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# Familial Antecedents and the Choice of a New Religious Movement

## Which Person in Which Religious Group?

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Sussan Namini and Sebastian Murken

**ABSTRACT:** Based on the idea of a *person-religion fit*, this study deals with the role of early familial antecedents for choosing a new religious movement (NRM). New members of three NRMs in Germany (a Pentecostal parish, the New Apostolic Church, Jehovah's Witnesses;  $N = 71$ ) were compared to each other in regard to the variables of loss of a parent, number of siblings, and birth order position. Statistical analysis revealed differences between the three groups regarding loss of a parent and trends for the number of siblings. The most striking finding was that 43 percent of the new New Apostolic members had lost their father (compared to 10 percent of the Pentecostals and 23 percent of Jehovah's Witnesses). Differences between the groups are discussed with a focus on the groups' specific structures and theologies. Overall, the idea of a person-religion fit proved to be useful for the study of biographical variables, although theoretical and empirical problems of the fit model still need to be solved. Further research on early family experiences and person-religion fit is encouraged. The need to investigate coping-related aspects is emphasized.

*A key finding of the Enquete Commission's work . . . is that there is no typical "biography of sect members." Instead, it is necessary to consider the entire biography of an individual in order to understand why he or she turned to new religious and ideological communities and psychogroups. The Commission has*

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*found that when individuals join such communities, they try to come to grips with a biographical problem, with varying degrees of success. A key term in this context is the "fit." Greater attention should be paid to such biographically relevant aspects in the public debate.*

Final Report of the Enquete Commission on  
"So-called Sects and Psychogroups"<sup>1</sup>

The question as to why individuals join new religious movements (NRMs) is one of the most frequently and most urgently discussed questions in the debate on sects, cults or NRMs,<sup>2</sup> which has not lost its relevance up to now. The notion that individuals become victims of destructive "cults" is still prevailing in many public debates and in the media. On the other hand, most of today's scholars on NRMs agree that individuals who join NRMs are not passive subjects to whom conversion happens, but rather play an active role and interact with their environment, i.e. the religious groups.<sup>3</sup> Membership in NRMs can be understood as one form of social activity to which principles of exchange apply in the same manner as they are valid in other social contexts. While the individuals joining NRMs satisfy the needs and demands of the religious groups, the groups satisfy the demands and needs of the individuals in a variety of ways: "They commonly offer such positive inducements as affection and heightened self-esteem, esoteric and exoteric knowledge that provides a sense of power and control over one's life, as well as plain material and social aid, security, new career opportunities, and prestige."<sup>4</sup>

Thus, it is not surprising that James T. Richardson in his reviews of personality and clinical assessments of members in NRMs comes to the conclusion that participation in the groups is "often therapeutic instead of harmful."<sup>5</sup> Over the years, a number of studies have shown that membership in NRMs can help people overcome—at least temporarily—the most different problems and can thus in many cases be understood as attempts to cope with life's problems. For example, Marc Galanter found that individuals who joined the Divine Light Mission reported a relief of psychological distress and a considerable decline in drug use after their affiliation with the group.<sup>6</sup> A Dutch study of adolescent converts to the Unification Church or the Pentecostal Church found relatively many personal problems and little social support prior to joining.<sup>7</sup> In our own study on the process of joining a Pentecostal parish, the New Apostolic Church, or Jehovah's Witnesses in Germany, the comparison of individuals' life satisfaction and happiness in the year before first contact and after affiliation with the group furnished a significant increase in both of these indicators of well-being.<sup>8</sup>

However, the crises that can be found in the biographies of individuals who become members of NRMs are not restricted to current life

problems. Converts to NRMs have also been found to report frequently unhappy and even traumatic childhoods.<sup>9</sup> For example, Chana Ullman found a high proportion of converts with extremely unhappy childhoods, often including the physical or emotional absence of the father, in a group of converts to Roman Catholicism, Orthodox Judaism, International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON) and Baha'i.<sup>10</sup> Alexander Deutsch, in his early study on devotees of an American guru found histories of unsatisfactory parental relationships.<sup>11</sup> In a recent Belgian study, members of different NRMs reported insecure childhood attachment to their fathers.<sup>12</sup>

Life crises prior to joining and early problematic relationship experiences in the biographies of converts have been found in studies on a variety of NRMs. However, there are some indications that generalizations about NRMs are not justified. Authors who conducted comparative studies on converts to different NRMs or intensive studies on converts to one NRM have emphasized that the needs of the individuals who joined were fulfilled by the specific offers of the religious group.<sup>13</sup> A good example is Tommy H. Poling and J. Frank Kenney's study of American converts to ISKCON. The authors found that the religious group, through the person and the authority of the guru, compensated for the absence or loss of a father that the converts had experienced.<sup>14</sup> This observation of a fit between the person and the group, which we call *person-NRM fit*, or in a more general way, *person-religion fit*, applies not only to individual needs that arise from biographical experiences and group offers, but it has also been identified for other variables. For example, the investigation of NRM members' personalities furnished typical convert characteristics that fit well with features of the groups.<sup>15</sup>

Although the notion of a person-NRM fit is not new (Poling and Kenney's study was published two decades ago) and although there is tentative support for the notion of a person-NRM fit, research on the topic is only in its beginnings. As of now, little systematic research has been done over the years that compares characteristics of individuals who join different NRMs and considers theological and organizational differences between the groups studied.

## **THE PRESENT STUDY AND METHOD**

### **Research Interest**

The purpose of this study is to enhance the understanding of the role that individual biographical predispositions play in the choice of an NRM. Since life courses and situations vary considerably for

different people, depending on a person's age, sex, background and other factors, we chose to focus this study on an important early aspect that has a long-lasting influence on every person's life: the composition of the family of origin or, more precisely, the loss of one parent or both parents, and the sibling situation, including number of siblings and birth order position.<sup>16</sup> Following the idea of a person-NRM fit, we assume that individuals who join different groups differ with regard to their early relationship experiences. We expect that individuals, who differ by their birth order position and by their number of siblings, will feel most comfortable in different kinds of groups. For example, it is unlikely that persons who grew up without siblings and are therefore used to being in the focus of attention will feel at home in large groups that demand strict subordination of the individual. Likewise, we assume that people who lost a parent have different needs compared to individuals who grew up with both parents (e.g., those with an early loss can be assumed to be in search of compensation). Moreover, we aim at exploring whether membership in any of the groups studied (a local Pentecostal church, New Apostolic Church, and Jehovah's Witnesses) can be understood as an attempt to cope with the early loss of a parent.<sup>17</sup> Group-specific findings on early family experiences will be interpreted against the background of structural and theological characteristics of the religious groups.

While the research field is dominated by single-case and qualitative studies following an idiographic approach, we chose a nomothetic approach to compare individuals who joined different religious groups. Although qualitative studies are valuable for the in-depth investigation into research questions and for the generation of hypotheses, only statistical means permit the testing of assumptions in a strict sense.

### **Choice of Groups**

For an investigation into the question of whether differences in early family conditions predispose toward adult membership in different NRMs, a comparative research design was needed: Individuals who joined different NRMs as well as the characteristics of the groups had to be compared and related to each other. Since the study presented here was part of a larger research project on psycho-social motives and consequences of self-chosen membership in NRMs, careful consideration had to be given to the choice of the groups to be studied. In order to gain an insight into the interactions between the predispositions of the individual and the offers of the NRM, the groups had to be sufficiently different from each other with regard to teachings and group structure.

At the same time, for a meaningful comparison among the groups and for the application of identical measures, the groups had to be similar to some extent.

Hence, we chose three groups that share the same general historic roots (Christianity), but differ in other aspects: a charismatic/Pentecostal parish within the Federation of Pentecostal Churches (FPC); the New Apostolic Church (NAC); and Jehovah's Witnesses (JW). Although American readers may doubt the classification of these groups as NRMs, it is justified in the German context in which this study was conducted. Following the German historian of religion Rainer Flasche, all three groups can be considered to be "new" religious movements as they have arisen since the mid-nineteenth century,<sup>18</sup> which—compared to the two major churches in Germany, the Roman Catholic Church and the Protestant Church—is quite "new." Apart from this historical argumentation, the groups share some other characteristics with the new religious movements that have arisen in recent decades. In Germany, like in many other countries, NRMs, including the groups studied, are a "fringe phenomenon"<sup>19</sup> since less than 2 percent of the German population belong to a religion other than the Roman Catholic Church or Protestant Church, an Orthodox church or Islam.<sup>20</sup> In 2005, of Germany's about 82,400,000 inhabitants,<sup>21</sup> 374,635 were members of the New Apostolic Church, 163,092 were Jehovah's Witnesses, and 39,000 were members of the Federation of Pentecostal Churches.<sup>22</sup> Although the public discussion on NRMs has quieted down in recent years, the majority of the German population and the media are still highly skeptical or even hostile towards small, deviant and new religious groups, including the three groups studied, and pejoratively call them *Sekten* (sects).<sup>23</sup> In contrast to the United States, a free choice or change of religion during one's lifetime is still uncommon.

### **Groups under Study**

As specifics of the three NRMs chosen will be an important part of our discussion, the groups shall be briefly introduced.

Pentecostalism is characterized by a strong orientation towards personal experience and a personal and lively relationship to the Trinitarian God, in particular to Jesus. Some other examples of fundamental Pentecostal theological concepts are salvation, baptism in the Holy Spirit, healing, glossolalia (speaking in tongues), and prophecy. Within the Federation of Pentecostal Churches, local churches are relatively independent and—in accordance with the minister's theological perspective—emphasize particular concepts in different ways.<sup>24</sup> Whereas in other countries charismatic churches have become part of

the “mainstream” religious landscape, in Germany they are usually considered deviant.

The New Apostolic Church is the third largest Christian denomination in Germany. The church is hierarchically organized with the chief apostle as highest religious authority, supported by some full-time apostles and many officers within the parishes. The three sacraments, “Holy Baptism with Water,” “Holy Communion,” and “Holy Sealing” are pivotal. The Holy Sealing is a specific New Apostolic sacrament in which living apostles administer the Holy Spirit by prayers and the laying on of hands.<sup>25</sup> The title of the church’s magazine, “Our Family,” and other characteristics of the church seem to convey the idea of a large family of believers.<sup>26</sup> In Germany, the NAC is still considered a *Sekte* in public perception, because it emphasizes exclusive salvation and strongly refused ecumenism for decades.

Jehovah’s Witnesses understand themselves as an organization that is led by God (“Jehovah”) Himself. The Governing Body in Brooklyn, New York directs the church’s branches and the contents of the group’s publications. Jehovah’s Witnesses have their own translation of the Bible (New World Translation), reject sacraments and the Trinity doctrine as well as the celebration of feasts like Christmas and birthdays, which they consider to be of pagan origin. An essential aspect of their religious practice, which has also shaped the public image, is the house-to-house preaching to attract new members.<sup>27</sup> In Germany, Jehovah’s Witnesses are considered the prototype of a *Sekte*. At the same time, there has been a long public and legal debate on the question of whether they should be granted the same corporate rights as the Roman Catholic Church and Protestant Church. After a lawsuit that lasted one and a half decades, Jehovah’s Witnesses finally, in February 2006, were granted the status of a public corporation.

### **Participants and Procedure**

The present sample is part of a large German multi-method, longitudinal research project which investigated the process of joining an NRM. Participants were individuals who, at the first point of analysis in spring 2003, showed a recent interest or were new members in one of the three NRMs introduced above—a Pentecostal parish, the New Apostolic Church, or Jehovah’s Witnesses in Germany. In order to ensure that the individuals had their first contact as most recently as possible, only persons who, at the first time of analysis, had been affiliated with the group no longer than two years after their baptism or sealing<sup>28</sup> were eligible for participation in the study. This criterion was intended to minimize recollection errors, especially in regard to the time before the first contact with the group.

TABLE 1 Description of the Sample

Variable	FPC	NAC	JW
Group size	21	28	22
Sex:			
Female ( <i>n</i> )	14	12	17
Male ( <i>n</i> )	7	16	5
Age (in years):			
Mean	38.35	43.69	40.63
Standard Deviation	12.98	12.68	11.35
Range	18–62	19–65	19–66
Partner:			
Yes ( <i>n</i> )	14	23	11
No ( <i>n</i> )	7	5	11
Membership status:			
Baptized/sealed ( <i>n</i> )	8	28	12
Not baptized/sealed ( <i>n</i> )	13	0	10
Time since baptism/sealing in years* ( <i>M</i> )	0.84	1.11	1.20
Time since first contact in years* ( <i>M</i> )	2.00	4.30	5.62

\*up to the interview

In order to find individuals who met our criteria and would be willing to participate in our research, we needed the support of the religious groups. After consultations with the NRMs' leading bodies, the groups actively supported the recruitment process by: (a) encouraging worshipers to participate at the end of Sunday services (FPC); (b) sending letters to all potential respondents within a certain geographical area (NAC); or (c) personally asking potential participants (JW). We then contacted and informed all individuals who had indicated interest separately by telephone before they decided whether or not to participate. Individuals received monetary reimbursement for participation.

Seventy-one individuals were recruited altogether. Affiliation with the three groups was as follows: FPC, *n* = 21; NAC, *n* = 28; JW, *n* = 22. Sixty-eight percent (*n* = 48) of the participants were already baptized or sealed in the NRMs; the time that had elapsed since baptizing or sealing was 1.09 years (*SD* = 0.53) on average. The age of respondents ranged from 18 to 66 years (*M* = 41.16, *SD* = 12.40). Sixty-one percent (*n* = 43) were women; 68 percent (*n* = 48) had a partner. Table 1 describes the sample and differences between the groups in detail.



## Measures

Questions relating to the family of origin were part of a structured personal interview.

*Loss of a Parent.* Loss of a parent was assessed with the following question: “Did you grow up with both biological parents?” If applicable, respondents also indicated which parent was absent and their age when the loss occurred. All reported losses before the age of 15 were considered for the analysis.

*Siblings.* Respondents answered two questions on siblings, one asking for the number of siblings (“How many siblings did you grow up with?”), the other asking for birth order position (“How many of them were older than you?”).

## Analysis

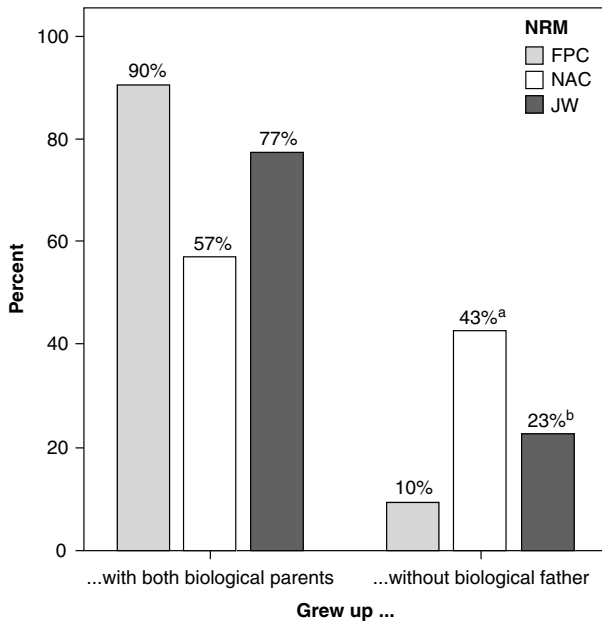
Due to the small sample size, only non-parametric statistics were used to test for statistically significant differences between the three groups. Chi-square, Kruskal-Wallis, and Mann-Whitney tests were applied. For Chi-square tests with at least one cell having an expected count less than five, exact tests were computed. Analyses were conducted with the statistical software SPSS for Windows 14.0.

# RESULTS

## Descriptive Analyses

*Loss of a parent.* Apart from two respondents (one from the Jehovah’s Witnesses group and one from the NAC group) who grew up without both biological parents, all participants who had reported the loss of a parent before the age of 15 had lost their biological father. Figure 1 shows that loss rates differ among the groups: 10 percent ( $n = 2$ ) for FPC; 23 percent ( $n = 5$ ) for Jehovah’s Witnesses; and 43 percent ( $n = 12$ ) for NAC (this includes those two individuals who grew up without both their biological parents).

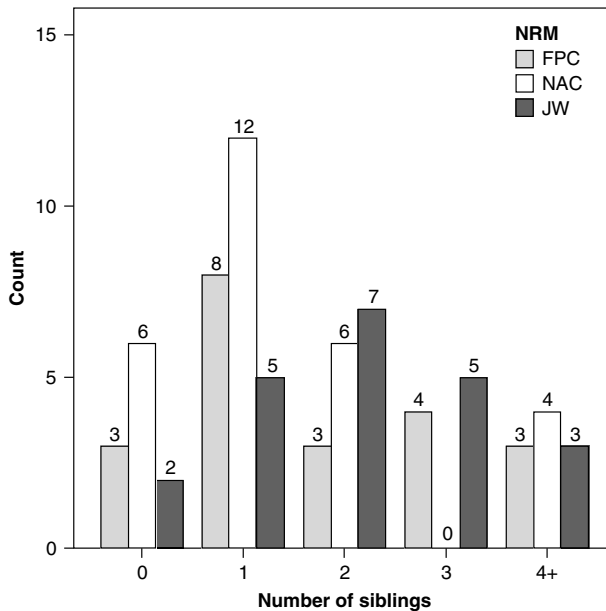
*Siblings.* The number of siblings ranged from 0 to 7 for FPC and NAC, and from 0 to 9 for Jehovah’s Witnesses. Group medians were as follows: FPC: 1; NAC: 1; and JW: 2.<sup>29</sup> Sixty-four percent of the NAC group grew up as a single child or with one sibling only (versus FPC: 52%; JW: 32%), whereas 68 percent of the JW group had two or more siblings (versus FPC: 48%; NAC: 36%). For more details, see Figure 2. Data on birth order are given in Table 2. It shows that 53 percent of the NAC group were an eldest or a single child (versus FPC: 28%; JW: 45%) and that 52 percent of the FPC group grew up as a youngest child (versus NAC: 29%; JW: 27%).



**Fig. 1** Loss of a parent before the age of 15.

<sup>a</sup> Of the 12 (43%) individuals who grew up without their biological father, 1 grew up without both biological parents.

<sup>b</sup> Of the 5 (23%) individuals who grew up without their biological father, 1 grew up without both biological parents.



**Fig. 2** Number of siblings.

TABLE 2 Birth Order Rank in Percent, with N in Parentheses

Birth order rank	FPC	NAC	JW
Single child	14 (3)	21 (6)	9 (2)
Eldest child	14 (3)	32 (9)	36 (8)
Middle child	19 (4)	18 (5)	27 (6)
Youngest child	52 (11)	29 (8)	27 (6)

### Differences among the Groups

*Loss of a parent/father.* A chi-square test was conducted to examine whether the NRMs groups differed with regard to the loss of a parent/father. A comparison of the categories *loss of a parent* and *no loss of a parent* showed a significant difference among the three groups.<sup>30</sup> The difference between the groups becomes even more striking if one considers that the proportion of comparable individuals of the general Western German population who have been brought up without a biological father can be assessed as 9 percent of the population.<sup>31</sup> Whereas the loss rate in the FPC group corresponds to this rate, the rate in the New Apostolic group was more than four times higher.

*Siblings.* A Kruskal-Wallis test that was computed to compare the number of siblings did not furnish any significant difference among the groups.<sup>32</sup> However, a chi-square test that compared categorical data on family size found a statistical trend for the two categories “no or one sibling” versus “two or more siblings.”<sup>33</sup> A chi-square test comparing birth order positions (three categories: single or eldest child, middle child, and youngest child) found no significant difference among the three groups.<sup>34</sup>

## INTERPRETATION AND DISCUSSION

The aim of this study was to investigate the role of individual differences in loss of a parent and sibling situation for the choice of a particular NRM in Germany (Federation of Pentecostal Churches, New Apostolic Church, or Jehovah’s Witnesses). In line with the idea of a person-NRM fit, different rates of loss of father were found for the three groups of persons with a recent interest or membership in different NRMs. The considerable proportion of individuals who had lost a parent and belonged to the NAC group and to a lesser extent to the JW group, moreover, indicates that membership in these groups can be understood as an attempt to cope with early losses. With regard to the sibling situation,

a statistical trend for the number of siblings also indicates the relevance of fit. However, findings are mixed; no statistical differences were found for birth order position. In the following, we interpret and discuss the findings on differences among the three groups of individuals, with due consideration of prominent features of the religious groups.

### **Loss of Father**

If one considers that a number of studies found absent fathers in the biography of converts to NRMs,<sup>35</sup> it is not surprising that in two of the three groups under study, a high proportion of members reported the loss of their father during childhood/youth. In psychological terms, this finding can be explained by the compensatory function that religion and more specifically (a personal) God as a “substitute attachment figure” can fulfill.<sup>36</sup> However, the question still remains: How can one explain the differences among the three groups? To answer this question, the specific aspects of the groups have to be taken into consideration.

What is it that the NAC can offer to many of its new members who grew up without their biological father? The NAC is not only noticeably family-oriented, but the group’s theology and terminology is highly father-oriented. “God the Father” or simply “our Father” is frequently mentioned. Through Holy Sealing the believer becomes a “Child of God,”<sup>37</sup> which is sometimes understood quite literally.<sup>38</sup> The NAC’s ministerial positions are restricted to men, and there is a hierarchy of ten levels of offices. Thus, apart from God, the NAC offers ministers as substitute fathers. Among them, the chief apostle, the leading figure and a distinctive element of the church, seems to be especially important. As he holds services all over the world, ordinary church members hardly get into close contact with him. Nevertheless, he is omnipresent. For example, photos and excerpts from his services are printed in all issues

**Picture 1: The Chief Apostle of the New Apostolic Church: Substitute father on Earth? Photo courtesy of New Apostolic Church South Germany.**

of the bi-monthly magazine, *Our Family*.<sup>39</sup> We assume that the chief apostle offers a mixture of distance and closeness, which facilitates a process of idealization, and hence renders him a particularly “ideal father.”<sup>40</sup>

The Christian concept of God as father appears to be emphasized less or in a different way in the other two groups’ theologies. Jehovah’s Witnesses also refer to Jehovah as loving father, but the concept of father is strongly linked with a variety of other roles, such as a teacher, and his authority is emphasized.<sup>41</sup> Observations suggest that the relationship to Jehovah can be assumed to be of less emotional importance since the group emphasizes *knowledge* over feeling.<sup>42</sup> However, this more cognitive relationship can explain in a different way why we found a heightened loss rate in this group as well. It allows for an omnipresent, but at the same time distanced relationship that appears well suited to individuals who suffer from an early loss.

In the Pentecostal Church, Jesus as the Lord whom the believers follow on their way to God plays a major role. Thus, the central relationship seems to be one between a loving guide and his follower. Nevertheless, it is surprising that no more individuals with an early loss were in the Pentecostal group under study. Since Pentecostal faith emphasizes a personal and emotional relationship to God, it should offer an ideal compensation for individuals with relational needs. Further research will have to determine if this finding is specific to the parish under study or applies in general to Pentecostal faith in Germany. In one of the semi-structured interviews that were conducted, a young woman who had just left the Pentecostal community after her stepfather had left the family (and whose biological father had left when she was three years old) reported in detail that she had not found support in the parish, because people there had too ideal families and could not understand her.<sup>43</sup> In a more general way, it is also possible that the emphasis on a close personal relationship with God and Jesus is too demanding for individuals with physically absent fathers. It may be more attractive to individuals who are familiar with close and emotional relationships, or, as compensation, to individuals with other kinds of negative relationship experiences.

## **Siblings**

Although little systematic research is available on sibling situation as a predisposing factor for self-chosen membership in NRMs, studies in general suggest that converts tend to come from families with many children.<sup>44</sup> Our data on the number of siblings, however, indicates that, again, a generalization does not seem justified. Respondents from our JW group tended to come from families with more children than respondents from the other two groups. About two-thirds of the JW group came from families with three or more children. How can this be explained? Considering that family size correlates negatively with the

amount of parental resources/attention each child receives,<sup>45</sup> children from large families have learned to contain themselves and to accept group norms. This behavioral pattern fits Jehovah's Witnesses' theology and religious practices: Jehovah's Witnesses seem to require a stronger ability to subordinate oneself because this group has a dogmatic theology plus a strict weekly schedule.<sup>46</sup> The capability to adapt to peers is needed when Bible studies and proselytizing activities are done together with other believers. Additionally, Jehovah's Witnesses' terminology and religious practice tend to emphasize the group over the individual; for example, the believer is part of the "flock" and the "great crowd,"<sup>47</sup> birthdays are not celebrated, the individual is baptized in a mass baptism and even the religious leadership is depersonalized ("Governing Body").

With regard to birth order, the comparison of the three groups did not show a significant difference. This finding may be due to the fact that, in general, the size of the sibling group seems to produce stronger effects than birth order.<sup>48</sup> As the descriptive data showed some tendencies, we will, nevertheless, discuss some observations that seem to be interesting with regard to a person-religion fit. To explain why a high proportion of the New Apostolic group is a single or a first-born child, whereas the majority of the local Pentecostal group is a last-born or later-born child, we draw on Frank J. Sulloway's study and evolutionary theory. According to Sulloway, eldest children—and to some degree also single children—tend to be conservative, ambitious, and achievement-oriented and to identify themselves with authorities. In contrast, later-borns are more open toward novel experiences and more strongly

**Picture 2: Jehovah's Witnesses: The individual as part of "the great crowd."**  
Photo courtesy of Picture Alliance.

inclined to take risks in their quest to find niches that differ sufficiently from those occupied by the siblings born before them.<sup>49</sup>

In consideration of Sulloway's conclusions, the individual differences found in our study seem to fit very well into the offers made by the groups. Of the three groups under study, the NAC is closest to German mainstream religiosity (and in this sense is the most conservative one). Additionally, the NAC, in which ministers play a crucial role, offers the best possibility for personal achievements, at least for men. As there is no specific theological training each layman has the potential to be appointed to ministry and to move up the hierarchy in a rather short time.<sup>50</sup> Hence, one reason why men who are first-born or single children are attracted to the NAC may be the prospect of attaining a ministry.<sup>51</sup> This idea is supported by the findings of Sulloway and others. Rudy B. Andeweg and Steef B. van den Berg, for example, found that a disproportionate number of politicians in the Netherlands were first-born or single children.<sup>52</sup> A study by Oluf Martensen-Larsen and Kirsten Sørrig revealed that the proportion of eldest children in a sample of 302 pastors was higher than average.<sup>53</sup> Pentecostal religiosity, on the other hand, seems to require a greater openness to experience. As Hansjörg Hemminger notes, typical Pentecostal elements such as glossolalia or extended emotional singing are less common in Germany than in the United States.<sup>54</sup> Hence, many Germans are skeptical towards these types of religious expression that require more than average openness—an observation that indicates the importance of the surrounding culture for a person-religion fit.

### **Limitations and Implications for Future Research**

The sample, which we consider to be a strength of our study, is a limitation at the same time. Our attempt to investigate into the process of joining an NRM as closely as possible resulted in a rather small sample size, which is detrimental to statistical testing. Quantitative analysis is highly dependent on the size of the sample so that small effects may not have reached the level of statistical significance in this study. Whereas the public holds the opinion that NRMs attract enormous numbers of people, our contact with several groups shows that this is not the case in Germany. Even Jehovah's Witnesses, one of the largest groups among the NRMs in Germany, report only one to four new adult members baptized per year in a congregation.

The objection of a sampling bias, which is often raised when study participants are recruited with the support of the religious groups, seems unwarranted. Although there were practical and religious reasons, respectively, which did not enable us to study individuals before they were sealed (NAC) or reached the status of an unbaptized publisher (JW),<sup>55</sup> there is no hint that the groups tried to influence the recruitment process itself. In spite of the limitations, it must be emphasized that in a research

field that relies mostly on the reports of members from only one NRM, mixed samples, and apostates, and which usually does not pay any attention to the length of contact or membership, a group of 71 new converts to three distinct NRMs is quite exceptional.

Although our findings on differences in the families of origin could be interpreted plausibly in light of the characteristics of the religious groups, caution is needed in doing so. Detailed psychological studies on the groups, which would allow a systematic comparison and the linking of individual and group attributes, are not available so far. Thus, in our analysis, we relied mainly on our own observations made during the course of our research. Further studies have to investigate the specific aspects of the religious groups, as well as their implications, such as the role and the psychological function of leading figures like the NAC's chief apostle.

More theoretical and empirical research is needed to explore the concept of a person-religion fit. So far, there is no systematic theory that specifies the nature of fit and the aspects of the person that should match specific aspects of groups. As illustrated above, groups may fulfill the same compensational or other needs in different ways. They can offer compensation for certain "deficits," but they may also offer an environment corresponding to a person's psychological make-up. Moreover, the fit between a person and a religious group cannot be assumed to depend on just one aspect, but on a bundle of characteristics of the person and the group, which are each weighted differently according to the personality and biography of the person. Considering our results that showed significant differences among the groups for loss of father, but not for the sibling situation, and considering the fact that membership in NRMs can be understood as an attempt to cope with the demands in one's life, it can be hypothesized that personal experiences that either currently or permanently call for a "solution" take a particularly strong influence. As the experience of an early loss of a parent is more probable than the experience of a certain sibling situation to call for a long-lasting search for a solution, the former may indeed have a stronger impact. More research is needed to investigate this question and to explore whether or not other early life and current problems can be found to differentiate converts to different NRMs. Only a systematic, theory-guided, step-by-step empirical investigation of the many variables that may play a role will be appropriate to shed more light on the complexity of person-religion fit and the membership process in general.

Apart therefrom, other (probably related) factors determining group choice, such as the situational context or the individual perception processes, may interfere with the impact of the person-religion fit. The study of related processes may also shed light on the question of why individuals with certain early experiences choose to become members of a religious group at all. Even if we adhere to the coping assumption, questions such as the following remain and call for a investigation: Why



do some people who grew up without their biological father try to cope by joining a certain NRM, while many others who also lost their fathers never become interested in it and choose completely different (non-religious) “solutions”?

From a psychological perspective, it also seems important to investigate further into a number of questions regarding the precise way in which early family antecedents affect person-religion fit and take an influence on the decision to join a specific NRM: Do early family relationship experiences directly predispose for membership in NRMs, or is the effect of early family relationships mediated by other variables that are influenced by these early experiences (e.g., personality, mental health)? Are there confounded variables that either mask or produce effects (e.g., social status, parental religiosity)? And how can the latency between childhood experiences and membership decision be explained? If childhood has an influence on religious choices, why is that so in midlife twenty-five years later?

### CONCLUDING REMARKS

In conclusion, our results support the assumption that the composition of a person’s family of origin is one of the factors that have an impact on the kind of NRM he or she enters. It seems that the choice can at least partly be explained by the specific offers—or features—of the religious group. However, as findings differed with regard to the loss of father and sibling situation, there is some indication that coping-related aspects may be more important for the choice of the group than other aspects. On a more general level, the idea of a person-religion fit proved to be a useful approach to the study of self-chosen membership in NRMs, although more systematic research is needed to strengthen the theoretical and empirical basis. Likewise, further investigation is needed to come to a more thorough understanding of the exact role that early family experiences play in the choice of an NRM.

A better knowledge of biographical pathways and coping-related person-religion fit is not only interesting from a mere academic point of view. A better comprehension of the way religious needs and quests are influenced by biographical experiences, including the early family situation, can also contribute to the work of psychotherapists and counselors working with religious clients.

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## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Deutscher Bundestag, Referat Öffentlichkeitsarbeit, ed., *Final Report of the Enquete Commission on "So-called Sects and Psychogroups": New Religious and Ideological Communities and Psychogroups in the Federal Republic of Germany*, trans. Wolfgang Fehlberg and Monica Ulloa-Fehlberg (Bonn: Deutscher Bundestag, Referat Öffentlichkeitsarbeit, 1998), 282.

<sup>2</sup> All three terms are used interchangeably in the debate, depending on the (cultural) context and the parties involved. For a discussion of the terms, see J. Gordon Melton, "Perspective: Toward a Definition of 'New Religion,'" *Nova Religio* 8, no. 1 (July 2004): 73–87; John A. Saliba, *Understanding New Religious Movements* (Walnut Creek, Calif.: Altamira Press, 2003), 1–24.

<sup>3</sup> Lorne L. Dawson, *Comprehending Cults: The Sociology of New Religious Movements* (Toronto: Oxford University Press Canada, 1998); James T. Richardson, "The Active vs. Passive Convert: Paradigm Conflict in Conversion/Recruitment Research," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 24 (1985): 163–79.

<sup>4</sup> Dawson, *Comprehending Cults*, 83.

<sup>5</sup> James T. Richardson, "Psychological and Psychiatric Studies of New Religions," in *Advances in the Psychology of Religion*, ed. Laurence B. Brown (Oxford: Pergamon Press, 1985), 209–23, here 221; James T. Richardson, "Clinical and Personality Assessment of Participants in New Religions," *International Journal for the Psychology of Religion* 5 (1995): 145–70.

<sup>6</sup> Marc Galanter, *Cults: Faith, Healing, and Coercion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 34–36.

<sup>7</sup> Willem Kox, Wim Meeus, and Harm 't Hart, "Religious Conversion of Adolescents: Testing the Lofland and Stark Model of Religious Conversion," *Sociological Analysis* 52 (1991): 227–40.

<sup>8</sup> Sebastian Murken and Sussan Namini, "Selbst gewählte Mitgliedschaft in religiösen Gemeinschaften: Ein Versuch der Lebensbewältigung?" [Self-chosen membership in religious movements: An attempt to cope with life's demands?], in *Religiosität: Messverfahren und Studien zu Gesundheit und Lebensbewältigung. Neue Beiträge zur Religionspsychologie*, ed. Christian Zwingmann and Helfried Moosbrugger (Münster: Waxmann, 2004), 299–316.

<sup>9</sup> For a review, see Sebastian Murken and Sussan Namini, "Childhood Familial Experiences as Antecedents of Adult Membership in New Religious Movements: A Literature Review," *Nova Religio* 10, no. 4 (May 2007): 17–37.

<sup>10</sup> Chana Ullman, *The Transformed Self: The Psychology of Religious Conversion* (New York: Plenum Press, 1989).

<sup>11</sup> Alexander Deutsch, "Observations on a Sidewalk Ashram," *Archives of General Psychiatry* 32 (1975): 165–75.

<sup>12</sup> Coralie Buxant, Vassilis Saroglou, Stefania Casalfiore, and Louis-Léon Christians, "Cognitive and Emotional Characteristics of New Religious Movement Members: New Questions and Data on the Mental Health Issue," *Mental Health, Religion, and Culture* 10 (2007): 219–38.

<sup>13</sup> For example, Gunther Klosinski, *Warum Bhagwan? Auf der Suche nach Heimat, Geborgenheit und Liebe* [Why Bhagwan? In search of home, security, and love] (München: Kösel, 1985); Tommy H. Poling and J. Frank Kenney, *The Hare*

*Krishna Character Type: A Study of the Sensate Personality* (Lewiston, N.Y.: Edwin Mellen Press, 1986); Jan M. van der Lans and Frans Derks, "Premies Versus Sannyasins," *Update: A Quarterly Journal on New Religious Movements* 10, no. 2 (1986): 19–27.

<sup>14</sup> Poling and Kenney, *Hare Krishna Character Type*.

<sup>15</sup> Poling and Kenney, *Hare Krishna Character Type*; Norman D. Sundberg, Carl A. Latkin, Richard A. Littman, and Richard A. Hagan, "Personality in a Religious Commune: CPIs in Rajneeshpuram," *Journal of Personality Assessment* 55 (1990): 7–17; Arnold S. Weiss and Andrew L. Comrey, "Personality and Mental Health of Hare Krishnas Compared with Psychiatric Outpatients and 'Normals,'" *Personality and Individual Differences* 8 (1987): 721–30. See also the review by Raymond F. Paloutzian, James T. Richardson, and Lewis R. Rambo, "Religious Conversion and Personality Change," *Journal of Personality* 67 (1999): 1047–79.

<sup>16</sup> See, for example, Barbara Schneider, Allison Atteberry, and Ann Owens, *Family Matters: Family Structure and Child Outcomes* (Birmingham: Alabama Policy Institute, 2005); Frank J. Sulloway, *Born to Rebel: Birth Order, Family Dynamics, and Creative Lives* (New York: Vintage Books, 1997).

<sup>17</sup> As we focus here on the coping aspect, it shall be noted that we assume membership in NRMs—as other decisions in life, too—to have individual benefits and costs. We discussed the latter aspect in detail elsewhere: Sebastian Murken and Sussan Namini, "Psychoziale Konflikte im Prozess des selbst gewählten Beitritts zu neuen religiösen Gemeinschaften" [Psycho-social conflicts in the process of self-chosen membership to new religious movements], *Zeitschrift für Religionswissenschaft* 12 (2004): 141–88.

<sup>18</sup> Rainer Flasche, "Neue Religionen" [New Religions], in *Die Religionen der Gegenwart: Geschichte und Glauben*, ed. Peter Antes (München: C. H. Beck, 1996), 280–98, 282.

<sup>19</sup> Brigitte Schoen, "New Religions in Germany: The Publicity of the Public Square," *Nova Religio* 4, no. 2 (April 2001): 266–74, 266.

<sup>20</sup> See Murken and Namini, "Psychoziale Konflikte," 144.

<sup>21</sup> Statistisches Bundesamt, "Bevölkerung im Jahr 2005 leicht gesunken - Pressemitteilung vom 19. Juli 2006" [Population slightly decreased in 2005—press release of 19 July 2006], <<http://www.destatis.de/presse/deutsch/pm2006/p2920021.htm>>.

<sup>22</sup> REMID, "Religionen in Deutschland: Mitgliederzahlen" [Religions in Germany: Membership figures], 4 November 2006, <[http://www.remid.de/remid\\_info\\_zahlen.htm](http://www.remid.de/remid_info_zahlen.htm)>.

<sup>23</sup> The German equivalent for *cults*.

<sup>24</sup> Erich Geldbach, "Pfingstkirchen" [Pentecostal Churches], in *Handbuch der Religionen: Kirchen und andere Glaubensgemeinschaften in Deutschland (II—2.2.2.11)*, ed. Michael Klöcker and Udo Tworuschka, (Landsberg am Lech: Olzog, 1997), 47–55; Peter Zimmerling, *Die charismatischen Bewegungen. Theologie—Spiritualität—Anstöße zum Gespräch* [The Charismatic Movements: Theology—Spirituality—Impetus for Dialogue] (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2002).

<sup>25</sup> Katja Rakow, *Neuere Entwicklungen in der Neuapostolischen Kirche. Eine Dokumentation des Öffnungsprozesses* [Recent Developments in the New Apostolic Church. A Documentation of the Opening Process] (Berlin: Weißensee, 2004).

<sup>26</sup> Andreas Fincke, “Exklusive Wege zum Heil—Die christlichen Sondergemeinschaften und sog. Sekten” [Exclusive Ways to Salvation—Christian Minority Groups and so-called Sects], in *Panorama der neuen Religiosität: Sinnsuche und Heilsversprechen zu Beginn des 21. Jahrhunderts*, ed. Reinhard Hempelmann, Ulrich Dehn, Andreas Fincke, Michael Nüchtern, Matthias Pöhlmann, Hans—Jürgen Ruppert, and Michael Utsch (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 2001), 499–594.

<sup>27</sup> Andrew Holden, *Jehovah’s Witnesses: Portrait of a Contemporary Religious Movement* (London: Routledge, 2002); Peter Noss, “Zeugen Jehovas” [Jehovah’s Witnesses], in *Handbuch der Religionen: Kirchen und andere Glaubensgemeinschaften in Deutschland* (6. EL, II—5.8), ed. Michael Klöcker and Udo Tworuschka (Landsberg am Lech: Olzog, 2002), 1–10.

<sup>28</sup> Eighty-five percent of the respondents had already been baptized in the Roman Catholic Church or Protestant Church when they were a child. Baptism was chosen as criterion for formal entry into the Pentecostal Church and Jehovah’s Witnesses as both groups do not accept child baptism and baptism of other churches respectively. The NAC accepts water baptism by the Roman Catholic Church and Protestant Churches, but has an additional sacrament, the Holy Sealing, which makes a person New Apostolic.

<sup>29</sup> Group means (with standard deviations in parentheses) were as follows: FPC: 2.19 (2.11); NAC: 1.64 (1.83); and JW: 2.59 (2.36).

<sup>30</sup> ( $\chi^2 = 7.07$ ,  $df = 2$ ,  $p = .03$ ,  $V = .32$ ).

<sup>31</sup> Based on representative data from the Federal Statistical Office Germany, Statistisches Bundesamt, *Fachserie 1, Reihe 3, Tabelle 7.17\_L203\_01* [Series 1, set 3, table 7.17\_L203\_01] (2001).

<sup>32</sup> ( $\chi^2 = 4.50$ ,  $df = 2$ ,  $p = .11$ ).

<sup>33</sup> ( $\chi^2 = 5.23$ ,  $df = 2$ ,  $p = .07$ ,  $V = .27$ ). As the NAC group was found to be the group with the least number of siblings as well as the highest parental loss rate, in addition, we computed a Mann-Whitney test to ensure that the trend regarding differences in size of sibling group is not just a by-product of parental loss. A comparison between the two groups “no loss of a parent” ( $n = 52$ ,  $mean\ rank = 37.93$ ) versus “loss of a parent” ( $n = 19$ ,  $mean\ rank = 30.71$ ) yielded no significant difference ( $U = 393.50$ ,  $p = .18$ ).

<sup>34</sup> ( $\chi^2 = 4.82$ ,  $df = 4$ ,  $p = .31$ ).

<sup>35</sup> For example, Poling and Kenney, *Hare Krishna Character Type*; Ullman, *The Transformed Self*. See also Murken and Namini, “Childhood Familial Experiences.”

<sup>36</sup> Lee A. Kirkpatrick, *Attachment, Evolution, and the Psychology of Religion* (New York: Guilford Press, 2005).

<sup>37</sup> New Apostolic Church International, *Three Sacraments—Three Acts of Blessing*, <<http://www.nak.org/en/about-the-nac/three-sacraments/>>, accessed 18 September 2006.

<sup>38</sup> Gerrit J. Sepers, who was an apostle of the NAC in the Netherlands from 1987 until 1 December 2004 when he resigned from ministry, criticizes the NAC for its father image: “We have created an image of God that is much removed from Him. We have the image of a father and think in very human terms. God cannot be predefined” (translation by the authors). “Dahinter steckt immer das

konservative Denken”—Telefonisches Interview von C. Puffe am 10. und 17.12.2004 [“Behind it is always conservative thinking”—Telephone interview by C. Puffe on 10 and 17 December 2004], <<http://www.naktuell.de/0105/0105003.html>>.

<sup>39</sup> *Our Family* is the major publication of the NAC. The German version appears twice per month. Translations and “mini versions” are available in 34 other languages.

<sup>40</sup> Poling and Kenney in *Hare Krishna Character Type* also refer to the ISKCON guru as an “ideal father.” Interestingly, until 1997 the chief apostle has officially been the “representative of the Lord on Earth” (Rakow, *Neuere Entwicklungen in der Neupostolischen Kirche*, 96, translation by the authors). In a similar way *The Krsna Consciousness Handbook* (Boston: ISKCON Press, 1970), quoted in Poling and Kenney, *Hare Krishna Character Type*, defined A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada, as “representative of God” (10).

<sup>41</sup> For instance see Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society of Pennsylvania, *Draw Close to Jehovah* (New York: Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society, 2002), 10:

Parents know how versatile and adaptable they must be in caring for their children. In the course of a single day, a parent may be called upon to act as a nurse, a cook, a teacher, a disciplinarian, a judge, and much more. [ . . . ] Jehovah too is a loving parent. Yet, within the framework of his own perfect standards, there is *nothing* he cannot become in order to care for his earthly children in the best possible way. So his name, Jehovah, invites us to think of him as the best Father imaginable (James 1:17). Moses and all other faithful Israelites soon learned that Jehovah is true to his name. They watched in awe as he caused himself to become an unbeatable Military Commander, the Master of all natural elements, a peerless Law-giver, Judge, Architect, Provider of food and water, Preserver of clothing and footwear—and more.

<sup>42</sup> Holden, *Jehovah’s Witnesses*.

<sup>43</sup> The following is an excerpt from the interview:

I could always go there, and they are really all helpful and they all listened and gave advice. That’s no problem, but I have to honestly say that I did not feel understood. They are prettily, prettily brought up and are one nice large family and they develop further in this direction and everything is nice and good and fantastic and the sun shines and they cannot understand how it feels when parents separate. [ . . . ] It is nice to have such a great family and everything, but that’s not the case for everybody. [ . . . ] [A]nd every time I left the church I drove home and was crying and then I thought: that’s not it.

<sup>44</sup> See Murken and Namini, “Childhood Familial Experiences.”

<sup>45</sup> Douglas B. Downey, “When Bigger Is Not Better: Family Size, Parental Resources, and Childrens Educational Performance,” *American Sociological Review* 60 (1995): 746–61.

<sup>46</sup> In addition to private Bible and literature studies and ministry, Jehovah’s Witnesses have a weekly schedule including book study (one hour), theocratic ministry school (45 minutes), service meeting (45 minutes), public talk (45 minutes) and *Watch Tower* study (one hour). See Noss, “Zeugen Jehovas,” 6.

<sup>47</sup> For example, Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society of Pennsylvania, “Jehovah’s Sheep Need Tender Care,” *Watch Tower*, 15 January 1996, 15–20; Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society of Pennsylvania, “A Great Crowd Before Jehovah’s Throne” in *Worship the Only True God* (New York: Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society, 2002), chapter 13.

<sup>48</sup> Lala Carr Steelman, Brian Powell, Regina Werum, and Scott Carter, “Reconsidering the Effects of Sibling Configuration: Recent Advances and Challenges,” *Annual Review of Sociology* 28 (2002): 243–69.

<sup>49</sup> Sulloway, *Born to Rebel*. However, it has to be noted that our conclusions must remain tentative, as research on the effects of sibling configuration has furnished inconsistent findings. See Steelman, Powell, Werum, and Carter, “Reconsidering the Effects of Sibling Configuration.” Likewise, Sulloway’s results have been supported; see for example, Delroy L. Paulhus, Paul D. Trapnell, and David Chen, “Birth Order Effects on Personality and Achievement within Families,” *Psychological Science* 10 (1999): 482–88; and challenged; see for example, Jeremy Freese, Brian Powell, and Lala Carr Steelman, “Rebel without a Cause or Effect: Birth Order and Social Attitudes,” *American Sociological Review* 64 (1999): 207–31.

<sup>50</sup> Rakow, *Neuere Entwicklungen in der Neuapostolischen Kirche*.

<sup>51</sup> Of the twelve NAC-respondents who reported loss of a parent, half were women and half were men.

<sup>52</sup> Rudy B. Andeweg and Steef B. van den Berg, “Linking Birth Order to Political Leadership: The Impact of Parents or Sibling Interaction?” *Political Psychology* 24 (2003): 605–23.

<sup>53</sup> Oluf Martensen-Larsen and Kirsten Sørrig, *Große Schwester, kleiner Bruder. Prägung durch die Familie* [Big sister, little brother. Familial imprint] (München: Heyne, 1995), quoted in Jürg Frick, *Ich mag dich—du nervst mich! Geschwister und ihre Bedeutung für das Leben* [I like you—you irritate me! Siblings and their meaning for life] (Bern: Huber, 2004), 150.

<sup>54</sup> Hansjörg Hemminger, *Grundwissen Religionspsychologie: Ein Handbuch für Studium und Praxis* [Psychology of religion basics: A handbook for students and practitioners] (Freiburg: Herder, 2003), 12–13.

<sup>55</sup> An unbaptized publisher is a person who has not yet been baptized as a Jehovah’s Witness, but participates in the field ministry after having been interviewed by elders (a kind of formal preliminary stage to membership).