

Article

“This Is a Progression, Not Conversion”: Narratives of First-Generation Bahá’ís

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Abstract: This paper discusses the concept of religious conversion in the Bahá’í Faith through conversion narratives of first-generation Bahá’ís. Through life story interviews, the converts narrate their process of becoming Bahá’ís as “not converting”, which aligns with a principle of the Bahá’í Faith called “progressive revelation”. Religious conversion has frequently been described in the literature as a radical, sudden, dramatic transformation—often following a personal crisis and seemingly entails a definite break with one’s former identity. Consequently, religious conversion studies have focused on the subjective experiences of the rapid changes in the lives and identities of individuals. However, such perspectives have, until now, focused mainly on Christianity and Christian models and have not adequately addressed religious conversion models in other Abrahamic religions, such as the Bahá’í Faith. The paradigm of conversion focuses our attention on the ways particular theologies shape life stories of conversion and what kind of narratives social scientists will include in the corpus of conversion. Therefore, this research asks to broaden the social scientific paradigms of religious conversion through the case study of the Bahá’í Faith.

Keywords: religious conversion; Bahá’í Faith; progressive revelation; life stories; conversion narratives; grounded theory



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1. Introduction

“I became Bahá’í; I did not convert”. (Fabrizia,¹ Spain)

Based on life story interviews with first-generation Bahá’ís living mainly in Europe, this paper analyzes their narratives of the conversion process to examine the role such stories play in forming new religious selves. Anchored in the contemporary scholarship of religious conversion, the present analysis offers a new model of what is traditionally referred to as “conversion” and posits that in the Bahá’í Faith, the process is a transition to the Bahá’í Faith that focuses on religious progression rather than a religious conversion. More specifically, the “conversion” narratives of first-generation Bahá’í that are analyzed here emphasize a process of continuity of their religious and personal identity rather than discontinuity or rupture.

The Bahá’í Faith, named after its founder Bahá’u’lláh, originated in Iran in the late 19th century and is one of the world’s youngest monotheistic religions. Its fundamental values, calling for removing boundaries between religions, gender, cultures, and countries, have attracted many Muslims, Christians, Zoroastrians, and Jews in Iran (Amanat 2013). Today, in Europe and most countries around the world other than Iran and other countries in the Middle East, many Bahá’í believers are first-generation Bahá’í, as opposed to having been born into a Bahá’í family.

While early research on conversion often analyzed subjects’ accounts, focusing on the social and psychological factors predicting converts’ changes in religious affiliation to create a unified model, most contemporary research has focused on how conversion narratives should be analyzed as religious practices.

This paper shows that its rhetorical focus on a religion that emphasizes the progressive identity of the interlocutors contrasts with most past and contemporary research on conversion that highlights narratives of temporal rupture or a complete break with the past life course of the convert. Furthermore, by examining how and why the religious identity of continuity and progression is expressed in Bahá'í conversion narratives, this analysis demonstrates how the rhetoric of “not converting” constitutes a form of religious experience and self-definition. Finally, this paper also indicates that though it is an Abrahamic religion, the Bahá'í Faith is exceptional in its perception of religious conversion.

The paper begins by situating first-generation Bahá'í narratives within broader approaches to conversion narratives. Of particular importance is how such Bahá'í narratives reconfigure the relationship between an individual's past and present religious identification. The analysis then proceeds to the theological principle of progressive revelation, demonstrating the need for a more inclusive model of and more inclusive discourse on religious conversion. Finally, this paper examines how “becoming Bahá'í” narratives challenge the model of a sudden life-changing experience or social crisis, new relationships, and social integration.

2. Religious Conversion

Scholars of religious conversion have often interpreted it as “a radical change in the religious identity, followed by a commitment to a new religious group” (Gooren 2010, p. 50). Gooren's definition regards conversion as a personal modification and engagement with a new community. The converts establish new boundaries and transgress pre-existing religious, political, social, and cultural boundaries (Rambo and Farhadian 2014). Köse (1994) defines conversion as “a definite break with one's former identity . . . a radical change in one's identity, beliefs, personality, ideas, behavior, and values” (Köse 1994, p. 195; in Köse 1999).

Social and psychological researchers of religious conversion, such as Snow and Machalek (1984), characterize conversion as a radical change in one's identity, meaning, and life, while Rambo (1993, p. 5) defines conversion as a bioprocess of change in a dynamic force field of people, events, ideologies, institutions, expectations, and orientations.

Ines Jindra (2014) claims that many studies of religious conversion have focused on individuals' subjective experiences, such as a rapid change in one's life and identity, including revision in religious affiliation, clothes, name, language, and more (Jindra 2014).

Hood et al. (2018) have mapped the study of religious conversion from a psychological point of view. They show that most studies on conversion involve a transformation of the self, which is not merely a process of maturing, but is usually associated with a process (either sudden or gradual) that leads to a significant change in the self. This transformation in the self is radical in its implications, as seen in an alteration of concern, interest, and action. Furthermore, this new sense of self is seen as “higher” or as freedom from a previous problem or situation. Therefore, conversion is a form of self-realization or self-reorganization in which someone finds or adopts a new self (Hood et al. 2018).

2.1. The Christianization of the Study of Religious Conversion

The origins of the notion of conversion can be found in Christianity. Christian tradition describes conversion as an individual's reorientation of their spiritual identity or soul, a dramatic change in beliefs, lifestyle, and more, radically altering one's view of reality, the world, and oneself. The tradition has early roots in the Confessions of Augustine² of Hippo and Paul's vision on the Road to Damascus (Jacobs 2012).

Over the last several decades, scholars of religion have demonstrated that the central discourse of scholarly research on religious conversion, like many other allegedly neutral terms, has been based on case studies of Christianity and often unattributed Christian notions. Asad (1996) states in “Comments on Conversion”: “Conversion is a process of divine enablement through which the intransitive work of becoming a Christian and attaining true consciousness can be completed” (Asad 1996, p. 266).

Recent studies have shown that religious conversion is conceived differently in different religious traditions, such as Islam, Buddhism (Bryant and Lamb 1999), and Judaism (Kravel-Tovi 2017, 2019). Jindra (2014) used in-depth interviews to develop a comparative approach to conversion by considering possible differences between religious groups (Jindra 2014). Still, even theories that have moved beyond Christianity to include other Abrahamic religions, such as Judaism and Islam, have not focused on the Bahá'í Faith.

2.2. Conversion Narrative in Christianity—A Narrative of Rupture

Christianity calls for a rupture in the personal history of those who convert, asking converts to forsake other behaviors, other belief systems, and certainly other gods. The literature presenting Christian conversion narratives often relates to the process as a rupture, such as occurs in Christianity's Pentecostal and Charismatic variants (Hurlbut 2021).

Brigit Meyer (1998) writes in her research on Pentecostals that they "make a complete break with the past" during the converter's trajectory; they seek to distance themselves from aspects of their prior lives. She demonstrates how Pentecostalist discourse about rupture allows members to approach the ideal of modern, individual identity and address all the ties they seek to leave behind that, up until that point, mattered in their lives (Meyer 1998).

Coleman and Hackett (2015) have also remarked that within the anthropology of Christianity, "one of the key theoretical tropes so far . . . has revolved around the question of 'rupture'" (13–14). Within the Pentecostal branch, for example, rupture might refer to fundamental transformations in the societies and cultures it has encountered. Encounters with Pentecostalism and Evangelicalism have facilitated the shift of populations toward radically new forms of self-conception and practice involving engagement with "modernity" and rejection of past customs (Coleman and Hackett 2015).

Yet the notion of rupture is not limited to Pentecostals or Evangelism. Virtually all denominations of Christianity emphasize the importance of radical change. As Robbins (2012) states, Christianity emphasizes the importance of radical change in several respects. First, almost all forms of Christianity tell its story as a break from Judaism, from which it originated. Second, Jesus' incarnation significantly changed the timeline of history, making Christianity a new and different force in the world. Finally, in many, not all, Christian eschatology of its forms also focuses on a drastic change in the future. Additionally, Christianity calls for a transformation in the personal history of its adherents, requiring them to convert to the faith. Therefore, according to Robbins, 'various forms of Christianity may stress these ruptures in their doctrine and ritual' (Robbins 2012, p. 12).

2.3. Continuous Conversion

In his work on Eastern Orthodox conversion narratives, Daniel Winchester found a contrast to the aforementioned Christian conversion practice; he termed the process of joining the new religion that he observed as "Conversion to Continuity" (Winchester 2015, p. 439). Through examining how and why temporal continuity is incorporated into Eastern Orthodox conversion narratives, his analysis demonstrates that narratives of self-continuity work to constitute forms of religious experience and self-interpretation that differ in important ways from the narratives of temporal rupture that have been so well analyzed in studies of Evangelical, fundamentalist, and Pentecostal Christian subcultures. He pays particular attention to how continuities between non-Orthodox pasts and the Orthodox present and future are established within their stories of religious becoming (Winchester 2015).

Other research, albeit a small fraction of the bulk of conversion discourse, has also found conversion experiences that stray from the common "complete break" stories. Conversion as a process and conceptions of the position of converts in society can be seen in the literature to turn on two poles of alternate emphasis, those of change and continuity. Tomas Sealy (2021) states that converts to Islam balance notions of change and continuity. British Muslim converts engage in a long negotiation process between their sense of self and the community they have left as opposed to the Muslim community they have joined.

Sealy argues that we need to focus on the dynamic process between change and continuity and the negotiations converts make when they navigate their identities and social relations (Sealy 2021).

Moving away from earlier models that emphasize conversion as a sudden epiphany, conceptualizations of conversion as a continuous process offer helpful frameworks for approaching conversion studies outside Christian contexts.

3. Conversion Rituals—A New Commitment

A significant part of the conversion process is transitioning from one religion to another (Rambo 1993). Many religions express this through a public rite of passage to mark that moment, and most traditions employ rejection, transition, and incorporation rituals at the commitment stage. In the ritual, the convert demonstrates a formal or informal and explicit or implicit decision to become a religious community member. The convert thereby leaves the previous religion and indicates their new identity by various means, such as dress (Islam, Judaism), a name change (Islam, Judaism), baptism (Christianity), mutilation of the body (Judaism), and more or less explicit acts of renunciation of the past.

In Hine's (1970) words, commitment rituals are "bridge-burning events" and can be very effective. Hine mentioned three significant functions of the rituals: First, the convert enacts the ritual ceremony and thus embodies the transformation process. Second, the convert's public proclamation of rejecting an old way of life and embracing the new consolidates the conversion process. Third, the bridge-burning conversion rituals provide the individual with powerful subjective experiences that confirm the group's ideology and transform the convert's self-image. New group members are ritually reaffirmed in their convictions and transported into new roles and statuses. The crowd observing and sometimes taking a critical part in the ritual is reminded of their own commitment to a new way of life. Finally, outsiders may be offended or bewildered by the "absurdity" or irrationality of the rituals. Such reactions help define a sense of boundaries between the religious group and the outside world (Hine 1970).

Robbins calls these performances "rituals of rupture" (Robbins 2003, p. 223). According to Robbins (2003), Pentecostals routinely enact a rupture from their prior faith and identity in ritual practices that make disjuncture a constant theme.

Contrary to the theme of rupture in the previously mentioned cases, the Bahá'í Faith practices virtually no rituals, conversion or otherwise. In order to examine what serves as a commitment ritual when "becoming" Bahá'í, I present personal narratives of people who have joined the Bahá'í Faith.

4. Methods, Research Process, and Analysis

The narratives presented in this paper are drawn from a selection of 60 interviews held online via Zoom and Skype and held face-to-face in Ireland and at the Bahá'í World Center in Haifa, Israel between 2020–2022. The interviews are part of large-scale research about the Bahá'í Faith and include extended ethnographic fieldwork in the Bahá'í community in Ireland. For this research, I interviewed first-generation Bahá'í rather than people that were born to Bahá'í parents, as I wanted to explore the experience of a new religious identity. These first-generation Bahá'í came from a variety of religious backgrounds. Most were raised Christian; others grew up in Jewish, Muslim, or mixed-religion households.

In this research, the methodology of life story interviews was employed. "A life story is a fairly complete narrating of one's entire experience of life as a whole, highlighting the most important aspects" (Atkinson 1998). Life story interviews are conducted as open interviews to hear about historical and personal experiences and obtain as comprehensive a picture as possible of different aspects of the interviewees' lives. The life story interview provides a practical and holistic methodological approach for collecting personal narratives that reveal how a specific human life is constructed and reconstructed to represent life as a story (Atkinson 2012).

Each interview comprised several stages. In the first stage, I introduced myself and my research. I then instructed the interlocutor, “please tell me about yourself”, and I listened to their life stories without intervening. Next, I asked each interlocutor to clarify issues and provide details on the events mentioned. Each interview lasted between an hour and a half and four hours. In cases where the time frame set for the interview did not cover their story, I asked to speak with the interlocutor more than once, accumulating over 200 interview hours in total.

Jerome Bruner (1987, 1991) illustrated that personal meaning (and reality) is constructed during the making and telling of one’s narrative and that stories are a way of organizing, interpreting, and creating meaning from our experiences while maintaining a sense of continuity through it all (Bruner 1987, 1991). Through the interviews, I sought to understand the identity and self-definition of the people who became Bahá’í and to grasp shared or different narratives in their life stories. Since no single conversion model could fit all conversions, I sought to understand the various narratives about how they became Bahá’í.

4.1. The Research Process

Due to COVID-19 restrictions in 2020, I started my fieldwork online. I began by contacting Bahá’í acquaintances and received a list of people that showed interest in sharing their stories. As a non-Bahá’í, this stage was critical to creating the first connections. Next, I emailed potential interviewees to introduce myself and the research objectives. Many referred me to their friends and family. This “snowball” recruiting method was most common among interlocutors from Italy and then in the fieldwork in Ireland. I did not aim for a purposeful sampling, yet a similar number of men and women were interviewed, 32 women and 28 men.

Furthermore, after learning about my research, the Bahá’í World Center invited me to interview five volunteers from various nationalities and ethnicities. Throughout the research, I interviewed 60 people from 16 nationalities: Germany, the USA, Canada, Chile, India, Spain, Italy, Guyana, Belgium, New Zealand, the UK, Switzerland, Tanzania, Belarus, Ireland, and South Africa. Yet, since most of the interlocutors were from Ireland and Italy, countries with a high percentage of the Catholic population, the majority of them came from a Catholic background. As “narratives about conversion contain elements shaped by specific religious traditions” (Smilde 2005, p. 785), it can be assumed that people with different ethnic and religious characteristics would present other issues and narratives, so, therefore, in this case, the “snowball” sampling has limitations regarding the lack of diversity of interlocutors.

4.2. Data Analysis

I used grounded theory for this research, analyzing culture based on the interactions of individuals in society and the interpretations they give to their actions and the actions of others (Corbin and Strauss 2015). In grounded theory, data are compared throughout the research process rather than after data collection, enabling new categories to emerge and making direct relationships between concepts and categories. This facilitates a shift from description to higher levels of abstraction and theoretical elaboration. In addition, grounded theory can aid analysis by avoiding the use of pre-existing disciplinary categories, minimizing unsystematic and random data collection, approaching the data in novel ways to enhance the building of categories, concepts, and theories, and eliminating the artificial separation between data collection and analysis (Charmaz 2014).

Following the interviews, I began analyzing the transcribed data. First, I summarized and divided the data into key themes to focus on follow-up questions and to extract the critical narratives. Next, the interview transcripts were coded iteratively in search of common themes. In the second phase, similarities and differences were analyzed and eventually merged into significant themes. For this paper, I did not investigate the biographical aspects that led them to join the Bahá’í Faith.

An Institutional Review Board approved the study at Ben Gurion University. The interlocutors were given a consent form, agreeing to share their life stories and to be recorded. Most interviewed people agreed that I could use their real names, yet I chose to use aliases and change place names; the coded data and the interlocutors' names were stored separately.

5. Progressive Revelation and the Unity of All Religions

“The religion of God is one religion, but it must ever be renewed”. ([‘Abdu’l-Bahá 2006](#))

The theological basis of the Bahá'í Faith is the unity of the revealed religions. According to this doctrine, each religion is based on God's revelation to man of ideas that man would not have arrived at by his natural reason alone. Bahá'u'lláh claimed that he embodied the messianic figures of the four religious traditions that predominated in nineteenth-century Iran: Judaism, Zoroastrianism, Christianity, and Islam ([Buck 1986](#)). Followers believe that the founders of their religions, such as Moses, Zoroaster, Jesus, Muhammad, the Báb, and Bahá'u'lláh, are human manifestations of God, and for the Bahá'ís, Bahá'u'lláh's revelations represent the culmination of the current prophetic cycle. Progressive revelation is considered a circular and continuous process; in other words, Bahá'u'lláh did not declare himself to be the last prophet, and the Bahá'í Faith is not the “last” religion; they are just the most updated versions for this time. Bahá'u'lláh said that the next divine revelation would come in 1000 years and must be accepted ([Bahá'í Reference Library—The Kitáb-i-Íqán, Pages 161–200 n.d.](#)).

Over time, Bahá'u'lláh and his son ‘Abdu’l-Bahá accepted the Old Testament prophets, such as Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel ([‘Abdu’l-Bahá 2006](#)). While Bahá'u'lláh spoke primarily of Zoroastrianism, Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Babism, and the Baha'i Faith itself, his son and successor, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’ (1844–1921), extended this philosophical framework to encompass the religions of Buddha and Krishna as well ([Cole 1993](#)). Moreover, Bahá'í scholars have sought to demonstrate that other beliefs, religious messengers, and prophets are connected in the Bahá'í writings. For example, in 1996, Christopher Buck related indigenous beliefs in North America to the Bahá'í religious framework. Bahá'í pioneers used native prophecies in efforts to teach Bahá'u'lláh's vision to Native Americans by creating an “eschatological bridge” between the native worldview and Bahá'í universalism, linking native wisdom and the Bahá'í vision ([Buck 1996](#)).

Some religions, however, have not had their manifestations recognized or mentioned in the Bahá'í scriptures. According to Shoghi Effendi, the Guardian of the Bahá'í Faith, Confucius and Lao-Tzu (Chinese), Mahavira (Jainism), and Guru Nanak Sahib (Sikhism) were not manifestations. Furthermore, there is no official Bahá'í position on Mani, the founder of Manichaeism ([Stockman 1995](#)).

While Muslim clerics denied the validity of Zoroastrianism, Hinduism, and Buddhism and refused to accept the Christian Bible as reliably transmitted scripture ([Cole 1993](#)), the Bahá'ís did not follow suit, even though the Bahá'í Faith emerged from Islam. The Baha'i Faith recognized prophets who followed Muhammad, creating a new, liberalized religious law that acknowledged the validity of South Asian and non-Abrahamic faiths and accepted the Christian Bible and other holy books as generally valid scriptural texts ([Momen 1988](#)).

According to the aforementioned theological principle, God sends a messenger who transmits the epistle, the word of God, to human beings in every generation. Whatever it is called and whatever the means of transmission, the message is appropriate for the period and society in which it is given. In interviews, Bahá'í often used a metaphor for a child's education to describe the notion of progressive revelation: When a baby is born, it is cared for at the primary level; he is kept alive. Then the child grows, his abilities are intensified and perfected, and so is what we expect of him. In the same way, humanity is granted continuous and progressive revelation.

As the world's major religions and their prophets are part of the Bahá'í religious story, different narratives from different cultures are channeled into one meta-narrative, one story,

and one God. Thus, people from virtually all faiths and religions, even non-Abrahamic religions, such as Native Americans, are said to be able to find their beliefs and cultural heritage in the Bahá'í Faith. Moreover, unlike in most varieties of Abrahamic religion in which converts are required to renounce their past beliefs and commitments to create a rupture, in the Bahá'í "system," there is no exclusiveness of one theological principle or rejection of others. Therefore, the Bahá'í believe that there are no boundaries between religions and that, therefore, people do not leave their previous religions when they become Bahá'í.

Not leaving or breaking from one's previous religion is different from that which happens when one joins virtually all other religions and accounts for the Bahá'í experience being perceived as a "becoming" rather than a converting. This difference, in turn, affects the Bahá'ís' life stories; as Jindra (2014) marks in her research: "some converts might tell and reinterpret their story much more to match the doctrines of their new religion, whereas others might rely more on their emotional experience" (Jindra 2014, p. 18). In this paper, I will demonstrate how this theological principle has shaped how first-generation Bahá'ís narrate their conversion experience and religious identity.

6. Narrating Their Conversion: "This Is Not Conversion; I Am Not a Convert."

While interlocutors shared their life stories and described how they became Bahá'í, they did not call themselves "converts"; instead, they used the emic term "first-generation Bahá'í." From the Bahá'í community's point of view, this expression describes them as not being born to Bahá'í parents. However, on a personal level, this is also meant to declare their new religious identity and belonging to the community. Therefore, using the term "first-generation Bahá'í" implies the element of choice or free will of their religious identity, contrary to a religion into which they were born and that they did not choose.³ Meanwhile, children of Bahá'í parents can choose whether to join the Bahá'í community when they turn 15 years old.

After establishing the rhetoric of being first-generation Bahá'ís and not converts, the interlocutors asked that I replace the terminology of "religious conversion" with "becoming Bahá'í" to describe their religious transformation. "Not converting" was a dominant narrative among all 60 interlocutors while describing their life stories and religious paths: they became Bahá'í; they did not convert. As one interlocutor recounted:

"It's not conversion . . . I would never ever say I converted to the Bahá'í faith. That title was never part of my vocabulary; it was 'I became a Bahá'í'". (Bernadette, Ireland)

Another summarized: "I would never say I converted to being a Bahá'í" (Pearl, Ireland).

For Bernadette, Pearl, and other interlocutors, the term "conversion" does not define their spiritual and religious process. Moreover, using the etic term of religious conversion created resistance and even evoked negative connotations of necessity, violence, coercion, passivity, and more: "Nobody is pushing you to do anything because if there is not a clergy class, there is no one who is telling you what to do" (Sergio, Italy).

The concept of free will and the ability to choose one's faith and belief was a dominant part of their explanation. Therefore, I wanted to pursue and deepen the subject and understand why the term religious conversion had such a negative connotation and reaction and why they were so reluctant to use that word, even though their religious leaders, such as Shoghi Effendi, did use it in the Bahá'í writings (Shoghi Effendi 1957).

As described in the study population, most interlocutors were from Christian and predominantly Catholic backgrounds. In addition, the vast majority, men and women, had received strict religious education and were "indoctrinated," in their words, into those beliefs by the religious institutions and their representatives. Therefore, the interlocutors had also absorbed the Christian doctrine of religious conversion, how it is performed, and its outcomes: "I suppose conversion has the connotation of pressure. And I don't think for either one of us that was the situation for my sister and I" (Harriette, Ireland).

Harriette and her sister both became Bahá'í, the first in their family. Growing up in Catholic Ireland, they knew how Christianity spread worldwide, so she related conversion to Christianity's history and its violent efforts to convert people to the faith:

I think that the connotation for Catholics in particular, and for Christians, we think of the missionaries who went to Africa and who would, you know, build churches and give people money. But the conversion was, it was almost like a transaction. I think, in particular, for Irish Baha'is who would have come from that background, there is the idea that conversion comes with the idea of there being a transaction involved, so no transaction would be permissible for a Bahá'í. (Harriette, Ireland)

Bahá'ís are expected to teach people about the faith, but not proselytize or pressure people to change their religions; in other words, they do not offer money or other benefits. Therefore, the interlocutors position themselves and the Bahá'í faith as not converting. Meanwhile, Han (2019) demonstrated how Asian Buddhists in America express ambivalence over using the label "convert" because of its Christian connotations and its associations with whiteness (Han 2019); thus, the rejection of the term is similar, but the motivation for rejection is unrelated.

Most research on conversion narratives engages with stories of people entering a new religious community who are also leaving a religious tradition. The community often encourages a person who joins a new religious group to create a narrative about their new identity that will present their story to the community and the world.

While narrating their life stories, some interlocutors described personal tragedy, grief, and even abuse. Yet even when they were asked directly about it, none of them linked such past experiences to their decisions to become Bahá'í. For example:

I became Bahá'í before they (his parents) were even officially divorced. But, of course, it was very difficult nonetheless. And I think that that's important to add least. I think it (becoming Bahá'í) helps me, in general, to cope with difficult situations or with things that we might find hard to accept more. (Johann, Germany)

When Johann was investigating the faith at age 20, his parents divorced. He reports that the divorce had a significant emotional effect on him, yet, he does not believe that this event was a catalyst for his decision to join the Bahá'í Faith. Had such events been a root cause for changing religions, "converts" might have been more compelled to emphasize a break with their pasts.

If first-generation Bahá'ís have not converted, and this is not a conversion, as they adamantly claimed, then what is it? In their narratives, the Bahá'ís asked to redefine their process to align with progressive revelation principles.

7. From Conversion to Progression—Using New Rhetoric

"It's a progression, not a conversion. So, there wasn't really any converting to do". (Sophia, Canada)

In most religious conversions, while obtaining new religious identities, religious converts leave their previous religious, personal, and even ethnic identities behind. This often happens in the process of commitment rituals, where the new believers claim their new identities by building a wall or, as Hine defines it, by "burning bridges" (Hine 1970). However, following the narrative of not converting, the first-generation Bahá'ís are not crossing a bridge and then burning it. Instead, they continue connecting with their prior faith, and, most importantly, they build new bridges to other religions. Becoming Bahá'í entails intensive learning and accepting the messengers and religious philosophies that came before Bahá'u'lláh. As one interlocutor said: "'Conversion' has the inference that you are somehow giving up what you previously believed; it's really not; you are adding to your understanding of what previously came" (Nichole, Ireland).

The narrative of “progression and not conversion” corresponds with the theological ideas and conceptions of the Bahá’í Faith, namely that of “progressive revelation,” in which followers believe that the Bahá’í Faith represents the accepted “eternal truths” of all revealed religions. In the interviewees’ perceptions, the transition to the Bahá’í Faith is part of their personal and spiritual development. There is no objection to or erasure of the religion they grew up in, as it forms part of their contemporary identity. While becoming Bahá’í, they can integrate most of their ethnic identity, such as their names, clothes, languages, scriptures, and even ceremonies, into the Bahá’í Faith. This is demonstrated by one of the interlocutors describing his identity: “My ethnic identity is Jewish. I’m Christian; I’m Muslim, I’m Bahá’í. I’m everything” (David, USA).

And another one shared:

I didn’t feel as if I was leaving that [Christianity] behind. It was more of an evolution or moving on into another stage of settlement with congruence. So that this whole kind of line of religion, is this whole kind of pantheon of religious figures lined up, and this is the next most obvious step to take, it seemed to me anyway, so I didn’t feel as if I was rejecting anything that I was brought up with. (Justine, Ireland)

As mentioned, Bahá’ís often use the metaphor that every religion is a chapter in God’s book, while the Bahá’í Faith’s latest and relevant chapter is today. This also allows them to position themselves in the context of other religions and not just the Abrahamic ones. They believe that their personal and religious identity is evolving alongside the progression of God’s plan.

“What we Baha’is believe is the next chapter in the book. It’s the same book. It’s the same Creator. It’s the same line of work, you know, revelation”. (Dubán, Ireland)

“Religion is progressive. The Word of God is progressive. That’s why God’s prophet’s messengers [are sent] to update us”. (Sophia, Canada)

To paraphrase the progression narrative that the interlocutors described, their religious identity has progressed; therefore, it can be claimed that if you are not progressing in your spirituality, you are receding. They believe that this is true for people and religions at the same time.

“I wasn’t leaving anybody behind, and I was going to something that was part of. I believe in the plan of God as this is progressive revelation, and this is how we progress. And if you look at nature, it teaches us about progression as well. Everything is progression. So, if it doesn’t evolve, it recedes back”. (Bernadette, Ireland)

8. Exclusiveness versus Inclusiveness

Monotheistic religions tend to insist on the exclusivity of their revelation as doctrine. Most Judeo-Christian religions will accept the prophets that came before but not the following ones. Jews do not accept Jesus as the fulfillment of Messianic prophecy, Christians do not accept Mormons as fulfillers of Jesus’ mission, and Muslims do not accept Bahá’u’lláh.

Juan Cole (1993) claimed that fundamentalist movements tend to adopt an exclusivist point of view. The Christian church, for example, instituted the doctrine of exclusivity of salvation through Jesus Christ. For Muslims, it is the finality of God’s revelation with Muhammad (Khodadad 2008). This was so widely held that it led to the persecution, imprisonment, and exile of Bahá’u’lláh, the founder of the Bahá’í Faith, considered a prophet by his followers.

The Bahá’í Faith, on the other hand, offers a relatively revolutionary idea: the unity of all religions. While most religions demand believers to commit exclusively to them, the Bahá’í Faith provides a new point of view with Bahá’í texts asserting the underlying unity of the world and the unity of the prophets or founders of those religions (Cole 1993). Following the doctrine of progressive revelation and unity of all religions, the Bahá’í

Faith seeks to offer a more inclusive approach to believers. Instead of espousing a specific religious ideology and abandoning the old ones, they enfold all religions.

“What I found with the Bahá’í Faith is that you’re actually embracing all faiths . . . what you’ve learned in school, you’re not going to throw it away. You’re adding more to it”. (Lorette, Ireland)

“The Bahá’í faith embraces the other religions. So, you’re not separated, you’re all together”. (Wilma, USA)

Another aspect is embracing rituals and other religious practices from their prior faith. As Bahá’í do not practice any religious traditions in everyday life, some choose to preserve their past customs. This is possible since those rituals do not contrast their new religious identity. In this way, Bahá’ís are not asked to exclude their prior religious practices, and they can include them in their new religious identity. For example, many interlocutors from Christian backgrounds mentioned Christmas as an example of a religious celebration that they practice primarily with their non-Bahá’í family:

Christmas is the day they would do so [celebrate religious holidays] because we believe that all the manifestations of God come from the same God. We don’t make the tree with all these colored balls, but generally, we don’t have difficulties attending any Catholic or Christmas meetings today. Mainly, it is a big lunch on the 25th of December. All the friends come together. (Sergio, Italy)

A lot of us, you know, have families who are not Bahá’ís. And so we do observe Christmas. We observe Easter. I mean, that’s an individual call for myself. I like to remember that Christmas is about the birth of Christ, not about, you know, cake. And I mean, it’s about, you know, gathering together and family and all of that. (Carly, New Zealand)

9. Declaring and Committing

To become Bahá’í, new community members declare that they believe that Bahá’u’lláh is the latest manifestation of God, and they agree to follow his teaching. With this, they are committed to the Bahá’í community and its spiritual institutions, such as the Universal House of Justice, the supreme religious authority of the faith.

In most Western Bahá’í communities, when a person wishes to join, they sign a declaration card and then become a full member of the Bahá’í community with all rights and duties (Warburg 2006). The declaration marks the individual’s decision to join the Bahá’í community, yet they can still participate in some of their previous religious community activities. Therefore, there is no expectation that new believers will erase their identities or adopt new ones. Furthermore, the Bahá’í Faith allows the new believers to maintain their personal, social, ethnic, and cultural identity symbols, such as their names and clothing.

Instead of external or physical changes, such as particular clothes, body mutilation, or immersion in water, the Bahá’í Faith speaks of a spiritual progression that elevates one’s spirituality through the individual process of enquiring about knowledge. Most of the people I interviewed who have become Bahá’í do not recall that the declaration was a significant part of their process of becoming Bahá’í: “I did not change my faith; I’ve declared myself” (Matilde, Italy).

Moreover, the declaration was not a public event but a small meeting, sometimes unplanned, and it was not facilitated. For the interlocutors, the turning point is how they feel about themselves, as put by one interlocutor: “being a better version of myself.” Because no one is “burning bridges,” there is no need to leave past religion, culture, or community behind. Similarly, there are no apparent features to mark this event, such as a purifying process. Nor are they asked to cut off all their previous social connections. From the Bahá’í point of view, becoming Bahá’í is an active process when declaring their faith:

You just assert, really, I suppose, that you accept the laws of the Bahá’í Faith and that you try to live by them, you know? Then you just register as a Bahá’í. It’s

not a big moment, really. Well, it is in your soul, I think it is at the moment. But there isn't a big change. (Harriette, Ireland)

Dubán comments on his experience making the statement, comparing it to his previous religious background:

The terminology at the time was a declaration of faith. You don't get water poured over you or anything like that. You just make a conscious decision, and you sign your name on a registration card to keep records of who the members are. Once you become a member, once you make that declaration and you are ready, the declaration card is usually sent to the Local Spiritual Assembly. Then in many cases, they will invite you in for a consultation, and they will welcome you, greet you to pray with you. In some cases, they might even give you a gift book to read. (Dubán, Ireland)

10. Discussion and Conclusions

In this research, I sought to describe and interpret the trajectories of religious conversion as told by first-generation Bahá'ís. Through life story interviews, I strived to explore the personal experiences of those who decided to become Bahá'í and to reveal their narratives with connections to concepts of identity, conversion, and community. This exploration shows how such narratives reconfigure the relationship between past and present religious identification, which is significant to the conversion discourse.

The rejection of the concept of "conversion" in Bahá'í narratives is likely rooted in the Christian backgrounds of the interlocutors. The notion of conversion to Christianity carries heavy connotations, such as valences, violent crusades, colonialism, and financial transactions. These attributes of conversion have shaped the Bahá'í narratives, in addition to Bahá'í theology of progressive revelation. The lack of a conversion ritual might also promote continuity because others do not have to witness the newly declared Bahá'í renouncing their past to join a community. This absence of conversion rituals might facilitate a stronger sense of continuity and identity within the Bahá'í Faith. Moreover, conversion could be seen to be more aligned with the Christian worldview than the Bahá'í worldview. The concept of "progressive revelation" at the center of the Bahá'í Faith declares that humanity as individuation need not stay static but progress over time.

First-generation Bahá'ís state that they are "not converting." Unlike most scholarly accounts of religious conversion, which emphasize crisis and rupture with past religious and social commitments, the Bahá'í principle of progressive revelation leads Bahá'ís to describe their affiliation as a continuous result of their previous religious orientations. This view of religious change is progressive, emphasizing the continuity of one's identity and faith. This is contrary to the concept of rupture that is dominant in Christianity.

Furthermore, continuous approaches for conversion, as [Winchester \(2015\)](#) and [Sealy \(2021\)](#) suggested, still employ a notion of change and acquiring new religious selves. By examining how and why continuity of religious identity is performed in Bahá'í Faith "conversion" narratives, this analysis demonstrates how narratives of "not converting" work to constitute forms of religious experience and self-definition that differ from the narratives of temporal rupture customarily analyzed in studies of religious conversion. Therefore, the Bahá'í narratives appear not to relate to change resulting from life crises, but from personal growth. Thus, instead of burning bridges with their prior beliefs, they seek to build new ones that connect them not only to their previous faith but also to other religions and religious messengers.

Further research about Bahá'í conversion narratives should try to answer questions such as: How do the person's birth, faith, nationality, race, and ethnicity affect their decision to become Bahá'í? How do "converts" combine their cultural motives in the Bahá'í Faith? What ideas or practices do first-generation Bahá'í leave behind? Moreover, ethnographic research based on the Bahá'í communities will contribute to our understanding of how Bahá'í believers practice the religious faith within that community. Finally, it will allow us to

demonstrate how the theology of the new religion, Bahá'í, as well as previous background, shapes conversion narratives in new ways.

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Notes

- ¹ Throughout the paper, I will use pseudonyms to keep the interlocuters anonymous.
- ² Augustine (later named St. Augustine) was a philosopher; his work consists of sixteen volumes called confessions. His writings have had a profound influence on Christian spiritual life.
- ³ Asian American converts to Buddhism consider themselves as having long family histories of being Buddhist in America and, therefore, consider themselves to be “multi-generation” and reject the concept of a “first-generation” Buddhist as the first member of the family to be Buddhist in America (Han 2019).

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