The "Not-So-Faithful" Believers: Conversion, Deconversion, and Reconversion Among the Shakers

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On March 1, 1831, Rufus Bishop, a member of the central ministry of the United Society of Believers in Christ's Second Appearing—the formal name of the Shakers—wrote the following entry in the ministry journal at New Lebanon, New York:

> In the P.M. Ruben Treadway at the Office. by his request I go
> to see him—he is in great trouble—confesses his hard speaches
> & lies which he told me when he went to the world—wants
> another privilege—is allowed to go & confess the lies he has
> told to the world—he came last Friday.[1]

Seven weeks later, on April 26, in the same journal, Bishop took note of the fact that Treadway was seeking with "importunity" yet another privilege. The penitent had left the Shaker village sometime after his March 1 confession, and less than two months later he was seeking to reenter again. A year earlier, in 1830, Treadway had visited the village in order to remove his son, Haten, "to the world," and he had also tried to persuade another family member, Almira, to go with

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them.[2] From the record it is clear that Ruben Treadway changed his mind about Shakerism several times.

By the 1830s, the United Society of Believers included several thousand members located in twenty villages stretching from Maine in the East to Ohio and Kentucky in the West. New Lebanon was the headquarters of the society. Founded in America by the English woman Ann Lee (1736-1784) and a small band of her followers who came from England in 1774, the Shakers were identified with a number of distinctive practices. They rejected sexual relations as sinful, practiced celibacy as the way to perfection, and created spiritual families in place of biological units. The Believers required potential converts to confess their sins to the ministry. They renounced private property and organized their villages on communal principles. Both men and women occupied positions of responsibility in the society. The Believers held several peculiar doctrines including the notion that God manifested both a male and female aspect, that Ann Lee's ministry complemented and completed the redemptive mission of Jesus, and that her successors in the ministry possessed wide-ranging spiritual authority. But often these formal beliefs and practices figured only marginally in the comings and goings of persons such as Ruben Treadway.

In making his request for another privilege, Treadway typified hundreds of individuals in the nineteenth century who became part of the Shaker movement for limited periods of time. One after another, individuals and small groups—often family members—entered and exited Shaker villages. Some stayed only a few nights at the Office, the designated location in the communities where Believers and the world's people interacted. Others spent a week, a month, several months, or even longer in a Shaker family, usually the "Gathering Order," or "Gathering Family," a living unit where potential members or new converts were given special attention. They entered the society seeking a home, physical refuge, spiritual nurture, or something else. One thing or another drew them to the Believers and for a time satisfied that desire. Eventually many, if not most, drifted away, no longer finding the society attractive or acceptable. Many left never to return; some, it seems, came back to try Shakerism again. A good number, including Ruben Treadway, repeated this process several times.

Village journals often provide detailed information concerning the comings and goings of would-be Believers—short-term Shakers. These less-than-fully committed members are the "not-so-faithful" Believers. The voluminous records of the society document a steady stream of such individuals floating in and out of the community, crossing back and forth across the boundary between the world and the society. At this point there is no reliable calculation of the numbers involved, nor even any good estimate as to how many entered and left particular villages. From diverse sources, however, it is clear that this movement in and out of the society was constant, it involved surprisingly large numbers, and a variety of motives drove these people.[3] In fact, it appears likely that there were more short-term Shakers than long-term Believers over the history of the society.

One judgment often repeated about these "not-so-faithful" Believers dismisses them as "winter Shakers" or "bread and butter Shakers." According to this perspective, the society was inundated during the cold months of the year by persons seeking food and shelter, but as soon as the weather improved, they were on their way again.[4] By implication, such individuals feigned sincerity and interest in order to gain a full stomach and a warm bed. Another opinion commonly expressed about short-term Shakers declares them "apostates," people who abandoned a faith they once believed in.[5] This latter viewpoint reflects the severe judgments on these individuals frequently rendered by the Believers themselves.

Fortunately, today the study of Shaker membership patterns is enjoying new attention from those in the social sciences and in religious history. For instance, building on earlier studies conducted by William Sims Bainbridge and Priscilla J. Brewer, economic historian John E. Murray identifies factors accounting for long-term membership in a Shaker commune. Using data from the Church Family at New Lebanon, he observes that urban-born entrants "were more likely to apostatize in the next year than the rural born."[6] In another essay, Murray correlates the literacy levels of new entrants with their likelihood of exiting from the society. He finds that by the middle of the nineteenth century the Shakers were attracting less literate new members, and that by the same time "the literate were more likely to exit than the illiterate," an observation with immense implications for both the life of the community and its ultimate decline.[7]

All of these judgments—the clichéd and the sophisticated—relate to an important question involving membership patterns among the Believers, namely, how sharply defined was the boundary separating the United Society from the world, and how easily was it crossed, either way? Or to put the issue in other terms, how did notions of conversion and its opposite figure into the steady stream of people moving in and out of the society? What, if anything, does short-term presence in a Shaker village imply about long-term commitment? And as a corollary, is it appropriate to brand as "apostates" all individuals moving in and out of the society?

In what follows, I will argue that the "not-so-faithful" Believers are inappropriately grouped with genuine Shaker apostates. The experience of the New Lebanon community in the 1830s (and that observed elsewhere, too) suggests a critical link between the processes of conversion and deconversion among the short-term Believers, a link that reinforces the contrast between apostates and short-term Believers. The ministry journals add flesh and blood to the statistics compiled by demographers. Examination of the "not-so-faithful" Believers demonstrates how easily individuals crossed back and forth across the boundary separating the society and the world. The Shaker experience in the nineteenth century also reflects larger patterns still observable among contemporary marginal religious communities. In that respect this essay has relevance for the study of conversion and deconversion among contemporary outsider religions in

America and for understanding the relative ease with which religious seekers move in and out of such communities today.

Do short-term Believers deserve to be branded as "apostates"? Listening only to the Shakers as they comment upon these individuals produces a rather distorted judgment. The ministry standardly showed little charity to those who left the community for whatever reason.[8] The journals castigate those departing from the society by using terms of derision and condemnation. It was commonplace for the Believers to denounce some as "flesh hunters" and to condemn others as "ungrateful" and "unthankful." The Shakers described one group of young members leaving the Alfred, Maine, village as returning "like dogs to their *vomets*, as sows who might have been washed, to their *wallowing* in their filth." Another individual, on taking leave, was a "dishonest pretender." "Turnoffs" was applied as a general term to those who "went to the world."[9] The traditional name for those who abandon any religious community is "apostate." In the records kept by the Shakers themselves and in the literature about the society, this category is often applied to many, if not most, of the "not-so-faithful" Believers.[10]

Even sophisticated studies of Shaker membership patterns continue to employ uncritically the category of apostasy. Murray, for instance, writes, "Urban-born men were about twice as likely as rural born to apostatize soon," by which it appears that he intends "in the next year."[11] He is speaking, of course, not about those I am describing as typical short-term Shakers. And yet, he uses the term "apostasy" for departure after less than a year of full membership. In a second study correlating literacy and duration of stay, Murray states correctly that "the Society preferred to make membership as open as possible, to extend potential salvation to the greatest number of people," especially through the use of the Gathering family. But after conceding the ease of movement in and out of the society, he attaches the category of "apostasy" to all departures.[12]

It is more useful, instructive, and accurate to reserve the label "apostasy" for those cases that fit its historic meaning. The term "apostate" derives from a Greek word denoting those who "stand apart." An apostasy is an insurrection or secession. The Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible prepared in Alexandria, Egypt, in the third and second centuries B.C.E., used the word for "rebellion against God." By the third century C.E., the term commonly referred to those abandoning Christianity for paganism. Perhaps the most prominent apostate of all times was Flavius Claudius Julianus, emperor of Rome (361-363 C.E.), who, after renouncing Christianity, was known in Christian history as Julian the Apostate. By that time "apostasy" implied public abandonment of the faith, not private departure.[13]

Apostasy was a very serious offense at that time because Christianity was struggling with other religions for hegemony. For that reason the regulations of the early church were severe. Apostasy was an unforgivable sin. It became a civil crime after Christianity was adopted by the emperor Constantine in the fourth century. Apostates had neither the right to make wills, nor the ability to inherit

property. They were to be shunned or ostracized, forfeiting their rank and status; they were thought to be "branded with perpetual infamy." In other words, apostasy was reprehensible.[14] When viewed in this light, the category of "apostate" seems inappropriate for most of the short-term Believers; it ought to be reserved for those Shakers who renounced the society and created a public identity out of that rejection.

A proper distinction between genuine apostates and short-term Shakers is important for several reasons. The distinction is a reminder that the population of an average Shaker village at any moment consisted of both long-term Believers and those actively considering membership. The presence of both within the community means that the principle of separation from the world was never as absolute as Shaker ideology implied. The sharp divide between the Believers and the world's people dictated in the "Millennial Laws," for instance, did not exist in daily reality. The constant movement of short-term Shakers in and out conforms with the processes of conversion and deconversion in religions more generally. People test religious options in much the same way that they examine economic and social choices before making firm commitments. Apostates, by contrast, had already moved past the indecision of the short-term Believers to full conviction, only later to renounce that commitment in a public and sustained manner.

There were notable authentic apostates who left the United Society and devoted themselves to attacking Shaker principles and practices. Two examples will suffice to give a sense of the animosity that drove some of the most prominent (perhaps "notorious") Shaker apostates in the earliest decades of Shaker history.

Reuben Rathbun was a genuine "apostate." He was an early convert to Shakerism, attracted in the summer of 1780 by what he had heard about the remarkable "gifts and power" of the English Believers and by their doctrines, including what they called "the *cross* against the flesh" (or celibacy). Rathbun was impressed, confessed his sins, and took up the "cross." He worked vigorously on behalf of the movement and rose in respect and reputation among the Shakers. In 1795 he was appointed Elder Brother at the Church Family at Hancock, Massachusetts. A year later when he was passed over for advancement to the local ministry, he protested that decision, creating division within the village. Eventually the central ministry at New Lebanon stepped in and resolved the conflict with the result that Rathbun decided to leave the society in 1799. One year later he published a 28-page pamphlet at Pittsfield, Massachusetts, entitled *Reasons Offered for Leaving the Shakers.*[15] That publication demonstrates why Rathbun is appropriately categorized as an apostate.

At first glance Rathbun's account appears rather dispassionate. He began by recording the story of his conversion to Shakerism, admitting that previously he had been preoccupied with "earthly sensual pleasure." The society's claim that "the children of the resurrection" would not marry or be concerned with the "natural generation" attracted him. The fact that it was said that Ann Lee and her

followers did not suffer natural disorders or infirmities also impressed him. Rathbun gladly became a *"Eunuch* for the kingdom of heaven's sake."[16]

But Rathbun's attitude toward the Shakers changed after the conflict at Hancock, a change evident in his description of deconversion from the sect. Now Rathbun challenged the authority of the New Lebanon ministry, accusing them of deception. He charged that the principle of mortification was carried to such extremes by the Believers that some individuals "almost continually" experienced "involuntary evacuations" (to use his term) of semen, to their great consternation. He found it equally distressing that Ann Lee had "menstrual cycles" and that she was not free from the "natural infirmities" of other women. According to Rathbun, after he decided to leave the society, the Shakers set out to discredit him. He, in turn, defended himself against charges of adultery and homosexuality, stating boldly his support for marriage and his innocence of any wrong-doing, and repeating what would become a standard litany of accusations by Shaker apostates. He charged that Ann Lee was often drunk, that James Whittaker (another of the early leaders) committed whoredoms, that the English founders used vile and profane language, and that the Believers, male and female, from time to time, stripped "naked" and went into the water together.[17] Rathbun pulled no punches in his attack on the Shakers; he qualifies as an authentic apostate.

A second example, Mary Dyer, became an even more prominent Shaker apostate. Around 1810, she, her husband Joseph, and their children joined the Enfield, New Hampshire, community, although it appears that she was somewhat reluctant to enter the society. After a year or so, she decided to leave the village, and she was determined to take her two youngest children with her. Her husband and the village leaders, however, prevented her from doing so. Over the course of the next three decades Mary Marshall Dyer (who began using her maiden name) attempted through every means at her disposal, first to gain custody of her children, and then to attack Shakerism and bring it to public disrepute. She sought redress in the courts by lawsuits, petitioned the legislature of New Hampshire on her behalf, and published a string of pamphlets and books that repeated every charge ever made against the Shakers. There was no hint of impartiality in her writings. In the preface to *A Portraiture of Shakerism*, she denounced the Believers as "subversive of christian morality" and "detrimental to the *well-being* of *society*." In that same 1822 publication, she assembled a host of affidavits accusing Ann Lee of uncounted perversions, including fortune-telling, adultery, gambling, child abuse, hypocrisy, deception, the destruction of families, and the violation of every moral duty. Dyer made a vocation out of attacking the Shakers.[18]

Because of these accusations and the unrelenting determination of Mary Marshall Dyer to spread scandalous judgments about the Believers, the Shakers could not ignore her. They were forced to take her seriously and to defend themselves against her charges. She became a constant source of irritation and consternation to the society. In her study of the Shakers, Priscilla J. Brewer

reports that in 1826 the ministry at Hancock noted Dyer's presence nearby. They wrote, "Mary Dyer the *Abominable* is in these parts, she has crept over into Lebanon hollow and like a sitting goose or turkey-buzzard is brooding over her nest of lies, and generating them into life with her lascivious pen."[19]

The cases of Reuben Rathbun, Mary Marshall Dyer, and scores of other apostates, many of them less prominent than these two, make clear that Shaker apostasy, too, was distinguished by an overt intention to attack and vilify as well as to denounce and bring shame upon the United Society of Believers. Apostates were defined by their public stance, by the intensity of their hostility, and by their determination to be heard.

The point is that the vast majority of the not-so-faithful Shakers entering and exiting the society do not deserve to be branded as "apostates." Most short-term Believers possessed a very different mindset from that of the apostates. Shaker records provide insight into the reasons why many individuals came to the villages and spent time there and, in turn, why they departed.

What were the diverse motives of those entering the United Society of Believers? Some came looking for assistance—food, shelter, or clothing. The Believers had acquired a reputation for charity and hospitality. Immigrants (foreigners) were another subset along the same lines; they often wandered into the villages, probably without a specific sense of purpose. Others arriving were simply curious, having heard about the Believers and wanting to determine for themselves who these people were. Young persons formed a special group of newcomers, and a large group, too. They entered the villages under different circumstances. Some came on their own; others were brought by parents who wished to leave them or indenture them to the Shakers; still others were "gathered" by the Believers from nearby towns and cities. The most promising new arrivals, from the standpoint of the Shakers, fell into three other categories— those who initially planned to spend a Sabbath among the Shakers, and subsequently decided to stay longer; those who came with a positive disposition toward the society, having learned about it from some source before arriving, and then were confirmed in that judgment and stayed; and finally, those who came to the villages to visit members of their immediate or extended families and were persuaded to stay on.[20]

These last three categories provided the largest number of serious prospects for new converts, as examples drawn from the New Lebanon journals in the 1830s illustrate. On January 8, 1831, for instance, nine individuals from the area of Troy, New York, came and stayed at the South Family at the Watervliet village, the second site under the direct supervision of the central ministry. The ministry's journal described them as having "faith in the testimony" and as being desirous of getting more "information." Some of the nine were "connections & relatives" of the Wright children in the First Order. In September of the same year, it was reported that Rufus Crosman, Jr., came to see his relatives, already having "some

feeling to be a Shaker." In April 1833 the ministry noted that three of Pamilea Earl's sisters from Delaware walked sixty miles to be among the Believers. The youngest stayed, whereas the oldest "confessed her sins" to the ministry, but had a family and had to return to them. In November of the same year three male adult members of the Green family who lived near the Cohoes bridge came to the South Family at Watervliet; two days later the mother, five other children, and "one young man who had boarded" with the Green family also came. In June of 1839 the ministry reported that a family of four by the name of Harrison came to the Office; the wife was the niece of Henry Bennet. The children quickly formed a "very fast attachment" to the Believers.[21]

The same journals that report the steady stream of people entering the Shakers' villages also record the departure of individuals, couples, groups, and families from among the Believers. Short-term Shakers left for a variety of reasons and in very different ways. Those who came seeking assistance, for example, often exited when the problem was solved or when they saw little prospect of it being solved. Immigrants moved on, often looking for others of their own kind, perhaps someone who could speak their native language. The curious departed when they satisfied their curiosity about the Believers or when they discovered all they wished to know. Young persons were constantly exiting under almost every imaginable circumstance—carried off by their parents or guardians, sent away by the Shakers because they were rebellious or disobedient, or more commonly, running away on their own accord. Even most of those who came positively disposed toward the Believers eventually left because somehow the society failed to satisfy their hopes and desires or to fulfill their expectations. Hundreds of references to individuals and groups "going to the world"—the code words for "exiting from the society"—fill the Shaker records.[22]

Among the specific examples in the 1830 journals of the central ministry are the following. In July 1831 Flo' the Scotchman took his two boys and departed from the North Family at New Lebanon because he disliked working at hay in the late afternoon. He said he was not "fellowshiped in it." When David Taylor chose to leave in October of the same year, he settled with the deacons and then went to his parents. Abigail Navarro was "kidnapped" from Watervliet by her aunt and another person in June of 1833 while returning from school. A year earlier the sisters at the same location had sent Mary Train away from the village; likewise, a year later the elders purged "Benjamin Brant, [a] drunkard," from the midst of the faithful. When Garret Van Hoosen went to the world in February 1835, he returned four days later with four wagons to gather up his "moveable property." When Eliza Van Hauton made up her mind to leave in June of the same year, she stated that she was departing in order that she could "enjoy the flesh!" More commonly, short-term Believers followed the example of Charles Knight who "went off to the world" on June 17, 1836—"privately."[23]

Many journal entries record departures without commentary; others, however, include explicit condemnation of the individuals leaving. When the Believ-

ers transported Theodore Long back to his family in New York in 1835, for example, the ministry took note of his "base conduct." The society at Watervliet expelled Permilla Wicks in January 1837 because she was a "ring-leader of disorder & rebellion among the young females in the Second family." The next month Moses Sherman was dismissed for stealing. The same year Alexander McArthur was declared a "cider toper & a corrupter of the simple" and a "great affliction in the Second Family," and Thomas Munson was described as an unfaithful "cross-bearer" (meaning that he had trouble with celibacy). In March 1838 Elizabeth Hanford, a mentally unbalanced person, departed the community by hanging herself in an apple tree in the dooryard. She was denied funeral honors, according to the ministry, because she had "dishonored herself & the gospel." In August 1839 Elleyett Gibbs, who had figured prominently as a visionist during the Era of Manifestations, the period of Shaker history beginning in 1837 that witnessed an outburst of spiritualism, left the society because she was unwilling to abide by the strict standards of the Believers and "wanted the liberty of the world."[24]

But these departures were not the end of the story for some of the "not-so-faithful" Believers. Theodore Long, for example, who had been expelled because he "had violated the faith of the believers," one week later came back to the Office and asked to see Rufus Bishop in order to "get another privilege," but Bishop refused to see him. Three days later a man named Baird from Albany came to plead with the Believers to take Long back again, saying that he had attempted to commit suicide the previous day with a large dose of laudanum, a mixture of opium. It appears, however, that the elders did not bend on their decision. On other occasions they did. One man named "Old Jacob Adams," according to the ministry's journal, "took offence" and left the society on August 21, 1836, and went to his son's house. One day later he came back, "beg[g]ing on his knees to be restored," saying that he would "lick the soles" of the Shakers' feet if "he could by that means find his union." So the elders allowed him to return. Less than three months later a brief entry adds a final comment about this short-term Believer. It reads, "Old Jacob Adams took a walk to the world, had not far to go at the best."[25]

Two individuals, William Fairbanks and Sally Chase, left the society in the fall of 1836 and were married. A few weeks later they came back "in awful trouble of soul." Fairbanks "begged on his knees for a privilege to confess his sins to somebody—his very flesh quivered on his bones." But the elders told him it was "too late," that "he had made his own garment & he must now wear it." The two were sent away "without releasement." Three days later Fairbanks returned again and was allowed this time to confess his sins, but he had to provide a home for himself—he was not therefore readmitted fully to the society. Less than a month later the ministry took note of "unfavorable reports" concerning William Fairbanks.[26]

Why did the Shaker leaders even bother with these "not-so-faithful" Believers who violated the society's principles and rules? Why not cut off all contact

with such persons? It seems as though the members of the society were risking contamination themselves.

The treatment of Garret Van Hoosen illustrates how long-suffering and patient the ministry could be. Van Hoosen's first contacts with the South Family, or Gathering Order, at Watervliet occurred in November of 1824. Some ten years later he reappeared in the ministry journal when, it was reported, he had "imbibed a sense in opposition to the Order of believers." In November 1834 Rufus Bishop had a long conversation with him about the relationship between "republican government" and the "kingdom of Christ." Van Hoosen apparently was caught up in the democratic impulses of the day. Four days later it was reported that he planned to withdraw from the community and that he went to Albany "to find a place for himself, his wife & mother." One day later, before breakfast, Bishop learned that Van Hoosen, who had rented a house in Albany, "had recanted," saying that "he could not go away unless they carried him off." One hour later, after breakfast, Bishop was informed that Van Hoosen "had changed his mind & was bent on going off." Shortly after that another report came that he had changed his mind again and "could not go!" This "poor doubleminded man" (that is what Bishop called Van Hoosen) returned to Albany the next day and backed out of his rental agreement, seemingly ending the episode. But less than three months later Van Hoosen and his wife "went to the world." Several days later he and members of his extended family came with wagons to pick up his property.[27]

Similar movement is evident in the record of the efforts of the Train family to enter and reenter the society. Doubts and misgivings appear on both sides of the encounter. The journal kept by Rufus Bishop needs no commentary. January 1, 1832, "Mary Train at the Office, determined to winter here." January 2, "[T]he Sisters send Mary Train off this afternoon." March 17, "Baily, of Stephentown, brought Oliver Train to 2nd family's Office the 15th inst[ant] in a feeble & deranged condition—agreed to come after him next Wednesday." March 24, "Oliver Train returned to Stephentown yesterday with his things." April 14, "Oliver Train here yesterday & today." September 11, "E[lder] Br[other] Amos informs that Oliver Train came last night beg[g]ing & crying to get another trial." October 2, "Mary Train & her sister Lydia here today." October 10, "Oliver Train comes to the Office—sent a humble letter to me—I go & see him—he pleads hard for another privilege." October 11, "[T]his forenoon Oliver Train comes again today & pleads as before, & tries to cloke nearly all his bad conduct under mental derangement; but that is about the same as to say he has been crazy nearly the whole time since we became acquainted with him." April 24, 1833, "Poor Oliver Train is at the Office again pleading for another trial or privilege." July 26, "Oliver Train at the Office pleading for temporal & spiritual relief." October 28, "Oliver Train has been very crazy about 2 weeks. He threatened the life of his Sister Mary, had to be confined, & was last week, carried to Hudson for safety." February 25, 1835, "Elizabeth Train has been growing crazy for some time past, insomuch that she had to be confined," but she broke out and created a disturbance at the

meetinghouse. August 21, 1839, "[P]oor little Azubah Train became insane last Sabbath day night" and had to be confined.[28]

These episodes and others like them surely tried the patience of the Shaker ministry. So why did they carry on such deliberations and seemingly pointless efforts? The answer is clear. When a community produces no new members by birth, the future depends entirely upon converts. The pattern of conversion, deconversion, and reconversion—of coming, going, and coming again—was the best and only hope for the Shakers. They calculated on at least a few of the short-term Believers becoming long-term, or even lifelong, members. The odds were slim, the investment substantial, and the risk great; but the Believers had few other options. The ultimate hope for the society's survival lay in great part with these short-term Believers.

The evidence derived from the experiences of the short-term Shakers refutes the common estimation that the United Society of Believers managed to isolate its members from interaction and contact with the surrounding culture. On the contrary, what is evident is the porousness of the boundary separating the society from the world. Most of the records that speak of the "not-so-faithful" Believers document their direct contact with the more fully committed Shakers. Family contacts, work associations, recruitment efforts, disciplinary processes—these and other activities linked the two closely. In this interaction between the faithful and the "not-so-faithful" Believers, it was the latter who brought the world to the former even though the faithful attempted to make certain that they controlled the terms of the interaction.

From one ten-year period in the 1830s at New Lebanon, it is clear that the short-term Shakers defy easy categorization in terms of age, gender, class, or marital status. The United Society attracted a highly diverse group of inquirers who were looking for different things. Similarly, their reasons for departing from the society varied widely and included conflict with the community over living arrangements, discipline, work obligations, personal relationships, and sexual activity—to name but the most obvious areas in dispute. No single theory provides a sufficient explanation for this pattern of entrances and exits.

The case of the short-term Shakers is instructive in another way. From it we learn about the fluidity of categories. "Conversion" and "deconversion" are typically incremental and conditional rather than instantaneous and absolute. We in the late twentieth century ascribe more precision to these categories than do those undergoing the processes of conversion and deconversion. One "convert" may be only in the first stages of making a religious commitment; another "convert" may have reached a measure of conviction and certainty nearly unshakable. Yet the presence of genuine apostates is proof positive that conversion is never an absolute, not even after years of unwavering commitment. Similarly, an individual leaving a religious community, either of the short-term variety or an apostate, often measures the departure in terms of multiple steps taken from the community.

The mix of motives evident among the individuals entering the United Society in the 1830s almost guaranteed that the Shakers would be able to satisfy the concerns of some potential converts more easily than others. Those, for example, seeking short-term relief from specific hardships were more likely to find it among the Believers than those desiring an end to all stress, conflict, and interpersonal difficulties. In neither case were these individuals strong candidates for long-term membership in the United Society. Some might leave when free of the particular difficulties that brought them to the Believers, and others might exit when they discovered that the Shakers had not achieved a heaven on earth free from all problems.

The Shaker examples drawn from the ministry journals in the 1830s confirm this pattern of incoming expectations and outgoing frustrations. Individuals entering the Shaker villages came looking for something, and if they found it, they stayed. When the society no longer satisfied, the short-term Believers left. From the records it appears that only rarely was the decision to join or to leave instantaneous. In the case of Garret Van Hoosen, for example, what Rufus Bishop called "doublemindedness," more likely reflects Van Hoosen's attempts to think through his situation. His actions, in fact, demonstrate a rather responsible course of action. He sought out a residence for his family in Albany before leaving the village permanently. After leaving, he returned to gather his property. Van Hoosen left the Believers finally after he came to resent the authoritarian structure of the Shaker community. In that respect he was reflecting the cultural and political currents in Jacksonian America.[29]

It would be unfair to depict Shaker leadership in the 1830s as totally unbending and rigid, or as the principal cause of the exodus of "not-so-faithful" Believers. On the contrary, it is striking how tolerant and patient they appear in many of the records despite the harsh tone of the formal denunciations in the journals. Or to put the matter another way, the boundary separating the Believers and the world was far more permeable than is often depicted. The Shaker leaders made it astonishingly easy for short-term Believers to cross that line. They welcomed virtually all comers to their villages, even when their suspicions must have been high that the newcomers were not likely to become serious converts. And they granted repeated requests for "yet another privilege" made by individuals whose record for keeping their word or abiding by the covenant was spotty at best. They dealt charitably with cases involving special difficulties, such as the Train family which was plagued by mental instability. The only striking exception to this tolerance is the firm negative response consistently accorded by the ministry to genuine apostates, those who publicly sought to revile or damage the United Society.[30]

Most of those who came to the Shaker villages ultimately left. Only occasionally did the short-term Believers end up in the ranks of the lifetime Shakers. Therefore the short-term presence implied little about long-term commitment. But even the possibility of the latter had an impact on Rufus Bishop who

urged caution in talking about those who left the society on the chance that they might return. At the close of 1839, he wrote in the ministry journal, "Mother Ann wanted we should all remember that 'a wise head makes a close mouth,' & to be careful about making conversation with the worlds people concerning Apostates."[31]

In many respects the Shaker experience of the nineteenth century resembles that of other more recent sectarian groups—what sociologists and historians call "New Religious Movements" (NRM's), "intentional communities," and "alternative societies," and what journalists often pejoratively label "sects and cults." A great deal of research on such groups has taken place over the past three decades.[32] Some twentieth-century groups have been driven by conservative Christian values, others by liberal countercultural ideals, and still others by eastern mystical visions. Most of these communities have been short-lived, and relatively few have attracted attention to themselves. A handful became numerically significant and in that way entered our consciousness. A few, most notably the Peoples Temple at Jonestown, Guyana, and Mount Carmel at Waco, Texas, became notorious by virtue of their activities and by their tragic ends.[33] As a result, negative stereotypes about these groups abound within the general public.

The experiences of persons moving in and out of New Religious Movements today parallel those of the "not-so-faithful" Shakers in the nineteenth century. Individuals enter communes or intentional communities today for many of the same kinds of reasons that short-term Believers were motivated or impelled to join the United Society even though the world of the 1990s is very different from that of the 1830s. The need for physical security, the desire to be close to family members or to belong to a "family," the search for a higher purpose in life, the quest for answers to enduring questions—these universal pursuits persist even though the contexts have changed dramatically. Likewise, those leaving contemporary groups make their decisions on similar grounds as those who left the Shaker villages. The study of the processes of entering and of exiting provides insight into the relationship between conversion and deconversion.[34]

From contemporary studies, too, we learn that conversion and deconversion are of a piece with one another. Individuals enter religious communities and leave such communities for related reasons. They make up their minds to join a religious group by measuring the potential benefits and the risks. Similarly, disaffiliation involves a process of weighing the rewards of community life against other options. In much the same fashion that an individual explores a new community before making a commitment to join, so also when defecting, the person effects both a physical and a psychological separation. Those departing must sever their dependence on one community and reestablish some kind of independence or find an alternative support structure. They must fracture relationships with members of the society they are leaving, including the leaders, and establish new, equivalent links to others outside the community, whether it be to

family or to another alternative society. Deconversion is therefore often a slow and jerky process. It is not always easy to make a clean break.

This cost/benefit language may seem inappropriate to many when describing religious decisions. We are accustomed to thinking about the practical affairs of life in terms of such categories, but we exclude such terminology from use when talking about religious choices. Some persons do so because they attribute such decisions to the influence of higher powers, others because of the awkwardness of talking about spiritual topics in the language of supply-side economics. No such inhibitions operate among those who use economic models to analyze membership patterns.[35] It is precisely for that reason that evidence about the short-term Believers derived from Shaker journals becomes useful for contemporary studies. Side by side with the rational choice describable in terms of benefits and risks, we see the anguish of soul that frequently wracks individuals who are entering or leaving the society. The ordeal of the "not-so-faithful" can be measured in two different ways: by calculating deliberately the practical advantages and disadvantages that derive from membership, or by describing the personal satisfaction or turmoil that accompanies such a decision.

The Shaker experience at New Lebanon in the 1830s is therefore more revealing about the American way of religious affiliation than it might seem at first glance. Conversion, deconversion, and reconversion (CD&R) are a well-established pattern in almost every period of American history and among nearly all religious traditions. CD&R helps to explain the contemporary phenomenon known as "church hopping" as well as the return of "baby boomers" to the churches. CD&R sheds light on the unwillingness of many to identify themselves too closely with a particular denominational brand of Christianity. CD&R has implications for the way in which many church-going Americans provide financial support for the "virtual churches" represented by television preachers at the same time that they participate in a local congregation. And CD&R helps to explain the continuing attraction of secularization theory for observers of American culture who are misled by declining statistics in a few of the mainline religious communities. The often-unobserved truth is that in the United States it is as easy to deconvert or leave a religious tradition, and reconvert or join it again, as it is to convert or join a community for a first time—a fact that needs greater attention by those who study religion in American culture.

NOTES

1. "A Daily Journal of passing events Begun January the 1st 1830 By Rufus Bishop, in the 56th year of his age," Manuscript division, New York Public Library, March 1, 1831. Hereafter this manuscript is cited as "Central Ministry Journal, 1830-1839."

2. "Central Ministry Journal, 1830-1839," April 26, 1831, and April 18, 19, and 21, 1830.

3. I have examined closely select years at different sites, including one ten-year period at New Lebanon, the 1830s, using the central ministry's journal. These data are the primary source for the examples that follow in this essay.

4. In 1875 Charles Nordhoff defined "winter Shakers" as "the shiftless fellows who, as cold weather approaches, take refuge in Shaker and other communes, professing a desire to become members; who come at the beginning of winter, as a Shaker elder said to me, 'with empty stomachs and empty trunks, and go off with both full as soon as the roses begin to bloom.'" See Nordhoff, *The Communistic Societies of the United States* (New York, 1965), 395. See also Flo Morse, *The Shakers and the World's People* (Hanover, N.H., 1987), 113. For a contemporary example of the use of the theme of "winter Shakers" in fiction, see Deborah Woodworth, *Death of a Winter Shaker* (New York, 1997).

5. For example, Priscilla J. Brewer assumes that all persons leaving the villages are to be included in the "apostasy rate" that she calculates. See *Shaker Communities, Shaker Lives* (Hanover, N.H., 1986), 28.

6. John E. Murray, "Determinants of Membership Levels and Duration in a Shaker Commune, 1780-1880," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 34 (1995) 35. See William Sims Bainbridge, "Shaker Demographics, 1840-1900: An Example of the Use of U.S. Census Enumeration Schedules," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 21 (1982):352-365; and Brewer, *Shaker Communities*, 209-238.

7. John E. Murray, "Human Capital in Religious Communes: Literacy and Selection of Nineteenth Century Shakers," *Explorations in Economic History* 32 (1995) 217.

8. See Edward Deming Andrews, *The People Called Shakers: A Search for the Perfect Society* (New York, 1963), 193.

9 "A Daily Journal of passing events; begun May the 19th 1839 at Watervliet; By Rufus Bishop, in the 65th year of his age," Manuscript division, New York Public Library (Hereafter cited as "Central Ministry Journal, 1839-1850"), January 16 and August 16, 1844, August 24, 1847; Elisha [Pote] to Joseph Brackett, December 15, 1842, United Society of Shakers, Sabbathday Lake, Maine; and "A Register of Incidents and Events Being a Continuation of other Records kept by the Ministry Kept by Giles B. Avery Commenced Oct 20th 1859," Manuscript division, New York Public Library, April 22 and May 3-4, 1863.

10. For examples of Shaker use of the term "apostate," see "Central Ministry Journal, 1830-1839," April 5 and May 24, 1836, March 21 and April 2, 1838, and April 14, 1839; and "Central Ministry Journal, 1839-1850," August 27, 1839.

11. Murray, "Determinants of Membership," 42.

12. Murray, "Human Capital," 219.

13. For an excellent summary describing the historical usage of the concept of apostasy in Christianity as well as in Greek and Roman religions, Judaism, and Islam, see H.G. Kippenberg's entry on "Apostasy" in *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, edited by Mircea Eliade (16 vols., New York, 1987), I:353-356.

14. *Ibid.*

15. Reuben Rathbun, *Reasons Offered for Leaving the Shakers* (Pittsfield, Mass., 1800). On Rathbun, see also Brewer, *Shaker Communities*, 56-57; and Clarke Garrett, *Spirit Possession and Popular Religion: From the Camisards to the Shakers*, (Baltimore, 1987), 233-234.

16. Rathbun, *Reasons*, 3-6.

17. *Ibid.*, 13-15, 26-28.

18. Mary Marshall Dyer, *A Portraiture of Shakerism, Exhibiting a General View of their Character and Conduct, from the First Appearance of Ann Lee in New-England, down to the Present Time. And Certified by many Respectable Authorities* (N.p., 1822), v. On Dyer, see also Lawrence Foster, *Religion and Sexuality: Three American Communal Experiments of the Nineteenth Century* (New York, 1981, 51-53. For a very useful analysis of the writings to two prominent female Shaker apostates, see Jean M. Humez, "'A Woman Might to Pull You Down': Married Women's Rights and Female Anger in the Anti-Shaker Narratives of Eunice Chapman and Mary Marshall Dyer," *Journal of Women's History* 6:2 (1994): 90-110.

19. Brewer, *Shaker Communities*, 92.

20. The special dilemma of immigrants is evident in this set of entries. On May 4-5, 1837, Rufus Bishop told of the arrival of three Germans who spoke no English. Two days later he recorded that "the 3 strangers from Germany were at the public meeting & gave solemn attention, but I suppose they could understand nothing only by sight & feeling." The next day he recorded the departure of "the young German." See "Central Ministry Journal, 1830-1839," May 4-5, and 7-8, 1837. The inability of the Shakers to communicate with persons who did not speak English limited the society's prospect for converts from those ranks.

21. "Central Ministry Journal, 1830-1839," January 8 and September 24, 1831; April 30 and November 10 and 12, 1833; and "Central Ministry Journal, 1839-1850," June 27, 1839. For general

background on the society's situation in the antebellum years, see Stephen J. Stein, *The Shaker Experience in America: A History of the United Society of Believers*, (New Haven, 1992), 119-237.

22. The use of force to attempt removal of family members from the society is illustrated in the following entry. "Brother John F. returned from Watervliet brought word that Mariah Webster was kidnapped by her mother, but after having her clothes torn made her escape. The mother came in deceit, pretended great satisfaction with the condition of her 3 daughters & one little son among Believers, exhorted them to be good & obedient, & requested the Sisters to be Mothers to them—Said she was going to the South House to see her Daughter Eliza, & requested Mariah to meet her at a certain gate, where lo! she had a carriage & 2 men, one white & the other black, prepared to take her. Mariah seeing this fled home—her mother persued & laid hands on her daughter, but was prevented from taking her away; she then threatened highly that she would spend her heart's blood & burn their buildings before she would give her up &c &c. This took place the present week" ("Central Ministry Journal, 1830-1839," August 17, 1833).

23. "Central Ministry Journal, 1830-1839," July 25 and October 5, 1831; January 2, 1832; June 28, 1833; May 27, 1834; February 13 and 17 and June 1, 1835, and June 17, 1836.

24. "Central Ministry Journal, 1830-1839," March 21, 1835; January 17, February 20, and March 18 and 24, 1837; and March 29 and 30, 1838; and "Central Ministry Journal, 1839-1850," August 3, 1839.

25. "Central Ministry Journal, 1830-1839," March 28 and 31, 1835; August 22 and November 18, 1836.

26. "Central Ministry Journal, 1830-1839," November 16 and 19, and December 9, 1836.

27. "Central Ministry Journal, 1830-1839," November 20, 24, 25, and 26, 1834; February 12, 17, and 18, 1835. Information concerning Van Hoosen's first visits to the Shakers is found in the manuscript collection of the Western Reserve Historical Society, Cleveland, Ohio, in section III B 35, pp. 9 and 46.

28. "Central Ministry Journal, 1830-1839," January 1 and 2, March 17 and 24, April 14, September 11, October 2, 10, and 11, 1832; April 24, July 26, and October 28. 1833; February 25, 1835; and August 21, 1839.

29. See above, note 23.

30. For example, sixteen apostates signed a "Memorial" against the society that was circulated in Albany. See "Central Ministry Journal, 1830-1839," March 21 and April 2, 1838.

31. "Central Ministry Journal, 1839-1850," December 29, 1839.

32. Two diverse examples of research dealing with marginal religious communities in the United States are R. Laurence Moore, *Religious Outsiders and the Making of Americans*, (New York, 1986), and Timothy Miller, ed., *America's Alternative Religions*, (Albany, New York, 1995). Numerous articles on related topics appear in the *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*.

33. See, for example, David Chidester, *Salvation and Suicide: An Interpretation of Jim Jones, the Peoples Temple, and Jonestown* (Bloomington, Ind., 1988); and James R. Lewis, ed., *From the Ashes: Making Sense of Waco* (Lanham, Md., 1994).

34. See, for example, Janet Liebman Jacobs, "Deconversion From Religious Movements: An Analysis of Charismatic Bonding and Spiritual Commitment," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 26 (1987) 294:308; Jacobs, *Divine Disenchantment: Deconverting from New Religions* (Bloomington, Ind., 1989); and "Four Studies of Religious Defection and Disaffiliation," in *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 28 (1989) 162-229. *Divine Disenchantment* contains an extensive bibliography on the topic of deconversion. See also Robert W. Balch, "'When the Light Goes Out, Darkness Comes': A Study of Defection from a Totalistic Cult," in *Religious Movements: Genesis, Exodus, and Numbers*, ed., Rodney Stark, (New York, 1985), 11-63; Eileen Barker, "The Ones Who Got Away: People Who Attend Unification Workshops and Do Not Become Moonies," in *ibid.*, 65-93; Stuart A. Wright, *Leaving Cults: The Dynamics of Defection*, (Washington, D.C., 1987); and Thomas Robbins, *Cults, Converts & Charisma*, (London, 1988).

35. For example, see the provocative volume by Roger Finke and Rodney Stark, *The Churching of America 1776-1990: Winners and Losers in Our Religious Economy*, (New Brunswick, N.J., 1992).