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# *Dual Aspect of Social Knowledge: A Case for Religious Alternation*

Jan Krátký

## **Introduction**

This paper would like to refer to some of the theoretical standpoints of the so called *biographical-narrative paradigm*.<sup>1</sup> As Hetty Zock<sup>2</sup> claims the biographical-narrative paradigm aspires to apprehend conversion as an active<sup>3</sup> and volitional process which draws upon social, as well as cultural factors. In contrast with other scientific methods it avoids clear specification of the initiation, development and final stage of conversion.<sup>4</sup> Conversion is not a one-way process, indeed as Zock<sup>5</sup> insists it can be terminated as well as shifted onward. From this point of view it is more appropriate to speak of *converting* rather than *conversion*.

First, in accordance to the notion of conversion as *open-ended process*, this paper will introduce such a perspective which does not identify one's involvement in a specific religious group with total acceptance of its world-view since such a situation is usually just a limit case. Second, in this paper I will focus on communication as a mean of negotiation between an individual person and a group. The main assumption is that the level of involvement comes out of the process of communication of everyday

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1 Hetty Zock, "Paradigms in Psychological Conversion Research", in: Jan Bremmer – Arie L. Molendijk – Wout Van Bekkum (eds.), *Paradigms, Poetics, and Politics of Conversion*, Leuven: Peeters 2005, 41-58.

2 H. Zock, "Paradigms in Psychological...", 42.

3 John Lofland and Rodney Stark supported the active paradigm in sociology of conversion. See John Lofland – Rodney Stark, "Becoming a World-Saver: Theory of Conversion to a Deviant Perspective", *American Sociological Review* 30/2, 1965, 862-874. For a comprehensive presentation of the religious group under scrutiny and research course see John Lofland, *Doomsday Cult: A Study of Proselytization, and Maintenance of Faith*, New York: Irvington Publishers Ltd 1981. For an overview of active paradigm see William Sims Bainbridge, "The Sociology of Conversion", in: Newton Malony – Samuel Southard (eds.), *Handbook of Religious Conversion*, Birmingham, AL: Religious Education Press 1992, 178-192.

4 David Snow – Richard Machalek, "Sociology of Conversion", *Annual Review of Sociology* 10/1, 1984: 167-190.

5 H. Zock, "Paradigms in Psychological...", 41-58.



issues and more refined reflexive concepts. Hence the main goal of the paper is to offer a theory describing certain way in which personal experiences intervene with a more general common sense and reflexive knowledge held by larger groups of people. Here the notion of outgoing process of *converting* instead of *conversion* as a terminal state can be engaged. From this point of view, converting may be for the purpose of explanation conceived as the circulation of knowledge between individual and group, that is between minority and majority. Hence *converting* is to be involved in communication and verbal argumentation and to bring personal aspirations into the thinking environment of a group.

It is necessary to stress with the reference to Berger and Luckmann<sup>6</sup> that the problem of conversion is just a particular case of otherwise broader problem of *alternation*. I speak of conversion here since my study interest was to analyse the process of commitment to the New Age religious group. However, the mechanism I wish to outline can be well enough applied also on non-religious groups.

From a strictly constructivist perspective the possibility for an individual to convert springs from a moment of secondary socialization<sup>7</sup> fostered by affective bonds<sup>8</sup> between the individual and the group of significant others. However, this certainly true assumption will not be discussed in this paper, since my main interest is to explain the process of circulation of knowledge between an individual and a group. Hence, my argumentation will mainly refer to the field of cognitive psychology and social psychology.

This analytical shift may be illustrated by the view on the nature of plausibility structure. A strictly social analyst would possibly argue that plausibility of a world-view is maintained via affective bonds to significant others. Such claim by no means explains the inner constitution of this attachment, since it neglects the specific quality of knowledge that keeps up the surface level of social attachment. This system of knowledge plays a crucial role for an ongoing commitment of an individual. It may be represented as a set of propositions, that is, a hierarchic and internally structured system of statements about external reality.

This approach which applies cognitive science perspective on the problem of (religious) alternation is not genuinely novel since it was already

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6 See Peter Ludwig Berger – Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge*, London: Penguin Books 1991 [1966], 176-181.

7 P. Berger – T. Luckmann, *The Social Construction...*, 177.

8 See J. Lofland – R. Stark, "Becoming a World-Saver...", 862-874.

presented by Brown and Caetano.<sup>9</sup> The new moment is in connection of this approach to the methods of social psychology. This may help to deliver the explanation of the process of circulation and sedimentation of knowledge<sup>10</sup> since knowledge is conceived as crucial for the success of alternation.

An active participation in a religious movement usually calls for acceptance of a specific set of shared ideas which consist of (a) more or less stable world-view and (b) on-spot interpretations of reality. To put it differently, there is presumably a principal division in the quality of knowledge circulating within a specific social group. There is (a) highly standardized and systematized knowledge often enshrined in canonic scriptures, rules and limits, theological disputations etc. and there is also (b) system of common-sense knowledge displayed in gossips, proverbs, myths, stories, life-memories etc.

### Dual aspect of social knowledge

Serge Moscovici divides public area into two related spaces; that is into *consensual* and *reified* universe.<sup>11</sup> These domains are revealed as two

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9 Brown and Caetano conceive personal world-view as some sort of propositional network which can be revealed hence studied via means of psychological inquiry. The important assumption is that this propositional network is organized, yet hierarchic structure of knowledge. The state after the alternation does not necessarily means the total re-composition of the propositional network. It is rather a change in a hierarchy of certain units of network or assignment of new superior levels to already existing structure. Via instalment of the units which are rooted extra-worldly (i.e. concept of God, extraordinary experience of some sort etc.) the whole structure can gain stability and plausibility. This approach resonates also with the Seymour Epstein's *Cognitive Experiential Self-Theory* which will be discussed later. See Warren Brown – Carla Caetano, "Conversion, Cognition and Neuropsychology", in: Newton Malony – Samuel Southard (eds.), *Handbook of Religious Conversion*, Birmingham, AL: Religious Education Press 1992, 147-159.

10 For the purpose of this paper the aspect of quality of religious knowledge is not important, reader concerned specifically in this problem may see Pascal Boyer, "Cultural Symbolism", in: Robert Wilson – Frank Keil (eds.), *The MIT Encyclopedia of the Cognitive Sciences*, Cambridge – London: The MIT Press 1999, 216. For the problem of meaning in the religious ritual see Maurice Bloch, "Ritual and Deference", in: John Laidlaw – Harvey Whitehouse (eds.), *Ritual & Memory: Towards Comparative Anthropology of Religion*, Walnut Creek, CA: Altamira Press 2004, 65-79.

11 Serge Moscovici, "The Phenomenon of Social Representations", in: Gerard Duveen (ed.), *Social Representations: Explorations in Social Psychology*, Cambridge: Polity Press 2000, 18-78:34-36.

independent modes of behaviour. Activity within each one of these differs mainly in the quality of knowledge they produce.<sup>12</sup>

Why is this important for the problem of alternation? These two modes of thinking meet in the environment of a (religious) group. Hence individual commitment to the group demands to react on both of these modes of thinking. Furthermore, as I will present later, these modes of social knowledge echo even in individual minds since there are two modes of computing producing different types of knowledge. Thus, there is some sort of reference between social thinking and thinking as a mental process.

Serge Moscovici named the first sphere of thinking as *Consensual universe*. Consensual universe is a place “where society is seen as a group of individuals who are equal and free”<sup>13</sup>, says Moscovici. This is a space where all of us participate in some extent. Knowledge being produced here is expressed and transformed as public possession, it happens spontaneously and effortlessly. This activity takes place in cafés, on boulevards, public transport etc. Consensual universe is a sphere with vast complexity, nobody is able to uncover entirely the politics which governs this sphere,<sup>14</sup> yet it is no one’s land, everyone is allowed to enter and leave according to his or her needs.

The exchange of knowledge is ‘done out loud’,<sup>15</sup> it satisfies the need for communication and it is through communication that the body of communal knowledge is continuously evolving. The outcome of this activity manifests itself in a system of common sense, i.e. in interconnected strips of theories, gossips and proverbs.<sup>16</sup> The common sense also reveals in the forms of laminating structures operating underneath the surface level of language, as basic awareness of everyday life.

12 Notion of social representations in this paper is based mainly on S. Moscovici, “The Phenomenon of Social Representations...”, 18-78; Serge Moscovici, “The History and Actuality of Social Representations”, in: Gerard Duveen (ed.), *Social Representations: Explorations in Social Psychology*, Cambridge: Polity Press 2000, 120-156; *id.*, “The Concept of Themata”, in: Gerard Duveen (ed.), *Social Representations: Explorations in Social Psychology*, Cambridge: Polity Press 2000, 156-184; *id.*, “Ideas and Their Development: A Dialogue Between Serge Moscovici and Ivana Marková”, in: Gerard Duveen (ed.), *Social Representations: Explorations in Social Psychology*, Cambridge: Polity Press 2000, 225-286; Ivana Marková, *Dialogičnost a sociální reprezentace: dynamika myslí*, Praha: Academia 2007.

13 S. Moscovici, “The Phenomenon of Social Representations...”, 34

14 Erving Goffman, *Interactional Ritual*, New York: Random House 1967.

15 S. Moscovici, “The Phenomenon of Social Representations...”, 34.

16 Compare with Illka Pyysiäinen, “True Fiction: Philosophy and Psychology of Religious Belief”, *Philosophical Psychology* 16/1, 2003, 109-125; Illka Pyysiäinen, *Magic, Miracles and Religion: A Scientist’s Perspective*, Thousand Oaks, CA: AltaMira Press 2004.

Common sense knowledge deals with trivialities but also with highly metaphysical problems, such as life and death, truth, injustice etc. Thus, production in this field is everything but vain, it offers a highly valid knowledge; in fact it holds the reality together. Knowledge of consensual universe crystallizes into social representations, that is a network of habitual knowledge shared by certain common sense community.

In *reified universe*, on the other hand, we witness a completely different situation. Each actor in this field has his or her own prescribed position with its own means and goals. Here a society is seen as a system of different roles and classes whose members are unequal.<sup>17</sup> There is a certain trajectory given to each one of the actors, it is defined what decision corresponds to a specific moment and even which resources are present to support immediate tactics. There are certain rules describing how it is actually possible to acquire the demanded position and how to maintain it.

In consensual universe a network of *social representations* is produced in order to enable orientation in this world. They are certain skeletal guides which funnel the way we reason and act. On the other hand, reified universe produces knowledge in the form of structured abstract categories, that is, as verbalized and fully conscious concepts with conventional but valid effect. The effect itself – an active radius of each reified universe – displays itself just in the presence of individuals familiar with its politics. Its validity is restricted specifically to a certain community. *Science* is the exemplar illustration of such a reified universe.

The essential difference between acting in tune with social representation and according to science is the factor of competency. In order to behave according to social representations within a consensual universe, the actor needs no special training. Everyone lives in a common-sense system which is natural to him. In case he meets unfamiliar common-sense knowledge he takes pains to uncover the politics of the place from the behaviour, attitudes and morals of its inhabitants. Common-sense knowledge is not likely to be defined, encapsulated and detached from the world of da-  
liness.

On the other hand each reified universe has its own profound techniques of production and distribution of knowledge. These practices usually do not correspond to our inherent assumptions, and may even collide with them. Hence, a special training is needed in order to behave according to the rules of reified universe.

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17 S. Moscovici, "The Phenomenon of Social Representations...", 35.



The language of science produces logical inconsistencies and may not contribute to fast and smooth reacting, in fact it may give us blurred and contradictory resolutions.

However, speaking of duality of knowledge leads the discussion to certain difficulties. Since we speak of the world of common sense, we are no longer acting according to mechanisms of its space. As we depart from information provided by social representations, and proceed towards information granted by rules of science, we are on the grounds of science. That is also why Moscovici<sup>18</sup> speaks of science as sacred and profane. Consensual universe produces knowledge which is in some respect set apart, hence secret. But once it is objectified and analysed it falls apart to propositions subordinated to profane categories of reified universe.

Each of us stand in both of these worlds – in consensual as well as reified universe – and incline to the type of thinking that suits the actual activity best. We live in these two worlds simultaneously. Most of the time we behave according to intrinsic rules encapsulated in the world of common sense. For ordinary purposes it is fast and reliable enough. We switch to the language of science in moments when there is a more inquiring and insightful approach to the problem needed. This reflexive questioning is the normally present activity, but it is costly and effortful, and thus we employ such strategy only in a limited number of cases; that is for purposes which are somehow special for us, such as intentional intellectual effort, when re-considering life strategy, passed events, etc. We engage in this mode of thinking each time when there is enough time and effort at hand for such an activity, and also in situations when we are not scared to loose our customary landmarks.<sup>19</sup>

Behaviour according to reified universe is not reserved exclusively for scientists, priests and other experts called down to this activity in the name of their professions. It is likely that it was set into motion together with the development of modern society. As was stated<sup>20</sup> such an activity and its intrinsic allure of reflexivity are essential for each of us living in a modern world.

### **Diffusion of dual knowledge in public space**

It is important to emphasize that reified universe is not likely to be conceived as one coherent sphere of internally identical production. There

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18 *Ibid.*, 33-36.

19 S. Moscovici, "The Phenomenon of Social Representations...", 35.

20 Compare with Anthony Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity*, Oxford: Polity Press 1991.

may be many different types of reified universes. Science is just one of these; it is also present in ideology, religion, etc. This type of knowledge is present in religion in the form of abstract concepts and principles of thinking.

This leads us to a more refined definition of knowledge in reified universe. Every semiotic system which provides us with an ability to objectify and transfer knowledge from one world to another, that is "to cast (the) consensual into reified categories and subordinate former to the latter can be conceived as reified universe."<sup>21</sup> This is of a relatively high importance since this occurs in the process of social thinking, but also in the course of individual thinking. Thinking about one's past experience is the ability to label the experienced situations with names and terms shared within a religious group. Hence strange occurrences may be labelled as divine signs, otherwise unimportant people as special characters etc. Terms serve as some sort of laminating structure forming otherwise amorphous strips of experience into comprehensible, yet communicable system of knowledge.

So, religious space rests upon these both types of knowledge and thinking abilities. Theological speculative thought fosters a special type of reified knowledge since it is constructed with an internal coherency of logic and scientific argumentation. Apart of that, it also rests upon unshakeable bedrock of axioms rooted outside of the testable empirical reality.<sup>22</sup> Religions may be, and indeed are, systems situated at the same moment in consensual as well as in reified universes. They rest partly on the ground of common sense and partly in the realm of reflexive reason. Devotee to a specific religion participates to some extent on a common-sense knowledge rooted in everyday activities provided by the community. The common sense knowledge one shares is partly the one he inherited from his life outside the religious group, but it is also rooted in churchly discussions and activities the individual engages in.

There is a certain base level of common knowledge that is likely to be shared by most of us, which is the knowledge about basic conventions, customs and abilities. But there is also a common sense knowledge which rises and concentrates exclusively in the purposes of a specific group, and indeed for its purposes too. In the case of a religious group we can speak of a common sense knowledge concerning their specific viewpoint. This knowledge is widely realized by the members of this group to such an extent that it concerns everyday issues, yet it is unique in a way it deals with this common-sense temporality. The environment of a religious group can

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21 S. Moscovici, "The Phenomenon of Social Representations...", 38.

22 See I. Pyysiäinen, "True Fiction...", 109-125.



serve as an illustration of a system clustered around common-sense and reified knowledge. Day-to-day issues are treated here in a special manner; categories concerning everyday matters intersect with special religious concepts which we are not likely to encounter outside the religious group. Hence, the reality is marked by the view of the religious group, i.e. days in calendar, places, people or things may be sacred, certain acts and behaviour may be of special importance, history can have its purpose etc.

Results of this diffusion are special stories and proverbs which are produced and circulated within a religious group. In fact these stories are shared since they possess some common features familiar to the in-group audience. As László states, “our stories are not only our individual stories, mental or verbal. Common experiences are articulated in common stories or story skeletons in a culture or society.”<sup>23</sup>

We can call them life stories since they are mostly constructed from bits of experienced situations. They usually serve as explanations for important issues in life. So what do such stories look like? They are rather ordinary, yet important biographical narratives. They may be recollections of special meetings, for instance a meeting with the pope or superhuman agents like God, angels, wraiths etc.<sup>24</sup>

The special notion about these stories is that on top of describing standard situations they usually include some additional material, that is a highly abstract religious knowledge. In stories, these reflexive categories serve as intersecting points of the life fabrics. They are neatly structured and abstract enough, so they maintain their significance<sup>25</sup> vis-à-vis other reality. The theological categories belonging to reified universe refer either to real people and objects blessed with special abilities, or to superhuman entities.<sup>26</sup>

There is an ongoing diffusion of common sense parts of religion and those parts which are rationalized and reflexive. What we are witnessing here is that this low- and high- religious culture is melting together. Both of these concepts are present in life stories and they are engaged in construction of a coherent and united image, an autobiographic narrative. It

23 J. László, “Narrative Organization of Social Representation”, *Papers on Social Representation* 6, 1997, 155-172: 160.

24 See Uwe Flick, “The Episodic Interview: Small Scale Narratives as Approach to Relevant Experiences”, *Discussion Papers – Qualitative Series* 5, 1997, 1-24.

25 See the concept of the structure of social representation in Celso Pereira de Sá, “The Central Nucleus Approach to Social Representations”, *Discussion Papers – Qualitative Series* 2, 1996, 1-9.

26 For a detailed analysis of nature of religious concepts see Pascal Boyer, *Religion Explained: The Human Instinct that Fashion Gods, Spirits and Ancestors*, New York: Basic Books 2001, 58-81.

may be joyful and relaxing, having one's life story enriched with religious concepts, since these may offer a never before experienced encouragement and support.<sup>27</sup>

The quality of religious concepts<sup>28</sup> can provide the situations that were experienced with a genuine sense of truth. Yet real-life experiences add to the theological material a sense of liveliness and emotional thrill. Merging both types of knowledge together results in a vivid and stable picture of past and present.

### Maintenance and change of individual knowledge

As was proposed above, bridging mechanisms do exist between consensual and reified universe in the religious group, that is, a point of suture between these two modes of knowledge on psycho-social level, but there also exists one on the mental level. In other words the dualistic division of knowledge in reified and consensual universe resonates with the means of how is the information stored and revealed in our mind.

Categories of consensual universe may be portrayed here as some sort of raw experiences, since we learn the new knowledge in the course of everyday life, in the form of direct examples, appeals, consent, etc. On the contrary abstract categories are those we apprehend as systematic knowledge. According to Tulving<sup>29</sup> and his theory of memory systems, there exists some cooperation between individual raw experiences and mental abstract categories.

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27 Compare conception of religion as a healing experience in Ulrike Popp-Baier, "Narrating Embodied Aims: Self-transformation in Conversion Narratives – A Psychological Analysis", *Sozialforschung/Forum: Qualitative Social Research* [On-line Journal], 3/2 2001, available at: <<http://www.qualitative-research.net/fqs/fqs-eng.htm>> April 15, 2008) with P. Boyer, *Religion Explained...*, 6-17. Boyer argues that it is unlikely to decide whether religion contributes in any respect to an inner stability of the person. As he insists religious world may be a dreadful experience and religious ideas may be something as well as scary for a devotee.

28 Ilka Pyysiäinen conceives the quality of religious ideas for everyday thinking as axiomatic. As he insists religious concepts are not accessible for testing in everyday life since they do not describe the empirical entities, yet they are supported by emotional and somatic markers what endow these ideas with special sense of truth. See Ilka Pyysiäinen, *Magic, Miracles and Religion: A Scientist's Perspective*, Thousand Oaks, CA: AltaMira Press 2004, 127-134.

29 For a detailed description see Endel Tulving, "Episodic and Semantic Memory", in: Endel Tulving – William Donaldson (eds.), *Organization of Memory*, New York: Academia Press, 1972, 381- 403; id., "Introduction", in: Michael Gazzaniga (ed.), *The New Cognitive Neurosciences*, Cambridge: MIT Press 1995, 727-732; id., "Episodic vs. Semantic Memory", in: Robert Wilson – Frank Keil (eds.), *The MIT Encyclopedia of the Cognitive Sciences*, Cambridge: MIT Press 1999, 278-280.

The *episodic memory*<sup>30</sup> stores all the encountered material – all situations, feelings and emotions. In fact, everything we experienced should be possible to recover again. The bad feature regarding recollection of passed moments is that episodic memory is very fragile and inconsistent.<sup>31</sup> Every situation is indeed stored in our episodic memory, but what may be missing is a certain *clue*, a pathway leading to a desired information. It works impulsively; sometimes even a single word, a feeling or even a smell is enough to remind us about a whole situation in an extremely vivid way.

The *semantic memory*<sup>32</sup> contrasts with episodic system in many respects. It provides us with very stable and rich information, but with no reference to a certain situation.<sup>33</sup> Categories within the semantic memory are fully abstract. Categories stored in semantic memory are mutually connected and this fact may also be a possible explanation of their extraordinary durability. Each category here presents itself as an intersection of its surrounding data. It is a knot, a force field, or a spatial network of meanings. In order to forget data from the semantic memory a huge part of this network would need to collapse.

Possibly the most clear illustration of how the semantic memory functions may be presented using the example of language categories. Let us consider the word *bread*. We might for sure recollect a plenty of real situations in which this word is employed: e.g. eating bread, baking bread and dozens of others. The striking fact is that we are hardly ever able to recollect a clear and de-contextualized image of bread. It is impossible. It always is a recollection of certain situation with bread.

What we are witnessing here is nothing less than an internal relation of our semantic and episodic memory. These two types virtually cannot exist without each other. Thus, we can see that semantic memory functions as a structuring force of episodic memory. In fact, it constrains our experience, so we can only keep a memory which is possible to exist within the framework of semantic categories. And vice versa, we are not able to recount clear semantic categories since they always express at least some situated features, they are more or less situated.

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30 E. Tulving, "Episodic and Semantic...", 389.

31 Cf. Harvey Whitehouse, *Modes of Religiosity: A Cognitive Theory of Religious Transmission*, Walnut Creek, CA: Altamira Press 2004, 106-111; cf. Also Scott Atran, *In Gods We Trust: The Evolutionary Landscape of Religion*, Oxford: Oxford University Press 2002, 161-162.

32 E. Tulving, "Episodic and Semantic...", 385.

33 *Ibid.*, 391.

Let us forget the conceptual division of dual systems of memory for the time being, let there be no clear distinction between semantic and episodic memory. Then we can imagine that what we unwittingly divide into two separate functions of memory are with high probability just two endpoints of one continuum. What we learn when analysing certain data is either more or less abstract or more or less concrete information. The most concrete details are mere icons; they are mimetic relatives of some specific object in the real world. Proceeding to the other end of the continuum the categories are more abstract and detached from the real life scenario. Hence, we experience *bread* as an image of a real object or as a *prototype*,<sup>34</sup> that is a contrasted and typified representative of its species.

What we are witnessing here is a certain paradox. I have already stated that the semantic memory reveals itself always in the form of real episodes. What does this mean? Since we have employed the illustration with a single continuum it would no longer be a problem to imagine a semantic memory just as a certain set of functions, a tool-kit organizing unrefined episodes, working as an offline processing unit, building up meaningfully structured and hierarchical knowledge out of the experience one encountered according to our inherent mental limits.<sup>35</sup>

Epstein<sup>36</sup> developed a *cognitive experiential self-theory* that provides us with helpful conceptualization of such offline processing unit, as the function of semantic memory may be:

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34 Cf. I. Pyysiäinen, *Magic, Miracles and Religion...*, 205-208.

35 Cf. Gilbert Lewis, "Religious Doctrine or Experience: A Matter of Seeing, Learning, or Doing", in: James Laidlaw – Harvey Whitehouse (eds.), *Ritual & Memory: Towards Comparative Anthropology of Religion*, Walnut Creek, CA: Altamira Press 2004, 155-173.

36 See Seymour Epstein, "Cognitive Experiential Self-Theory", in: Lawrence Pervin (ed.), *Handbook of Personality*, New York: Guilford Press 1990, 165-192.

Experiential system

1. Holistic
2. Emotional: pleasure vs. pain oriented (what feels good)
3. Behaviour mediated by “vibes” from past experiences
4. Encodes reality in concrete images and metaphors
5. Rapid processing: Oriented toward immediate action
6. Slow to change: Changes with repetitive experience, direct
7. Learn directly from experience
8. Crudely differentiated and integrated: Associationalistic, emotional complexes
9. Experienced passively and preconsciously
10. Self-evidently valid: “Experiencing is believing”

Rational system

1. Analytic
2. Logical: Reason oriented (what is sensible)
3. Behaviour mediated by conscious appraisal of events
4. Encodes reality in abstract symbols: Words and numbers
5. Slower processing: Oriented toward delayed action
6. Changes rapidly: Changes with speed of thought
7. Learns from symbolic representations of experience
8. More highly differentiated and integrated
9. Experienced actively and consciously: We are in control of our thoughts
10. Requires justification via logic and evidence

**Tab. 1. Experiential vs. Rational system.**

Taken over from S. Epstein, “Cognitive Experiential...”, 168.

Rational system is working in an analytical manner. It works on the level of language and the concepts it produces are symbolic.<sup>37</sup> This system functions rather slowly; it works with the actual speed of human thought. We may assume that this kind of reasoning is applied during reconstruction of individual experience. It is a rather slow editing of what was already experienced. It is possibly the same set of processes as is responsible for the development and preservation of complex theological doctrines, that is reified systems of knowledge within most of the religious groups.

Via this comparison we can draw a line of analogy between the production of what we have called priestly doctrine and what is to be a personal biography. Rational system produces knowledge analogous to theological speculations to the extent that it produces and employs reflexively constructed categories. As one participates on a common-sense world of a certain religious group, he (or she) also adapts his personal stories in a generally acceptable way. He uses bits of his own past and reconstructs them with the help of reified categories offered by the church doctrine. On the contrary he also cast out his own categories and opinions. Moscovici refers to this process as to the diffusion of knowledge by the way of communication.<sup>38</sup> It is a process of social influence when communicator demands consent of his audience. What is important here is that the vehicle of social influence is the spoken word. Hence, Moscovici does not detach communication from a direct influence. In the person of communicator, there is an "intrinsic persuader".<sup>39</sup> It is the factor of conversation<sup>40</sup> which allows the reflexive concepts to circulate in the group and influence the audience, yet it is the language which connects the rational reflexive knowledge (see table personal experience vs. reflexive knowledge) as a thinking of special sort with a public space where a everyday communication takes part.

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37 Cf. P. Boyer, "Cultural Symbolism...", 216.

38 S. Moscovici, "The Phenomenon of Social Representations...", 256-264.

39 *Ibid.*, 260.

40 Cf. I. Marková, *Dialogičnost a sociální reprezentace...*, 260-264.

## Bringing memories back to life

The *Theory of social representations* delivers besides distinction of consensual and reified universe also such concepts<sup>41</sup> which describe the reproduction of knowledge in a common-sense world. In fact, these concepts cast light not just on the process of reproduction of common sense knowledge, but even on the pervasion of reified knowledge in a common sense world.

So far I have discussed an inner circuit of reproduction – that is the internalization of common sense knowledge and its reconstruction by reflexive categories – I will now outline the outer circuit, that is the reproduction within a consensual universe and the penetration of categories of reified world into everyday reality.

I have already briefly mentioned the functions of social representations, and I will discuss it somewhat more into detail here, since they describe in an elegant manner the process in which the external reality is transformed into mental representations and vice versa.<sup>42</sup> Firstly, with the introduction of social representations, Moscovici and others offer a scientific tool that puts itself between the two levels of individual and public processes of thinking. But what lies in this gap? Is there anything more apart from the individual and the public? Moscovici et al. suggest so, yet it does not come as a meaning accessible via interpretation, it possibly comes in the form of social representations. Social representations are not meanings,<sup>43</sup> they are rather a common reference points which canalize and filter meaning. This means they act before meaning and before language, these are lower, that is, more basic structures of knowledge. They always belong to

41 For further concepts and development within the boundaries of the theory of social representations see Jean-Claude Abric, “Central System, Peripheral System: Their Functions and Roles in the Dynamic of Social Representations”, *Papers on Social Representations* 2/2, 1993, 75-78; See also Sean Hammond, “The Descriptive Analyses of Shared Representations”, in: Glynis Breakwell – David Canter (eds.), *Empirical Approaches to Social Representations*, Oxford: Clarendon Press 1993, 205-223; Willem Doise, “Debating Social Representations”, in: Glynis Breakwell – David Canter (eds.), *Empirical Approaches to Social Representations*, Oxford: Clarendon Press 1993, 157-69; Gerard Duveen – Barbara Lloyd, “An Ethnographic Approach to Social Representations”, in: Glynis Breakwell – David Canter (eds.), *Empirical Approaches to Social Representations*, Oxford: Clarendon Press 1993, 90-108; Robert Farr, “Theory and Method in the Study of Social Representations”, in: Glynis Breakwell – David Canter (eds.), *Empirical Approaches to Social Representations*, Oxford: Oxford University Press 1993, 15-39; David Good, “The Problems of Investigating Social Representations: Linguistic Parallels”, in: Glynis Breakwell – David Canter (eds.), *Empirical Approaches to Social Representations*, Oxford: Clarendon Press 1993, 171-178.

42 D. Sperber, *Explaining Culture...*, 99-100.

43 J. László, “Narrative Organization...”, 157.

a certain group, since the body of social representations is constructed from many endpoints incarnated in a real person with his or her own attitudes and ambitions. Hence to be a part of a *thought community*<sup>44</sup> means to be subordinated to certain more general patterns of thoughts.

Moscovici<sup>45</sup> speaks of two specific cognitive functions provided by social representations, which serve as (a) *prescriptions* and also as (b) *conventions*.

Social representations (b) prescribe the reality. Representations as native and inner set of categories serve as a primary mask of thoughts even before we pass our judgement on an actual situation. This in turn enables representations to act as (b) conventions of thought.

Therefore, social representations as (b) conventions govern the way we judge reality. Just imagine stepping into a room which was said to be an office. As you enter the room, there is nothing more than two wrecked wooden boxes. According to a prevalent convention you judge these two boxes as a part of the office, hence you set the smaller one to be a chair and the larger to be a working table. You enter the room, take a seat on the box and turn towards the working table. That is the manner in which social representations conventionalize what we are likely to perceive and how we act in a context defined by our assumptions.

In contrast with a rather rigid image of social representations as constraining cognitive masks, it is necessary to underline their ever-changing quality. They change the way they circulate between the internal and external reality. And it is precisely the external world where they are accessible for us and where we can observe their influence.

Moscovici introduces twin concepts of *anchoring and objectification*<sup>46</sup> to describe the transmission between mental representations and external reality.

“To anchor strange ideas is to reduce them to ordinary categories and images, to set them into familiar context.”<sup>47</sup> The purpose of this mechanism is to compare what we actually can perceive with the things we already know. According to Rosch<sup>48</sup> the whole process in fact means to sub-

44 For further information upon the concept of thought community see Eviatar Zerubavel, *Social Mindscales: An Invitation to Cognitive Sociology*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press 1997; Eviatar Zerubavel, *Time Maps: Collective Memory and Social Shape of the Past*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press 2004.

45 S. Moscovici, “The Phenomenon of Social Representations...”, 21-26.

46 *Ibid.*, “The Phenomenon of Social Representations...”, 41-45.

47 *Ibid.*, 42.

48 Eleanor Rosch, “Principles of Categorization”, in: Eleanor Rosch – Barbara B. Loyd (eds.), *Cognition and Categorization*, Hillsdale – New York: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates 1978, 27-48.





ordinate the perceived reality under certain mental prototypes. This process works unconsciously and is processed by online experiential system (see table 1 above). “Prototypes serve as concrete exemplars of things in relevant category”.<sup>49</sup> Our memory consists of already habitual categories, which provide prescriptive functions of thinking since they set the limits of the conceivable. This internal reality is a unique type of cognitive environment: in learning new things for example, I relate the new information to the totality of representational potential that only I have.<sup>50</sup> So in brief, to anchor a new idea, a thing or situation, is to compare it to already known categories. The anchoring process of an encountered phenomenon occurs as we delineate what is extraordinary in a specific situation, and what is common.

*Objectification* operates in the opposite way. Via objectification we transfer abstract mental concepts into reality, which means we find a real representative which matches best the expectation we have.

This process slightly differs depending on the quality of the initial idea. If it is a highly abstract one, the process of objectification may occur in more steps. If it is a more concrete one – the *figurative nucleus*, which is a primordial projection of the idea, is created – and it starts to circulate in the form of proverbs and gossips. The final stage is the transformation of what is *conceived* into that what is *perceived*.<sup>51</sup> This occurs when a matched mental image represented by a class of real objects becomes widely accepted. The whole process takes longer when objectifying abstract concepts such as justice, peace etc. Still, in general it occurs in the same way; e.g. the semantic category has to match the icon. Recent studies in situated cognition<sup>52</sup> support the view that even very abstract concepts as feelings and emotions are either adopted via somatic markers or stored in episodic memory. In order to map them back to everyday world it is necessary to find an appropriate life memory first. This way we may objectify even highly abstracted ideas concerning morals and emotions.

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49 I. Pyysiäinen, *Magic, Miracles and Religion...*, 206.

50 *Ibid.*, 12

51 S. Moscovici, “The Phenomenon of Social Representations...”, 51.

52 See Lawrence Barsalou – Katja Wiemer-Hastings, “Situating Abstract Concepts”, in: Diane Pecher – Rolf Zwaan (eds.), *Grounding Cognition: The Role of Perception and Action in Memory, Language, and Thinking*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2005, 129-164. See also Arthur Glenberg – David Havas – Raymond Becker – Mike Rinck, “Grounding Language in Bodily States: The Case of Emotion”, in: Diane Pecher – Rolf Zwaan (eds.), *Grounding Cognition: The Role of Perception and Action in Memory, Language, and Thinking*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2005, 115-129; Diane Pecher – Rolf Zwaan, “Introduction to Grounding Cognition: The Role of

Now I would like to summarize what was stated about the functions of social representations and their relation to the process of biographical reconstruction:

### Social representations vs. reality

**A** Social representations as conventions  
**model of reality < reality**  
 (constrained and conventionalized by categories  
 of social representations)

**B** Representations as prescription  
**model for reality > reality**

### Tab. 2. Anchoring and objectification

Table 2 describes different yet possibly parallel processes. The first to emerge is the process of circulation of social representations through the world of consensual universe; this is provided by the process of *anchoring*. The new-comer in the group accepts the everyday knowledge of the group in the form of stories, examples, rules and limits, etc. Via the process of anchoring he accepts the new information to his system of already appropriated categories.

Next, the process of *objectification* opens the way for his own reflexive concepts to be cast out to the public. Since there are internal processes of episodic reconstruction occurring in our mind, internally reconfigured or entirely novel categories may be meaningfully objectified into real life objects and situations. This way an individual can argue his own ideas and assumptions about the world. He or she accepts the knowledge of the group but also casts out new knowledge about the world which springs out of his assumptions.

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Perception and Action in Memory, Language, and Thinking”, in: Diane Pecher – Rolf Zwaan (eds.), *Grounding Cognition: The Role of Perception and Action in Memory, Language, and Thinking*, New York: Cambridge University Press 2005, 1-8; Jesse Prinz, “Passionate Thoughts: The Emotional Embodiment of Moral Concepts”, in: Diane Pecher – Rolf Zwaan (eds.), *Grounding Cognition: The Role of Perception and Action in Memory, Language, and Thinking*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2005, 93-115.

## Internal circuit of processing (experiences vs. rational categories)

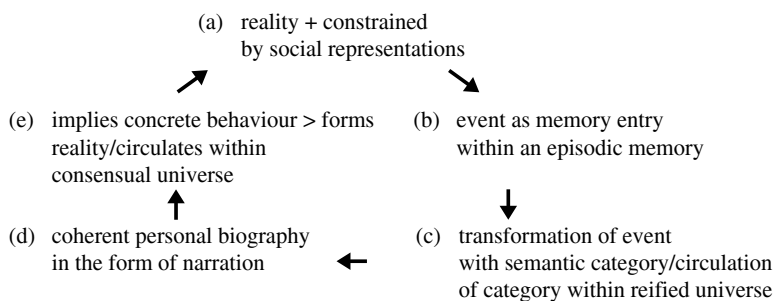
**Tab. 3. Internal circuit of processing**

Table 3 describes the internal redaction of experience. This process works by means of individual reflexive categories built up by rational system of mind and with the assistance of third party concepts offered by a group and communicate in conversation. These concepts were developed as reified categories and may be circulated just in a form of doctrinal conversations and scriptures. By the way of this mechanism may be the individual experience influenced by doctrinal knowledge which accepted as one's own may contribute to redaction of past experience and memories. The essential point here is that these reflexive categories may circulate out of consensual universe, hence they are not necessarily present in informal discussions where mainly every-day issues are discussed.

This doctrinal body in the religious group I was focused on was present in the techniques of therapy which contributed to an inner development of adherent. Nevertheless, these techniques were not merely tools, but rather complex, yet abstract system of knowledge concerning psychic and social politics of every-day life and as such they had to be trusted in order to be practically helpful. There had to be a strong bond to a doctrine in order to use the techniques properly. However, these bonds were not established just by the power of affective bonds to other participants and promoters of the technique, but rather by the way the main principles of this technique were applied to one's own life. The life memories were redacted and often revisited in the light of therapeutic questioning which were held in pairs. Via this motor the bond with technique and also other adherents were further intensified.

## SUMMARY

**Dual Aspect of Social Knowledge:  
A Case for Religious Alternation**

In this paper I discuss the mechanism of commitment to a specific world-view system. This mechanism is developed upon the theory of social representation as well as concepts of cognitive psychology. The essential argument of paper is based on assumption of mutual influence of an individual and a group established by a conversation and argumentation. The new-comer intervene in common discussions about everyday issues shared in gossips, sayings, etc. as well as doctrinal principles that are communicated in a logically coherent way. Next, the resulting commitment to a specific group and its world view is developed upon the mutual connection of one's past experiences and memories and reflexive concepts presented by the group. This mechanism is outlined on the grounds of social psychology when discussing the mutual connection of Serge Moscovici's *consensual* and *reified* universe and it was further connected to individual view when presenting two specific modes of thinking – experiential and rational system – which as I argue refer to the relation of knowledge in consensual and reified universe. The motor for a commitment is established in the moment, when a specific life issues are comprehended in the light of reflexive terms of doctrine.

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## RÉSUMÉ

### **Dvojitá povaha sociálního vědění: Implikace pro výzkum konverze**

V této práci se snažím rozvinout specifický teoretický rámec vhodný pro výzkum konverze, která je chápána jako přechod k určitému menšinovému názoru reprezentovanému náboženskou skupinou. Je umožněna na základě interakce a verbální argumentace mezi jednotlivcem a náboženskou skupinou v rámci společných aktivit a sdílených konverzačních témat. Hlavní teoretickou hypotézou práce je myšlenka, že ke konverzi dochází v okamžiku, kdy si uvědomujeme naši minulost ve světle představ náboženské skupiny. Zcela konkrétní osobní životní situace nabývají svého významu díky představám sdíleným a udržovaným náboženskou skupinou. V tomto procesu identifikace se tak setkávají reálné zážitky s abstraktní doktrínou náboženské skupiny, výsledkem je pak určitý ucelený, i když někdy dočasný biografický obraz, kde jsou jednotlivé osobní situace a názory zastřešeny širším rámcem náboženských představ. Tento specifický pohled akcentující verbální argumentaci jako prostředek vlivu mezi jednotlivcem a skupinou se opírá o teorii sociálních reprezentací, především konceptu *konsenzuálního* a *zvěčnělého* univerza, jak jej rozpracoval Serge Moscovici. Proces rekonstrukce biografie je pak nastíněn za pomoci některých teoretických východisek kognitivní psychologie.

Prezentovaný pohled na problém konverze by mohl být přínosný v situaci, kdy je obtížné přesně vymezit náboženskou skupinu s ohledem na její doktrínu. S takovým problémem se setkáváme například u nových náboženských forem jako je spiritualita New Age. Proces konverze v rámci těchto skupin nebývá pevně institucionalizován a u jejich členů se často protínají různorodé myšlenkové vlivy. Konverzi je pak vhodné chápat jako neustálý proces bez jasného rozlišení fází přechodu.

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