Taking leave of Damanhur. Deconversion from a magico-esoteric community

(Article begins on next page)

07 January 2023

Article

Taking leave of Damanhur. Deconversion from a magico-esoteric community

Mario CARDANO
Torino University, Italy

Nicola PANNOFINO
Torino University, Italy

Abstract

This article deals with an aspect of religious behavior that has remained in the shadows, both in the scientific literature and in public discourse: deconversion from New Religious Movements. The article analyses the deconversion from a magico-esoteric community located in Northern Italy: Damanhur. Founded in the 1970s, Damanhur is one of Europe's major spiritual communities that counts about 400 devotees. The article starts with an outline of the process of deconversion, followed by a brief description of the religious organization studied. Lastly, the process of disaffiliation from Damanhur, is reconstructed, through the close reading of twenty narratives of deconversion of former Damanhurians interviewed in 2010. The process of deconversion is analysed, distinguishing four ideal-typical steps that repropose the main results of the research in this field. They are the coming out of a vague and unfocused discomfort; the attempt to deconstruct the discomfort; the opening of a reflexive instance; and the departure from the community.

Introduction

This article will deal with an aspect of religious behaviour that has remained in the shadows, both in the scientific literature and in public discourse: deconversion from a religious organization and, more particularly, from a New Religious Movement (hereafter, NRM).[1] Deconversion from NRMs is an action that bridges two turning points (see Bonica and Cardano, 2008). The closer of the two, leaving the NRM, entails a thorough reshaping of the identity of the ex-devotee, who is abandoning, not only his former brethren, but also an entire set of beliefs and a specific 'emotional regime' (Riis and Woodhead, 2010). This redefining of the self comes after another process of metanoia: that took place at the time of conversion, whereby the protagonists of the life transition in question became part of another world, part of a religious organization which can be regarded as, in David Bromley's words, 'subversive' (1998: 23).

The deconversions examined here have taken shape in a religious organization, Damanhur in Northern Italy, a country where Catholicism is unquestionably dominant. In such a setting, and given the doctrinal content of the spiritual teachings purveyed by this magico-esoteric community, proselytes to this NRM must necessarily undergo a radical change of identity. The hostility, as it were, of the religious field (*sensu* Bourdieu, 1971) surrounding Damanhur contributes to making this organization – which in this respect is not unlike the majority of NRMs – a 'greedy' institution (*sensu* Coser, 1974), or, with Skonovd 'totalist' (Skonovd, 1981, cited in Currie, 2016: 53), which demands that prospective members make a commitment that often extends past the spiritual level to encompass the social plane. This accounts for the radical character of the second turning point, the deconversion, which calls for yet another and perhaps an even more radical redefinition of self.

In the following pages, we will begin with an outline of the process of deconversion, followed by a brief description of the religious organization that provides the stage on

which the deconversions examined here are acted out. Lastly, we will analyze the process of exiting from Damanhur, reconstructed from the narratives of twenty former Damanhurians interviewed in 2010.[2]

Deconversion from New Religious Movements

Deconversion, like most kinds of role exit, is not a single event, but a process (see Barbour, 1994; Brinkerhoff and Burke, 1980; Ebaugh, 1988; Jacobs, 1987; Skonovd, 1981; Streib and Keller, 2004; Wright, 1991). Converting to an NRM – as we have said – is a choice that goes against the flow, and requires a great deal of identity work and affective investment on the part of the person who chooses to convert. Accordingly, the first doctrinal doubts, or the first cracks appearing in the relationship with the other brethren, do not result in immediate disaffiliation. Rather, the emergence of misgivings, or more generically, of a vague sense of unease that clouds the devotee's spiritual experience, leads first to an effort at reparation, whereby – as in a marriage in crisis (see Wright, 1991) – the doubter tries to patch things up, letting the optimism of will prevail over the pessimism of reason. This is linked to another feature of the process of deconversion, its reliance on negotiation (Brinkerhoff and Burke, 1980). The decision to leave the religious organization is reached in the course of intense social interactions, first among the devotee who harbors doubts and the other members, and then extending to outside agents, family members and, at times, anti-cult associations.

Under closer scrutiny, deconversion is the outcome of a process of deconstructing commitment that unwinds on several levels: the social level of belonging, the intellectual level of belief, and the emotional level of feeling (Brinkerhoff and Burke, 1980; Ebaugh, 1988; Mauss, 1969; Streib, 2014). On this latter level, that of the emotions, deconstruction concerns not only the emotions elicited by social relationships with the other brethren and – where present – the leader, but also those that take shape in the relationship with the supernatural, which make up the experience of the sacred (see Riis and Woodhead, 2010: 7). In general terms, the process of deconstructing commitment does not necessarily proceed at the same rate on the emotional, cognitive, moral and social levels. The voluntary disaffiliation, the withdrawal from social involvement can precede – as Brinkerhoff and Burke point out – the erosion of belief and vice versa, just as falling out of tune with the religious organization's 'emotional regime' (Riis and Woodhead, 2010) can trigger the process of deconversion. Lastly, it should be emphasized that the process of deconversion must not be seen only as a defeat, as the failure of the project of salvation that was embraced at the time of conversion. It can also be regarded as a success (Jacobs, 1987), as the resolution of a profound cognitive and emotional dissonance, as the only possible solution to the conflict between brotherhood and authority (Wright, 1988: 147).

The characterization of the deconversion process proposed here posits a formal analogy with the process of conversion. Conversion to an NRM is voluntary (Dawson, 1998), and it entails a series of steps (Lofland and Stark, 1965). Also, like the process of deconversion, conversion is not linear: it is interactive and rooted in negotiation (Dawson, 1998), taking place on the social, intellectual and emotional levels, though not necessarily with a uniform impact on each. And, *pace* the anti-cult movements, not even the

conversion to an NRM can be seen as a defeat, viz., the defeat of reason, as the brainwashing theory would have us believe. Nevertheless, deconversion has its specific nature in the 'conversion career' (Gooren, 2010), which makes it more than simply going back and retracing the process of conversion in the opposite direction. With deconversion, the disaffected believer does *not* return to the starting point that led him/her to join an NRM in the first place. The defector's task – often an arduous one – is to incorporate his/her past in the new identity (Ebaugh, 1988: 5), to deal with the 'residues' of the role that was left behind – at times burying them, at times putting them to good use – in order to reconstruct her/his everyday existence, with its social, affective and professional relationships.

Damanhur, the city of light

Located a few kilometers from Torino in Valchiusella, Damanhur is one of Europe's major spiritual communities (see Cardano, 1997; Cardano and Pannofino, 2015; Del Re and Macioti, 2013; Pace, 2000). Damanhur is home to just under 400 'citizens' who have embraced the community's spiritual project with a solemn vow binding them to the mysteries of Horusian magic. Gravitating around this core of devotees, a larger group of sympathizers and supporters attend the courses and seminars organized by the community or go for treatment at the Damanhur Centers, where the community's healers practice various types of alternative medicine. This outer circle (consisting respectively of 'audience members' and 'clients', to use the terminology proposed by Stark and Bainbridge, 1985) can be estimated at around 500 or 600 people, though the community's leaders put the number much higher.

The settlement at the heart of the community was inaugurated on 26 December 1979. The Damanhur project dates to a few years earlier, when Oberto Airaudi, the community's founder, set up the 'Horus Center for Parapsychological and Esoteric Research' in July 1975. At the same time that the first dwellings were built, construction began – in secret – on an underground temple that was to become the main theatre of the great work of magic that the Damanhurians hope to realize: the rebirth of God. The Damanhur of the pioneers was an austere place, run on almost military lines by Airaudi, who thus intended to emphasize the distance that separated his idea of community from that of the hippy communes. This first season in the history of Damanhur came to an end in 1983, when the 'Game of Life' was initiated. Airaudi, accompanied by several disciples, set out across Italy in a camper van, spreading the word and recruiting those – young people for the most part – who had nurtured an interest in the community in that period. It was a true call to arms, an appeal to join in a magic battle to save humanity and the planet. The 'Game of Life' brought new blood to Damanhur, and with this a new community climate, made of artistic creativity and spiritual effervescence. This all changed five years later, with an about-face by Airaudi, who decided that the community's activities should be made more profitable, and introduced increasingly tight forms of control over the citizens. Things changed again in July 1992, when, following an anonymous tip-off by a disaffiliate, the underground temple became publicly known. This breach of secrecy and the authorities' threat to demolish the temple forced a change in Damanhur's communication with the external public. Damanhur opened its doors to the outside world

to display, not only the wonders of the temple, but also the moral solidity of its way of life. This was flanked by a renewal of the spirit of the 'Game of Life': economic pressures were relaxed and the creative impetus that had marked the community's second season returned. This impetus faded a few years later, in 1998, with the introduction of increasingly stringent rules governing the initiate's progress, dictated by the establishment of a new pathway to spiritual self-improvement and a new institution for overseeing it, the 'Tecnarcato'. This pathway – introduced in 2001 – was intended to meet the need to raise the spiritual level of the initiates, who are required to match the devotional commitments they have assumed with their everyday conduct. It is in this period of the community's history that our interviewees were bringing the process of withdrawal from Damanhur that had begun some years earlier to an end. The last major milestone in Damanhur's history was the death of its founder in June 2013, after which the community was run by the disciples who had been closest to the master. This latest chapter in the Damanhur story, as it followed the events narrated by our interviewees, will not be discussed in these pages.

The organization of the community has changed over time, as the number of its members grew and the spiritual project that informs it evolved. Despite these changes, a number of features that can be seen as distinctive to Damanhur have remained constant. The first organizational trait that deserves mention is the secrecy that surrounds the community's doctrine and ritual practices. Damanhur is – to all intents and purposes – a secret society, where what is secret is not the fact that individuals have joined, but the activities that the members engage in (Simmel, 1950). From the very beginning, Damanhur's organization has been based on the combination of two distinct political frameworks, one designed to govern the spiritual progress of the *initiates*, the other dealing with the social, economic and political relationships between the *citizens*. For both areas of governance, Damanhur has established a group of institutions that regulate the Damanhurians' conduct through a set of normative apparatuses and roles. Today, Damanhur refers to itself as a federation, based on an organized group of communities. From the economic standpoint, Damanhur supports itself by combining the income from the businesses operated by the community with members' earnings from their outside jobs.

The spiritual heart of Damanhur is the 'School of Meditation', the ritual context in which the knowledge required of initiates is transmitted. In addition to the School, Damanhur has two other institutions governing spiritual development: the 'Game of Life', which is intended to encourage change, and the 'Tecnarcato', which fosters the devotees' individual renewal and self-improvement. Alongside these three 'pillars', there are a number of 'initiate pathways', each focusing on a specific aspect of the Horusian doctrine.

We will conclude with a brief description of the Horusian doctrine. The belief system that guides magic action in the city of light is a heterogeneous set of doctrinal elements that has grown in complexity over the years. In its first formulation, the 'Horusian philosophy' was built up around the topics typical of the Western esoteric tradition. In the initial core of Horusian thought, we thus find Egypt and the hermetic tradition, a few nods to the Orient of the Theosophists, the more vivid elements of the druidic tradition (elves, fairies and nature spirits), together with borrowings from Masonic initiation

practices and ritual models. A number of other elements were later adapted with a very free hand and grafted onto this core. In line with the spirit of the theosophists, the Horusian doctrine embraced the sciences, and in particular, the new physics, which in outlook and the issues it addresses is close to mysticism. Airaudi formulated his own 'esoteric physics', applying a para-scientific approach to esoteric cosmogony, indicating formulas and causal or acausal mechanisms behind the creation of the visible and invisible worlds. Following along these lines, Airaudi adopted the idea of time travel and, thanks to the possibilities that this 'technology' holds out, proposed to resuscitate the culture of Atlantis, as reconstructed by a purported journey to the lost city. More recently, the Horusian philosophy drew on some of the notions advanced by the UFO cults in the theory of 'alien insemination', which enables initiates to host the spirit of an alien entity in their own body.

This jumble of sources serves (and from many points of view, is forced into service) to give shape to two key concepts in Airaudi's thought, the creation and control of the divinities, on the one hand, and the battle with an evil entity, the Enemy, on the other. In the former area, Horusian thought deploys a composite version of theurgic magic, in which two threads of discourse are intertwined but only loosely connected. In the first, theurgic magic is a means of governing divinities; in the second, magic strives for the full expression of the divinity inhabiting the initiate. In the first case, the magus wins control over the deity, in the second the magus becomes God. This is the cosmic scenario surrounding the figure of the Enemy. Akin to the divine, the Enemy, as the absolute principle of evil, inhabits the subtle world, but also lives in man. In its first guise, the Enemy is the adversary in the many magic battles fought in the community against anything and everything that stands in the way of the fulfilment of the Damanhur project. In its second guise, the Enemy is that part of each initiate's self that prevents full spiritual development, that part which causes the initiate to enter into friction with the community's social and spiritual organization, and, lastly, it is what each Damanhurian becomes when he decides to leave the community (Cardano and Pannofino, 2015).

Damanhur can be considered as the most populous and longeval spiritual community in Italy. This guarantees an obvious centrality in the Italian NMRs field, but not without some ambiguity.[3] Damanhur tends to define its doctrine as a philosophy and not as a religion, and this creates some little frictions with the NMRs that insist on their religious profile. At the same time, the rigidity imposed by the Rule of a 'monastery for families' (as Damanhur defines itself), generates some hostility from the cultural area that Heelas and Woodhead (2005) define as 'subjective life spirituality', part of the variegated world of New Age.

Narratives of deconversion

Before analyzing the epilogue of the 'conversion career' of our respondents, an overview of the social profile of the community members seems necessary. For this purpose, the data of a survey, carried out in Damanhur in 1992 by one of the authors of this work will be analyzed (Cardano, 1997). The questionnaire, designed with the cooperation of a little group of devotees, was filled up by 163 out of 203 (79%) of the adult people who lived in the community at that time.[4] The sociodemographic profile of the community members

shows high heterogeneity by age and sex. The Horus's devotees had an education level higher than the general population (described by the 1991 Population Census), even though they come from low educated families. For more than two-thirds of them, affiliation to the community came when they were between 20 and 30, but there were late conversions as well, after forty (7%). Three-quarters of the Damanhur citizens joined the community after having gone through other religious universes, first the Judeo-Christian one (68%). A small quota of devotees, 18%, reached Damanhur starting from a form of privatized religiosity, and another 9% starting from positions of agnosticism or atheism. About the conversion's motives, for more than 70% of the devotees, they were spiritual, dictated, now by the attraction to spiritual research proposed at Damanhur (26%); now from the fascination of magic practices (26%); now from the paranormal and from the hope to enhance the power of their own mind (10%); now by a combination of the above mentioned motives (9%). Besides these spiritual reasons, some more secular motives were active. About 29% of the converts have found two main reasons to join Damanhur, the charm of the communitarian life, or the attraction for a profound relationship with nature. The reasons for joining Damanhur, reconstructed by the respondents from the new vantage point of disaffiliated, overlap with the ones mentioned above, although distributed otherwise. As reasons for their previous affiliation to Damanhur, the deconverts recognize the charm of a different spiritual experience, the attraction of the paranormal, and the enchantment for the communitarian life. Our 20 respondents are distributed in a balanced way between these three classes of affiliation reasons. This was the antecedent; now we can focus on the last step of the conversion career of the former members of Damanhur we interviewed.

The narratives of deconversion we collected describe a process that is at once prolonged, tortuous and dramatic.[5] We can discern – at least on an ideal-typical level – four different steps in this process. The first step is that of discomfort, an unease, often vague and unfocused, which first manifests itself on the emotional plane, as a tension between the emotions that are actually felt and those that are dictated by Damanhur's 'emotional regime' (Riis and Woodhead, 2010). This emotional tension frequently has repercussions on the cognitive plane, triggering doubts about the appropriateness of one's decision to convert, and/or the promise of salvation held out by Damanhur. At times, this discomfort can make it difficult to stay with the other brethren, at other times it leads to types of 'heretical' conduct (Brinkerhoff and Burke, 1980) that are at odds with the expectations associated with initiate status. From its first step, the depictions of the process involve three analytical levels, reflecting three dimensions of religious defection (Mauss, 1969): the intellectual, the emotional and the social. Nadia offers an effective illustration of this discomfort.[6]

> After the early honeymoon period (…) I started – unconsciously – to notice the contradictions. Because in this film, there were a number of gaps. But the incredible thing was, that these things I had felt, at the rational level I had set them aside. Because the power of this film was so great that it overcame everything that could call it into question. I would say: 'it can't be that way! I'm the one that doesn't understand'. Because in the community, that's the way doubts work: if you don't understand it's because you're not yet capable of understanding. And I was well indoctrinated by the School of Meditation – and it was no accident that the School was

scripting the whole screenplay for this film. (…) I went on for years without realizing that I was inside *The Truman Show* (Nadia).[7]

In the second step, the initiate and the community deconstruct the discomfort, in an attempt to restore the enthusiasm felt at the time of conversion and to recreate, if not the 'honeymoon' atmosphere, at least a hope that it will return. The fact that Damanhur makes no provision for legitimizing doubt, which is seen as the mark of the Enemy, means that this effort at reparation falls chiefly to the initiate. The community – its leading figures, the master, the other brethren – begins to take an interest only when clear though still involuntary signs of unease on the part of the initiate emerge. This effort at reparation involves the initiate on all of the three planes or dimensions mentioned above: the emotional, the intellectual and the social. On the emotional plane, reparation consists of suppressing the dissonance between the initiate's emotions and the emotional regime that prevails in the community. This translates into suppressing the inappropriate emotions, mainly disenchantment and the feeling of inadequacy, and replacing them with others in line with Damanhur's emotional regime: enchantment, wonder, and pride, dictated by a sense of belonging to the group of the elect who are called to promote the rebirth of the God. Where this is not possible, the bond with Damanhur is protected through a process of self-blame, as is well illustrated by Valeria.

> The first big crisis I had, but I wasn't, uhm, able to recognize the root cause, I still penalized myself. In the sense that, even though I was upset with Damanhur and with what he [*Airaudi*] did, said, and so forth – because I felt that something wasn't quite right – (…) I continued to blame myself. (Valeria).

On the intellectual plane, reparation strives to reduce the dissonance between the representation of Damanhur that inspired conversion and that which emerges from the initiate's experience in the period of misgivings, of that vague unease that triggered the disaffiliation process. How this is done, the mechanisms for easing the tensions between conflicting beliefs, are aptly described by Nadia and Ezio.

> I had everything I needed to know to understand that it was a put-on, and I refused to see that because I needed it, or because they created that need in me. (…) Because when you want to believe in a thing, you believe in that thing. And Damanhur makes sure that you want to believe in Damanhur, and when you start believing, you're done for. (Nadia).

> If I think about it, when I first came to Damanhur I already saw and felt certain things, that – paying a bit more attention to them – when I left, it was precisely because of those things that I left. Things I had felt when I came and that I didn't like. But you're so enthusiastic, you're so motivated, that it gives you reasons not to see those things, or in any case to notice only the positive ones. (Ezio).

The procedure described by Nadia is an almost perfect instance of wishful thinking, the illusion that has us believing what we want to believe. Ezio describes the mechanism that makes this possible, the selective exposure to information, that leads us to pay attention only to the things that corroborate our desires, ignoring whatever runs counter to them.

On the social plane, reparation relies on two strategies, both intended to lessen the sense of difficulty in staying with the other brethren: the strategies of distance and – paradoxically – of closeness. In the strategy of closeness, the initiates throw themselves wholeheartedly into exercises of social participation, of overcommitment, in an effort to lessen that vague unrest they are hoping to overcome. The strategy of distance consists of two lines of conduct, both designed to counter the normative pressures exerted on citizens of Damanhur. With the first line of conduct, the initiate defends himself, reducing social relations to the greatest possible extent by carving out a niche at the margins of the community (see Streib and Keller, 2004: 191). With the second, the normative pressure is opposed more directly, at times by circumventing, at times by infringing the rules governing life at Damanhur, or in other words by resorting to 'practices of resistance' (*sensu* Foucault, 1976), whether public or private.

Efforts at reparation on the part of the community (by the master and his prominent disciples) are based on small rewards – small in the eyes of the deconverts, at least – and on assigning responsibility, as referred to by Stefano and Osvaldo in the quotations below.

> Crises have to be provided for in a system of control. They're overcome by giving you a little more energy, more attention in the moments of crisis. When someone's in crisis, he's given a bit of energy, of attention. Once the period of crisis is over, they've already got you on the program! (Stefano).

> [Airaudi] puts you in a position where you're responsible for a program, for a project that might be real or it might not, you at the time see it as *real* and so you feel the responsibility that's assigned to you. Handling this responsibility is a *very big* thing, in the sense that you feel that you've also been given responsibility for others who aren't those who live in the community, but for the *whole world*! (Osvaldo).

At times, in addition to rewarding the devotee, the internal stresses that arise are transferred outside the community, bearing out Coser's insights regarding the positive functions of conflict (Coser, 1956). This is how Luca describes the process:

> Everything that could become a social mechanism of stress within the community is diluted, looking for an outside enemy to fight. And this is what all systems of power do. We look for a common enemy so that we can control each other, manage each other. And so you go look for evil outside. (Luca).

When these practices of reparation fail, the first two steps in the process go into a loop, with the emergence of discomfort and the attempt to ease it repeating themselves, first one and then the other, over and over. Repeated failures at reparation, together with the fatigue that the attempts involve, lead to the third step, when an opening for reflection appears, making room for the skepticism that will culminate in defection from Damanhur. The appearance of this reflexive opening is accompanied by a radical shift in the strategies for coping with the conflict between expectations fueled by the decision to convert, and the actual experience at the community. Whereas the emotional, intellectual and social *effort* in the reparation stage was oriented towards reinforcing the ties to

Damahur, in the stage following the reflexive opening, the initiate's effort consists of calling these ties into question through a critical scrutiny of everything underlying them.

The factors that the interviewees identify as being capable of providing a reflexive opening fall into five categories. The first includes time-related factors, i.e., those that come into being simply through the passage of time (cf. Ebaug, 1988: 129–130). Acquiring greater intellectual maturity, for those who joined Damanhur at a very young age; achieving greater mastery of the language, for those who came to Damanhur from another country, are two examples of this type. The second category consist of factors that made it possible to break out of the social isolation that joining Damanhur led to for all our interviewees (see Wright, 1988). These opportunities for breaking out of isolation chiefly consist of going out of the community, even if only for short periods or part of the day. This is the case, for example, of Valeria, for whom starting a new job outside the community provided a more critical perspective, or of Irene, who went back to university as an adult.

> I started working outside (…) and so I started seeing a piece of another world. It's not as if I liked it particularly, because in any case I've always cherished Damanhur, you might say. But in a way I started to think, about the differences, about things, about what I could and couldn't do, and so forth. (Valeria).

> And there I found a strength, an interior, intellectual strength that let me see how things really were. Like, I remember that I was just like a small child, everything I read, studied, learned opened my mind. I was really greedy for this knowledge. Because everything managed to put the pieces back together for me. Like, I found the explanations I was looking for. (Irene).

The third category includes factors that interrupt *negotium* and awaken the skepticism buried deep in the initiates' bodies. Here, we refer to the sudden appearance of health problems, whether serious or less so, that, abetted by the lowering of the expectations associated with one's role, make room for that *otium*, that critical outlook, which drives devotees to leave the community. Luca speaks eloquently of his experience in this respect:

> I was lucky enough not be ill very often, not to have fevers (…) Six years ago I had a fever and I realized that it was a fever that was teaching me, it was trying to explain things … And this fever – in one night and one morning – made me think about my life and after two days I decided to change it completely. And so [I said to myself]: 'I'm not all of those things they propose to me, I'm something else, I don't recognize myself in this and so I'll say a fond farewell to everybody and go my own way. I'll go where my heart takes me. Not where fear takes me. (Luca).

The fourth category consists of various kinds of shock that clash with the initiate's role; shocks arising from events and situations that challenge our interviewees' spiritual and social convictions, forcing them to take a hard, critical look at Damanhur. What all of these situations have in common is the conflict arising between the master's words and daily practice, which translates into an attack on the implicit component of faith (*sensu* Weber, 1922, English translation 1978), the faith held, not in the professed doctrine, but

in the spiritual authority that preaches it. Here, an exemplary case is that of an episode mentioned by more than one of our interviewees, when one of the community's administrators (in Damanhur's jargon, a King Guide) who had fallen out of favor with the master was dethroned. Among the critical elements cited by our interviewees that can be classified as shocks to the initiate's role, mention should also be made of the emergence of doctrinal or social innovations that – *immediately* – grate against the devotees' expectations. Usually, the critical scrutiny of the community's doctrine and social order begins after a reflexive opening appears. By contrast, what we will discuss below are themselves agents that trigger the critical attitude that leads to deconversion. The master's singular invention of a machine for multiplying money falls into this category. Margherita has this to say about the powers of this machine and the impact that its introduction to Damanhur had on some of the devotees:

> The thing that kind of opened my eyes was that evening of Mediation (…) They showed us a video where he [*Airaudi*] told us that he had discovered a machine – practically – for making money. (…) And he says to us that he has discovered this way of making money, and thanks to this way, he had been able to have a lot, and thus many of Damanhur's expenses – which if we couldn't afford them – we had managed to afford. And that, though, was an alarm bell, I said: 'but how does he copy money?'. I mean, as long as we're talking about the big things, well and good, but if then we start talking about these things … (Margherita).

Margherita is very clear in maintaining that as long as the willingness to believe centers on the 'big things', meaning Damanhur's cosmological myths and theurgic magic, everything is fine. But when these lofty considerations give way to material concerns, and to something as material as money, it is far more difficult to have faith. The fifth and last category consists of the factors that bring about a reflexive opening when a conflict emerges between the Damanhurian's main (and in many respects all-embracing) role and the other roles that our interviewees occupy at the same time. The fields in which these conflicts arise are, with Smelser, those of love and work (see Smelser, 1980). In the first area, tensions build up as the roles of child, spouse and parent enter into a collision course with the role of the initiate who is wholly devoted to Damanhur. Tensions in work roles are mentioned by interviewees who have an independent activity in the community. Here, the problem arose and – together with other experiences – provided a reflexive opening when the master asserts his authority by interfering in how businesses are run: 'you're the head of a company, but somebody else is calling the shots' (Alessandro).

Just as the reparation stage can either overcome the feeling of discomfort or cause it to return, the appearance of a reflexive opening may lead to a retreat into inertia, leaving everything the way it was before this little ripple passed through the lives of the initiates, or it may add to reasons for disaffiliation. It goes without saying that, for our interviewees, the outcome was the latter: all of this led to the fourth and final stage of the process of deconversion, leaving the community.

In this last stage of the deconversion process, our interviewees prepare their departure. To this end, they must cut their ties with the community and, at the same time, build a not-too-shaky gangway that will enable them to clamber back into the world they left behind when they joined Damanhur. In the first line of action, breaking the initiates'

vows and achieving the ability to face the costs are crucial. These costs, compared to those commonly incurred by defectors from other 'greedy institutions' (Coser, 1974), differ in their expression. They are magico-spiritual costs that consist – according to the Horusian doctrine – in the annihilation of the soul of anyone who fails to fulfil the vows. This drastic punishment is expressly mentioned by half of our interviewees. The question of spiritual sanctions for breaking the vows is also linked to the fear of magical retaliation, in the shape of curses and death spells. There is no need to take a stance regarding the actual efficacy of these threats to recognize that they have an impact on those who believe in them. Believing oneself to be targeted by magical action does not necessarily mean that the threat can really be carried out. What is real is the terror elicited by these threats, and the anger – fueled by the conviction of having paid the consequences – felt by everyone who, true to the Thomas Theorem – *believes* that the threats are real.

Deconstructing the bond with the community is also a question of loosening the affective ties. In this connection, our interviewees' narratives testify to the gradual 'secularization' of the master's image and the links with the other brethren. Once the original magico-spiritual cachet has gone, these relationships become less binding. Like conversion, de-conversion is also a life transition that can disrupt family ties, at times dictating hard choices in which one's faith or loss thereof can come between spouses and/or between parents and their children. In our small sample, the only ruptures were in parent/child relationships, while between spouses – as will be discussed in greater detail later – what we observed was more in the nature of an alliance. The conditions for joining Damanhur, a community experience, and the bonds forged as a result of conversion make leaving the city of light particularly taxing. Most of our interviewees overcame these difficulties because they could count on social support from either inside or outside the community: in Irene's words, 'you can't do it on your own'. The first and most important support was, for our interviewees, their spouse. Half of the interviewees left the community empowered by an affective tie, in most cases built up at Damanhur. All of them, in one way or another, could rely on the support, even if only the moral support, of the brethren who made this same decision before them. Moreover, many benefited from the emotional support (and at times the economic support) of their families.

In addition to citing the obstacles that prevent or slow departure from Damanhur, our participants' narratives speak of the resources and tools that brought them closer to their new role as disaffiliates. Among these tools, pride of place goes to a set of practices of disobedience, for the most part secret, which strengthened the initiates' determination to leave. Examples include certain bodily practices with a two-fold purpose: deconstructing the *habitus* imposed by the community, and seeing – on a small scale – what it feels like to live free from the dictates of Horus. These secret 'practices of resistance' (Foucault, 1976) emerge from the words of Adriana, who draws a specific lesson from these little deviant acts.[8]

> I started – secretly – not to follow the rules anymore. For example, you absolutely couldn't eat before meditation, and fasting began at three sharp. I had chewing gum in my mouth! And these things seem ridiculous here, but they're not. They're enormous steps inside, enormous! (…) And then I started to stop doing things to see if the sky would fall. But the sky didn't fall at all! (Adriana).

Disobedience has an even more clearly epistemic connotation in the route taken by a small cluster of Damanhurians who – while still part of the community – decided to disobey the master and meet the witness to one of Airaudi's most remarkable undertakings, the journey back in time to Atlantis that he took together with a painter, Dovilio Brero, who was brought along to portray everything they saw. Ignoring the master's ban, the little group of sceptics went to Brero to ask about this journey. One of our interviewees describes the outcome of this secret meeting in the following terms.[9]

> So we went, a group of people, and I brought it up, I said: 'tell me a bit about this business of the journey. Because, you know, we've always been told that you went with Oberto Airaudi on this trip through time, that you travelled back in time' and he looked at me, laughing a bit, and goes: 'Sure, we went on a journey, an imaginary journey!'. (…) This trip never happened. And you [*addressing the interviewee*] will tell me: 'OK, but I could have told you that myself!' Yes, but for the Damanhurians it was the gospel truth!

The relatively obvious character of the conclusions reached by our interview must be viewed in the context of the climate of belief at Damanhur. For the Damanhurians, time travel is an established fact, something that only those who are *not* sufficiently advanced could possibly doubt.

Once the bond with Damanhur is broken, leaving the community calls for building up the conditions – chiefly material – needed to embark on a new life outside the city of light. Several of the steps in this transition are shared by most processes of role exit (Ebaugh, 1988). One of these shared features is the retention/construction of economic independence. As our interviewees left Damanhur as adults, their age and, to an even greater extent, cultural considerations made it unthinkable for any of them to return to their family of origin: hence the importance of economic independence. Our interviewees' decision to leave Damanhur was so heartfelt, however, that they were willing to put up with decidedly frugal living arrangements, facing up to risks and uncertainties that were acceptable only because of their desire to break away from Damanhur.

For half of our interviewees, taking leave of Damanhur was preceded by a transient change in the conditions under which they belong to the community, with the adoption of a status we could call liminal, and which entails substantial easing of the obligations to participate in community life (see Skonovd, 1981).

For the last step in leave-taking, viz., informing the community leadership, an effective theoretical illustration is provided in the paper by Stuart Wright cited above (Wright, 1991). Wright distinguishes between three modes of leave-taking which he argues are common to both deconversion (apostasy in the Wright terms) and the dissolution of marital bonds.[10] In the first mode, *covert* departure, the spouse or devotee leaves in secret, without warning, presenting the other spouse or the community with a *fait accompli*. In the *overt* mode, the defector engages in a discussion that may continue for some time until some sort of balance is struck, in one way or the other. In the third or *declarative* mode of departure, the leave-taker merely announces the decision, leaving no room whatsoever for mutual reconciliation or even for negotiation. The defector says: 'I'm going', and that is all there is to it.

The declarative mode is the most frequent among our interviewees (used by 17 out of 20), testifying – were further testimony necessary – to the difficulty of these exits. This type of departure was chosen by all of our interviewees who had gone through what we referred to earlier as the liminal, in-between stage of disaffection. For all these people, being able to set a certain physical and moral distance between themselves and the community is the condition that makes it easier to present the other brethren with a *fait accompli*. In their typical route to declarative departure from Damanhur, our interviewees looked – secretly – for a new place to live and, if necessary – and again in secret – for a new job. Then, once a firm foothold has been established in the world surrounding Damanhur, the devotee, now a convinced deconvert, announces his/her new status as an Ex, usually to the King Guides and the fellow residents of the sub-community or Nucleo where he/she lives. A telling example of this last transition is provided by Margherita. As she was already employed outside Damanhur, Margherita only had to find a new home, but also decided to do so secretly. With the help of several ex-members, she and her partner – without letting anyone know – found a house, prepared to move in and then, once everything was done, informed the community leaders.

> They [the friends who had already left the community] found the house for us. We didn't say anything to anybody. We had it painted and, in a couple of months – more or less – we were out of … of the community. When we had the lease, and the painting and the important things were done, we told them. We stayed another ten days and then we left practically right away. In other words, said and done. Were they ever surprised! In fact, they were dumbstruck: 'this decision, just like that … we weren't expecting it!'. (Margherita).

Some of our interviewees went even further, if possible, in cutting the announcement of their decision to leave Damanhur down to the bare minimum: Beatrice and Raffaele did it by phone, Francesca sent an email.

Two of our interviewees made an overt departure from Damanhur. In one case, the ensuing confrontation was relatively sedate, punctuated by numerous attempts at 'reparation' by the community leadership. In the other case, the confrontation was particularly tense and concluded with an expulsion, which was then retracted, inviting the rebellious devotee to make amends for his errors. No such recantation was forthcoming, and the expulsion – not contested, but welcomed as something in the nature of a liberation – marked the end of the relationship with Damanhur. Only one of the interviewees chose the covert mode of departure, to avoid painful exchanges with community leaders and other brethren.[11]

How the decision to leave Damanhur is announced is linked to the nature of the relationships that the deconverts have with the community after their departure. A high degree of heterogeneity can be observed among the ex-member we interviewed, with five who took the community to court, another two who retain fond memories and say that they still have a deep affection for their former master, and a third who professes a 'profound feeling of forgiveness'. The other twelve cases are evenly spread between these two extremes, harbouring an intermediate level of tension towards Damanhur.

Epilogue

The life course of those who defected from Damanhur and, by extension, of those who defected from other NRMs in a country like Italy, where a single Church is dominant, is marked by two turning points.[12] The first is the conversion to a 'subversive' religious organization (*sensu* Bromley, 1998: 23); the second is de-conversion from it. The narratives of deconversion we collected describe a process that is at once prolonged, tortuous and dramatic. Both transitions entail a radical redefinition of self-identity, which imparts a particular color, a particular complexion to these lives. It is this radicalism that makes these life transitions so interesting, as it is in them that we can see – writ large – the distinctive features of social phenomena that, less sharply limned, also show themselves in other settings. It is a question, as Edgar Morin puts it, of 'looking at the extraordinary and seeing that it is an informer for the ordinary' (Morin, 1969), of discerning, in the steepest life transitions, the shapes – the magnified shapes – of everyday change (see Bonica and Cardano, 2008).

Notes

1. In this article we use the term 'deconversion' in the broad meaning attributed it by Heinz Streib, as a process of disaffiliation from a religious organization that implies the withdrawal of the cognitive and emotional dimensions of faith (Streib 2014).
2. The data examined here are taken from a more extensive study of disaffiliation from four NRMs: Damanhur, Soka Gakkai, Scientology and Jehovah's Witnesses. The empirical material consists of the narratives provided by a selected set of people. For three of the case studies – Jehovah's Witnesses, Soka Gakkai and Scientology – the narratives are taken from websites administered by defectors. In the case of Damanhur, the process of deconversion was analyzed by conducting twenty in-depth interviews and a focus group. For the contact with the Damanhur ex-members, we took advantage from a previous relationship with the community of one of the authors of this essay. The participants who contributed to the study by narrating their own experience were selected using a theoretical sample strategy, designed to maximize heterogeneity. Specifically, the selection criteria guaranteed heterogeneity of gender (10 men and 10 women) and in the rank reached in the participants' 'career' as initiates. Nearly all our participants had a medium-high level of education, i.e., at least a high school diploma, and all displayed considerable capacity for analysis in reconstructing the events they narrated. All interviewees had spent a large portion of their lives in the community: 19 years on average, with a range from 6 to over 25 years. Leave-taking from the community took place between 2004 and 2009, during adulthood, as participants were over thirty years old when they left Damanhur. For a more detailed discussion of the study design, see (Cardano and Pannofino, 2015: 19-24, 321–326).
3. In Italy, the so-called religious minorities – NMRs included – count not more than 3.2% of affiliates (Introvigne and Zoccatelli, 2013).
4. The survey was part of an ethnographic study, carried out in a season of the community story when exactly three-quarters of the leave-takers, interviewed for this study, were living in Damanhur.

5. Among our interviewees, the average duration of the process of disaffiliation can be estimated at around three years, with a minimum of slightly under a year and a maximum of nearly eight years.
6. All interviewees quoted in the text are identified by a pseudonym to protect anonymity.
7. *The Truman Show* is a 1998 film directed by Peter Weir. The protagonist, Truman Burbank, has lived since birth in an artificial world built by a television network that adopted little Truman as an infant. Truman thus becomes the involuntary star of a reality show that broadcasts his life as shaped by the show's director, who deploys a mass of actors and extras around Truman.
8. Ebaugh mentions similar practices in exiting from the role of nun, e.g., breaking the rule against eating in public places (1988: 102). The author sees these practices as a sort of 'rehearsal' that helps prepare for playing the new role (1988: 11–117).
9. For confidentiality reasons, the person who made these statements cannot be identified even with a pseudonym.
10. Wright proposes that the metaphor of divorce is a better model of this process than the common view promulgated by the anti-cult movements, which see it as a liberation from imprisonment. With compelling arguments, the author demonstrates that the keys to interpretation suggested by the analogy between divorce and deconversion are both more adequate and more parsimonious, restoring agency to apostates, without relieving the organization to which they belonged of responsibility for harming devotees through violence, abuse or coercion (Wright, 1991: 127).
11. The representation of the deconversion process proposed in these pages shows some clear 'family resemblances' with some of the most authoritative schemes present in the literature. The first step of the process, the vague and unfocused discomfort, reproduces and combines the triggering categories elaborate by Skonovd (1981), Ebaugh (1988), Barbour (1994) and Streib and Keller (2004). Skonovd identifies in the appearance of a 'crisis', combined with the emergence of a condition of 'cognitive dissonance', the triggering of the deconversion process; Ebaugh attributes it to the emergence of 'first doubts'; Barbour links the emergence of 'doubts' with the 'denial of the truth of a system of belief'; finally, Streib and Keller identify in the 'loss of specific religious experience' the start of the deconversion process. We also include, in our first step, some elements of the second and fourth stages identified by Streib and Keller in the emerging of 'intellectual doubts' and in the 'emotional suffering'. Through these combinations, we develop the emotional dimension by considering, besides the cognitive dissonance, the emotional dissonance as well. The second step proposed, that of the repair, combines the theoretical categories of Wright (1991), Skonodov (1981) and Ebaugh (1988). We borrow from Wright the key notion of repairing the relationship, drawn from the analogy between cult and marriage (Wright, 1991). The family resemblance between our repairing step with the second step of the process identified by Skonodov, that of 'negotiation of identity, belief and membership in the organization', is quite evident. Also evident is the correspondence with the second stage of the process postulated by Ebaugh, 'seeking and weighing of role alternatives'. The third stage, the reflexive opening, coincides essentially with the third stage of the Ebaugh scheme, which identifies the emergence of a 'turning point'. Our fourth step, leaving the community, coincides with the fourth and fifth stages proposed by Skonovd: 'preparation of the leaving' and 'transition in the mainstream society', and also with the fifth stage identified by Streib and Keller: 'disaffiliation from the community'. In the definition of the theoretical tool used in this work, we chose to privilege the goal of the harmonization between empirical data and theoretical tools, instead of adhering as strictly as possible to an established theoretical scheme, present in the specialist literature.
12. The legitimacy of this extension by analogy is borne out – at least in part – by the comparison between the four NRMs investigated in the study cited above (Cardano and Pannofino, 2015).

References

Barbour JD (1994) *Versions of deconversion: Autobiography and loss of faith*. Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia.

Bonica L and Cardano M editors (2008) *Punti di svolta. Analisi del mutamento biografico*. Bologna: il Mulino.

Bourdieu P (1971) *Genèse et structure du champ religieux. Revue française de sociologie* 12(3): 295–334.

Brinkerhoff MB and Burke KL (1980) Disaffiliation: Some notes on falling from the faith. *Sociological Analysis* 41(1): 41–54.

Bromley DG (ed) (1998) *The politics of religious apostasy. The role of apostates in the transformation of religious movements*. Westport, CT: Praeger.

Cardano M (1997) *Lo specchio, la rosa e il loto. Uno studio sulla sacralizzazione della natura*. Rome: Seam.

Cardano M and Pannofino N (2015) *Piccole apostasie. Il congedo dai nuovi movimenti religiosi*. Bologna: il Mulino.

Coser LA (1956) *The Functions of Social Conflict*. New York: The Free Press.

Coser LA (1974) *Greedy institutions: Patterns of undivided commitment*. New York: The Free Press.

Currie SE (2016) *Disaffiliation and New Religious Movements*. In: Lewis JR and Tøllefsen IB (eds) *The Oxford handbook of New Religious Movements*. New York: Oxford University Press, vol. 2, 50–59.

Dawson LL (1998) *Comprehending cults: The sociology of New Religious Movements*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Del Re M and Macioti MI (2013) *Comunità spirituali del XXI secolo. Memorie, esistente, futuro. Il caso Damanhur*. Ariccia: Aracne.

Ebaugh HR (1988) *Becoming an ex. The process of role exit*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Foucault M (1976) *La volonté de savoir*. Paris: Gallimard.

Gooren HPP (2010) *Religious conversion and disaffiliation: Tracing patterns of change in faith practices*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Heelas P and Woodhead L (2005) *The spiritual revolution. Why religion is giving way to spirituality*. Oxford: Blackwell.

Jacobs J (1987) Deconversion from religious movements: An analysis of charismatic bonding and spiritual commitment. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 26(3): 294–308.

Introvigne M and Zoccatelli P (2013) *Enciclopedia delle religioni in Italia*. Turin: ElleDiCi.

Lofland J and Stark R (1965) Becoming a world-saver: A theory of conversion to a deviant perspective. *American Sociological Review* 30(6): 862–875.

Mauss AL (1969) Dimensions of religious defection. *Review of Religious Research* 10(3): 128–135.

Morin E (1969) *La rumeur d'Orléans*. Paris: Seuil.

Pace E (2000) Damanhur, de la religion à la politique. *Ethnologie française nouvelle série* 30(4): 575–582

Riis O and Woodhead L (2010) *A sociology of religious emotion*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Simmel G (1950) *The secret and the secret society*. In: Wolff KH (ed.) *The sociology of Georg Simmel*. Glencoe, IL: The Free Press, 305–376.

Skonovd LN (1981) *Apostasy: The process of defection from religious totalism*. PhD Dissertation, University of California.

Smelser NJ (1980) Issues in the study of work and love in adulthood. In: Smelser NJ and Erikson EH (eds) *Themes of work and love in adulthood*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1–26.

Stark R and Bainbridge WS (1985) *The future of religion: Secularization, revival, and cult formation*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Streib H (2014) *Deconversion*. In: Rambo LR and Farhadian CE (eds) *The Oxford handbook of religious conversion*. New York: Oxford University Press, 271–296.

Streib H and Keller B (2004) The variety of deconversion experiences: Contours of a concept in respect to empirical research. *Archive for the Psychology of Religion* [*Archiv für Religionspsychologie*] 26: 181–200.

Weber M (1978[1922]) *Economy and society: An outline of interpretive sociology*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Wright SA (1988) Leaving New Religious Movements: Issues, theory, and research. In: Bromley DG (ed) *Falling from the faith. Causes and consequences of religious apostasy*. London: SAGE, 143–165.

Wright SA (1991) Reconceptualizing cult coercion and withdrawal: A comparative analysis of divorce and apostasy. *Social Forces* 70(1): 125–145.

Authors biographies

Mario CARDANO is professor of qualitative methods for social research in the Department of Cultures, Politics and Society at Turin University. On the topic of NMR, he has written articles and books, including *Lo specchio, la rosa e il loto. Uno studio sulla sacralizzazione della natura* (Seam 1997) and, with Nicola Pannofino, *Piccole apostasie. Il congedo dai nuovi movimenti religiosi* (il Mulino, 2015).
Address: Dipartimento di Culture Politica e Società, Lungo Dora Siena 100, 10153 Torino, Italy.
Email: mario.cardano@unito.it

Nicola PANNOFINO is a post-doctoral fellow at University of Turin. He co-edited *Invention of Tradition and Syncretism in Contemporary Religions: Sacred Creativity* (Palgrave, 2017), and authored, with Mario Cardano, *Piccole apostasie. Il congedo dai nuovi movimenti religiosi* (il Mulino, 2015).
Address: Dipartimento di Culture Politica e Società, Lungo Dora Siena 100, 10153 Torino, Italy.
Email: nicolaluciano.pannofino@unito.it