

# The Unificationist Conversion Narrative: Current Perspectives on Past Experiences in the Austrian Unification Movement

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## 1. Introduction

Use all your devotion to spread the Word. In doing so, you centre on the Word and will realise that God is always with you. Thus we are connected to God through the Word. If there were no Word, we could not be connected to God. [...] Without the word we could not find the way to connect [to Him]. That is why, unless there are subjects who promulgate the Word, nothing will happen. The connection between humankind and God is intended to enable us to connect to God's love. The people who promulgate the Word, that can connect humankind to God, are people on earth. However, for the Word conveyed by those people is God's Word, new people can be brought forth (Mun 1986: 337-338).<sup>1</sup>

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*Notes on Romanisation and Style:* Korean terms and names are romanised using the McCune-Reischauer system. Korean names are given according to East Asian custom: family name precedes given name. Hyphens are included between syllables when romanising given names. The transcription of Japanese follows the Modified Hepburn system.

1 “내게 있는 정성을 다해서 말씀을 전파해 보는 것입니다. 그러다 보면, 말씀을 중심삼고 하나님이 항상 같이한다는 것을 알게 될 것입니다. 그럼으로 말미암아 말씀을 통해서 하나님과 연결되는 것입니다. 말씀이 아니고는 하나님과 연결될 수가 없다는 것입니다. [...] 말씀이 없이는 연결성을 찾을 수 없어요. 그렇기 때문에 말씀을 선포할 실체가 없으면 아무것도 안 되는 것입니다. 하나님과 인간이 연결되는 것은 하나님의 사랑에 연결되는 것이 목적입니다. 인간을 하나님과 연결시킬 수 있는 말씀을 선포하는 사람은 땅의 사람입니다. 하지만 그 사람이 전하는 말씀은 하나님의 말씀이기 때문에 그 말씀으로 말미암아 새로운 사람이

We were told, that Christ is on earth [...]. For 40 days I had the most severe headache (as I had never before experienced in my life) and one day I was almost paralyzed by pain. I fell on my knees and cried to God for answers and signs, One night I woke up and saw a person sitting on a chair at the foot of my bed, holding a baby in its lap – it was either our Leader or Miss Kim.<sup>[2]</sup> This was not a dream, but a vision with open eyes, God had answered my prayer. One Friday noon, after praying all morning (while I was working), peace came over me, a peace that other people could feel. Even though I could not fully understand the complete message I accepted Now I began to learn and see who Satan really is. He was after me ever since. But God and his Principle are much stronger, Slowly I am beginning to understand, how much our Leader has done for us; and this is to testify, that I will go with him all the way (NAF18 1964: 4).<sup>3</sup> [...] What made my wife and I accept this Message? Today I have the answer. Because It Is The Truth. It says, “And the truth will make you free”!<sup>[4]</sup> Oh Father [i.e. God], we thank you from the bottom of our hearts that you have made us free – free of materialism, free of churches and their doctrines, free of people’s opinions, but most of all free of ourselves (NAF21 1964: 8).<sup>5</sup>

Rooted in antiquity, the genre of (religious) ‘autobiography’—a term coined in 1797 by the British essayist William Taylor (1765–1836)—started to flourish from the eighteenth century onwards.<sup>6</sup> The conversion story, especially, became part and parcel of the autobiographical religious discourse, mainly spurred by the evangelical emphasis on the conversion experience of the adherent (Payne 1998: 3-4). A century before, the Puritans were the first crafting the ‘conversion narrative’ into a popular genre (cf. Caldwell 1983; Hindmarsh 2005); a genre that, via the First Great Awakening of the 1730s and early 1740s, entered the pool of revivalist religious expression (cf. Brauer 1978).

Protestant evangelism lastingly arrived on the Korean peninsula in the first half of the 1880s. Perpetually struck by disaster at an already grim time of economic and socio-political unrest—thus being receptive for new salva-

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빛어질 수 있는 것입니다”. Mun Sŏn-myŏng (1920–2012) on the significance of the Unificationist mission in his new year’s sermon in 1970.

2 Kim Yŏng-un (1914–1989), the first missionary to the United States and the early European community’s most important international contact to the Korean church.

3 The earliest published conversion testimony of Paul Werner (1927–2008), the first missionary to Austria and founder of its UM branch.

4 Werner alludes to John 8:32.

5 Paul Werner’s continued testimony before his and his wife’s departure for Germany.

6 The first self-writing of this genre that was deemed exemplary is Augustine of Hippo’s (354–430) *Confessiones*, an account of religious experience revolving around conversion to Christianity.

tional ways, ideally of a millenarian bent—“Korea was an evangelistic gold mine” (Lee 2010: 13). Missionary success erupted between 1903 and 1907 in the form of the Great Revival (*taebuhŭng*) culminating in P’yŏngyang, from where revivalist fervour spread to major cities in the country. Conversion figures were propelled, enabling Protestantism to gain a firm foothold particularly in the North, under Methodist and Presbyterian lead, the latter to which Mun’s parents converted in 1930. During the time of Mun’s religious socialisation, P’yŏngyang—tellingly called the ‘Jerusalem of the East’ (*tongyang’üi Yerusalem*)—was the hub of Korean Christianity (Clark 2010: 246). His exposure to a vibrant spiritual milieu that was still anchored in neo-Confucian mores, vividly amalgamating various revivalist Christian(-inspired) doctrines and passionately craving for messianic liberation, was the matrix for the formation of Unificationism; a current of thought that was first crystallised in print in 1952 with the *Wŏlli wŏnbon* (*Original Text of the Principle*) and, consequently, fleshed out organisationally in 1954 as the Holy Spirit Association for the Unification of World Christianity (HSAUWC; *Segye kidokkyo t’ongil sillyŏng hyŏphoe*), the religious kernel of what was henceforth to orchestrate a ‘religious *chaebŏl*’, the Unification Movement (UM). Programmatically and until relatively recently, the UM identified itself as thoroughly Christian, strenuously attempting over decades to tie in with the ecumenical movement—however, largely to no avail. Naturally, the dynamic (syncretised) Protestant environment, out of which Unificationism was born, left its undoubtedly Christian marks on doctrine and practice—the latter echoing elements of revivalist means of proselytising, such as, most notably, joint spiritual ‘ecstasising’ and the conversion narrative.

Early on, the story of one’s conversion experience occupied centre stage in UM member’s ‘testimonies’ (*chŭnggŏ*). Concomitant with the overseas growth of the movement—which commenced in earnest in 1958—the number of testimonies released in the US-based international newsletter *The New Age Frontiers* increased, so that, starting in early 1966, *Testimonies* became a regular section.<sup>7</sup> This was initially taken up by the Austrian group when members began to issue the internal monthly *Familien Nachrichten* (FN; *Family News*) in October 1968.<sup>8</sup> The FN connected not only believers

7 From 1969, *NAF*’s contents shifted addressing primarily US members.

8 The figure in the brackets indicates the number of *Zeugnisse* (testimonies) published in all FN issues between October 1968 and July/August 1972: 10/1968 (8), 11/1968 (5), 12/1968 (3), 1/1969 (4), 2/1969 (1), 3/1969 (1), 4/1969 (4), 5/1969 (2), 6/1969 (–), 7/1969 (1), 8/1969 (–), 9/1969 (1), 10/1969 (3), 11/1969 (2), 12/1969 (2), 1/1970 (–), 2/1970 (1), 3/1970 (2), 4/1970 (–), 5/1970 (1), 6/1970 (1), 7/1970 (1), 8/1970 (1), 9/1970 (–), 10/1970 (1), 11/1970 (1), 12/1970 (2), 1/1971 (1), 2/1971 (1), 3/1971 (2),

throughout Austria, but also German-speaking followers internationally. By the end of the 1960s and until 1975/76, the Austrian UM ranked among the most active national branches in Europe. Proportionally speaking, in this time period the group produced the highest number of converts across Europe, many going abroad permanently for proselytising or due to marriage, which gradually drained core personal resources, thus putting an end to the heydays of rapid expansion by 1978. For 1974, sources give about 180 members, a figure—if accurate—that was certainly surpassed a year later, when on October 10 and 11, 160 members alone travelled to Camberg to attend Mun during his stay in Germany.<sup>9</sup> As a comparison, Barker (1978: 81) reports circa 200 resident followers in the United Kingdom for 1978, a comfortable surge from the 55 members indicated for mid-1972 by Cozin (1973: 107). About the same number, that is 200 members, is mentioned by Hardin and Kuner (1981: 139-141) for Germany at the end of 1971. Over the next years this number was to be tripled or quadrupled. Between 2,000 and nearly 3,000 believers are estimated for the United States by the end of 1974 (Barker 1984: 64-65).<sup>10</sup> The Austrian group's proselytising activities, with the traditional focus on 'street witnessing' (*Ansprechen gehen* or, literally, 'addressing people'), dropped noticeably during the 1980s and ceased almost completely in the 1990s. Reason for this is that on the one hand, as mentioned above, a sizeable portion of the movement's energetic core fellowship was dispersed abroad; on the other hand, during the 1980s and 1990s, 'blessed' (i.e., ritually married) members settled down and dedicated their time to raise and provide for their families. While living in a centre (commonly called *Center* or, more formally, *Zentrum* by Austrian Unificationists), at least for some time, was obligatory in the 1960s and 1970s, members' starting of family life in the 1980s and 1990s ended this custom and, at the same time, concluded both the need for shared living space and

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4/1971 (3), 5/1971 (–), 6/1971 (1), 7/1971 (1), 8/1971 (–), 9/1971 (1), 10/1971 (1), 11/1971 to 7-8/1972 (–). The monthly's full title and its exact spelling changed over time from *Familien Nachrichten der Vereinigten Familie GVW* (10/1968 to 12/1969) to *Familien-Nachrichten der Vereinigten Familie-GVW* (1/1970 to 1/1971 and 4/1971 to 8/1971), *Familien-Nachrichten* (2/1971 to 3/1971 and 9/1971 to 10/1971), and *Familien-nachrichten* (11/1971 to 7-8/1972).

<sup>9</sup> See, for example, *The History of the Austrian Family in Outlines 1965–1982*: 10-11. A total of 800 'brothers and sisters' (*Geschwister*) allegedly joined the Camberg meeting in 1975 (Hutzfeld 2004: 86).

<sup>10</sup> Wilson and Dobbelaere (1987: 184) number 20 members for Belgium in 1976. Ylimys (1981: 378) speaks of 50 adherents in Finland in 1981. The same number is given by Mayer (1984: 41) for Switzerland in 1984. Palmer (1994: 90) indicates 197 followers, which include 58 children, for Canada in 1990.

the maintenance of a number of ‘centres’.<sup>11</sup> In the last 25 years, and in tandem with the direction taken by the worldwide movement, the Austrian group visibly shifted from classical means of proselytising to an augmented engagement in NGO activities, ranging from peacebuilding and human rights to interfaith dialogue. The dissemination of (religiously-derived) ideas moved from the streets and the ‘love-bombing’ atmosphere of early centre life to cultural events and the sober setting of conferences and the internet.<sup>12</sup> The public outreach of the Austrian group’s NGOisation, although limited, is internally communicated and received in a decisively positive way, binding in particular the current first generation’s millenarian drive. The reason why UM elders increasingly resorted to this soft form of proselytising can be expressed in the formula: ‘no more, no will’. Whereas first generation members ‘no more’ want or can return to old proselytising habits, second generation members largely have ‘no will’ to emulate their parents’ religious careers during the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s. Zest for action in the spirit of ‘kingdom-building’ is still alive among many of the first generation; however, its arena has changed. To better understand the ‘ignition spark’ and early context of those members’ clinging to—modernly and emically phrased—(the vision of) Cheon Il Guk (*ch’önilguk*), whatever nuance of it is personally deemed most crucial,<sup>13</sup> this paper addresses their conversion stories. The investigation is limited to textual materials composed (or orally delivered and transcribed) in recent years, mainly in 2014, following a call to members by the Austrian FFWPU national leader, Peter Zöhner (b. 1952), to write and submit a personal testimony. This paper discusses the question of how current first generation Unificationists relate (or view in hindsight) their motif for conversion to the Austrian movement, their conversion experience and its framework, and the conversion’s more

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11 Today, one can still find several Unificationist flat-sharing communities (Vienna, Graz, and Linz), all of them occupied and privately rented by second generation members, most of whom are students. The shared flat in Rennweg 45/9 in Vienna’s third district also serves as the local CARP (Collegiate Association for the Research of Principles) centre. The Austrian CARP is incorporated as an association (*Verein*) as *CARP – Hochschulvereinigung zur Erforschung von Prinzipien* since November 1989.

12 Street witnessing is still carried on today—albeit vanishingly small in scope and unsuccessful in terms of conversion—to some extent also in response to the UM leadership’s recent call for “reviving past vibrant missionary activities at the grassroots level” (Pokorny 2014: 144).

13 In Unification thought, Cheon Il Guk refers to multi-level (individual, family, tribe, society, nation, world/cosmos) relational harmony centring on God, as well as the harmonious state of each individual level. The levels of the family, the individual, and the world/cosmos (in order of significance) are particularly important to Austrian Unificationists for their personal context, as shown by this and previous research.

immediate personal ramifications. For the purpose of this paper, conversion (from Latin *conversio* or ‘the act of turning round’) signifies a change in one’s worldview or belief, an alteration in one’s relation to reality and transcendence, a transformation of one’s inner moral and/or spiritual compass, taking expression through community or organisational affiliation and, thus, a change of social identity.<sup>14</sup> Conversion experience, be it immediate or processual, marks a personal caesura and, in the case of current first generation Unificationists, the beginning of a religious career under the shining guidance of their ‘True Parents’ (*Wahre Eltern; ch’am pumonim*), Mun and his wife. It is this beginning in an ex post narrative construction that is of interest here.

The following section elaborates on the research methodology and the theory of conversion applied. Section 3 describes the main trajectories in the collected conversion narratives, analysing background, conversion process, and repercussions in the light of Lewis R. Rambo’s (1993) seven-stage model. Section 4 provides the concluding remarks.

## 2. Methodology and Theory

On June 15, 2015—following a postal application by the Austrian UM national leader, Peter Zöhrer, sent a year earlier, on August 24, 2014—the movement was acknowledged by the authorities as a ‘State-registered religious confessional community’ (*staatlich eingetragene religiöse Bekenntnisgemeinschaft*) in accordance with the *Bundesgesetz über die Rechtspersönlichkeit von religiösen Bekenntnisgemeinschaften (BekGG*; Federal Law concerning the Legal Entity of Religious Confessional Communities) of 1998 (*BGBI I 19/1998*).<sup>15</sup> A major requirement of this step in

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14 Whereas religious conversion often links “experiences of personal transformation” and “change in religious affiliation”, these are in fact two separate processes often erroneously taken as one (Stromberg 2014: 118). Experience of personal transformation does not necessarily portend change in religious affiliation and vice versa. For the conversion stories scrutinised in this paper, however, both processes occurred hand-in-hand, that is, (nascent) personal transformation was formalised (and, in further consequence, often augmented and reinforced) through religious affiliation. This is not to generalise, since the focus of the paper is on first-generation believers that are still active as members today (or are, at least, on cordial terms with the UM and its core message as is the case with one person in the sample, who officially left the group some years ago). Rather, my wider research showed that both processes have not always been inextricable. Yet, for long-term followers they have.

15 Austrian religious law identifies three levels of state recognition—*Verein* (association), *staatlich eingetragene Bekenntnisgemeinschaft*, and *gesetzlich anerkannte Kirche*

state recognition is to evidence a domestic membership of at least 300 followers who are not simultaneously registered with any other formally recognised religious community at the level of State-registered religious confessional community or legally recognised church and religious society.<sup>16</sup> Initial struggle notwithstanding, the UM could eventually verify the necessary minimum membership, indicating in statements, before and after state recognition, to have an effective core membership of 450 people, including second and third generation members. Roughly 300 of those are first generation members, of which around one third did not join the UM in Austria.

In order to qualify for assessment, the submitted testimonies had to fulfil five criteria: (1) sufficient reference to the conversion process, personal background, and/or consequences of the conversion; (2) conversion that was at least initiated in Austria and being confirmed by joining the Austrian family before any other national UM branch; (3) the testimony had to be communicated orally or in writing (preferably the latter) by the former convert herself/himself; (4) the convert was to belong to the first generation of UM members; (5) the testimony had to be authored in recent years, that is, no written testimony was used that had been published in various UM publications from the 1960s to 2000s, including, for instance, *NAF* and *FN*. Of the 87 testimonies assembled between July 25, 2014, and January 3, 2015, 67 (or 77%) met the given criteria. Of them, 56 (or 84%) were part of the Austrian UM at the time of submission. Taking the above figure of circa 200 people, it means that 28% or almost three out of ten first generation members, who joined the UM in Austria and are presently living in the country, provided their story of conversion. Given the size of the corpus of conversion narratives utilised in this research, it can be stated that it offers an appropriate sample relevant to the issues addressed.

The gender ratio of the 67 individuals is 2:1 or 44 male to 23 female members (or 2.3:1, which translates to 39 male to 17 female for those currently residing in Austria). Neither does reflect the almost balanced overall gender composition of the Austrian group, which virtually equals the gender distribution of the Austrian population (51.23% female versus 48.77% male as of 2012) (Pokorny 2014: 135). This can largely be explained as being still very much common among blessed Unificationists that the wife follows

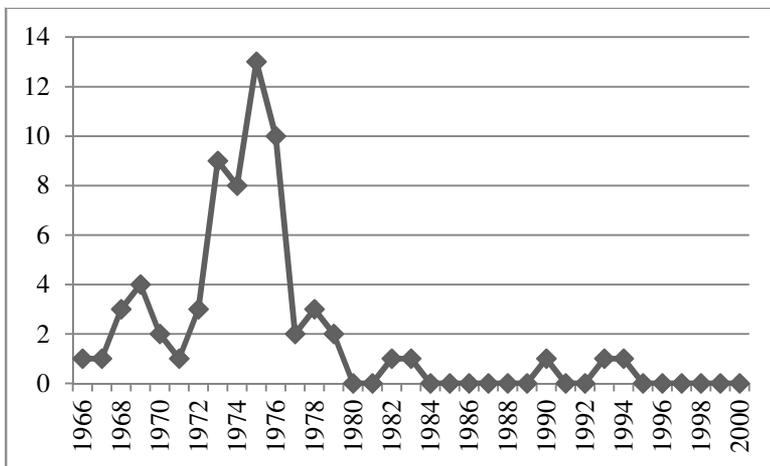
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*und Religionsgesellschaft* (legally recognised church and religious society)—rising in attribution of formal status and public privilege.

<sup>16</sup> In the original § 3.3 of the *BekGG*, it is stated: “Zusammen mit dem Antrag ist der Nachweis zu erbringen, daß der religiösen Bekenntnisgemeinschaft mindestens 300 Personen mit Wohnsitz in Österreich angehören, welche weder einer religiösen Bekenntnisgemeinschaft mit Rechtspersönlichkeit nach diesem Bundesgesetz noch einer gesetzlich anerkannten Kirche oder Religionsgesellschaft angehören”.

the husband in terms of choice of residence, which, at least in the long run, is often the husband's native country. Thus, looking at mixed Austrian/International couples living in Austria, the female partner frequently has a non-Austrian background. All testimonies give a specific or approximate date of conversion, usually congruent with the time one had formally 'accepted the Principles' (*die Prinzipien akzeptieren*), that is, declared her or his spiritual assent as well as social and moral compliance with Unification doctrine.<sup>17</sup> The distribution of the years of conversion named matches roughly the period of proselytising success.

Figure 1: Formal Conversion Year Named



Of the 67 members evaluated (Figure 1), nine were formally converted to the Austrian UM during the 1960s, 53 during the 1970s, with 40 alone in the booming years between 1973 and 1976, two in the 1980s, and three in the 1990s. None has converted since 1994.

<sup>17</sup> 'Principles' and 'Principle' refer to both the then central Unificationist scripture and its major tenets. The reference term is the Korean *wōlli*, which may indicate singular or plural. It is the fixed crucial part of the otherwise varying title of the main text that was given to every new edition—*Wōlli wōnbon* (1952), *Wōlli haesōl* (*Explanation of the Principle*; 1957), and *Wōlli kangnon* (*Exposition of the Principle*; 1966)—commonly translated as *Divine Principles* (*Die Göttlichen Prinzipien*) or, later, *Divine Principle* (*DP*; *Das Göttliche Prinzip*).

The collection of the testimonies started shortly after a brief oral presentation of the project at a UM board meeting in Vienna on July 20, 2014. There the research gained unanimous endorsement, prompting the UM national leader to circulate a call among the Austrian community and former Austrian members living abroad to submit a personal testimony with an emphasis on the conversion process. Peter Zöhrer encouraged members by referencing Mun's appeal to long-term followers leaving their own experiences to posterity in the form of autobiographies.<sup>18</sup> Enclosed was a note by myself that introduced the wider and past research and gave submission guidelines, assuring due diligence in handling the data for the project and, of course, complete anonymity. On the one hand, members were invited to send their testimonies directly to the researcher via e-mail or a special web interface designed for this purpose using LimeSurvey, a free and open source online survey application (cf. <https://www.limesurvey.org/en/>); on the other hand, testimonies could be instead submitted to the hands of Dominic Zöhrer, who was indeed very committed in motivating individuals to share their stories. In fact, only a handful of testimonies arrived through LimeSurvey and e-mail, with the majority being submitted internally. Several testimonies are based on interviews conducted by Dominic Zöhrer, which were subsequently transcribed, and revised and approved by the interviewees. Two testimonies were taken from Burton 2011. The collection phase ended in January 2015.

Conversion experience does not necessarily entail formal conversion, that is, community affiliation; this is an argument frequently brought forward by the Austrian leadership to explain the gap between 'core members' and overall adherents (or sympathisers). Similarly, conversion experience, as can be seen in the testimonies, is often not bound to a single event but may stretch over a series of occurrences spanning years accompanying gradual transformation. In the same vein, conversion memory not only adjusts to one's developing (religious) vita, but is over time constantly reshaping—Snow and Machalek (1984: 176-177) therefore speak of a conversion narrative's 'temporal variability'—in response to transformative effects in relation to a specific organisational and ideological environment. This is one of the reasons why the research exclusively draws upon a corpus of recently gathered conversion narratives. It is the current reconstructed explanation of one's religious past and transformation that counts. In other

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18 Apart from the scholarly value of the data, an argument for such call raised by myself was that this would create the possibility for the Austrian group to assemble and archive the valuable missionary and life experience of long-serving members, saving those from being lost and forgotten for future generations of adherents. Also, this would revive the practice of and reconnect to the Unificationist tradition of testimony writing.

words, the present transmission of conversion memories supersedes memories of old in terms of discursive relevance today, be it general proselytising or inter-generational faith discourse (for example, parent $\Rightarrow$ child). It is not that second generation members would consult their parents' testimonies that were written (and occasionally published) decades ago. Instead, they would listen to their reflections of the conversion process from today's perspective. Another reason for generally not considering the qualitative descriptions of particularly early published testimonies (*NAF* and *FN*) is their (more invasive) editorial altering and distinct context of creation.<sup>19</sup> *NAF* testimonies, for instance, setting aside that a number of the 'authors' have since left the UM (or passed away), were translated and redacted by the then national leader Paul Werner.<sup>20</sup> *FN* testimonies were produced in a comparatively greater tension, concerning surrounding expectations and relations (especially by and towards Paul Werner).<sup>21</sup> This interferes with the sample quality of the given corpus.

Belonging to the first generation of followers was one criterion in the selection of conversion narratives. Moreover, members that were born into a certain religious movement might at one point undergo conversion experience (or, more precisely, an experience of personal transformation), corroborating current affiliation. In other words, conversion experience is not limited to first generation believers but may happen to their offspring as well, which, in the actual case, is evidenced through interviews, personal conversations, and submitted testimonies of second generation members. I also noted cases of former second generation members who, after a conversion experience, reaffirmed their affiliation and (past) faith. Undoubtedly, this is an interesting subject; however, it is not their conversion story that fits the theme of this research.

At its core, religious conversion (factoring out the aspect of mere organisational affiliation), as most theorists would agree, relates to a pervasive self-change. It is a radical change of one's 'universe of discourse' (Snow

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19 What is taken into account as a reference for comparison for the general discussion of the conversion setting, however, is relevant information on 'context' (age, religious background, etc.) and first 'encounter', as well as general trajectories.

20 Testimonies of newly joined Austrian members published in *NAF* can be found in *NAF*5 1966: 21-23 (7); *NAF*8 1966: 17-20 (3); *NAF*6 1967: 15-19 (5); *NAF*10 1967: 23 (1); *NAF*6 1968: 37-38 (2); *NAF*7 1968: 24-25 (2); *NAF*1 1968: 25-26 (3); *NAF*12 1968: 18-20 (3).

21 This does not negate that autobiographical writing by Unificationists today, especially with respect to the conversion story, is not subtly impacted by a standardised form of narration established in the Unificationist discourse being shaped by relational expectations and power conventions (cf. Beckford 1978; Snow and Machalek 1984: 175-176). Yet, the quality compared to previous decades is different.

and Machalek 1983: 265)—that is, a socially construed system of meaning creation animated by language and other symbols—that entails a change in the self-concept or of one’s “sense of root reality” (Heirich 1977: 674), which is articulated through performative and experiential transformation and is socially constituted or explicated by a distinct rhetoric. Ultimately, conversion as a socially tangible phenomenon is an autobiographical narrative reconstruction (cf. Staples and Mauss 1987), and the convert is one who self-describes herself/himself as such. Naturally, communicating personal transformation experience requires to have previously mentally appreciated it. The nature of this individual experience is hidden from any external observation, and can only be acknowledged as such through communication, a social process conjuring a discursively accommodated experiential imagery.<sup>22</sup> The communicator must create mutual understanding with the receiver by utilising a shared symbolic inventory and its pertinent interpretative framework (Krech 2005: 360). The conversion account becomes the medium of conversion. It positions itself between one’s “own immediate situation” and the “canonical language” of the faith system embraced, ritually rendering the “communicative behaviour” as constitutive for confirming religious creed (cf. Stromberg 1993).

Krech (2005: 363) characterises religious conversion as “an act of ‘communicative self-care’ and verbal reassurance of the relationship vis-à-vis the self and the world”. Whereas religious belief appears as a resource of coping with contingency (cf. Luhmann 1982), conversion is the communicative process socially attesting and validating its application, namely the religious grammaticalisation of life orientation and consequential action. Religious conversion discursively and thus socially integrates the individual into a collective. It serves therefore as both a psychological (identificatory) and a social remedy; a solution strategy for multi-dimensional personal crisis, resonantly defined in sociological terms by Lofland and Stark (1965: 864) drawing on their research on the UM “as a felt discrepancy between some imaginary, ideal state of affairs and the circumstances in which these people saw themselves caught up”. The intensity of crisis or tension so described may vary considerably in situ, but it always exists (if only latently) as a defining element of the human condition. Under the label of ‘deprivation theory’ or ‘strain theory’, sociologists operate with the conceptions of relative—and to a much lesser degree—absolute deprivation to theoretically specify this momentum. Relative deprivation refers to the lack of something relative to a possessing peer group, taking the form of social,

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22 In turn, communicating conversion experience within a religious co-ordinate system might also give personal meaning to the experience in the first place.

political, and/or economic disparity, the psychological implication of which might result in religious conversion. In contrast, absolute deprivation refers to the lack of something objectively needed (for example, good health), which may be extended to the need of 'good spiritual health', that is, being capable of coping with contingency and the conundrum of existence. Both may provide a reason for religious conversion. However, crisis alone offers no explanation for religious conversion,<sup>23</sup> which is why deprivation theory is often combined with 'social influence theory', which itself breaks down into 'control theory' and 'subculture theory'. The former suggests that once an individual's firm bond to the surrounding conventional social order is severed, he or she becomes amenable to alternative ways. Incisive biographical developments, regardless of whether they are deemed positive or negative (for example, the bereavement of a beloved person, a failed or new relationship, the transition to adulthood and independence from one's parents, etc.) may crack discursive and social conventionality respectively, and give way to reshape order by drawing on a novel catalogue of discursive/social options. The latter maintains that group participation among like-minded people may function as a powerful social adhesive, peer pressuring, or otherwise inducing individuals to align with dominant in-group thought and behavioural patterns. Uniting both theories, Bainbridge (1992: 182) summarises: "As control theory states, a person is socially free to join a new religious group only if he lacks strong ties to some other group. As subculture theory states, to convert to a new religion, such person must develop strong social relations with persons who are already members".

The motivational urges behind 'conversion careers' (Richardson 1978) are addressed seminally by Lofland and Skonovd (1981). Based on the qualitative composition of five major factors or dimensions held to chiefly mould religious conversion—the degree of social pressure, temporal duration, the level of affective arousal, the affective content, and the belief-participation sequence—they conceived a typology of six conversion motif experiences. 'Intellectual' conversion, bypassing subculture theory, happens prior to any social engagement. The convert subscribes to an alternative mind-set after having actively approached religious offerings from a theoretical angle by reading books, attending lectures, etc. The 'mystical' convert follows in the footsteps of the biblical Saul of Tarsus, giving in to some sort of sudden calling, vision, or profound insight. 'Experimental' converts embrace a 'show me' attitude, pertaining to a distinct religious offering for pragmatic reasons before 'genuine conviction' develops. Possible or prom-

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23 That is to say, if crisis would indeed trigger an automatism for religious conversion, then everyone would indulge in religion at one point in anticipation of ending or transcending deprivation.

ised benefits of religious commitment are tentatively explored in practice. The ‘affectional’ motif stresses the impact of close and warm social relationships upon conversion. Affectional conversion is stimulated by the emotionally nurturing interpersonal context of the religious option approached. This and the fifth motif, revivalism, are connected by Lofland and Skonovd (1981: 379-381 in reference to Bromley and Shupe 1979: 169-196) to UM conversion trajectories in the US. The ‘revivalist’ conversion is energised by the pressures of conformity exerted in an emotionally enthusiastic group setting. The last motif introduced in the typology is ‘coercion’. Although quite rare, coercive conversion (colloquially dubbed ‘brainwashing’) is defined by the compulsion of an individual leading him or her to adopt a certain faith.

In this paper (Section 3), the structure of conversion analysis, while briefly referring to the aforementioned theories, follows Rambo’s stage model of religious conversion, which he laid out most thoroughly in his influential *Understanding Religious Conversion* (Rambo 1993).<sup>24</sup> Informed by the works of Lofland and Stark (1965) and Tippett (1977), Rambo heuristically marshals seven stages to present a “cartography of the converting process” (Rambo and Farhadian 1999: 33): context, crisis, quest, encounter, interaction, commitment, and consequences. Although discussed in sequential order, the stages or phases following the ‘context’ in this scheme need not to appear consecutively or unidirectionally. Instead, one may observe an oscillation between stages. Also, the stage spectrum from crisis to consequences is not isolated but mutually interacts with the context. The multi-stage process that makes religious conversion is, in fact, embedded in a dynamically changing context; a “force field of people, institutions, ideologies, expectations, and global settings in which people confront the human predicament” (Rambo 1993: 42). The context is the matrix—fed by steadily changing social, cultural, religious, and personal configurations—constituting both the infrastructure and the superstructure of conversion, the “total environment in [and through] which conversion transpires” (ibid.: 20). Rambo generally divides the context into two inter-related levels: the ‘macrocontext’ or ‘the big picture’ and the ‘microcontext’ or ‘the local setting’.<sup>25</sup> The former indicates the overall social, cultural (religious), political, and economic fabric and the corresponding discursive milieu, specific for the time and area in which the conversion process takes place. The latter comprises the more immediate socio-cultural cosmos (family, ethnic group, religious community, etc.) of the individual. The microcontext fashions a

24 For a more compact introduction of his model, see Rambo 1992.

25 In Rambo and Farhadian 1999, a third context is added, that is, the ‘mesocontext’, mediating between the other two, which are accordingly semantically revisited.

person's individuation in interaction with the macrocontext. This interaction may also play out as (partial) opposition vis-à-vis the macrocontext deliberately turning the microcontext into an enclave that isolates itself from the influences of the macrocontext. The context has a dual role with a view to the second stage in Rambo's model. It may safeguard from or keep in check, but also provides the fuel for crisis. Crisis qua biographical disruption (sudden or cumulative) can take numerous forms, fluctuating in intensity, duration, and scope—interpersonal problems, illness and identificatory disorientation, or, generally, any kind of deprivation (see deprivation theory). Internal and external stimuli converge catalysing the will to implement change, setting the individual on a 'quest' (the third stage). The quest is the complement of crisis, propelled by the wish to "maximize meaning and purpose in life, to erase ignorance, and to resolve inconsistency" (Rambo 1993: 56). A person seeks ways to tackle crisis, which may—also depending on one's overall contextual and personal 'availability'—passively or actively lead to religious conversion. Drawing on Epstein (1985), Rambo identifies six basic motivations solidifying in the quest stage that reciprocally and cumulatively steer through the conversion process: to experience pleasure and avoid pain; to adopt a conceptual system; to enhance self-esteem; to establish and maintain relationships; to exercise (self-referential) power; and to yearn for transcendence (Rambo 1993: 63-65). A watershed in one's quest represents the next stage, the 'encounter'.<sup>26</sup> Paradigmatically, the potential convert encounters a (new) religious offering via an impersonal or personal intermediary, the 'advocate'. The encounter setting and the advocate's role thereby shape the sustainability and quality of the contact and, if proved mutually fruitful, result in deepened 'interaction' (the fifth stage). The advocate, especially, may exert a stimulating impact, piquing interest and guiding the transition to closer interaction and, possibly, commitment and spiritual transformation. During the interaction stage, the potential convert familiarises with the new context ushered by four factors according to Rambo (1993: 107-123): The establishment of interpersonal relations; participation in the ritual cosmos; exposure to and adoption of the distinct rhetoric employed; and embracing the emic value system and corresponding behavioural norms. A formal turning point in one's immersion into the religious field marks the next stage, 'commitment', that is, the explicit and/or public expression of faith allegiance, the ritually or formally communicated self-recognition of successful religious conversion, and/or, simply, the acceptance of one's surrender and devotion. In short, commit-

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<sup>26</sup> Indeed, it might be the 'encounter' that generates or uncovers crisis in the first place.

ment is “the consummation of the conversion process” (Rambo 1993: 168), in which the new faithful rearranges autobiographical reflection accommodating to the altered context. The last stage in Rambo’s model addresses the multi-layered ‘consequences’ accompanying and following the conversion process; the consequences of the transformation for oneself and the surrounding discursive environment.

Alongside these seven stages related to religious conversion, this paper examines the Unificationist conversion narrative. The relevant data is extracted from 67 recently authored first generation member’s testimonies. Yet, the conversion story contained therein is not a window through which one may look at what genuinely happened. Various forces are at play in narratively reconstructing the conversion memory, rendering the account a retrospective view on a trajectory devised in the present. When Gusdorf (1956: 114), with an eye to autobiographical writing, famously averred that “[l]a récapitulation des âges de l’existence, des paysages et des recontres, m’oblige à situer ce que je suis dans la perspective de ce que j’ai été”, he indeed formulated an epistemological axiom that applies to the conversion narrative: past experience is filtered through and shaped by the current perspective taken. In the words of Snow and Machalek (1983: 280) with reference to the shift in one’s horizon of meaning following conversion: “Since observations about the past are always refracted by the prism of one’s universe of discourse, a change in universe of discourse provides a different vantage point from which to view one’s life”. What this means for the present study of the Unificationist conversion narrative is that the stories told are emically executed reconstructions of the individual’s religious conversion as it is appreciated today. The depiction so created attaches to the past the discursive flavour of the present.

### 3. The Conversion Narrative

#### 3.1. Context

The aim of this paper is to delineate the narratological dimension of conversion of first generation Unificationists, who took on their new identity of convert in Austria. Rambo’s stage model was chosen as it is perfectly applicable to the religious conversion process investigated; this is all the more so because its formation was saliently informed by scholarship on conversion to the UM. In discussing the context, attention is turned to elements of the

microcontext as can be ascertained on the basis of the testimonies.<sup>27</sup> The vast majority of converts hail from a Roman Catholic background: 61 out of 67 persons (or 91%) explicitly mention their Catholic upbringing, while three state to have had a Protestant belonging prior to conversion. Another three persons do not indicate any particular formal affiliation. What is remarkable is that most converts point out their upbringing within a staunchly religious family environment. Thus, from an early age, many were actively involved in Catholic community life, serving as altar boys, or participating in the local youth group (*Jungschar*). The religious milieu is often presented to have been formative; an initial token of the sincere devotion to God later resumed as UM converts. Alfred recalls his engagement in the Church as a youth to be fulfilling, “something special and sacred”: “In those years a firm foundation of faith in a loving God in Heaven was formed within me” (#30).<sup>28</sup> Frequently, members even note their childhood intention to dedicate their adult life to the Church, be it as a nun, monk, priest, or missionary. Interestingly, two persons actually carried out this early calling and became a (Benedictine) monk and a priest, respectively, before entering the UM. A larger portion of converts not only partook intensively in Church community life but also received schooling in Catholic-led institutions. Generally, members recall to have been profoundly religiously permeated by the Christian faith from an early age, with several reporting to have had lasting spiritual experiences—even prior to encountering the UM—solidifying their personal bond to God. In terms of social background, the converts by and large stem from (lower) middle class families. Family life, with the majority enjoying the company of siblings, is often painted in warm colours, emphasising a harmonious familial past. Whereas the majority of converts indeed seems to have been embedded in a well-functioning social network, thereby experiencing first-hand the value of intimate interpersonal relationships, some explicitly stress a (growing) lack of cohesion in their immediate social environment.

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27 The Austrian macrocontext in the 1960s with reference to the UM has been touched upon by Pokorny and Steinbeiss (2012: 172-175). Even though the general legal framework has not changed noticeably between the 1960s and the early 1990s (although legal interpretation certainly has), the macrocontext at large has very much so. See, for example, Hanisch 1994.

28 “In diesen Jahren entstand in mir ein festes Fundament des Glaubens an einen liebenden Gott im Himmel”. All names have been anonymised. The digit next to the hash refers to the number of the quoted testimony in chronological order of the author’s stated conversion date/time.

### 3.2. Crisis

Raised in a catholically entrenched sociotope, many members relate early feelings of dissonance concerning dogmatic aspects of their former faith. Commencing mainly from the teenage years onwards, a more intensive engagement with the theological specifics of one's belief was developed, which led to questioning received thinking, causing confusion or dissatisfaction with formal explanations offered. Johanna remarks: "In primary school I was deeply impressed by the life of Jesus. However, during religious education in middle school, Catholic theology became more and more unintelligible to me" (#9).<sup>29</sup> Similarly, some gradually noticed the Church to have apparently fallen prey to doctrinal ossification and monotonous ritualism. Others, such as Norbert, point out the perceived hypocrisy among many of the alleged faithful, that is, the striking difference between the publicly demonstrated commitment and solemnised sense of community at Church-related gatherings on the one hand, and actually lived religiosity on the other: "But the discord between community life on Sunday at church, and everyday life action as well as my own insufficiencies remained; and the questions of how to resolve this dilemma became all the while stronger and more pressing. At first, I directed them to my mother, who referred me to the priest; but he too could not give a satisfying answer" (#33).<sup>30</sup> In several testimonies, a continuity is (implicitly) established between pre-conversion revelatory intuition and Unification thought, when, for example, early frustration and puzzlement are mentioned vis-à-vis the Christian tenet of the need for Jesus' crucifixion: "[I] increasingly took courage to step before the altar while I was alone in the church in order to ask Jesus myself, why he actually had to die; if there had been no other way for redemption; and why God had not prevented his death on the cross. I was heart-broken because of this death on the cross, always wearing a ribbon around my arm out of protest on Good Friday" (#39).<sup>31</sup> In contrast, Horst makes it clear that

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29 "Ich war in der Volksschule tief beeindruckt vom Leben Jesu gewesen. Im Laufe des Religionsunterrichtes in der Unterstufe des Gymnasiums wurde mir jedoch die katholische Theologie immer unverständlicher".

30 "Doch der Zwiespalt zwischen dem Leben am Sonntag in der Gemeinschaft der Kirche und der Praxis des Alltags und meinen eigenen Unzulänglichkeiten blieb und Fragen nach der Erlösung aus diesem Dilemma sind immer stärker und drängender geworden. Zuerst habe ich sie meiner Mutter gestellt, sie hat mich zum Pfarrer geschickt und auch er konnte mir keine befriedigenden Antworten geben".

31 "[...] fasste immer öfter den Mut, alleine in der Kirche vor den Altar zu treten, um Jesus selbst zu fragen, warum er eigentlich sterben musste, ob es keinen anderen Weg für die Erlösung gegeben hätte und warum Gott seinen Kreuzestod nicht verhindert hat. Ich

“through intuition I was led to insights, which I was to find later in the Divine Principles” (#42).<sup>32</sup> Death or dysfunctionality in the family, social isolation, and problematic and failed interpersonal relationships<sup>33</sup> (such as divorced marriages) are further major elements introduced in the pre-conversion vita as explicit or implicit incentives for the shift in one’s life of faith. Generally, the change in religious thinking and private spirituality is often narrated to be a consequence of one’s coming of age, with all its social and psychological repercussions. The effect usually becomes more powerful once the individual has become independent, entering new social networks (as a student or a working person), which is often concomitant with relocation and, thus, leaving the socially familiar. This explains the age structure of neo-converts at the time of formal conversion into the Austrian UM with the mean age of circa 21 years (based on the testimony sample), which will be discussed further below. Crisis in the Unificationist conversion narrative is a cumulative process, sometimes reaching back as far as the early childhood. One member, for example, recounts a childhood trauma when he was four or five years old, eliciting a feeling of guilt that gave a lifelong impetus for seeking spiritual growth. Whatever the exact reason, the average future UM convert sought distance from or abandoned the learned belief patterns and/or institutional involvement,<sup>34</sup> eventually developing and cherishing (or at least longing for) a strong God-centred personalised piety. This change in religious attitude rendered the persons receptive to alternate views, putting them on a quest, albeit not necessarily one pursued proactively.

### 3.3. Quest

The majority of members refer explicitly to the ‘quest stage’ in their conversion story, when they were actively looking for novel spiritual or social

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war todunglücklich mit diesem Kreuzestod und trug aus Protest immer am Karfreitag eine Trauerschleife am Arm”.

32 “Durch Intuition wurde ich an Erkenntnisse herangeführt, die ich später in den Göttlichen Prinzipien wiederfand”.

33 Harald bemoans: “My ideals and dreams of living together in harmony were always frustrated by the social realities” (#41) (“Meine Ideale und Träume von einem harmonischen Zusammenleben wurden aber immer wieder von den gesellschaftlichen Realitäten zunichte gemacht”).

34 Hubert notes: “[...] I [developed] a very personal image of God, a very personal view of ‘eternal life’, and stopped going to the service and the confession” (#19) (“[I]ch [entwickelte] ein sehr persönliches Gottesbild, eine sehr persönliche Ansicht vom ‘ewigen Leben’ und ging nicht mehr zur Messe und zur Beichte”).

resources. For most, the general search for meaning stood at the centre of this quest, that is, the resolution of urging theological issues and inconsistencies,<sup>35</sup> the (re-)establishment of a tight relationship with God, spiritual empowerment, and the appreciation of existential belonging and prospect. Several times the individual quest is understood to have inhaled the general spirit of optimism allegedly prevalent at the time, the following of a natural impulse during the ‘Last Days’. “That Jesus returns was in the air somehow” (#18),<sup>36</sup> as one member maintains. In general, the agenda of the religious seekers directly overlaps with what was later to be found as key spiritual, doctrinal, and practical offerings by the UM—such as the fervent dedication to working towards world peace,<sup>37</sup> the entanglement of religion and science, the sensation of nearness to God, the removal of cognitive and spiritual dissonance (quoted here is in particular the issue of Jesus’ crucifixion, which is itself a central topic in Unification thought), general happiness, and the rejoicing in stimulating community life and interpersonal relations. The latter, especially, seems to have been an important driving force for some in their search. For Wilfried (#16), the reality of his family life displayed the opposite of enduring happiness, which caused him “anxiety, strong objection, and the desire to escape from this predicament”.<sup>38</sup> “Also, glaring questions after the meaning of life emerged; how can I achieve enduring happiness? Does a permanent love relationship exist as the key to

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35 Jutta, for example, remembers: “I attempted to find logical answers to [issues brought up by] biblical criticism; however, I could not find anything in the modern Catholic literature that proved satisfying to me. Already as a teenager I was open-minded towards a change of religion in case I would receive better answers by another Church. The only alternative at that time was Jehova’s Witnesses [...]. Yet, their arguments did not impress me” (#49) (“Ich bemühte mich, logische Antworten auf die Bibelkritik zu finden, konnte aber in der modernen katholischen Literatur nichts Befriedigendes finden. Schon als Teenager war ich offen für einen Religionswechsel, falls ich in einer anderen Kirche bessere Antworten bekomme. Die einzige Alternative waren damals die Zeugen Jehova [*sic*] [...]. Ihre Argumente beeindruckten mich jedoch nicht”).

36 “Dass Jesus wiederkommt, das war irgendwie in der Luft”.

37 Remarkably, the wish to fight Communism—the avowed ideological/religious nemesis of Mun and the UM during the 1970s and 1980s—is only touched on in a single testimony. There are two explanations for this. Firstly, to have one’s anti-Communist sentiments (religiously) approved was no vital component sought for during the quest. Secondly, the emically sanctioned belief to have spiritually triumphed over Communism in the 1990s, and the ensuing marginalisation or disappearance of the theme, have in hindsight greatly diminished its significance.

38 “Dies bewirkte in mir eine starke Unruhe, einen starken Widerspruch und das Verlangen, aus diesem Zustand auszubrechen”.

happiness? How can I find such a partner”?<sup>39</sup> Wilfried and others see the social dimension on a par with the spiritual.

Only very few members understand themselves as not having been spiritual seekers prior to their encounter with the UM. In fact, a number of members hold that they were rather actively reaching out to other groups, worldviews, and religious practices. Based on the testimonies, however, it seems that those experimenting did so mainly within familiar territory, that is, in the Christian context. Only a minority truly extended the search to offerings beyond the Christian realm, for example, pertaining to esotericism, Buddhism, Hinduism, or even Scientology. The intimately religious socialisation received by most seems to have contoured a distinctive propensity for worldview, fortifying the need for a conceptual system with a loving personal God at the centre: “At the time I read many books: the Bible, books by Sufis, the Bhagavad Gita, Buddhist books [...] and even the Qu’ran. I read texts by Rabindranath Tagore and Rudolf Steiner. I tried various meditation techniques. But I missed something: It was the personal relationship to God” (#15).<sup>40</sup> The quest follows a course prescribed by crisis, the wish to find relieve from emotional distress (cf. Galanter et al. 1979: 168). Consonant with crisis, the quest is of a varying intensity, it is dynamic and may extend over a long period of time with breaks in-between. The six basic motivations introduced by Rambo are all found in the Unificationist conversion narrative. The accounts attach the greatest magnitude to yearning for transcendence and adopting a consistent conceptual system. The others—establishing and maintaining relationships, exercising (self-referential) power, experiencing pleasure and avoiding pain as well as enhancing self-esteem—are less prominent but do resonate although only implicitly.

### 3.4. Encounter

The UM is an exemplary case, where the encounter is almost always initiated by a proselytiser or at least a person that is sympathetic to the group. Most frequently, the Unificationist ‘advocate’ is a stranger, approaching the

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<sup>39</sup> “Auch kamen die brennenden Fragen nach dem Sinn des Lebens dazu: Wie kann ich dauerhaftes Glück erlangen? Gibt es eine dauerhafte Liebesbeziehung als Schlüssel zum Glück? Wie kann ich eine solche Partnerin finden?”

<sup>40</sup> “Ich habe in dieser Zeit sehr viele Bücher gelesen: die Bibel, Bücher von Sufis, die Bhagavad Gita, buddhistische Bücher [...] und sogar den Koran. Ich las Texte von Rabindranath Tagore und Rudolf Steiner. Ich probierte die verschiedensten Meditations-techniken. Aber irgendetwas hat mir gefehlt: Es war die persönliche Beziehung zu Gott”.

potential convert in the public space, usually on the street.<sup>41</sup> 40 members (or 59.7%), that is, 27 (44) male and 13 (23) female,<sup>42</sup> indicate to have had their encounter with the UM in this way. The proselytiser's choice of who should be approached seems to have generally been gender-sensitive, specifically concerning potential female converts. Based on the testimonies, this means that women were predominantly addressed by female members, displaying a ratio of 12:1. Of the 26 men who later converted, 15 were approached by male, and eleven by female members. This suggests that female advocates were either more successful or more active (or possibly both) in proselytising than their male peers. Street witnessing was conducted individually or by a team of two members of the same sex, and chiefly took place in more populated locations or, strategically, next to buildings or venues where a religious concern could be expected from the people entering or leaving, such as churches or lecture halls. The potential converts were usually approached with crucial questions of meaning and faith, such as: "Who is God to you?"; "Does God need us?"; "Do you believe in God?"; "What is the meaning of life?"; "Would you have let Jesus die on the cross two-thousand years ago?"; "Is a unification of religions possible?"; "What is the most powerful force in the universe?"; or "Are you happy with the state of the world today?". In the ensuing conversation a response was offered or touched upon in light of Unification thought and/or practice in order to stir interest, while opening the possibility to learn more through further interaction that was usually to take place at a UM centre. Thomas remembers: "After the first few sentences, I was transformed. I was really interested and invited him and his colleague to a smoky pub, where Hans told me about the Divine Principles. I was so interested that I later visited the centre of the Unification Movement. I always felt like I am from another planet, but when I came for dinner, people there were like me" (#58).<sup>43</sup> Similarly, Regina recounts: "One day, while on my way to the university, I was approached and a few questions about life were addressed to me. At first I was rather dismissive, because I did not want to fall an easy prey; however, something in the conversation interested me, namely, that there are laws in

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41 Only rarely the first contact was established inside publicly accessible buildings, such as churches or universities.

42 The figures in the brackets refer to the overall number of male and female members whose testimonies have been assessed in this study.

43 "Nach den ersten Sätzen war ich wie verwandelt. Ich war wirklich interessiert und lud ihn und seinen Kollegen in ein rauchiges Lokal ein, wo mir Hugo die göttlichen Prinzipien erzählte. Ich war so interessiert, dass ich wenig später das Zentrum der Vereinigungsbewegung besuchte. Ich kam mir immer als wie von einem anderen Planeten vor, aber als ich zum Abendessen kam, saßen dort laute [sic] solche, die wie ich waren".

the spiritual realm just as there are natural laws in the physical realm. The young man [...] also said that he lived in a community, where they were trying to live and breathe Christianity, to which I replied, ‘You have taken on quite a bit here!’ I was also impressed that I could talk with him like he was my brother; there was no sign of any ‘flirting’ intentions” (#31).<sup>44</sup> In all cases thereafter, the future converts were introduced to community life and doctrinal study within the centre premises, often being taken care of especially by the advocate, who commonly took on the status of ‘spiritual mother’ (*geistige Mutter*) or ‘spiritual father’ (*geistiger Vater*) once the conversion was formally recognised. Thus, the advocate became a connecting link in the spiritual line of transmission reaching back to Mun himself.<sup>45</sup>

With two exceptions, no single member seems to have experienced his or her initial encounter brought about via other means of proselytising employed by the UM, such as door-to-door witnessing, mailshots, conferences, interfaith or cultural events, or pertinent literature. The two exceptions concern public lecturing on the one hand and the circulation of pamphlets on the other, both taking place in a university building, and initiating an intensified engagement with the subject. Wilfried recalls: “During the first semester [at the university] I got into contact with the Unification Movement through pamphlets. An inner voice told me that I should get to know more about these ideas. So I did. Hence, it was more an inner guide, and not the contact to a particular person, which was leading me to the movement” (#16).<sup>46</sup> Of the remaining 25 members, whose testimonies have been studied, 21 (or 31.3%) were introduced to the UM by either family members (6)—mainly their siblings—or friends and acquaintances (15).<sup>47</sup> This shows

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44 “Eines Tages, auf dem Weg zur Universität wurde ich angesprochen und einige Fragen über das Leben wurden mir gestellt. Zuerst war ich eher abweisend, da ich mich nicht als leichte Beute geben wollte, doch etwas in der Konversation interessierte mich, nämlich dass es im geistigen Bereich genauso Gesetze gibt wie die Naturgesetze im physischen Bereich. Der junge Mann [...] sagte auch dass er in einer Gemeinschaft lebte, und dass sie versuchten das Christentum zu leben, worauf ich antwortete: ‘Da habt ihr euch aber viel vorgenommen!’ Ich war auch davon beeindruckt, dass ich mich mit ihm wie mit einem Bruder unterhalten konnte, kein Anzeichen von ‘anbandeln’ wollen”.

45 In case the spiritual parent would leave the UM, the ‘spiritual parenthood’ could be transferred to another more senior member.

46 “Während des ersten Semesters kam ich durch Flugblätter in Kontakt mit der Vereinigungsbewegung. Eine innere Stimme sagte mir, dass ich dieses Gedankengut näher kennenlernen sollte. Das tat ich dann auch. Es war also eher innere Führung, nicht sosehr der Kontakt zu einer bestimmten Person, der mich zur Bewegung bringen sollte”.

47 Three members do not discuss the encounter stage in their testimony. Moreover, one member actively sought contact with the group after listening to and engaging in a floor conversation following a lecture on the ecumenical movement at the university between a UM member and others previously attending the lecture. It is interesting to

that proselytising within one's close social circle—almost one out of three neo-converts in the sample were recruited this way—contributed significantly to the overall inflow of members to the UM. The crux to ensure contact beyond the encounter stage is to achieve discursive convergence, which can be divided into two mutually dependent dimensions: first, thematic harmonisation, or attuning the Unificationist message to the receptive taste or ideological cosmos of the potential convert; second, interpersonal harmonisation, or socially bonding generated through one's aligning communicative performance and personal appearance in line with the potential convert's social affinity. Naturally, the discursive power of the proselytiser may only unfold when discursive contiguity is secured. Discursive convergence is most readily feasible when advocate and potential convert share a similar contextual vita. In the Austrian case, not only worldview but also social milieu, age, and gender proved to be defining contextual variables for determining the outcome of the encounter, a configuration confirmed when looking at the situation of the UM in Europe and North America. Those embarking on further interaction and, eventually, converting stem from the same pool of young, middle class (neo-)urbanites, entrenched in the Christian faith as their advocates and later co-religionists.

### 3.5. Interaction

Most testimonies picture the first encounter with the UM's advocate as stimulating and, eventually, creating the necessary momentum to carry on. The interaction stage in the Unificationist conversion narrative represents an emotional caesura inasmuch as the language starts becoming more passionate and indulging when reviewing all the incentives that evoked personal transformation and thus laid the foundation for the individual's full-time devotion to the shared religious cause. Ordinarily, intensification of interac-

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note that of the 15 members that found their way to the UM through friends and acquaintances, one encountered the group in the context of WonHwaDo (Wõnhwado), a martial art formally founded in 1976 (informally in 1972) by Han Pong-gi (1943–2010) under the spiritual auspices of Mun. In Austria, Won Hwa Do [sic] is currently taught in three training centres (dojang) in Vienna, Linz, and Seyring, a town located in Vienna's suburban belt (cf. <http://www.wonhwado.at/>). Paul writes: "Some members of the club were members of the UC [i.e., Unification Church]. [...] I became friends with some of the second generation, who also trained in this martial art. Over the years, I gradually got closer to the UC" (#67) ("Einige der Mitglieder im Verein waren Mitglieder der VK. [...] Ich habe mich mit einigen der jungen zweiten Generation angefreundet, welche ebenso die Kampfkunst trainiert haben. Über die Jahre bin ich der VK dann immer näher gekommen").

tion following the encounter occurred through frequent participation in community life at a UM centre also involving guided study, arriving at an apogee of doctrinal and interpersonal engagement when attending a special (weekend) workshop. It is exactly these two narrative elements, the immersion into both the well-regulated group dynamics and the Unification *weltanschauung*, which are depicted by members as having been decisive for their conversion process. Many members report that they were immediately completely captivated by the distinctive atmosphere at the centre. Elke states: “Together we went to the flat, and opened the door after which I was like spiritually thunderstruck, hearing the familiar [inner] voice saying, ‘The people living here are those you are looking for!’” (#53).<sup>48</sup> Observing and keenly feeling the purity and sincerity of interpersonal relations within the group, in which everyone eagerly embraces a set of shared moral values, is said by many to have made them rejoice in a previously unknown sense of unity. Gerlinde details: “The community in the centre inspired me especially in terms of the family atmosphere, the unity among brothers and sisters. The members came from different states of Austria; yet, we were living together as brothers and sisters of one big family. I was experiencing heaven on earth. I admired the young people living in the shared flat as well as their selfless love” (#60).<sup>49</sup> In the same vein, Claudia relates: “That is to say, the pure relationships in the shared flat were an important aspect for me to join the movement. I did not perceive it as a new religion, but as a community, which sought to realise the values I already carried inside me for a long time” (#48).<sup>50</sup> Some members liken the community spirit they experienced at the time to the imagined authenticity of God-centred relationships within the primitive Christian community. A sensed presence of God,<sup>51</sup> being expressed through pious and harmonious community life, established

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48 “Wir gingen gemeinsam zur Wohnung, machten die Türe auf und ich wurde geistig wie von einem Blitz durchfahren und hörte die mir vertraute Stimme: ‘Hier wohnen die Menschen, die du suchst!’”.

49 “An der Gemeinschaft im Center inspirierte mich besonders die Familienatmosphäre, die Einheit unter den Brüdern und Schwestern. Die Mitglieder kamen aus verschiedenen Bundesländern Österreichs und doch lebten wir gemeinsam wie Geschwister einer großen Familie. Ich erlebte den Himmel auf Erden. Ich bewunderte die jungen Leute der Wohngemeinschaft und ihre selbstlose Liebe”.

50 “Das heißt, die reinen Beziehungen in der Wohngemeinschaft waren ein wichtiger Punkt, mich für diese Bewegung zu entscheiden. Ich empfand das nicht als neue Religion, sondern als eine Gemeinschaft, die die Werte, die ich schon lange in mir trug, zu verwirklichen suchte”.

51 As Sebastian puts it: “Thereafter, I visited the centre in [Vienna’s] Marokkanergasse and sensed: Here is God!” (#22) (“Dann habe ich das Zentrum in der Marokkanergasse besucht und spürte: Hier ist Gott!”).

in many cases the matrix for dealing sensitively and considerately with and, eventually, accepting the new theology. As almost all members declare, this new theology was revelatory in that it bestowed existential insight. Upon reading the *DP*<sup>52</sup> the later converts delineate to have largely responded in two ways.<sup>53</sup> One portion of people, although riveted by the teachings, was initially troubled, doubting about aspects of this new truth. As Leopold vividly describes: “[After the first encounter], I really wanted to know more, because here I learned more about God than I had ever heard in any sermon. [...] However, when a few days later I learned about the view of the *Divine Principles* concerning the mission of Jesus, a chasm opened up before me. I could not and did not want to understand what I have learned and was already close to sever all contact with this group of ‘heretics’” (#12).<sup>54</sup> The final revelation of Mun’s actual messianity<sup>55</sup> appeared as the main challenge for many (cf. Barker 1983: 324):<sup>56</sup> “The ‘final conclusion’ that the Messiah has come and is living in our time stirred me up and occu-

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52 From around 1973, the Austrian group started to chiefly use Paul Werner’s German translation (1972) of the *Wöllli kangnon*, based on the then unpublished English translation (1973) by Ch’oe Wön-bok (1916–2006). Before that, next to the early German translation (1965) by Ursula Schuhmann (b. 1937) and Peter Koch (1927–1984), drawing on Kim Yöng-un’s *Divine Principle and Its Application* based on the *Wöllli haesöl*, members mainly studied and circulated scattered translations by Werner from various English sources. In 2003, a revised German translation, entitled *Das Göttliche Prinzip*, based on a new English edition (*Exposition of the Divine Principle*; 1996), was published, replacing any prior edition.

53 Guided study generally proceeded chapter by chapter, commencing with the Principle of Creation and ending by disclosing the implication of the last chapter, that is, the ‘final conclusion’ (*Endaussage*) that Mun was indeed the Messiah as alluded in the book.

54 “Die nächsten Abende war ich ausgebuht: ich wollte unbedingt mehr wissen, denn hier erfuhr ich mehr über Gott als ich je in einer Predigt gehört hatte. [...] Als ich aber wenige Tage später die Sicht der *Göttlichen Prinzipien* über die Mission Jesu erfuhr, tat sich vor mir ein Abgrund auf. Ich konnte und wollte nicht verstehen, was ich da hörte und war schon nahe daran, meinen Kontakt zu dieser Gruppe von ‘Häretikern’ abzubrechen”.

55 The Unification understanding of messiahship differs substantially from Christian beliefs in that Jesus, just like Mun, and later (i.e., according to post-Mun Unification theology) also his wife Han Hak-cha (b. 1943), is merely a spiritually and physically untainted human being sent by God.

56 Accordingly, being mindful of the quality of such assertion, this part of the new doctrine was normally disclosed only after a very careful course of instruction. Such strategy is of course not unique to the UM, but can be found in comparable movements with a belief in a living deity or otherwise salvific figure at the centre of doctrinal attention. For a contemporary case in the Austrian context, see, for example, Kōfuku no Kagaku (Pokorny and Winter 2012: 57).

pied me quite a bit” (#25),<sup>57</sup> as one member writes. Divulging the truth about Mun represented the crucial end point and the conclusion to the open-ended *DP*-narrative in a carefully structured instruction process, providing the missing link to complete the *raison d'être* behind the UM's millenarian agenda. With the purchase of an old farmstead in Gföhl—a small city about ten kilometres north-west of Krems in Lower Austria—in December 1970 and following a one-year-long restoration, the Austrian group established in December 1971 its first training centre specifically for workshops and (study) retreats. The first (weeklong) formal training session was held a month later, whereas the first weekend workshop was organised in May 1972.<sup>58</sup> From then on and throughout the peak time of the Austrian UM during the 1970s, the Gföhl centre served as the main venue for hosting *DP* workshops for both members and potential converts.<sup>59</sup> It was there that most future members, beginning in mid-1972,<sup>60</sup> would receive the *Endaussage*.<sup>61</sup> The first workshop experience of first generation members often seems to have been a mixture of emotional and spiritual ecstasy, the ingredients of which were the exposure to an exceedingly affectionate interpersonal (occasionally, also disparagingly, called 'love-bombing') environment, the enlightening realisation of a radically new worldview, and a related sensation of a more intimate understanding of God.<sup>62</sup> Trying to find proper terms to

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57 “Die ‘Endaussage’, dass der Messias in unserer Zeit gekommen ist und lebt, hat mich einigermaßen aufgewühlt und sehr beschäftigt”.

58 At the time, the premises were also used to house a candle factory installed under the national leader Peter Koch in April 1972. The candle factory was one of the earliest enterprises of the UM's business venture in Austria.

59 In December 1978, meeting the demands to accommodate a now sizeable group, several members bought a former inn in Gafrenz, a small town in Upper Austria, around 80 kilometres south-east of Linz, which was to serve as an additional training centre. The 'centre' in Gafrenz still exists today; however, it is only rarely used for larger gatherings, being replaced mainly by a 'centre' in Seebenstein (presently 'Villa Riehl'), which was bought in 1984 and is located in Lower Austria, around 60 kilometres south of Vienna.

60 Occasionally, *DP* seminars (usually spanning two days) were also held in the local centre.

61 As one member accounts: “The ‘final conclusion’ at this seminar was: The Messiah is alive and he is Sun Myung Moon, the founder of the Unification Church. My surprise and joy were vast, actually unbelievably so; and I was learning all this! I felt so free and happy” (#39) (“Die ‘letzte Aussage’ auf diesem Seminar war: Der Messias lebt und es ist Sun Myung Moon, der Gründer der Vereinigungskirche. Die Überraschung und Freude waren groß, eigentlich unfassbar, und ich konnte das alles erfahren! Ich fühlte mich so frei und glücklich”).

62 A number of testimonies tell of the drastic effect the *Endaussage* had on the recipient. This narrative aspect is mainly found in testimonies of members that joined after mid-1972, often in relation to the workshop participation in Gföhl. This suggests (which has been confirmed by personal interviews, and is in line with observations made in other

describe the workshop setting, Anton finally states: “The quality of the atmosphere was permeated by golden crystals of God’s love” (#28).<sup>63</sup> For many, the workshop experience is held to have been a turning point in the interaction process with the UM. Miriam remarks: “At the beginning of 1973, we were invited to a weekend seminar, where the Divine Principles were taught in detail. [...] Yet, this seminar on the Divine Principles was like an epiphany and revelation, logical and with such clear statements and explanations, which I have never heard before” (#27).<sup>64</sup> Likewise, Elke reviews her Gföhl experience: “Soon my sister and I were invited to a weekend [workshop]. There we heard about the Divine Principles, that is, about the deep meaning of our life and in what special time we are allowed to live today, in which the Messiah is already present on Earth. It was a momentous experience. I would not have been able to go on living as before. [...] What I have learned during this weekend radically changed my perspective on life [...]” (#53).<sup>65</sup> To those who, during the interaction stage, had to face inner conflicts or were hesitant to accept the Unificationist message, relief and new determination was in many cases apparently brought by affirming spiritual events,<sup>66</sup> as two examples shall illustrate. Hubert remembers: “On the next day [...] I went to the service of this group. And during

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Western countries by scholars at the time) that, for the workshop, a distinctive structure and ambiance was created—what Barker calls “environment control” (1984: 174)—to deepen the experiential dimension of the attendees. With respect to UM workshops, Galanter (1980: 1579) underlines the social component in the induction phase, giving attention to the effective practice of mixing members and potential converts “in conjoint group experience for modeling and identification”.

63 “Die Qualität der Atmosphäre war durchsetzt von goldenen Kristallen der Liebe Gottes”.

64 “Anfang 1973 wurden wir dann zu einem Wochenendseminar eingeladen, in dem die Göttlichen Prinzipien ausführlich gelehrt wurden. Doch dieses Seminar über die Göttlichen Prinzipien war für mich wie eine Erleuchtung und Offenbarung, logisch und mit solch klaren Aussagen und Erklärungen, die ich noch niemals zuvor gehört hatte”.

65 “Bald wurden wir gemeinsam, meine Schwester und ich zu einem Wochenende eingeladen. Dort hörten wir die Göttlichen Prinzipien, also über den tiefen Sinn unseres Lebens und in welcher besonderen Zeit wir heute leben dürfen, dass der Messias bereits auf der Erde lebt. Es war ein tief einschneidendes Erlebnis. Ich hätte nicht mehr so weiterleben können wie bisher. [...] Was ich an diesem Wochenende erfahren durfte veränderte meine Sicht zum Leben total [...]”.

66 In one case, a member even points to a change of physical health, which she understood as a sign for the veracity of the new revelation: “Shortly before the ‘final conclusion’, following a period of around six years where I had constant breathing difficulties, on September 1, 1973, I was suddenly cured, which to me was a confirmation that everything is right” (#23) (“Als ich kurz vor der ‘Endaussage’ nach ca. sechs Jahren ständiger Atemnot am 1. September 1973 eine Spontanheilung erlebte, war das für mich eine Bestätigung, dass alles richtig ist”).

this service a lot happened. First, I had a feeling of a nearness to God, previously unknown to me. [...] It became clear that this experience did not come about by what those people SAID. It became clear that God works through those people. [...] ‘I want to join you!’ – Everyone was surprised, since in previous weeks they got to know me as a big sceptic” (#19).<sup>67</sup> Likewise, Franziska notes: “I was sitting on the balcony, the sky opened up and the sun was shining on me. It was Jesus who made me feel his love, this protecting warmth, and I felt his embrace and confirmation of my journey with the Divine Principles. This was somehow like my rebirth and the obstetrician was Jesus. From then on I felt safe in all my decisions, because Jesus was always there in complete unity with the ‘Master’ (this is how Father Moon was called in the early years) [...]” (#39).<sup>68</sup> Sometimes sudden affirmation was also found when (accidentally) seeing a portrait of Mun, who, as several members indicate, exuded a salvational aura and triggered immediate spiritual change: “[...] Later when I saw the picture of True Father, I had the feeling that he comprises everything, everything is contained in him. Hence, I could accept him” (#51).<sup>69</sup>

A second portion of future members, upon studying parts of or the *DP* as a whole including the *Endaussage*, report to have not been filled with initial incredulity. The themes of their accounts (as well as of many of those who eventually made up their minds) largely fall into five interrelated categories. First, members praise the logical brilliance and rigorous clarity of this new truth. The *DP* would be inherently consistent, permeated by a

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67 “Es folgte am nächsten Tag [...] ein Besuch beim Gottesdienst dieser Gruppe. Und während dieses Gottesdienstes geschah einiges. Erstens hatte ich plötzlich das Empfinden einer Gottesnähe, wie ich es noch nie in meinem Leben hatte. [...] Mir war klar, dass dieses Erlebnis nicht durch das kommen konnte, was diese Leute GESAGT hatten. Mir war klar, dass Gott durch diese Menschen wirkt. [...] ‘Ich möchte bei Euch mitmachen!’ – Alle waren überrascht, weil sie mich in den Wochen vorher als großen Skeptiker erlebt hatten”.

68 “Ich saß auf dem Balkon, die Wolkendecke riss auf und die Sonne strahlte auf mich. Es war Jesus, der mich seine Liebe spüren ließ, diese beschützende Wärme, und ich fühlte seine Umarmung und Bestätigung meines Weges mit den Göttlichen Prinzipien. Dies war eine Art Neugeburt für mich, und der Geburtshelfer war Jesus. Von da an fühlte ich mich in allen Entscheidungen ganz sicher, denn Jesus war immer dabei, in vollkommener Einheit mit dem ‘Meister’ (so wurde Vater Moon in den frühen Jahren genannt) [...]”.

69 “Und auch eigentlich wie ich dann das Bild vom Wahren Vater gesehen habe, das Gefühl gehabt [*sic*], er beinhaltet alles, in ihm ist alles enthalten. Dadurch habe ich ihn akzeptieren können”.

stringent line of argument.<sup>70</sup> Second, the teachings were providing the right answers so desperately sought for in the quest for meaning hitherto pursued by the prospects. For many, the *DP*'s message had sagaciously, yet easily comprehensibly, put together a spiritual and emotional puzzle, impossible to solve on one's own. Third, the nature of the text, that is, the unmatched grandeur of the teaching, had to be indeed the product of the Messiah. Fourth, absorbing the doctrine had immediately resulted in a state of exhilaration (or even ecstasy)—often followed by or coupled with feelings of composure and tranquility—and/or a millenarian zest for action. Fifth, by comprehending this truth, a new appreciation and awareness of and relationship to God had suddenly been formed. The following accounts shall give some impressions hereof. According to Horst: “This coherence, the golden thread providing multi-faceted answers, the knowledge concerning the Fall and the workings of God in restoration history; all that cannot be a construct conjectured by man—such can only be put forth by the Messiah!!!! The world was suddenly turned upside down. My life would make a fresh start” (#42).<sup>71</sup> Similarly, Anita states: “I completed the text only to start anew, reading it three times during this night until dawn. It became clear to me that this truth could be earth-shattering, and I felt deeply connected to it. Something huge has entered my life. In January, I went to the Principles-weekend. I cried nearly the entire weekend” (#47).<sup>72</sup> Alfred too, was immediately fascinated: “Never in my life did I feel God so closely. I was deeply touched by the depth, clarity, and brilliance of this new truth. So many fundamental questions, that had accumulated in the course of my life and have been further multiplied by the study of the Bible, were answered. Who could bring such truth, which went beyond the New Testament? In deep prayer God confirmed to me that the Lord of the Second Advent was

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70 In many personal conversations with members of the Austrian UM, the predominant reason given for having joined the group in the first place was the *DP*'s (or, generally, the teachings') logical conclusiveness.

71 “Diese Zusammenhänge, der rote Faden, mit den vielschichtigen Antworten, das Wissen um den Sündenfall und dem Wirken Gottes in der Wiederherstellungsgeschichte, dies kann kein zusammengereimtes menschliches Ideenkonstrukt sein – dazu ist nur der Messias selbst mächtig!!!! Die Welt stand für mich mit einem Mal Kopf. Mein Leben würde neu beginnen”.

72 “Ich las den Text zu Ende und fing gleich wieder von vorne an. Ich las es drei Mal in dieser Nacht ganz durch bis zum Morgengrauen. Es wurde mir klar, dass diese Wahrheit weltbewegend sein kann und ich fühlte mich ganz tief damit verbunden. Etwas Großes war in mein Leben eingetreten. Im Januar darauf ging ich zum Prinzipien-Wochenende. Fast das ganze Wochenende musste ich weinen”.

among us!” (#30).<sup>73</sup> Georg felt to have received a call to action: “Through the Divine Principles I finally understood that I can do something for God; that I can raise a family as a contribution to restoration history” (#46).<sup>74</sup> For Helmut the new doctrine brought a dramatic emotional and spiritual change: “Following the weekend when I heard the so-called ‘Divine Principles’, I was seized by an inner clarity, self-confidence, and calmness [...]. I was elevated to an inner level of consciousness, which was completely different from that of my environment” (#35).<sup>75</sup> Some members recognise Unification thought as a sharpening of the contours of their (Catholic) belief and the Catholic faith in general. For the majority, however, Unificationism transcends denominational boundaries, yet it remains fundamentally ingrained in the Christian ideological milieu. The Unificationist conversion narrative unequivocally stays true to the fully-fledged Christian identity of the UM and its teachings (until 1994 the UM’s religious core organisation was named HSAUWC)—a self-image softened (and at times scrapped) these days by both the church leadership (now FFWPU) and ordinary believers, displaying the change of the UM’s confessional self-positioning.

A last aspect that should be mentioned in this section concerns again the role of the advocate. Presented above as the person that initiated further interaction via the encounter, the Unificationist advocate indeed commonly continued to be closely involved throughout the prospect’s entire conversion process. However, the interaction stage is defined by often carefully structured, joint proselytising (as can also be deduced from missionary diaries at the time), where the original advocate (also by virtue of group cohesiveness) becomes one among many others, that is, all those in the potential convert’s new social environment that are already members or at least sympathetic to the movement and the new doctrine. Those few testimonies of members joining before mid-1969, for instance, highlight the crucial role the national leader and senior member Paul Werner played in the interaction phase, as is also evidenced by pertinent research (Pokorny

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73 “Noch nie in meinem Leben spürte ich Gott so nahe. Ich war zutiefst berührt von der Tiefe, Klarheit und Brillanz dieser neuen Wahrheit. So viele grundlegende Fragen, die sich im Laufe meines Lebens angehäuft hatten und durch die Beschäftigung mit der Bibel noch vermehrt wurden, wurden beantwortet. Wer konnte eine Wahrheit bringen, die über das Neue Testament hinausging? Im tiefen Gebet bestätigte mir Gott, der Herr des zweiten Kommens war unter uns!”.

74 “Durch die Göttlichen Prinzipien verstand ich schließlich, dass ich etwas für Gott tun kann und als Beitrag zur Wiederherstellungsgeschichte eine Familie errichten kann”.

75 “Nach dem Wochenende, an dem ich die sogenannten ‘Göttlichen Prinzipien gehört hatte’, wurde ich von einer inneren Klarheit, Selbstsicherheit und Ruhe erfasst [...]. Ich wurde auf eine innere Bewusstseinssebene gehoben, die völlig unterschiedlich war von meiner Umwelt”.

and Steinbeiss 2014). The (more) senior members in particular, for example Werner's successor Peter Koch or his wife Gertrud (b. 1935) in the 1970s, by dint of their advanced knowledge and spiritual cultivation, seem to have contributed rather significantly to the conversion process and beyond. For instance, they were often consulted or summoned when individuals expressed doubts, uncertainty, or confusion. Ultimately, what cannot be inferred from the testimonies—yet what is evident through interviews, the missionary diaries, as well as contemporary research (most prominently Barker 1984)—is that only a small portion of prospects actually reached the subsequent stage of commitment.

### 3.6. Commitment

Commitment is the culmination of interaction. The interaction narrative provides the rationale behind commitment or, in emic terms, 'accepting' (*akzeptieren*). 'Accepting' meant the embracing of the 'Divine Principles', that is, the contents of the *DP* and the *Endaussage* of Mun's messiahship, recognising him and his wife as True Parents. The most important aspect of formalising one's commitment was the public declaration<sup>76</sup> to have accepted this new truth,<sup>77</sup> usually marking the 'spiritual birthday' (*spiritueller Geburtstag*) of the new faithful, or as one member writes, 'a kind of resurrection' (#40). Generally, the dates of 'acceptance' were meticulously recorded by the centre leaders. Occasionally, the dates were accommodated (i.e., spiritual birthdays have been antedated) by the centre leader to correspond to a more foundational moment in the convert's vita. Also, in hindsight, several members date their formal conversion often at their own dis-

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<sup>76</sup> This was usually confirmed by filling in and signing a membership form. One member, for instance, explicitly takes the day of signing the form as her spiritual birthday. One's announcement had to fall in line with one's overall discursive/social behaviour. That is to say, prospects that were to a certain degree obviously mentally unstable were normally rejected (either immediately or later on). Furthermore, one's earnestness had to be perceived by other members as authentic and not premature.

<sup>77</sup> As early as April 1966, Paul Werner introduced the so-called 'Principle test' (*Prinzipientest*), modelled on the practice conducted in the South Korean movement, with the intention to formalise the membership status (cf. Pokorny and Steinbeiss 2014: 195). This was continued by Peter Koch, when he took over as Austrian national leader in May 1969 (but later dropped in this format). However, the Principle test (consisting of a written and an oral part) was never deemed an entrance exam to the group. Instead, the purpose was to harmonise or ensure a certain level of familiarity with the *DP* among those who have already accepted. Hence, the test had no relevance for the actual process of formally joining the movement and is therefore not mentioned in any of the testimonies.

cretion, such as, for example, after having read some chapters of the *DP* for the first time, or when first visiting the group's centre. The importance attributed to this procedure is also due to the UM's custom of assigning a 'spiritual parent' to the main proselytiser. From the early days generating 'spiritual offspring' (i.e., recruiting converts) has been communicated as a key expectation (or, initially, even a requirement for certain matters, such as, for example, participating in the blessing ceremony) towards individual members (and later also blessed couples) to successfully further the shared millenarian cause. In the 1960s and 1970s, an important formalising aspect of one's acceptance, depicted in almost all the accounts in most enthusiastic terms, was the relocation (at least for some time) into one of the shared flats. This allowed (or committed) the neo-members to actively contribute to community life and engage in missionary activities; a responsibility many describe as having taken on as a natural impulse following acceptance. Enduring commitment to the UM from the 1960s to the early 1980s was virtually tantamount to full time service. Day jobs or (higher) education were an exception; however, as several members tell, both were often terminated (or the latter not started at all) when there was the need to concentrate on one's religious career (for example, pursuing missionary work domestically or abroad). According to the testimonies, for the vast majority of members, the duration between encounter and commitment, that is, one's publicly accepting the *DP* and Mun, was in-between a couple of weeks and a few months. Often members single out a distinct event as the decisive reason for joining, such as sudden spiritual appreciation in connection with the workshop experience. Others, like Eva, stress the cumulative nature of positive interaction experience, which was finally leading to conversion: "The revelation of the *Divine Principle* and the interpretation of the Bible story, respectively, the final conclusion (Messiah on Earth) as well as similar literature available in the centre, plus dreams and spiritual experiences about all those things, were the key to a new world. I felt a very strong presence of invisible beings that seemed to affirm repeatedly what I have heard. Also, my questions directed to God brought approval: 'Yes, this is true indeed. You prayed for an answer and now you have received one. Why is it that you are still having doubts?' Although I obtained the crucial feedback from the invisible-spiritual realm, it was helpful that my friend [...] as well as [...], a co-worker [...], were already members. The pleasant attention given by the residents, including the cosy atmosphere in the shared flat were certainly important, yet not decisive" (#49).<sup>78</sup> The mean age at the

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78 "Die Offenbarung des Göttlichen Prinzips bzw. Interpretation der Bibelgeschichte, die Endaussage (Messias auf Erden) und ähnliche, im Center aufliegende Literatur plus Träume und geistige Erlebnisse über all diese Dinge waren für mich der Schlüssel zu

reported time or date of conversion is approximately 21 years and five months, based on 66 testimonies.<sup>79</sup> For the 1970s, it was 20 years and ten months (N=53), or 20 years and six months (N=52) if a statistical outlier is not considered. For the 1960s, the mean age of converts was 23 years and eleven months (N=9). Despite the small sample size of nine testimonies, the number corresponds to the age pattern determined by studying internal sources, such as contemporary testimonies, missionary diaries, and activity reports.<sup>80</sup> The age difference of the average UM convert in the 1960s and the 1970s is around three years. Reason for this might not only be a changing context, but also a shift in the UM's proselytising strategy, involving a stronger focus on students and a generally younger clientele. The age composition based on 67 testimonies is as follows: 20 neo-converts were younger than 20 years old (29.85%; the youngest being 16 at the time of formal conversion); 44 neo-converts were in their 20s (65.67%); two were in their 30s (2.99%; 32 and 38 years respectively), and one was in his 40s (1.49%). The majority of members seem to have been single at the time of conversion, whereas 10% state to have been married or already divorced when joining the movement.

### 3.7. Consequences

The Unificationist conversion narrative confirms Galanter's assessment that membership for many provided "a considerable amount of structure and established for them a set of normative values that were sustained by the cohesive milieu" (1983b: 987). Naturally, since only members that were still affiliated with the UM submitted their testimonies (with only one exception), the personal and spiritual consequences of conversion are unanimously described in a very positive light. As Galanter (1986: 1248) sug-

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einer neuen Welt, einem neuem Leben. Ich spürte eine ganz starke Präsenz von unsichtbaren Wesen, die das Gehörte immer wieder zu bestätigen schienen. Auch meine Anfragen an Gott brachten eine Bestätigung: 'Ja, das ist wirklich wahr. Du hast um Antwort gebetet, jetzt hast du sie bekommen. Was zweifelst du denn noch?' Obwohl das entscheidende Feedback aus dem unsichtbaren-geistigen Bereich kam, war es für mich eine Hilfe, dass meine Freundin [...] sowie [...] die Arbeitskollegin [...] bereits Mitglieder waren. Die freundliche Aufmerksamkeit seitens der Bewohner inklusive der gemütlichen Atmosphäre in der Wohngemeinschaft waren sicher eine Starthilfe, aber nicht ausschlaggebend".

<sup>79</sup> One testimony is not included here because therein two dates of conversion are given.

<sup>80</sup> For comparison, the mean conversion age of the Austrian UM (N=7) at the time of incorporating as an association in May 1966 was 24 years (excluding Paul Werner).

gests, the closer members felt to the group, “the greater their sense of well-being”. Commonly, members note that their life of faith grew profoundly over the years. In most cases, the initial commitment appears to have heralded a series of further spiritual experiences, strengthening commitment, intensifying the relationship to God or spiritual receptivity in general, and deepening the individual’s religious and existential understanding. Major narrative plots comprise the family’s as well as the closer social circle’s reaction to the conversion, the socially and spiritually inspiring community life, enthusiastic missionary engagement (or work-related contribution) at home and internationally, spiritual growth, and formation of a family,<sup>81</sup> starting with the blessing and living a family life.

The most crucial outside consequence expressed in the Unificationist conversion narrative concerns the immediate response by the convert’s non-UM social environment, especially the family. In five accounts (7.5%), members report of a very positive response by the family; in two cases, family members themselves converted. Another approximately 15% of the members describe to have experienced a neutral or generally sympathetic response of the family, while at the same time mainly encountering irritation and rejection from the wider family and/or people outside the family. More than half of the members depict a harsh or even hostile reaction following their commitment. Frequently, the strong opposition led to a breakup of familial and other social ties. In some cases, even after several

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81 All but one member have received the blessing. This particular member joined the UM when she was already married. However, to date, her husband, a non-member, refused to receive the blessing. One member remains single after her 1975 blessing was annulled after several years. Generally, Austrian members can be found participating in almost all blessing ceremonies until the 1990s. Of the 66 blessed members (of which three reported to have been re-blessed), 40 alone were blessed in 1982 at either the ‘6,000 couple blessing’ on October 14 in Seoul’s Chamsil Students’ Gymnasium (Chamsil haksang ch’eyukkwan) (25), or the ‘2,100 couple blessing’ on July 1 in New York’s Madison Square Garden (15). At the time, those participating in both a matching event (where the partner was selected, often by Mun himself; cf. Galanter 1983a: 1197-1199) and the blessing ceremony usually had to be at least 25 years of age. This policy was dropped in the early 1990s. Another requirement was the (written) endorsement by the national leader (Peter Koch). The aspects responsible for such large portion of members attending the two 1982 blessings were: First, the height of membership expansion was reached between 1973 and 1976; second, the mean age of the then neo-converts was around 20; third, the minimum age required; fourth, 1982 witnessed the first large-scale international blessing (New York) as well as the largest ever held blessing (Seoul), both of which demanded a larger recruitment of participants. The blessings held in the immediate years before (i.e., the ‘118 couple blessing’ in London in 1978, and the ‘39 couple blessing’ in Hünstetten-Beuerbach in 1981) were dimensioned for a much smaller number of participants.

decades, these interpersonal ruptures are described to be ongoing. A number of members note that their parents asked for pastoral intervention from the local priest. Likewise, it is repeatedly mentioned that the social ostracism directed to oneself often passed on to the family, aggravating the situation. Starting notably in the 1970s, stirred up by bad press as well as (overly) critical information activities by the Church, the UM was widely taken as a notorious cult (*Sekte*), going by the pejorative label of *Moon-Sekte*. The heated sect/cult discourse emerging at the time energised a very negative public image of new religious movements with the UM being in the vanguard.<sup>82</sup> As Franziska laments: “The bad reputation of our church broke our parents’ heart. All the time I heard my parents saying, ‘We will never forgive you for what you have done to us’. From their perspective I was the victim of a ‘cult’, which is why they felt ashamed” (#19).<sup>83</sup>

#### 4. Concluding Remarks

The Unificationist conversion narrative exemplifies the interplay of deprivation theory and both segments of social influence theory, namely control theory and subculture theory. Personal crisis, insufficiently checked by the social lifeworld, and being comforted emotionally or,<sup>84</sup> from an emic understanding, relieved socially and spiritually, is the syntax of religious converting in the UM. The Austrian case study further confirms Lofland and Skonovd’s (1981) assessment of the UM as to calling forth affectional and revivalist conversion motif experiences, yet it adds to it the mystical motif—prospects reporting epiphanical and other mystical episodes beyond the affectional and revivalist setting that inspired their conversion. Additionally, the experimental motif is traceable, if only as a minor part of a motif cluster for present long-time members. However, the missionary diaries

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82 A few members mention in their testimonies to have heard about the ‘dubious’ *Moon-Sekte* prior to their encounter with the group. However, this did not prevent them from keeping in contact once they found out, as Elke remembers: “‘Is the name of the man in this picture perhaps Moon?’ Quite naturally she replied ‘Yes!’, but I did not mind, even though for months I have actually dreaded this cult, because I had read quite a bad article about it” (#53) (“‘Ist der Name des Mannes hier auf dem Bild vielleicht Moon?’ Sie antwortete ganz natürlich mit ‘Ja!’ und es machte mir nichts aus, obwohl ich vor dieser Sekte eigentlich seit Monaten große Angst hatte, da ich in einer Zeitung einen ganz schlimmen Artikel über sie gelesen hatte”).

83 “Der schlechte Ruf unserer Kirche brach unseren Eltern das Herz. ‘Das werden wir dir nie verzeihen, was du uns angetan hast’, hörte ich ständig meine Eltern sagen. In ihren Augen war ich das Opfer einer ‘Sekte’ geworden, und dafür schämten sie sich”.

84 Cf. Galanter’s ‘relief effect’ (1978 and 1999: 81-92).

show that experimental motif experience came to pass more frequently in the conversion of short-time members.

Narratologically, the Unificationist conversion proceeds exactly alongside the succession of stages laid out by Rambo in his model of religious conversion: context – crisis – quest – encounter – interaction – commitment – consequences. Naturally, the semantic scope of the individual narrative stages varies in every testimony; at times, ‘consequences’ is omitted, and one or more of the first three are touched on merely *en passant*. Crisis and quest elements of the conversion narrative are sometimes given only implicitly. The context stage commonly describes the early faith *vita* bracketed by experiences of socialisation, especially within the family. The catalysts of crisis at the next stage are manifold and often intertwined, ranging from the death of a beloved family member to intellectual and spiritual disharmony with the received worldview or theological knowledge. Generally, crisis falls into two categories of emotional imbalance: social dislocation and spiritual dislocation. The quest so nourished is commonly depicted to result in (often proactively pursued) spiritual curiosity and the longing for communal like-mindedness. The encounter stage marks the concrete start of formally converting, often described as an enthusing prelude to what is to follow at the next stage. In the encounter, the UM’s advocate—be it a stranger, an acquaintance, or occasionally even a family member—introduces the potential convert to the interaction process, emotionally tying or directing him or her to a new and dynamic religious field, promising to offer previously unknown soteriological clarity. It is at the interaction stage that the doctrinal specifics are unearthed, commonly depicted in the testimonies to be met by a kind of spiritual enlightenment facilitated by a newly established religious sense of cohesiveness. The commitment narrative then formulates the end of the quest, when the individual reaches discursive congruence with Unification thought and accepts the new truth by way of formal affiliation. Interaction and ensuing commitment, peaking in acquiring membership status, are often scenically presented as the crucial turning point in the individual’s life. Yet, commitment appears as a double-edged sword at the stage of consequences. On the one hand, it represents the foundation and starting point of a distinctive (life-long) religious career, characterised by unstinting missionary effort, continuous spiritual growth, and, concomitantly, an increasing awareness of one’s social identity and responsibilities, which positively affects the future course of life. On the other hand, commitment is often noted to cause interpersonal disruption within the social environment outside the UM, especially amid the (wider) family; an emotionally distressing sacrifice having been made by present first generation members.

The key insight of this research is twofold. First, it sheds light on the conversion process of first generation Unificationists in Austria, its various trajectories, and the distinct intricacies and technicalities. Second, it particularises the core subject of current first generation member's religious autobiography, the avenues of experience of religious conversion, their background, and aftermath. It is this memory, that is, the Unificationist conversion narrative that still firmly anchors first generation members' allegiance to the UM today, a movement—now having arrived in the post-Mun era—that has come of age like its early day followers.

## Appendix



Figure 2: Joint centre activity of Austrian members in Vienna, September 1970



Figure 3: Group Picture of the Austrian UM, January 1973



Figure 4: *DP* weekend workshop no. 59 (according to internal numbering) in Gföhl, December 1973

## List of Abbreviations

<i>BekGG</i>	<i>Bundesgesetz über die Rechtspersönlichkeit von religiösen Bekenntnisgemeinschaften</i> [Federal Law concerning the Legal Entity of Religious Confessional Communities]
<i>BGBI</i>	<i>Bundesgesetzblatt</i> [ <i>Federal Law Gazette</i> ]
CARP	Collegiate Association for the Research of Principles
<i>DP</i>	<i>The Divine Principle</i>
FFWPU	Family Federation for World Peace and Unification
<i>FN</i>	<i>Familien Nachrichten der Vereinigten Familie GvW</i> [including title variations]
HSAUWC	Holy Spirit Association for the Unification of World Christianity
<i>NAF</i>	<i>The New Age Frontiers and New Age Frontiers</i>
NGO	nongovernmental organisation
UM	Unification Movement
US	United States

## Glossary

Ch'oe Wŏn-bok (Won Bok Choi)	최원복 (崔元福)
Han Hak-cha (Hak Ja Han)	한학자 (韓鶴子)
Han Pong-gi (Han Bong Gi)	한봉기 (韓奉基)
Kim Yŏng-un (Young Oon Kim)	김영운 (金永雲)
Mun Sŏn-myŏng (Sun Myung Moon)	문선명 (文鮮明)
Chaebŏl	재벌 (財閥)
Chamsil haksæng ch'eyukkwan	잠실학생체육관 (蠶室學生體育館)
Chŭnggŏ	증거 (證據)
Ch'am pumonim	참부모(父母)님
Ch'ŏnilguk	천일국 (天一國)
Dojang	도장 (道場)
Kōfuku no Kagaku	幸福の科学
P'yŏngyang	평양 (平壤)
Segye kidokkyo t'ongil sillyŏng hyŏphoe	세계기독교통일신령협회 (世界基督教統一神靈協會)
Taebuhŭng	대부흥 (大復興)
Tongyang'ŭi Yerusalle	동양(東洋)의 예루살렘
Wŏlli	원리 (原理)
Wŏlli haesŏl	원리해설 (原理解說)
Wŏlli kangnon	원리강론 (原理講論)
Wŏlli wŏnbon	원리원본 (原理原本)
Wŏnhwado	원화도 (圓和道)

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- New Age Frontiers* IV.6 (June, 1968)
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