert (Lofland 1978; Lofland and Stark 1965; see for example Ng's [2002] study of Chinese converts to an American Reformed Church). A number of researchers suggest that conversion is more a process than an isolated event, may have multiple causes, and variable consequences for social behaviour (Lofland and Stark 1965; Rambo 1993). Travisano (1970) defines conversion as involving "drastic changes in life" and "negation of some former identity," a "change of allegiance from one source of authority to another." However, Downton (1980), who studied followers of Guru Maharaj Ji, suggests that conversion and commitment may be evolutionary in their development (see also Long and Hadden 1983; Richardson 1985). Furthermore, much of the theoretical discussion on the subject suffers from an excess of particularism; models of "conversion," its causes and its consequences, are often shaped by the researcher's own experience and the group studied (Rambo 1999).

On the collective level, conversion is an important means of religious group reproduction; another is intergenerational transmission. Neither is encouraged in Spiritualism. As I will show, personal networks are the main source of recruitment, as is the case with a number of other groups (Stark and Bainbridge 1980). I will try to show that, as paradoxical as it may seem, these Spiritualists' aversion to conversion and proselytizing does not exclude the fundamental "change of heart" (Heirich 1977) that lies at the core of conversion. Finally, I will argue that the very notion of religious identity does not necessarily hold the same importance in all religious groups.

Spiritualists in Montreal

Spiritualism is a modern religion in that it developed over the latter part of the 19th century, beginning in 1847 when two young girls on a farm in Hydesville, New York established contact with the spirit of a dead man whose bones were eventually discovered in the basement of their house (Aubrée and Laplantine 1990). The movement that began around the Fox sisters spread throughout the United States in a religious climate already affected by movements such as transcendentalism and Swedenborgianism[2] and individuals such as the charismatic Andrew Jackson Davis (1826-1910), who later became a Spiritualist (Goodman 1988). It spread across the Atlantic, influencing, among other movements, Spiritism, as developed by Alain Kardec.[3] For several decades around the turn of the century, Spiritualism was very popular in the U.S., especially in progressive, feminist circles (Braude 1989). Its numbers are estimated as high as eleven million toward the turn of the 20th century (Braude1989:25), though this is difficult to verify, given the informal, decentralized character of Spiritualist groups.

The Spiritualists I have met vigourously reject the label of "sect" or "cult," not surprising given the stigma currently attached to these designations. However, from a sociological point of view, Spiritualists do correspond to Stark and Bainbridge's "purely technical" notion of cult as an innovative religious group that creates a new "religious culture" (1996:104). That is, their beliefs and religious practices, as well as the social structure of the group, depart from that of longer-established Western religions. The sociologist Geoffrey Nelson, who identifies as a Spiritualist (1987:139), defines Spiritualism as a "spontaneous cult," that is, an innovative religious movement characterized by diffuse authority (1969b, 1987:55-57; see also Campbell 1998). Wallis notes the vague boundaries of cults, their fluctuating belief systems, and rapid turnover of membership (1977:14).

Spiritualism arrived in Montreal in the mid-1960s; one of the earliest congregations was the Spiritualist Church of Healing (SCH),[4]—the church that is the main site of this research—founded in 1967 by a married couple of ministers from England. Thus the "Spiritual Church," as its members often call it, was established at a time when Quebec society was undergoing rapid secularisation and the Catholic Church was losing its near-monopoly over the educational system and other institutions. Disaffected Catholics came to form the bulk of the new church's clientele; most of its ministers as well as the great majority of its members today are of Catholic background. Most of them grew up in working-class Fran-

cophone neighbourhoods in Montreal (Hochelaga-Maison-neuve, Ville-Émard, etc.), and many have resided in the same general area all their lives. Some live in suburbs on the South Shore (Rive sud) while a few others who come to the SCH live in more distant towns and villages.

The founding ministers left Canada in 1975, leaving a young Francophone minister, Michel, as pastor. The SCH quickly became Francophone in clientele as well as most of its services and other religious activities. However, an English-language service as well as a number of bilingual services are now held each month, as the SCH has begun to attract Anglophones coming from other Spiritualist congregations in the city. At present, most of those who attend services at the church (many more than its official membership of 275) are Québécois from Montreal and the surrounding area whose first language is French. Over the last few years, the congregation has become noticeably younger; most attending services are adults from about 30 to 60, with a smattering of older and younger individuals. Women generally far outnumber the men, usually by about three or four to one, though there are about as many men as women among the ministers, mediums and healers who practice in the SCH.[5]

At least six other Spiritualist groups can be found in Montreal; one is a prayer group that meets in a member's home, while the others, like the SCH, occupy rented spaces and have larger congregations.[6] All share the same seven basic principles, though the vocabulary is variable. These include the existence of God, sometimes termed "Universal Intelligence," the fraternity of mankind, individuals' responsibility for their actions, the consequences of their actions in the afterlife, the continued existence of the human soul and the eternal progress available to it, and the communion with spirits.

Like the Spiritualist churches observed by Zaretsky (1974) in the United States, the SCH has limited financial means. Its revenue comes from donations and the collections that mark every service and mainly goes to covering the rent for the two floors of space that it occupies. None of the five ministers, who include two women, are salaried, nor are the mediums and healers who contribute their efforts to church services. Apart from the rent, major expenses include heating and (a recent innovation) air conditioning in the summer.

Several Spiritualist groups, including the SCH, are located in downtown Montreal; the others are situated in working-class areas of the city. The SCH is situated on a central artery near a metro station; most attending services there use public transportation. Marked only by a cardboard sign in its narrow doorway, the church is easy to miss among many small businesses on the block—including used bookstores, grocery stores, a strip joint and a sex shop.

The Research

A series of chance events led to the study that is presented here. Supervising a student working on spirit possession in Brazilian Umbanda (Frigault 1999) piqued my interest in spirit possession. Around the same time, a teaching stint at the Université Lyon2 led me to become familiar with the work of François Laplantine. His (1985) study of a medium in Lyon helped me see the anthropological relevance of clairvoyance and healing in a modern urban setting that was somewhat similar to Montreal.

It was in this general context that I met Michel, reputed to be a gifted clairvoyant and healer, through a friend. Michel seemed approachable, dynamic, and appeared youthful for his nearly 50 years. He later told me that he grew up in a working-class neighbourhood in Montreal in a French-speaking family, but was sent to an English-language school run by the Jesuits—his father's hope for upward mobility for his five sons. Michel went on to study at a local university and then worked for many years in finance for a large corporation; now he does accounting on a part-time basis. Widowed in his twenties and later divorced from his second wife, he now shares his life with Elisabeth, a Spiritualist medium who is active in the SCH.

At our first meeting, for a clairvoyance reading, I was impressed by Michel's ability to capture the important elements of my past and present, along with his very precise predictions for the future (later confirmed). At the same time I was deeply affected by the experience of being with him as he went into a trance-like state (he later explained it as a "light" trance). The experience itself seemed to be quite as important as the content of what was said. We spoke English, Michel being fully bilingual. Most of the time Michel had his eyes closed; he explained that he received clairvoyance from his "guides," spirits who help him. Then he thanked them, opened his eyes and told me what he had seen, a sequence that would be repeated many times over the course of an hour while he covered major aspects of my life: health, work, love, family and so on. He concluded by inviting me to visit the church that functioned on the premises.

Out of curiosity, I began to go to services at the SCH where, over the next few months, I witnessed a series of mediums give what they called "messages" (clairvoyance) to others present. Occasionally one or another medium would channel for a spirit guide. The church seemed vaguely Protestant in décor and ritual. Eventually, I requested a second meeting with Michel to discuss the possibility of doing research on the SCH. He immediately

invited me to join a closed group (the first time I had heard of such groups), whose members are helped to develop their "spiritual gifts," particularly clairvoyance. This was on the condition of being discreet—not disturbing the religious atmosphere of the gathering and participating like other members. I readily agreed, since what interested me most was the Spiritualist experience, what it was like to see clairvoyantly and to give healing, and how this kind of religion fit into the daily lives of the participants.

Inspired by Favret-Saada's study (1977) of modern witchcraft in Normandy, from 1999-2001 the research that evolved was based on participant observation, with notes being taken outside the church context. I went on this way for about two years, except for three interviews with Michel in the months following my entry into the closed group. It was clear that in order to study Spiritualists' religious experience, I would have to, paraphrasing Favret-Saada, accept becoming a participant in the situations where this experience is manifested and shared in the discourse through which it is expressed (1977:43). Interestingly, Zaretsky, who did not seek to share the experiences of the Spiritualists he studied, describes Spiritualist discourse as distinctive, often "incomprehensible" to non-participants (1974:167).

Most of the time, the SCH does not function as a bounded group but rather as a collection of networks, each centred around a minister-medium (Meintel 2003). The core of the networks is made up of individuals who frequent the groups directed by that minister and go to his services. In the SCH, some of these networks overlap to a degree, but others do not. (Church rules prohibit going to more than one minister's closed circle at a time, as each teacher works in their own way.) Occasionally, ministers leave one congregation for another, or form their own congregation, in which case, their network tends to follow. Thus, I decided to focus the research primarily on Michel's network.

After several years of participating in the biweekly meetings of the closed group and attending church services when Michel officiated (several times a month), I began to interview some 16 "key informants," evenly divided between men and women, the majority of whom are between 30 and 55 years of age and who have been going to the Spiritual Church for at least three years. The first interview concerned their life history (religious background, employment, family and couple relationships) and how Spiritualism, the SCH and their connection to Michel fit into their personal trajectory. Other interviews have focussed on experiences of spiritual "gifts" (e.g., trance, healing, clairvoyance) and other extraordinary experiences such as astral projection, premonitory dreams and

so on. Like Fonseca (1991), I am interested in how the religious practices and beliefs of my interlocutors weave into their daily life. Insofar as possible, I usually meet informants outside the church, in cafés, my home or theirs, and continue participant observation on a part-time basis.

Most participants in the study work full-time. Some of the Spiritualists I have interviewed work in the lower echelons of the health care system (e.g., as home caregivers, massage therapists), some in service jobs (sales clerk, for example), and others in skilled occupations (as mechanics and so on). Most have been divorced at least once and most presently are in a stable couple relationship.

For the most part, I have adopted a subjectivist, "experience-near" (Wikan 1991) methodology that gives priority to the individual experiences of my informants and where I try to use my own as a basis for better understanding theirs. The "observation of participation" (Tedlock 1991) approach adopted for this research is one that, in my view, corresponds to its object, the Spiritualist religious experience.[7] Yet it should also be noted that the study is based not only on participation in Spiritualist activities such as doing healing and giving clairvoyance (as an apprentice) but also includes many interviews, and much systematic observation: for example, counting the number of individuals present at each gathering and the proportion by gender, observing décor, taking note of turns of phrase used in the mediums' discourse at church services, and so forth. Several research assistants and numerous anthropologist friends who have visited the SCH and met Michel have provided useful feedback.

Spiritualist Beliefs

Apart from the seven basic principles mentioned earlier, my informants share a number of other beliefs, most importantly regarding spirit guides.[8] The most important of these is the principal guide, or "gatekeeper" spirit who allows other spirits to come through or prevents them from doing so when a medium goes into "deep trance," also known as channelling.[9] Animals are believed to have spirits and a life after death and mediums often report seeing deceased pets around their owners.[10] Spiritualists hold that everyone has spiritual gifts for various sorts of healing and clairvoyance, astral projection and so on. These gifts can be developed and used to do harm or good. On the negative side, the Spiritualists interviewed also believe in *mauvaises entités* (evil entities): the spirits of deceased individuals who do harm by attacking people or seduce them away from their spiritual development, sometimes quite literally.[11]

All the foregoing beliefs form part of the lived experience of my informants or those close to them. Many

have seen angels (who manifest as very large entities, as tall as the room they appear in), guides and other spirit entities, sometimes negative ones. In fact, belief in guides and healing is integral to the ritual activities of the SCH, as well as the belief in mediumship or communication with spirits.

Another category of beliefs are widely subscribed to by Spiritualists at present but are not considered integral to Spiritualism. Many are taken from other traditions, for instance, reincarnation and chakras. Nonetheless, such notions are often mentioned in the clairvoyance transmitted by mediums or in the exchanges of the closed group, discussed in the next section. Unlike most of his students Michel is skeptical about reincarnation: "at least I hope it's not true." Also evident in the SCH is what might be called a "Catholic substratum" of religious belief; older members often venerate figures such as the Virgin Mary. Finally, there is a kind of Spiritualist "lore": notions current among Spiritualists that are not known to all of them, but are believed by some (e.g., the idea that a candle suddenly going out is the act of an evil entity). Most of my informants have occasional recourse to astrology, tarot, crystals and so on, but clearly separate such practices from spirituality.

Religious Activities

The Spiritual Church of Healing holds four services a week that are open to the public; three are held on Sunday and one on a weekday evening. Services last about ninety minutes to two hours; all begin with opening prayers that include the "Notre Père," or "Our Father" (Protestant version[12]). The main service on Sunday includes several hymns (mostly American or British classics, such as "Nearer My God to Thee," translated into French) and a period of meditation. Every service includes an offering that is then blessed and a period where "messages" (clairvoyance) are given by one or several mediums to those present. The service ends with prayers and a closing hymn. When Michel officiates at the main service on Sunday or at the weekday service, he gives a "discourse" (i.e., sermon or "dissertation" in classic Spiritualist parlance) in place of a meditation. A "healing service" follows the main Sunday service. On this occasion, six to eight chairs are arranged in the front area of the church; a healer works at each chair transmitting healing to the individual seated in front of him by the laying on of hands. Those waiting sit their turn quietly; often a guided meditation is offered, with a background of restful New Age music. Healers do not actually touch the person receiving their ministrations; in appearance, their work resembles that of the magnétiseurs (magnetizers)

described by Acedo (2000). The healing service also begins and ends with prayers, and is marked by a collection and the blessing of the offering. The last Sunday service, called a "message service," is shorter than the main service; there is no discourse, and often, no meditation and fewer hymns are sung. Some 40 or 50 come to the main Sunday service when Michel officiates, though weather or other factors may result in lower attendance. The weekday evening service is similar in format to late Sunday afternoon service; this service may draw 30 or so participants, but often fewer, depending on the time of year, weather and the minister officiating.

The material culture of the Spiritual Church is modest but significant. There is a small organ (played in the past by Michel's late father, but never in the time I have known this congregation) and a large Bible (King James Version) sits in front of the pulpit.[13] There are also paintings in a "New Age" style of angels and other spirit entities (some representing Natives) and there is a Star of David. Upstairs, one finds a meeting room, a small library, a kitchenette and a small office. Here more traditional sacred images are displayed, including one of the Sacred Heart. The church is decorated with flowers, streamers and so on for holidays such as Mother's Day and St. Valentine's Day, as well as Christmas and Easter. For important religious celebrations the ministers wear ritual vestments, such as a white tunic and blue stole.

During the part of services reserved for clairvoyance, or what ministers sometimes call "spiritual communion," the mediums (there are usually several) address individuals present to give them messages. These normally focus on themes such as health, emotional well-being, family and other personal relationships, work, and spiritual development. In most cases the mediums know little if anything about the person they "see" for. When addressed, individuals give their name, "for the vibrations," as Michel explains. Personal matters are mentioned in a discreet way, for example, "you're going to have it out with someone you work with, a guy. Not easy!" Or, "I don't know if you have anybody in your life right now, but if you don't, you will soon. I see a big heart right over your head!" At times a medium will suggest that the person should see a doctor or a dentist soon. Often mediums see one or several spirits around the individual; sometimes they may identify such entities as being loved ones. Mediums occasionally see Catholic figures such as the Virgin Mary. Occasionally a medium goes into what Spiritualists call "deep trance" (channelling).

Spirits so contacted are never those of illustrious individuals; in fact no effort is made to contact any particular spirit.[14] Some Spiritualist groups give greater emphasis

to the objective validity of contacts made with spirits than is the case in the SCH. At the SCH, the emphasis is on, in Michel's words, "the message rather than the messenger"—on the spiritual and practical guidance coming from the spirit world, rather than the identity of the spirit. Whatever their differences in approach, all the ministers of the SCH present Spiritualism as a *religion*, not simply as a "philosophy of life," unlike the case in some other Spiritualist groups in Montreal. At the same time, they also emphasize Spiritualism's openness to spiritual traditions.[15]

Closed Groups

As mentioned earlier, when I told Michel of my interest in doing research on Spiritualists' religious experiences, he invited me to join a closed group, or "circle," as these are called in traditional Spiritualist terminology. At the SCH, such groups are commonly called "courses in spiritual development." Usually they meet at the church, as is the case with the group I joined, or in the home of one of the participants. Meetings are usually held on a weekday evening twice a month (except for one group that meets every week) from September to June. The meetings, or classes, begin and end punctually, and last a little over two hours. A medium (usually also a minister) recognized by the SCH directs the proceedings, selects the members of the group from among those who have asked to be admitted, and presides over its meetings. Often demand exceeds the number of places available; groups usually number 18 or fewer. Michel avoids those who seem psychologically fragile, preferring to meet them individually.

Meetings begin with prayers, including the "Our Father," during which participants hold hands, forming a circle. Each week, Michel proposes a colour and explains its symbolism (see note 17). For the next two weeks, members of the group are invited to pray, visualizing the planet enveloped in that colour, for example, blue-green to help people considering suicide. In Michel's groups, prayers are followed by breathing exercises, done standing, "to open the chakras." These are followed by a guided meditation led by Michel.

A short break precedes the part of the session that Michel sometimes calls "active meditation"; that is, the period reserved for clairvoyance. Members, often referred to as "students" are given experience of various types of clairvoyance using, for example, symbols, colours or material objects.[16] Michel gives directions such as, "see a colour that the three persons to your left need and explain what it means." He then gives some examples, such as "green for balance, or red for energy."[17] After a period of meditation where students try to carry out the exercise given

by Michel, each one recounts in turn what he or she received, and for whom. Normally Michel's comments are encouraging but neutral: "Very good! Thank you!" He is likely to give clairvoyance to a number of individuals present before ending the meeting with prayers, where once again, all join hands to say the "Our Father."

In some ways the closed groups are reminiscent of psychoanalysis. Participants are encouraged, in a non-judgmental way, to give voice to impressions they would normally not register, still less, articulate; at the same time, this zone of freedom is circumscribed by a number of rules and regulations. The fee per class is modest ($10), so as to allow access even to the unemployed; however it must be paid for missed sessions. Punctuality is required. Moreover, individuals do not leave their places without permission, nor do they speak out of turn. Participants sit in the same place all year long, determined by Michel on the basis of the colours in their auras.[18] Verbal aggression, even of a mild sort, is not tolerated.

Spiritual "gifts" such as clairvoyance are not seen as signs of spiritual merit, in contrast to how Pentecostals see glossolalia (Goodman 1972). In fact, Spiritualists distinguish themselves from "esoterics" who, when they are not charlatans, may exercise their powers for selfish ends. As a "gift," it should be transmitted with the help of spiritual guides in order to help others. Clairvoyance as developed in the closed group is seen above all as a tool for developing the student's spirituality[19]; however, in Michel's view, it is also a tool for daily life in that the exercises done in the group stimulate the intuitive capacities of the students.

In fact, most of those who have participated more than a couple of years (the case with my key informants) experience not only stronger intuitions, but also premonitions, clairvoyant "flashes" and in some cases visions, outside the religious context. Neither Michel nor the other mediums exhort members of their groups to follow particular religious practices. At most a medium might give someone a message such as, "your guides would like you to meditate now and then." Yet all those interviewed pray daily for help with difficulties of everyday life and many reserve a time during the day for prayer or meditation. All have developed personal spiritual practices and routines adapted to their temperament and circumstances. For example, Nancy, a divorced mother of two young children who works two jobs has little time and is not inclined toward meditation. Nonetheless she attends services when possible and prays for protection every day when she leaves home for work and at night as well.

Sylvie, in her early sixties and employed as a secretary-receptionist, recalls that after she began attending

a group directed by Michel, over 25 years ago, she went through a very difficult phase: divorce, loss of custody of her two children, then a third child, a second divorce and life as a single mother. She was unable to continue attending the group, "but I learned to pray":

> For a long time, I used to pray sitting, I sat and prayed. And then I would feel the energy that came into me and that lifted me up, and I would see things. Now I meditate in a special room that I made...I do it to music, usually. All kinds of music. And there's a special kind that I can make sounds with myself. And when I make that kind of music, there's a moment where the vibrations come in, that's when I do healing with my guides and my hands. I feel the energy in my hands and I do healing then.

Daniel, trained as a mechanic, now in his late forties:

> Every day I pray. Not always long prayers, you know, but a minimum. The colours Michel gives us, right? I cover the world in the colour. And I read the Bible.

A longtime member of AA and former drug user, Daniel also meditates but avoids doing so at times that Spiritualists consider those of greater vulnerability to negative influences (the full moon, the months of October and March, when occult activities are said to be at their peak):

> I don't meditate, never in the full moon, never in a full moon. I never meditate in the full moon. I never meditate in October except in the courses or a church. Never. Because if I don't respect the strength of the dark side, if you will, I'm in danger.

Flexible Belonging

Only a small proportion of those who frequent the SCH are enrolled in spiritual development classes. On one hand, some of those who have frequented the classes for years have never been to a church service. On the other hand, there are a few older members who attend church services but find the clairvoyance exercises of the closed group somewhat suspect, vaguely "satanic."

Michel emphasizes the religious nature of the SCH by mentioning its legal status as a church and occasionally having those present read the seven basic principles of Spiritualism from the SCH hymnals at the beginning of the service. (These are booklets of photocopies of hymn verses in French with plastic covers that are made available to all present. Reading the seven principles aloud is regular practice in some Spiritualist congregations in Montreal.) At the same time, the non-doctrinaire approach of Spiritualism makes the SCH a religious resource for non-members; ministers are often approached to perform weddings, naming ceremonies (discussed below) and exorcisms[20] for those who might otherwise have difficulty finding a clergyman to perform these offices.

All the same, the official discourse of the SCH is characterized by a vocabulary that avoids certain typically religious terms: rather than disciple, one hears "student," for example, in the monthly schedule, where it is indicated that clairvoyance will be given by "Michel and his students" on certain dates. For the main Sunday service a "discourse" rather than a "sermon," is mentioned on the calendar. Members occasionally slip into a familiar Catholic lexicon, referring to "la messe" (Mass), "le sermon" and so on.

Although Spiritualism developed out of Protestantism, the SCH does not present itself as Protestant, still less as "Christian," emphasizing rather its openness to various sacred traditions. Indeed, it can be seen from the preceding description that borrowings from other traditions, such as the notion of "chakras" and meditation have been integrated into the practices of the SCH. Moreover, as I have explained elsewhere, members sometimes frequent Catholic churches or explore other spiritual approaches, such as neo-shamanism, concurrently with Spiritualism (Meintel 2003).

Membership in the church is by no means an affirmation of religious identity. Rather, it is regarded as a contribution ($20/year at present) that helps defray expenses and allows the individual to consult the library (located on the second floor, above the one where services are held) and pay reduced prices for clairvoyant readings at the "spiritual teas"[21] held a few times a year. To my knowledge, no one in this congregation has been baptized in the Spiritualist church, though such a rite exists; as Michel explains, "they're already baptized" (in the Catholic church).

Recruitment

In general, Spiritualism is not transmitted from parent to child. Instead of baptism, a naming ceremony is held where the child is sprinkled with flower petals, given a name chosen by the parents and presented to their spirit guides. There are no facilities for children (such as Sunday school or babysitting) at the SCH nor are parents encouraged to oblige children to come to services. It is far more common to find parents who have discovered the church via their adult children than children through their parents. Moreover, whole families are never present—inevitably some members of the family refuse any contact with the SCH.

At the same time, proselytism is discouraged. Thus two classic mechanisms of religious group reproduction—geneaological transmission and proselytizing—are absent among Spiritualists. Moreover the SCH maintains a low profile in its downtown location: it does not advertise and, in fact, has no telephone or website. Not surprisingly, Spiritualist congregations are small in number: taken together, all the groups in Montreal come to but a few thousand members. Yet the congregation of the SCH is not diminishing and has in fact increased slightly over the last few years.

Most come to the SCH through personal networks. Stark and Bainbridge have noted the importance of networks in recruiting, emphasizing "longstanding personal relationships" that bring new members to groups such as the Mormons or the "Moonies" (1980:1379). In the Spiritualist case, it would be more accurate to say that recruitment is by word of mouth. Those I have interviewed have all come to the SCH through a friend, a relative or a co-worker who had been to the church, but who in many cases were not actually members or regular attendees themselves.

The Spiritualists I have met are generally reticent to discuss their beliefs and religious experiences with people who express no interest in spirituality, even their closest associates. Sylvie, who often works as healer and medium in the SCH, explains with a certain sadness that she cannot speak to her family of her contacts as a medium with her deceased father, because "they wouldn't understand...They aren't open to these things, not at all."

Marie (45 years old) works in the field of mental health; she never speaks of Spiritualism with her colleagues:

> In the field where I work, you really can't talk about your spirituality. For them (colleagues) anyone who hears voices or feels things is psychotic...If I ever told them I was involved in something like this, well I've heard them talk, they would look at it very, very unfavourably.

It should also be added that there are no regular non-religious activities at the SCH. Though a number of researchers attribute the interest of contemporary religious movements to the social "community" they offer individuals who might otherwise be isolated or marginal (Cohen 1990; Hervieu-Léger 2001), this is mostly absent from the SCH.[22] Moreover, physical distance, work, and family obligations tend to limit social contacts between members of the closed groups directed by Michel, unless they already knew each other. Occasionally they might meet for coffee or a meal before or after one of the services. On the other hand, they are linked by privileged moments of "communitas" (Turner 1975)—co-experiences of the sacred, as for example in giving or receiving healing, or in the meetings of the closed group—that are often intensely lived yet rarely discussed with others in their social milieu.

Spiritualist Religious Trajectories

Conversion is more than a mode of recruitment to a religious organization. On the individual level, it usually implies a change of religious identity (Kirsch 2004; Rambo 1993; Travisano 1970), and is likely to be marked by special rituals such as baptism by immersion and in some cases, a change of name (e.g., in conversions to Islam). Conversion narratives, such as those of African converts to evangelical religions studied by Mary (2000), often take stereotypical form and may figure prominently in religious rituals. Other researchers speak of personal changes: new forms of subjectivity (LeBlanc 2003), new behaviours and beliefs (Travisano 1970). In Heirich's simple but eloquent phrase, conversion involves a "change of heart" (1977).

My research to date shows that Montreal Spiritualists tend to accumulate religious identities rather than reject one in favour of a new one. Similarly, Marryat (1920) writes of British Catholics who were also Spiritualists in the early 20th century (cf. Swatos and Gissurarson 1997 regarding Unitarian Spiritualists in Iceland). Many members of the SCH go to a Catholic church from time to time, venerate Catholic saints and cherish Catholic religious symbols and artifacts (rosaries, pictures, etc.). Nicole, in her late forties, is an active member of her Catholic parish but belongs to a closed group in the SCH and occasionally attends services. Most feel that they have not renounced Catholicism but added to it (Meintel 2003). There is no service on Christmas or New Year's at the SCH, it being tacitly recognized that those who go to church during the holidays are likely to go to Catholic masses with their families.

Nonetheless most reject in the strongest terms what they consider the authoritarianism of the Catholic Church. For example, Rémi (55 years old, divorced, teacher in a technical school) says:

> Here in Quebec, it was a dictatorship, religion...They made you afraid...through manipulation and fear.

As mentioned earlier, several Spiritualists have discovered other spiritual traditions, notably what they refer to as "la spiritualité autochtone" (i.e., Neo-shamanism). At least four members of the SCH, including three men, attend the annual Sundance on a reservation in the United

States, frequent sweat lodges, undergo vision quests and perform various rituals they consider to be of Native origin, usually under the supervision of Native shamans.[23]

Most importantly for our purposes here, the Spiritualists I have interviewed, including several who are recognized as mediums and healers in the church, do not usually think of Spiritualism in terms of a religious identity. Blaise, of West African origin, is a mechanic and part-time "energy healer" in his early fifties. He explains:

> There's something here that fits with me...I'm looking for the universal...The SCH is a tool that resonates with me, my intuitions, my feelings, how I want to live...When they talk about churches, its like taking on an identity. But the energy that I seek is something beyond all that, you can find it in a lot of different ways...I was baptized in the Catholic Church...I'm African...I think Spiritualism is partly animist (like Africans)...Everything is sacred.

Nancy, like many others, hesitates to call herself "a Spiritualist": "I'd say, rather, I'm spiritual. Spiritualism is a group of people and things, but I consider myself spiritual."

Though the great majority who frequent the SCH were baptized in the Catholic faith, most, like Rémi cited earlier, abandoned regular religious practice in adolescence, though not necessarily religious belief. Indeed all were what we might call "implicit believers" before their first contact with Spiritualism; that is, they had no active religious life at the time, yet had never renounced religious belief.

Typically, an adult life crisis of some sort set off a spiritual search for those I interviewed, be it recovery from drugs or alcoholism, a divorce, illness, an accident, or sudden loss of employment. Contrary to what Nelson found in Britain (1969a) none of the SCH members I have met came to the church in hopes of making contact with a deceased loved one. Nelson's Spiritualists tended to be middle-class and widowed, unlike my interviewees who are usually divorced, in stable couple relationships and of working-class background.

In a broad study of beliefs among Quebecois, the sociologist Raymond Lemieux (2002) found that recomposition of individuals' personal belief systems is generally associated with painful experiences of rupture that bring with them a new relationship to the environment and a void to be filled. The longing of my Spiritualist informants to find a deeper meaning in the events that had shaken up their lives seems to have made them receptive to the invitation of someone in their personal network to visit the SCH. As Heirich notes in his study of "Catholic Pentecostals"

(Charismatic Catholics), the impact of social networks is important for those *already* oriented toward a religious search (1977:673).

Despite the declared openness of the SCH to other spiritual traditions, there seems to be very little "shopping around" in other religions among the Spiritualists I interviewed, apart from the men who are involved with Neoshamanism. Instead, their religious paths are marked by changes in personal relationships and sometimes, encounters with the world of spirit (Meintel 2006). The latter do not constitute biographical milestones in themselves; rather they form part of a process of deepening spiritual commitment, a process set off early in the individual's encounter with the Spiritual Church of Healing.

In fact, many such occurrences involve encounters with what Spiritualists term "negative forces." Several of those I spoke with have experienced the "astral projection" of another person (interestingly, always someone themselves involved in Spiritualism). Nancy has had a number of unsettling experiences: "lower entities" infesting her house; visits via astral projection from a rejected suitor (a member of the SCH) whose (spirit) presence made friends staying with her suddenly want to leave; and, a premonitory dream of a well-publicized plane crash that in fact happened two weeks later. I was present at a meeting of the closed group when the spirit of an individual who had died in that disaster possessed her briefly.

Apart from such disturbing experiences, my informants have lived many ecstatic moments in Spiritualism, often outside the church setting. Nancy occasionally sees the auras of her massage therapy patients. Others speak of ecstatic moments while meditating or giving healing. Marie describes what giving healing, which she does regularly in the SCH, feels like:

> You are in communion with everything. The communion of healing, you receive it, and you transmit it to the other person. That fusion, I feel it. I feel a great power inside me, I feel absolute well-being...Really, I have the impression that I'm in another dimension. There are no more limits, there's nothing...no doubt, no fear, no anxiety. It's really a state of ecstasy on the inside.

In sum, Spiritualism is not usually experienced primarily as institutional incorporation and religious identity change. Nor do those I interviewed speak of renouncing Catholicism; indeed there are virtually no spontaneous statements of religious identity, such as "I am Spiritualist" or "when I became Spiritualist." Yet, religious faith and Spiritualist beliefs are omnipresent in the daily lives of these individuals; not only in practices such as prayer and meditation, but also in their way of experiencing the

joys and tribulations of daily life—new love, divorce, unemployment, bringing up children, mourning loved ones who have "passed on." Such common experiences are framed and lived as matters of faith and belief, and taken as challenges for spiritual growth by my informants (see Meintel 2005, 2006 for further detail). Though conventional indicators of conversion are largely absent, Spiritualist beliefs are fully present and constantly actualized in the lives of these individuals.

What Is Conversion?

Most of the work on conversion seems to be based on studies of groups whose institutional boundaries are clear, at least in theory. Conversion is usually imagined as a transformation of religious belonging, the taking on of a new (and exclusive) religious identity that is given ritual form by baptism or another ceremony. Take, for example, Travisano's oft-cited approach: "conversions are transitions to identities which are *proscribed* within the person's established universes of discourse" (1970:601, emphasis added). The author opposes conversion (e.g., from Judaism to fundamentalist Christianity), considered a pervasive change of identity and practice, to the milder "alternation" (e.g., Jews who keep Jewish affiliations but also become Unitarians), where religious life is thought to be compartmentalized.

Conversion so defined normalizes exclusive identities and global (i.e., fundamentalist) religious discourse as the "gold standard" of conversion and, by extension, of religious experience. The vocabulary of certain recent analyses of contemporary religious phenomena is laden with similar connotations, whereby lack of religious depth is suggested regarding religions that do not require exclusive identifications, are not highly institutionalized, and where individual *bricolage* is evident: for example, "religion à la carte" (Bibby 1990) and *le nebuleux mystico-religieux* (nebulous mystico-religious) (Champion 1990). Non-exclusive religions such as Spiritualism, end up looking somewhat flimsy, insubstantial, and the *serieux* of those who follow them is subtly (or not-so subtly) undermined.

The limited institutional elaboration of religions like Spiritualism makes conversion something of a non-issue, its usual social indicators being absent or relatively unimportant. Though Brown speaks of "conversion" in regard to the "Christian Spiritualists" he studied in San Diego, it is not clear if his informants use the same vocabulary; the author notes that "most Spiritualists are uncertain about their Spiritualist beliefs" (2003:137). He concludes, following Richardson (1985) that perhaps conversion should be seen in terms of shifts in behaviour, and as a

complex and long-term process. The sociologist Geoffrey Nelson speaks of "becoming a Spiritualist" after a "conventionally Christian" upbringing, but does not see himself as "converted," rather:

> The whole process...was a personal achievement as a result of a long period of change...I have never considered this an act of conversion, a procedure which I always associated with much more rapid and indeed sudden events. [1987:133]

The Spiritualists I have interviewed do not think of themselves as converts, or as having renounced Catholicism and reject the term. Spiritualism is simply what they do, their prayerful attitude, the faith that they find ever stronger and more present in their lives. This is not to say that there are no changes in *personal* identity; most of my key informants feel they have experienced profound personal change and relate to others differently since coming to the SCH. However, they do not tend to think of Spiritualism in terms of group belonging or religious identity.

In cross-cultural terms, affiliation and identity are not always key to how others imagine religion. For the Nepalese described by Letizia (this volume), it is the rituals that people participate in that situates them in religious terms. For the Zambians described by Kirsch (2004), belief is the crucial factor, though belief is likely to shift to allow individuals to change from one group to another according to circumstance. The Brazilian *favela* dwellers described by Fonseca (1991) move between the religious resources of Spiritist (Kardecist) groups, Umbanda and Catholicism according to the needs of the moment, while sharing a common pool of folk rituals and beliefs (e.g., *olho grande* [evil eye] and home baptism of newborns).

The emphasis on exclusive religious identities is largely, I suggest, an artifact of modernity. With the pre-eminence of the nation-state over the 20th century, exclusive national identities have long been the norm; in the ethnic domain, mixedness has been the "marked" case, to borrow a linguistic term. The religious dynamic of our era is obliging researchers to come to terms with the fact that exclusive religious identities and affiliations are far from being a generalized norm, that syncretism, bricolage and religious mobility—circulating among religious groups or accumulating religious resources of varied provenance—are widely the case.

Conceiving the relation between the individual and the group in identity terms is so prevalent that we assume it to be natural, and yet, as Oriol (1985) pointed out some time ago, the central place of identity in social discourse is part of a certain social order characterizing post-indus-

trial society. I would not go quite so far as Laplantine (1999) who suggests jettisoning the concept altogether, precisely because "identity" is so present in many people's thinking and discourse. However, it should be remembered that a logic of identity is but one way of connecting the individual and the social. As we have seen, religious identity does not figure prominently in the discourse of the Spiritualists I have met, still less the notion of conversion. This is true for even those whose actions over many years give evidence of intense and sustained Spiritualist religious practice.

It would seem something of a contradiction to consider anyone a "convert" who rejects being so identified. Yet, the aversion for the term among these Montreal Spiritualists should not be taken to mean an absence of personal change. On the contrary, all those interviewed experience a deepening of faith and develop regular (if idiosyncratic) spiritual practices, such as prayer, meditation and spiritual reading, in their daily lives (Meintel 2005). Moreover, many speak of "breakthroughs" in their relationships with others, often through forgiveness (*le pardon*) of ex-spouses, estranged relatives, abusive parents et cetera.

Rather than a religious identity or affiliation, the SCH offers its members a religious "home" that allows them to keep other religious referents and beliefs[24] while strengthening their religious faith through its distinctive practices of mediumship and healing. Their reticence to think of religious faith and practice in terms of affiliation or belonging should not obscure the depth and intensity of the spiritual process in which they are engaged.

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Notes

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2   Named for its main figure, the Swedish philosopher and mystic, Emanuel Swedenborg (1688-1772), Swedenborgianism still exists as a religion. Like spiritualism it emphasizes the eternal life of the human spirit and the validity of all religious faiths. For its tenets see the site of the Swedenborgian Church of North America: http://www.swedenborg.org/tenets.cfm. New England transcendentalism was a philosophical and literary group active in the decades before the American Civil War that included

Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau (McClenon 1998).

3   Like Spiritualism, Kardecist Spiritism, or Kardecism, is characterized by belief in spirits and its practices include mediumnic communication with them. In contrast to Spiritualism, reincarnation is a basic belief of Kardecism; another difference is that Kardecists often seek contact with the spirits of eminent deceased persons (Aubrée et Laplantine 1990).

4   Pseudonym. Pseudonyms are also used for the individuals mentioned. Interview quotes are based on verbatim transcriptions, with minor changes to assure clarity.

5   Braude (1989) has noted the association between Spiritualism and feminism in the latter half of the 19th century; Haywood (1983) speaks of the "empowerment" of women in Spiritualist groups.

6   Unlike other Spiritualist groups in the city, the SCH has legal status as a church, which among other things allows its ministers to perform marriages and hold funerals. Gay marriages are officially permitted, though none have been held so far; however a child of a lesbian couple has been given a naming ceremony.

7   Elsewhere I describe the personal experience of the research (Meintel In press) and take up the question of how my experience resembles or differs from that of other participants (Meintel 2006).

8   Spiritualist beliefs are presented in greater detail in Meintel (2005).

9   Quite often the Gatekeeper is the spirit of a Native, an issue I hope to explore further in another context.

10 This belief seems to have long been widespread in Spiritualism (see for example, Barbanell 1940).

11 Several informants report being physically aroused by spirits; it is thought that the entity seeks to create a sexual dependency that will put the person in their power.

12 The Protestant version of this prayer concludes with a sentence that is absent from the Catholic version: "For Thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory, forever and ever." In the SCH the prayer is always called the "Our Father" and in French, the *Notre Père*, as is common in Catholic churches, not "The Lord's Prayer."

13 Michel explains that in order to have legal status as a church, the SCH had to have a sacred text, and the Bible was the most familiar one for its members; also, the committee deciding on the group's status was mainly composed of Catholics.

14 At least one medium tries to contact the spirits of deceased relatives for those (not necessarily members of the SCH) who consult him privately.

15 Glossolalia, common in Evangelical churches(Goodman 1972) and charismatic Catholic groups (Csordas 2001), is not present in the SCH. However it apparently features in some Spiritualist churches, as indicated in a note about spiritual "gifts" in an English-language hymnal from the 1950s that is occasionally used at the SCH (National Spiritualist Association of Churches 1960).

16 This last is called psychometry and is at times practiced by mediums at church services. The medium takes an object among several on a tray that have been put there by members of the congregation. Without knowing to whom the

object belongs, the medium uses it to "see" for its owner, who is identified after the reading. A variant of this is clairvoyance where those present have put their names on pieces of paper that are folded and put into a container; the medium draws a folded paper and gives clairvoyance for the person concerned, opening the paper only after the reading.

17 Though Michel often suggests symbolic associations for colour to the group, there are individual variants, depending on the medium and the individual receiving the clairvoyance. For example, the colour orange may have different meanings on different occasions.

18 Michel explains that usually he opts for seating that favours harmony, but sometimes he puts people with somewhat incompatible auras next to each other, so as to make the group a bit more dynamic.

19 Elsewhere (Meintel 2005) I discuss how clairvoyance among Spiritualists seems to reinforce and strengthen religious faith.

20 Michel is the only medium in the SCH who regularly performs exorcisms. Often the exorcism is of a dwelling where troublesome spirits have manifested themselves, and occasionally it is for an individual who is attacked by such entities. Michel notes an increasing demand for his services as an exorcist in recent years and such requests usually come from non-Spiritualists.

21 The term "spiritual tea" dates from the early 1960s, when the ministers of the church feared that openly announcing such an event might attract unfavourable attention. Those waiting to meet with one of the mediums enjoy snacks and coffee in a sociable atmosphere. Proceeds go to the church.

22 Two non-religious events (communal suppers) were held in the summer of 2006, the first in decades, in order to raise money.

23 Nelson has noted the affinities between Spiritualism and Shamanism, terming the latter a "primitive form of Spiritualism" (1969a: 269).

24 One is reminded of Hoffman's notion of "home": "a possession made of our choice, agency, the labour of understanding" (1999:60).

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