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New spiritual movements as autonomous religiosity of Iranian young adults

New Spiritual Movements as Autonomous Religiosity of Iranian Young Adults

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One of the significant effects of promoting the diversity of epistemic systems in the 1970s was the emergence of a phenomenon known as "New Religious Movements" (NRMs) that provoked numerous debates. Such terms as "New Religiosities", "New Spiritual Movements", "New Religious Behaviors", "Light Religiosity", "Opaque Religion", etc., are evidence of the development of these tendencies. According to experts, new religious and spiritual movements are the natural result of expanding religious changes in the present era.[1] However, discussing the "new-fashioned-ness" of these approaches and determining a given time base for them in Western societies is not without controversy.[2] In the early 1990s, the Iranian religious community gradually became sensitive to New Spiritual Movements (NSMs). Since then, most of these spiritual societies have either been destroyed or discreetly continued their activities and remained unknown. However, today, despite all the pressures imposed on NSMs by the religious establishment, in many urban areas of Iran, there is an increasing tendency to convert to mystical and psychological sects with different structural, ideological, ritual, moral, and emotional features.

The diversity of the forms and contents of these currents indicates that masses of people in different ways – either through the innovation of traditional social forms or by importing different styles from the East and West – try to create specific environments among themselves. The result is a profound transformation of their intellectual and spiritual life, especially with respect to constructing a sense of belonging to these environ-

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1 Mircea Eliade, *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, Vol. 10, New York, NY: Macmillan Publishing Company 1987, 390.

2 George D. Chryssides, "New Religious Movements – Some Problems of Definition", *Diskus* 2/2, 1996, 193-234.

ments.[3] Undoubtedly, the increasing interest of teens and young people in these emerging sects can affect moral security, or the sense of the moral security of society and families. In addition, concerns about the spread of this type of secular spirituality have caused the Iranian religious and traditional community and certain social control agencies to react sensitively to this issue.

Overall, the main reasons for the increasing attractiveness of NSMs in Iran and the ideological doctrines of the people who have converted to these sects are less well known due to a lack of detailed sociological investigations in this field. Hence, in the present paper, we attempt to understand the course of the religious transformation of these converts and identify the reasons for their inclination towards NSMs. At the same time, we examine the converts' perspectives on "Autonomous Religion" arising from their lived experience. Accordingly, we examine the experience of religiosity among converts as well as their conception of religion before and after joining NSMs. In short, we seek to answer the following question: "Which social phenomena and conditions and which lived experiences made people imagine that they needed to join a New Spiritual Movement?"

1. A General Description of the Religious Life of Iranian Society

Survey research conducted during the last 30 years among the different classes of Iranian society (national, state, and local) indicates the prominent presence of religion in Iranian social life. In this sense, Iranian society can be considered a religion-based society. Nevertheless, it is essential to note that different generations of Iranian society believe in various levels of religious life, from Shari'a-based versions of Islam and ritualistic religious life to religious life that is secularized, individualistic, non-governmental, and spiritualistic. Meanwhile, many of the younger generation show the least commitment to worship rituals and often reduce religion to morality and spirituality.

One of the essential components and variables in the religious life of Iranian society is the increasing tendency of young people to engage with new spiritualities. It is of great concern to Iranian religious society that the younger generation often believes in or practices these NSMs without being aware of the fact or without officially joining them. Research shows that today at least ten sects of new Eastern, Western, and native spirituali-

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3 Sara Shariati Mezinani – Sosan Bastani – Behnaz Khosravi, "Societies in Social Nostalgia: A Review of NSMs in Iran", *Journal of Cultural and Communicational Studies* 8/3, 2007, 167-195: 188-189.

ties are active in the religious life of Iranian society. The most important of these expanding spiritual sects are as follows:

1) **The Mysticism Circle** is a native, Islamic, and well-known model of Iranian spirituality. Its founder, Mohammad Ali Taheri, was born in 1956 in Iran and did not have a higher academic education. He considers the goal of the "Mysticism Circle" to bring the worlds of religion, science, and mysticism closer to each other. To this end, he tries to provide scientific justifications for religious practices and duties. According to him, Cosmic Mysticism is in accordance with Islamic doctrines and Iranian Gnosticism. His declarations went so far as to claim the existence of an ability to connect to a phenomenon called "cosmic consciousness". The promotion of healing through cosmic consciousness, Scientology, mysticism without the need for austerity, spirituality without religion, and esotericism in practice has led to the growing popularity of this spiritual movement in Iran.

2) **The cult of Ramallah** is one of the emerging spiritual sects in Iran that believes in a kind of religious pluralism. The most central teaching is the promotion of "spirituality without religion" and an emphasis on Esotericism.[4]

3) **The Sai Baba Movement** is perhaps the most popular modern South Asian religious movement. It owes its origin to Shirdi Sai Baba (died 1918), who was an Indian spiritual master whose followers revered him as a sacred, poor, illuminator or guru. Sai Baba taught moral instruction, love, forgiveness, helping others, benevolence, philanthropy, contentment, inner peace, and submission to the Lord and Guru: "God is a kind of energy". He made no distinction based on religion or tribe.[5]

4) **The cult of Osho:** The founder of this sect is Osho Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh. He is influenced by the general themes of Indian philosophy, such as reincarnation, cosmic unity, and the power debate. Osho opposes rationalism and denies the mind. Instead, he values feelings and emotional comprehension. Furthermore, Osho believes in the denial of asceticism and repentance, the denial of pilgrimage, the denial of appeal, the denial of religion, and the denial of the role modeling of

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4 Esotericism is here as opposed to religious superficiality. See Mohammad Taghi Fa'ali, *Sun and Shadows (An Attitude towards Emerging Spiritualist Movements)*, Tehran: Abed Publications 2011, 89-91.

5 Antonio Rigopoulos, *The Life and Teachings of Sai Baba of Shirdi: The Conflicting Origins, Impacts, and Futures of the Community College*, SUNY Press 1993.

elders. Osho proposes "sexual meditation" as one of the most significant and influential ways to reach spirituality.[6]

5) **The sect of Eckankar:** Eckankar is a new religious movement founded by Paul Twitchell in 1965. This movement is not affiliated with any other religious group. Eckankar teaches simple spiritual exercises, such as singing "Hu", called "a love song to God", in order to experience the Light and Sound of God and recognize the presence of the Holy Spirit.[7] The term Eckankar lexically means "Co-Worker" with God. The final spiritual goal of all ECKists is to become conscious co--workers with God.[8] Some scholars believe that Eckankar draws partly from the Sikh and Hindu religions.[9] Before 1985, Eckankar was known as the ancient wisdom of Soul Travel, the knowledge of general awareness, and a way of life.[10] According to its commentators, Eckankar is a manifestation and product of the unity of religions.[11] Currently, Harold Klemp is the spiritual leader of Eckankar. One of the fundamental tenets of Eckankar is that the Soul (*the True Self*) may be experienced separately from the physical body and, in full consciousness, travel freely in "other planes of reality". Eckankar emphasizes personal spiritual experiences as the most natural way back to God. These are achieved through Soul Travel: "shifting the awareness from the body to the inner planes of existence."[12] "Each and every man, when properly trained, is able to detach himself from the physical body while still living in that body in perfect health, and then travel to all parts of the outlying universe. Everyone has this ability whether he is conscious of it or not."[13] In Iran, the Eckankar sect has had various preaching activities on its agenda since around 1991. In the beginning, when the methods and religiopolitical orientation of this movement were unclear and its activity was only limited to practising meditation and active relaxation, it was left to engage freely in all its activities. However, in

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6 Hugh B. Urban, "Zorba the Buddha: the body, sacred space, and late capitalism in the Osho International Meditation Resort", *Southeast Review of Asian Studies* 35, 2013, 32-49; Hugh B. Urban, *Zorba the Buddha: Sex, spirituality, and capitalism in the global Osho movement*, Oakland, CA: University of California Press 2016, 137-154.

7 Inayat Khan, *The mysticism of sound*, Victoria: Ekstasis Editions 2002.

8 Paul Twitchell, *The Shariyat-Ki-Sugmad, Books One and Two*, Chanhassen, MN: Eckankar 2015.

9 George D. Chryssides, *The A to Z of New Religious Movements*, Oxford: Scarecrow Press 2001, 298.

10 Harold Klemp, *A cosmic sea of words: The Eckankar lexicon*, Chanhassen, MN: Eckankar 2015, 55.

11 Todd Cramerand – Doug Mounson, *Eckankar: Ancient Wisdom for Today*, Chanhassen, MN: Eckankar 1995.

12 H. Klemp, *A cosmic sea of words*…, 185-187.

13 Julian Johnson, *The path of the masters*, Radha Soami Satsang: Beas 1980, 343

the wake of the discovery of the anti-religious leanings of the group, its activities were banned by the Iranian authorities.[14]

6) **Native American Mysiticism (Carlos Castaneda):** The characteristics of this spiritual movement include unconditional obedience to the Master, Anti-rationalism, the practice of voluntary insanity, the ignoring of daily social life, abstinence from sexual intercourse and drugs, the quitting of bad habits, and serving others without expectation.[15]

7) **The Movement of Dalai Lama**[16] is a kind of spirituality based on Tibetan beliefs. This spiritual movement pays great attention to living happily and considers human nature as kind and good. Inspired by Buddhism, it believes in "happiness through wisdom and compassion", "Reincarnation", and "karma". In the area of spirituality and religiosity, the Dalai Lama believes in pluralism, which means the legitimacy of all religions.[17]

8) **Satanism:** This sect has several branches in Iran in the forms of religious, philosophical, and Gothic Satanism. Beliefs in hedonism, the inner Satan, and anti-religion are among their fundamental ideas. Satanists believe in confrontation and war with God; the prevalence of a culture of opposition to divine religions; the spread of prostitution, promiscuity and addiction; the promotion of obscenity in speech; the philosophy of pessimism; the promotion of nihilism; and the culture of suicide to achieve perfection.[18]

9) **Yoga:** Yoga is a Sanskrit word meaning the unity of mind and body, which has been used in Eastern societies for 5000 years and has recently received much attention from Western countries.[19] Yoga, in this sense, is part of the cultural heritage of India (i.e., the ritual dimension of Hinduism). The roots of the teachings of yoga are found in the fourth chapter of the Hindu scriptures, the Vedas, which deal with emotions and sensations such as fear, the dread of death, anger, lust, hatred, and

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14 Davood Ranjbaran, *Criticism and analysis of imported mysticism of Eckankar*, Tehran: Sahil Andisheh 2008.

15 James Desper Jr., *The End of History: A Commentary on the Warrior's Way: A System of Knowledge First Reported in The Books of Carlos Castaneda*, Third Attention Publishing 2012.

16 Mary L. S. Hermann, "Keeping the magic alive in nursing care: Advice from the Dalai Lama", *Nurse Educator* 28/6, 2003, 245-246; Jim Rheingans, "A Propos the Historical Study of Reincarnate Lamas in Tibetan Societies: The Dalai Lama and the Emperor of China by P. Schwieger", *Journal of Religious History* 45/4, 2021, 659-667.

17 Vivas Maxime, *Behind the Smile: The Hidden Side of the Dalai Lama*, San Francsico, CA: Long River Press 2013.

18 Diane E. Taub – Lawrence D. Nelson, "Satanism in Contemporary America: Establishment or Underground?", *The Sociological Quarterly* 34/3, 1993, 523-541.

19 Patricia M. Barnes – Eve Powell-Griner – Kim McFann et al., *Complementary and alternative medicine use among adults*, Philadelphia, PA: Adv Data 2002, 1-19.

physical pain, and ways of influencing them. All yoga techniques focus on doing the opposite of what one is used to doing. One who can transgress all human values and act against them will achieve the goal of yoga.[20]

10) **Technical Self Meditation (TSM):** This movement was founded in Iran around 1991 by an Iranian living in the United States named Jamshid Reza Hajiashrafi. The TSM is a continuation of TM (Technical Meditation). It presents a new spirituality emphasizing the self by making changes, especially adding the word *self* before *meditation*. This movement is a kind of postmodern form of mysticism combined with Hinduism and the teachings of Buddhism, which has taken on a scientific form with complex words and expressions from the realm of physics.[21] The TSM movement aims to bring concrete outcomes such as relaxation and the reduction of pain and suffering by providing meditation methods and mental-physical discipline. One of the apparent fruits of these exercises is that one can meditate a few centimeters from the ground, which is called "yogic flying".

This emerging spiritual movement believes that "God is within people" and "God is love". One can attain enlightenment, peace, love, and God by living in love and traveling within ourselves. Their spiritual advice is: "live in love!" and "love yourself." [22]

Overall, we conclude that emerging spiritualities are spreading among young people in Iran due to their following characteristics: the promotion of a comfortable form of spirituality; the offer of freedom from religion; the emphasis of esotericism (instead of superficiality); extreme pragmatism; compliance with global norms; eclecticism (instead of orthodoxy); rationalism (instead of devotionism); the dissemination of love and compassion; and ethnic and religious tolerance.

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20 Bryan R. Wilson – Jamie Cresswell (eds.), *New religious movements: Challenge and response*, Hove: Psychology Press 1999; Georg Feuerstein, *The yoga tradition: Its history, literature, philosophy and practice*, Moryua: SCB Distributors 2012.

21 Hamid Mazaheri Seif, *Critical Current Studies of Emerging Mystics*, Qom: Research Institute of Islamic Warriors 2008.

22 M. T. Fa'ali, *Sun and Shadows*…,103-105.

2. Definition of Concepts and Terms

2.1. Religious Conversion

Religious Conversion refers to the process of changing one's religious orientation in life, and in particular, the transformation of one's personal worldview. It is often seen as a sudden and critical event, although this process can also occur gradually. In some cases, the conversion is associated with a change in self-image.[23] McGuire depicts "conversion" as a change in one's self along with a change in one's basic meaning system.[24]

2.2. New Spiritual Movements

The contemporary use of "spirituality" is often vague and clichéd. It is therefore difficult to define precisely, because it is increasingly disengaged from religious traditions. Nevertheless, despite its ambiguity, it is possible to suggest that the word "spirituality" refers to the deepest values and meanings by which people seek to live. In other words, "spirituality" implies some vision of the human spirit and of what will assist it in achieving its full potential.[25] "New spiritual movements" refers to new spiritual approaches that have, over the last hundred years, emphasized the search for meaning and interpretations independent of religion.[26]

But spirituality, according to contemporary Iranian thinkers, is a description of the mood of modern man. From this perspective, the spiritual man is one who enjoys a good and genuine life. First, positive moral characterics such as honesty, humility, justice, compassion, love, and mercy have become realized in her/him. Secondly, s/he experiences desirable psychological states such as self-esteem, peace, happiness, hope, and a sense of inner satisfaction. Thirdly, s/he believes in a given meaning and value for her/his own life.[27]

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23 Keith A. Roberts, *Religion in Sociological Perspective*, Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing Company 1990, 101-102.

24 Meredith B. McGuire, *Religion: The Social Context*, Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing Company 1981, 58.

25 Philip Sheldrake, *A Brief History of Spirituality*, Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell 2007, 1-2.

26 Furseth Inger – Pål Repstad, *An Introduction to the Sociology of Religion: Classical and Contemporary Perspectives*, Burlington: Ashgate 2006, 78-92.

27 Mostafa Malekian, *Story of Love: Studies in Rationality and Spirituality*, Tehran: Negahe Moaser Institute 2010, 277.

3. Literature Review

The present study is a logical continuation of previous investigations into new religious and spiritual movements in Iran and the world. Since it is neither possible nor helpful to cite all earlier research in the literature review, we will mention only the most relevant and recent studies in this field. The concept of conversion career, defined as all episodes of participation in religious organizations during a person's life, is a new and systematic approach to conversion as a dynamic process. Gooren's[28] research is almost the first in over a decade to attempt a systematic synthesis of the field of conversion studies, encompassing the disciplines of anthropology, sociology, psychology, history, and theology. Although Gooren does not provide a descriptive-critical analysis of new religious movements in the world, especially in ideological communities, he uses data from North America, Europe, and Latin America to analyze conversion and disaffiliation in a worldwide comparative framework. While some claim that the conversion experience is ineffable, Stromberg argues that such religious experiences can only be communicated through language.[29] According to his findings, the properties of language are necessarily intertwined with both believers' and observers' attempts to understand the religious conversion experience and its implications. The use of language-based approaches, especially the role of linguistic ideologies in conversion narratives, helps us to analyze new religious movements more accurately. The psychological study of conversion provides another empirical background to new religious movements. In their research, Rambo and Bauman express the hope that the phenomenon of spiritual transformation will continue to draw the attention of psychologists who increasingly appreciate the complexity and dynamism of religious/spiritual conversion.[30] According to their findings, for the psychology of religion (in general) and the psychology of conversion and spiritual transformation (in particular) to be viable and valuable, psychologists will need to join with researchers in the human sciences and religious studies to develop methods and theories worthy of this complex subject. We also agree with these authors that psychologists – along with colleagues in religious studies – need to explore the influence of the beliefs and practices of indigenous or prevalent religions such as

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28 Henri Gooren, *Religious conversion and disaffiliation: Tracing patterns of change in faith practices*, London: Palgrave Macmillan 2010.

29 Peter G. Stromberg, "The role of language in religious conversion", in: Lewis R. Rambo – Charles E. Farhadian (eds.), *The Oxford handbook of religious conversion*, Oxford: Oxford University Press 2014, 117-139.

30 Lewis R. Rambo – Steven C. Bauman, "Psychology of conversion and spiritual transformation", *Pastoral Psychology* 61/5, 2012, 879-894.

Islam and Christianity that shape human nature and the possibility of religious and spiritual change.

According to some scholars, such as Stuart A. Wright,[31] NRMs face contested terrain because they are often seen as challengers to established religions and a threat to the social order. He has organized his research around three fundamental aspects of theorizing about NRMs: (1) conceptualization, (2) theory, and (3) methodological issues. Cuda concluded that NRMs have a smaller sense of autonomy, and their sense of spirituality leads to a kind of chaos and anarchism.[32] In addition, they have desire to dominate the world that guides them in fulfilling their commitments and protects them against the outside world. Despite its helpful findings in the field of new religious movements, this research is based on a kind of invalid generalization.

Since the turn of the new millennium, many works – whether in the form of books, scientific or theological dissertations, articles, and notes – have been published on emerging religious and spiritual movements in Iran, often with a pathological and political orientation. However, empirical studies of new religious and spiritual movements are few and far between and often limited to academic dissertations. Here, it is necessary to refer to the most significant Iranian investigations. Jafari, in his survey research conducted on 400 students at universities in Tehran, concluded that about half of the students exhibited a moderate tendency toward new religious movements, and that almost ten percent of them exhibited a stronger tendency.[33] The major shortcoming of this research was its "unification" of emerging religious movements and spiritualities, this resulting in structural variables being ignored and a lack of explanatory analysis. Kashi, using a combination of methods including field observation, documentary work, and interview, provided a deep analysis of the spiritual and semi-religious movement called "Mysticism Circle".[34] In his study, he concluded that the reductionism of "the religious" to "spirituality" is the most crucial concept defining the Mysticism Circle religious group and therefore neglected other central concepts and themes, such as "doctrinal skepticism", the "secularization of religion", and "apostasy

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31 Stuart A. Wright, "Disengagement and apostasy in new religious movements", in: Lewis R. Rambo – Charles E. Farhadian (eds.), *The Oxford handbook of religious conversion*, Oxford: Oxford University Press 2014, 706-735.

32 John Cuda, *A Qualitative Study of the Self in New Age Spirituality Culture* [MA thesis], University of Pittsburgh 2013.

33 Zina al-Abedin Jafar, *A Study of Social Correlations of Scale of Tendency of Students of Universities of Tehran City towards New Religious Movement* [MA thesis], Mazandaran University 2008.

34 Fezzeh Kashi, *Ethnography of NSMs in Iran: A Case Study of Cosmic Mysticism* [MA thesis], Tehran University 2009.

from state religion". Baba Mahmoudi in a sociological study on the causes of the tendency to embrace new religious movements, claims that two groups, "Cosmic Circle" and "Wayfarers of Light and Knowledge" (in Iran) are more prevalent in terms of the number of followers.[35] However, this researcher is satisfied with an initial modernist description and pays no attention to social and cultural resources and factors or the functions of the institution of religion. Pasandideh concluded that the youth's tendency toward NSMs has mainly been encouraged by the enemies of the Islamic Republic of Iran, and it is often a political issue.[36] In the critique of this study, we should say that the researcher ignores the functional weakness of the inter-religious structures of Islam and indigenous factors. In addition, he analyses the prevalence of young people's inclination toward emerging spirituality with a "conspiracy theory" approach. Riahi concluded that eighteen percent of the students studied exhibited a strong tendency toward NSMs and were primarily from the middle and upper social classes.[37] Cultural contexts resulting from globalization have provided the necessary foundation for young people's growing interest in NSMs. However, the strong emphasis on the tendency of the middle-class toward emerging spiritualities and the focus on globalization as the most significant factor in converting young people to NSMs indicates the weaknesses of the study content because of the conservative bias of the researcher.

4. Theoretical Basis of Discussion

A study of the attitude of contemporary Iranian converts to new spiritualities led us to the conclusion that Lofland's model of religious conversion provides a suitable basis for theoretical discussion.[38] Lofland's model is just one of a variety of theories that helps explain the religious conversion of Iranians. This model may not seem very applicable at first glance to the religious-traditional context of Iranian society. But the social developments of the last two decades in Iranian society – including changes in attitudes in the younger generation and the expectations of state religion from young people in the field of religious beliefs and rituals – have led

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35 Iman Ali Baba Mahmoudi, *Sociological Study of Causes of Tendency toward New Spiritual Movements in Karaj City* [MA Thesis], Mazandaran University 2014.
36 Maryam Pasandideh, "A Study of Causes of Tendency toward NSMs in Iran and Its Consequences for Security", *Journal of Security Studies* 9/2, 2014, 74-91.
37 Mohammad Ismael Riahi, "A Study of Social Factors related to Tendency toward NSMs", *Journal of Spiritual Studies* 7, 2016, 39-70.
38 John Lofland, "'Becoming a World-Saver' Revisited", *American Behavioral Scientist* 20/6, 1977, 805-818.

young people to be drawn to spiritualities that have fewer requirements. Therefore, Lofland's theory has high efficiency and explanatory power for the present investigation.

In his analysis of the process of religious conversion, Lofland identifies a series of conditions that change impartial individuals into committed followers. According to him, only those who experience all these consecutive conditions may convert to a new religious group. He found that seekers are dissatisfied with the current stagnation and lack of mobility in conventional religious groups and discovered a type of interest in adventurism and religious seekership that leads them towards new religious groups. In his study on people who had converted to new religious groups, Lofland found that issues such as "immigration", "losing one's job", and "expulsion or graduation from the university" are turning points that can potentially lead to conversion.[39] In Lofland's study, almost all members had joined a group through friendship networks. He insists that "they have started conversion from the emotional stage and not from the cognitive stage."[40] Due to cutting one's relations with family or one's previous religious community, an individual may experience levels of seclusion, self-alienation, and loneliness and attempt to replace his relations within the network of co-religionist friends with emotional ties outside the official religious circle.

The results of Lofland's studies show that some of the converts to a new religious group are verbally committed to the religious group but do not have an absolute commitment to the group. Once "strong interactions" create a sense of unity among the converted people, they then actively turn to the group ideology.[41]

5. Methodology

In analyzing changes in a person's life, researchers usually distinguish between changes identified in "life course analysis" and "life story analysis". When one's life course is studied, biography is taken as a "data source", while in the study of one's life story, biography is examined as the "subject of study".[42] At first sight, the lived experiences of an individual are precisely studied, and at second sight, only the retold narrative

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39 Katherine A. Roberts, *Religion in Sociological Perspective*, Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing Company 1990, 111.

40 *Ibid*., 112.

41 J. Lofland, "'Becoming a World-Saver' Revisited…", 815.

42 Reza Kolahi, "Changes in the organizational power and spiritual power of the clergy in the transition from Qajar to Pahlavi", *Iranian Journal of Social Studies* 1/21, 2013, 113-135: 29

of his/her life. In the present study, data collection was performed using the narrative interview. After each interview, collected data were analyzed using the thematic analysis method. To study the period of the religious and spiritual life of individuals, the method of narrative analysis, which is considered a qualitative method, was used.[43] In the "life-course study", biography is regarded as a data source. Accordingly, significant events that have occurred during a person's life and have caused transformations are analyzed. The main question in this context is: What events during one's life have caused what kinds of changes?

Qualitative data was collected using in-depth narrative interviews and a semi-structured questionnaire in the metropolis of Isfahan in 2019. For security reasons, statistical samples were selected with difficulty using the snowball sampling method. In this method, future members of the sample are chosen by former members, and the sample becomes larger and larger like a snowball. For example, in qualitative interview-based research, people are asked to suggest another person for interview, and this process makes the sample more extensive.

The duration of each interview ranged from 1 hour and 35 minutes to 3 hours and 20 minutes. A total of 19 interviews were recorded with the interviewees' consent. Since the rest of the interviewees (7 cases) refused to record the interviews, inevitably, we had to prepare a written report of their statements. By agreement, the interviews were conducted at the interviewee's home or in public places such as a park or coffee shop. Detailed information about the participants is to be find in table 1.

In this research, existing spiritual groups and circles in Isfahan city were chosen as the target subject of the field study. Some members of these groups – regardless of their approaches – were also selected for participation in the study. However, in order to monitor the phenomena and factors impacting the change in the religious loyalty of participants, we needed to control a series of background variables that seemed to have influenced the religiosity of individuals, so that, if necessary, we were able to include them in our analysis. To evaluate and guarantee the quality of our research, we used "Expert Checking (Expert Validation)" and "Participation Checking (Participant Validation)", both of which are various types of "Transactional Validation".

43 Norman Blaikie – Jan Priest, *Designing social research: The logic of anticipation*, Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley and Sons 2019.

Participant	NSM	Marital status	Education	Age	Gender
1	Mysticism Circle	Single	Bachelor	27	Male
2	Satanism	Single	M.A	27	Male
3	Mysticism Circle	Single	Bachelor	28	Male
4	TSM (Technical Self Meditation)	Single	Bachelor	25	Male
5	Native American Mysiticism (Carlos Castaneda)	Married	M.A	34	Male
6	Sai Baba Movement	Married	Ph.D.	38	Male
7	Mysticism Circle	Single	Diploma	24	Male
8	Mysticism Circle	Single	M.A	24	Male
9	Yoga	Single	M.A	31	Male
10	Yoga	Single	bachelor	31	Male
11	Satanism	Married	M.A	38	Male
12	Sai Baba Movement	Single	Bachelor	26	Male
13	Mysticism Circle	Single	M.A	25	Male
14	Mysticism Circle	Single	Bachelor	24	Male
15	The cult of Osho	Single	M.A	28	Male
16	The sect of Eckankar	Married	Bachelor	36	Male
17	Sai Baba Movement	Single	Bachelor	24	Male
18	Satanism	Single	M.A	28	Male
19	Mysticism Circle	Single	Diploma	29	Male
20	The cult of Ramallah	Single	Ph.D.	38	Male
21	TSM (Technical Self Meditation)	Married	Bachelor	34	Male
22	The sect of Eckankar	Single	Bachelor	25	Female
23	Movement of Dalai Lama	Single	M.A	30	Female
24	Mysticism Circle	Single	Bachelor	26	Female
25	Movement of Dalai Lama	Single	M.A	28	Female
26	Mysticism Circle	Single	Diploma	29	Female

Table 1. Detailed table with participants' demographic details

6. Limitations of the Research

As with the majority of studies, the design of the current study was subject to limitations. In addition to the restrictions related to sanctions on the Islamic Republic of Iran concerning its civil nuclear program, we encountered numerous obstacles and limitations during the research process, especially in the data collection phase. Unfortunately, due to security concerns and fears of the government's religious institutions, there were no favorable conditions for open interviews with the converts. Even many of

the samples (participants) engaged in self-censorship. They refused to be interviewed for fear of being discredited or judged and pressured by public opinion. This resulted in limitations on our study known as "sample bias" or "selection bias".

Basically, research in areas related to religious beliefs and cultural currents is associated with structural limitations and taboo-like security considerations, especially if the study is about new subcultures and spiritual currents that disagree with the official reading of religion. Therefore, as researchers in this sensitive field, we also encountered organizational challenges from the ideological community of Iran.

7. Data Analyses: Coordinates of Autonomous Religiosity (NSMs)

In this part of the article, we will try to analyze the experiences and worldviews of the participants before and after converting to new spiritualities and examine the most significant characteristics of their autonomous religiosity. Generally speaking, one can formulate the coordinates of the autonomous religion of Iranian citizens who have converted to NSMs, as follows.

7.1. Adherence to Beliefs and Rituals in Early Religious Life

In this period, one can see total dogmatic loyalty on behalf of the individual towards the totality of his religious beliefs. Although their religiosity before acquaintance with NRMs was of a highly devotional, canonical, and ritualistic color, the spiritual aspect of religiosity and religious belief had a special place from the very outset of their religious life. Many of them alluded to the existence of a spiritual experience, inspiring a relationship with God and nature, and experiences of enthusiasm and ecstasy in their early religious life before their familiarity with New Spiritual Movements. Their image of the world was more or less spiritual before conversion to New Spiritual Movements. These are all signs of their higher share of "spiritual intelligence".

> Maryam, 20 years old and single: "I performed all the duties of the religion and prayed and went to the mosque."

> Mehdi, 26 years old and single: "I considered myself a religious person, and I read the Quran and participated in religious ceremonies."

These people based their image of God on the symbols and ideas derived from religious culture. Emphasis on divine power and magnificence and an understanding of God as a personal supervisor associated with both

fear and respect show the predominance of the prevailing religious culture concerning the notion of God in their early life. Their relationship with God during this period was mainly based on the following religious/spiritual motives: fear of punishment and the acquisition of rewards in this world; salvation from the torment of the Fire and otherworldly punishment; asking for help to overcome difficulties and the acquisition of interests, and in general, an orientation based on worldly and otherworldly reward and punishment. Moreover, since the relationship with God calmed them, it also had a psychological function.

Their moral orientation in early life was chiefly based on following significant others like parents and mentors, adhering to a religious group, and following the values of the social environment in light of the reward-punishment system. To put it otherwise, their model of moral behavior in the early stage of their life was a "Heteronomous Morality" or so-called "Obedience Morality", which implies regulation by significant others, and the blind acceptance of external laws as sacred, eternal, absolute, and unchangeable affairs.[44] Religious belief and the spiritual aspect of religiosity in the early religious life of the participants had a colorful role. In this period, a superficial-mythical faith[45] overshadowed the essence of their belief, and the individual had a relatively orphic and mysterious perspective on the world. The perspective paved the way for acceptance of mythical thinking in the religious culture, like belief in the existence of a Savior and faith in the myth of Divine Creation.

7.2. Reductionism of Religion to Inner Spirituality

Many participants considered some experiences of crisis and deprivation to be a turning point in their own life. Experiences such as immigration, the experience of failure in education, the death of relatives, military service, economic and social deprivation, the epistemological crisis resulting from encountering existential questions (Crisis of meaning), unsuccessful experience in socialization, the experience of stress as regards a misogynic religious vision, the experience of pressure resulting from the paternalistic imposition of canonically grounded religion, and the experience of stress caused by limitations on relations between the two genders were among the challenges, each one persuading the participants of the need for meaning and belonging and setting the scene for the emergence of doubts and the revision of some of their specific beliefs.

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44 Jean Piaget, *The Moral Judgment of the Child*, New York, NY: Free Press 1948, 106.
45 Richard W. Kropf, *Faith: Security and Risk: The Dynamics of Spiritual Growth*, Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers 2003, 122.

One of the tensions among participants resulted from the paternalistic imposition of the canonically grounded religion within the traditional context, this tension causing the participants to develop an adverse reaction to canonical religion. These individuals, who had found themselves to be under the constraint of superficial readings of religion within the traditional context of family and society, gradually, cordially, and ideologically distanced themselves from the previous religious community and, under the influence of a network of new relations, became familiar with spiritual movements.

The converts to these new spiritualities claimed to enjoy an excellent and genuine life in their spiritual experience. Firstly, this means that moral desires such as honesty, humility, justice, benevolence, love, and compassion were realized in their lives. Secondly, they experienced desirable psychological states such as peace, happiness, hope, and inner satisfaction. Thirdly, they had freed themselves from the repetitive and boring life of the past and given their own life meaning, value, and purpose.[46] Indeed, acquaintance with spiritual groups provided them with a new alternative to their regular religious milieu.

7.3 "Anti-Superficial Esotericism" (Emphasis on the heartfelt and internal aspects of religion)

In accord with their desire to reduce religiosity to inner spiritual experience, the converts to new spiritualities emphasized the emotional and spiritual aspects of religious rituals. They emphasized the early Shia mystical belief that religiosity is a type of esoteric knowledge and inner belief.[47] God is also informed of human hearts and does not need to be worshipped by humans. According to their understanding of the essence of religiosity, humans need to have friendly relations and peaceful coexistence.

Ali, 28 years old and single: "There is no need to pray, God is in my heart."

Dariush, 34 years old and married: "I do not regard myself as a Muslim, but I consider myself a free servant of God."

Homan, 27 years old and single: "Instead of praying, I always try to be connected and grateful to God through meditation."

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46 Mostafa Malekian, *Story of Love: Studies in Rationality and Spirituality*, Tehran: Negahe Moaser Institute 2010, 277.
47 Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Islamic Philosophy from its Origin to the Present: Philosophy in the Land of Prophecy*, New York, NY: State University of New York Press 2006, 111.

On this basis, other religious rituals are individual and arbitrary. In the stage of "individualistic contemplative faith", people find that symbols are separated from their meanings and can be "reinterpreted", "constructed", or "arbitrarily determined". In this stage, an individual might even demythologize religious myths, and, based on logical propositions, devalue existing symbols in his belief system.[48]

> Ahsan, 31 years old and single: "I feel Pleasant and relaxed when I read Osho's spiritual teachings."

> Erfan, 28 years old and single: "Instead of praying, I always try to be connected and grateful to God through meditation."

The converts to NSMs, in their interpretation of nonbinding autonomous religion, mostly preferred certain rituals and etiquettes, choosing a simple minimal religion reduced to internally transformed and cordial beliefs restricted to general creeds. In this autonomous religion, one can see almost no inclination to perform superficial (outward) religious rituals; instead, the participants insisted on internal purity with such phrases as "Your heart must be pure", "God is in the human heart", "The intention of the heart is the thing that really matters", "I am not a religious formalist", or "I am not Tartuffe".

Moreover, their adherence to human moral principles made their life more beautiful and pleasant. It created a sense of internal enthusiasm due to their commitment to this category of inner and selective moralities.

7.4 Maximal Tolerance in all Domains and Aspects of Religiosity

Another characteristic of the converts to NSMs was the spirit of religious tolerance, which stems from the denial of value realism. First of all, it is necessary to clarify the meaning of tolerance. The Oxford Dictionary provides these definitions of tolerance: "The ability or willingness to tolerate the existence of opinions or behaviour that one dislikes or disagrees with" or "the capacity to endure continued subjection to something such as environmental conditions without an adverse reaction".[49] Tolerance has also been examined on the basis of its theological and philosophical foundations. The Iranian religious intellectual, Soroush, was a pioneer in this

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48 James W. Fowler, *Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning*, San Francisco, CA: Harper and Row 1981, 122-123.

49 "Tolerance" [online], *Oxford living dictionaries* 2018, <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/tolerance>, 3. 7. 2018.

discussion. He has argued for "Pluralism" as a strong foundation for Tolerance.[50]

However, for the converts to NSMs, the concept of tolerance as an ethical virtue results from human nature. It means rational, compassionate, and benevolent behavior towards others and overcoming differences and adversity in interpersonal relationships, this showing human moderation in individual and social life. This characteristic – tolerance – stems from the denial of value realism by the people converted to the new spiritualities. According to them, religion is not the source of ethical values. The goodness or badness of human behavior depends on the collective will or the social contract. Therefore, the actions of individuals should not be severely judged by religious people.

They do not consider spiritual-moral values as absolute and natural but relative and conventional. They insist that everyone should follow the path of spirituality in whatever way s/he wants. In this regard, some researchers have stated: "Values such as tolerance and the belief that 'no one should impose their views on others' must prevail in religion, politics, and culture. Any belief contrary to the previous one will undoubtedly lead to religious conflict and violence because it means that whoever is different is the enemy."[51]

In this autonomous religiosity, not only talking but also listening patiently to the words of others is a sign of tolerance. Practicing intellectual dialogue is a means to increase tolerance towards others. Accordingly, one of the most frequent reasons for tolerance in all areas of religiosity is that "everyone is entitled to his own opinion."[52] Some people have claimed that after converting to new spiritualities, they were able to tolerate the beliefs or behaviors of others whom they had previously disliked or disagreed with because of religious dogmatism. Therefore, indifference towards opposing beliefs and the misconduct of others is one of the possible reasons for the formation of tolerance among converted people to NSMs.[53] Perhaps, for this reason, some scholars have argued that: "tolerance in behavior provides the social-ethical grounds for tolerance of belief to spread in society and become prevalent."[54] However, in autonomous religiosity, extreme tolerance prevails, which has led to the increasing ten-

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50 See Abdul Karim Soroush, *Serat-hayeh Mostaqim [Straight Path]*, Tehran: Serat 2009.

51 Farshad Tohidnia, "The damages of the system of domination over the Islamic society of Iran through emerging mysticism", *Journal of Spiritual Studies* 13/14, 2014, 77-107: 87.

52 See A. Cornelius Benjamin, "Science and tolerance", in: *Pacific Philosophy Forum*, 2/sup1, Oxfordshrie: Taylor and Francis 1963, 64-77.

53 Aaron Tyler, *Islam, the West, and tolerance: Conceiving coexistence*, New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan 2008, 8.

54 Shadi Nafisi, "Tolerance in Islam", *HTS: Theological Studies* 74/3, 2018, 17.

dency of young people towards these spiritual circles. In this regard, converts to NSMs argue that the relationship with God is a purely genuine and inner relationship. Therefore, it is unnecessary to perform outward rituals and religious practices accurately. Excessive tolerance among these people is to the point that even in some cases, it is accompanied by the flouting of many religious limitations, such as the prohibition on illicit sex.

8. Conclusion

Religiosity in Iran is not only the simple product of socialization and religious education. It is also a variable social construction comprising (1) the individual experience and interpretation of the actors and (2) the doctrinal-interpretive and discourse formats existing in the cultural environments in which the individual lives in each period of her/his life. This kind of religious transformation can be considered a sign of the secularization of the educational system of the Iranian family. The study of the religious experience of people who have converted to New Spiritual Movements provides some contexts for analyzing and explaining the diversity of spiritual sources in the religious life of young people and adolescents. The narratives reported by the converts to NSMs concentrated on reducing religiosity and religion to forms of spiritual-mental states and human emotions. According to these individuals, traditional religion has the same functions as modern spirituality. Revealed religion provides the exact psychic needs that secular spiritual feelings can fulfill. The present study revealed that Iranian youth distinguish between religion and spirituality. Most of them had positive emotions and attitudes toward spirituality and a negative stance toward religion.

An analysis of thematic narratives shows that reasons for the tendency of different individuals to be drawn to mystical groups and NSMs can be different from each other. From a teleological point of view, one can classify the converts to NSMs into two groups: "meaning-seekers" and "crisis-torn ones." Meaning-seekers are converts to new spiritual movements in search of truth and the actual meaning of life on the path that NSMs have provided for them. They are dissatisfied with the stagnation in popular religious culture and seek a different kind of experience. The crisis-torn ones are also those who have turned to these new spiritual sects, but, in this case, to alleviate the pain caused by tension-creating and painful lived experiences.

In addition, the study findings indicate that transformations in religiosity do not occur at once but gradually and in a process-like way. This means that after an extended period, the loyalty of individuals to some religious rituals and beliefs starts to decrease and eventually ceases. It

became clear that the most significant spiritual transformation of the converts was in adopting "Autonomous Religion" versus state religion or "Heteronomous Religiosity". In this regard, we deduced the coordinates of the autonomous religion of Iranian citizens who have converted to NSMs as follows: their adherence to beliefs and rituals in early religious life; the reductionism of religion to inner spirituality by emphasizing desirable moral and psychological characteristics; anti-superficial esotericism (reduction of the nature of religion to heartfelt love); and maximal tolerance in all domains and aspects of religiosity.

By analyzing these coordinates, we finally concluded that the ease of understanding emerging spiritualities, the simplicity (non-complexity) of their teachings, their flexibility with respect to morality, and their promotion of a culture of extreme tolerance in all areas have led young people to convert toward a secular spirituality. It became clear that the most significant spiritual transformation of the converts was in adopting "Autonomous Religion" versus state religion or "Heteronomous Religiosity." The study also found that converts to NSMs have abandoned certain canonical beliefs (such as the punishment of servants by God) that are not in line with their spiritual views. By individualizing religious-spiritual tendencies and beliefs, "Whatever is sacred" is rethought; "whatever is solid and violent" is discarded; and "whatever is subtle and tender and provides security, peace, and happiness for oneself and fellow human beings" is accepted. Finally, the findings demonstrate the impact of the government's strict strategies in diminishing the religious affiliation of young adults to currents contrary to the official reading of religion, including new spiritualities. This point is implicitly or expressly reflected in the statements of the interviewees. For instance, they mentioned the following as the most significant factors influencing religious avoidance and young people's inclination towards new spiritualities: inconsistency between the words and actions of the official custodians of religion and politics in Iran (the ruling clerics); attribution of the critical conditions faced by young people and society (for example, with respect to marriage and employment) to the religious government; Islamization of the public sphere by imposing religious values and norms (such as the mandatory hijab for women) on citizens; the ideological hegemony of the clergy over all aspects of people's lives, particularly in the area of political culture; and discriminatory governmental laws that prioritize the more religious class of society.

Appendix. Some expressions narrated by the Converts to NSMs

"I feel Pleasant and relaxed when I read Osho's spiritual teachings."

"Instead of praying, I always try to be connected and grateful to God through meditation."

"I now feel that the spiritual teachings of the Dalai Lama are closer to my consciousness."

"I do not regard myself as a follower of any religion, though I do not consider the path of any of them wrong."

"I am not a follower of any religion at the moment. For now, I only accept the presence of God."

"I would love to be a disciple of one and have a spiritual master."

"When I was not satisfied with going to Safi Alisha Monastery, I turned to Osho teachings."

"I do not regard myself as a Muslim, but I consider myself a free servant of God."

"I talk to God during the day! I have experienced this spiritual feeling since I joined the Mysticism Circle."

"Relaxing with mountains, trees and nature remind me of God."

"There is no need to pray, God is in my heart."

"For several years I have only accepted 'the religion of humanity'. Religion means humanity. Religion means peace and only peace for me. Anything that comforts me is my religion."

"Our God, Muslims, is no different from the God of Christians; He is the Most Merciful and Gracious! But the merchants of religion [i.e. the clergy] forged various Gods. "

SUMMARY

New Spiritual Movements as Autonomous Religiosity of Iranian Young Adults

New religious converts experience many ups and downs before and after conversion and acquire a new and alternative understanding of religion and religiosity. The paper seeks to examine their spiritual experiences before and after converting to NSMs and answer this question: what factors and experiences led to the emergence of such a transformation in their religious life?

For this purpose, we examined the narratives of people who had converted to NSMs in Iran using narrative interviews and narrative analysis methods. The findings show that such factors and experiences as the imposition of the official and superficial interpretation of religion, the experience of deprivation in one's personal and social life, distressing experiences of encounters with evil, and the search for meaning all brought about changes in people's religious loyalties.

We also identified the most meaningful aspects of the spiritual transformation of the studied converts to NSMs, these promoting "Autonomous Religiosity" over "Heteronomous Religiosity". By examining their narratives, we discovered the following coordinates as the most critical manifestations of their spiritual transformation: adherence to beliefs and rituals in early religious life; the reduction of religion to inner spirituality; anti-superficial esotericism; and maximum tolerance in all aspects of religiosity.

Key Words: conversion; spirituality; tolerance; new spiritual movements; autonomous religion

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