

ENTREVISTA AMB EILEEN BARKER⁴

Juan M. García Jorba

Eileen Barker dona classes de Sociologia de la Religió a la London School of Economics, havent-se especialitzat en l'anàlisi dels nous moviments religiosos i, concretament, en el procés de conversió als mateixos. La seva reputació professional és excel·lent. Ostenta el càrrec de Presidenta de la Societat per a l'Estudi de la Religió, organització d'abast internacional i reconegut prestigi. Entre les obres publicades per Eileen Barker es poden destacar les compilacions *New Religious Movements: A Perspective for Understanding Society* (1982), *Of Gods and Men: New Religious Movements in the West* (1983) o els seus llibres *The Making of a Moonie: Choice or Brainwashing?* (1984) i *New Religious Movements: A Practical Introduction* (1989). L'autor de l'entrevista va arranjat una cita per fax amb la intenció de donar a conèixer alguns aspectes del pensament de Miss Barker. Les següents línies reproduïxen el contingut dels 15 minuts d'entrevista telefònica mantinguda des del seu hotel a Londres.

J.M. Miss Barker, you are one of the most outstanding members of the new generation of British sociologists of religion. You have edited many books and your intellectual production is considered as rigorous and also incisive. Conversion and deconversion processes associated to sects and NRM have been the main subject of your research. You know there are great differences between several authors who work on religious conversion when they define and delimit this field. In your opinion, how do you think we must conceive religious conversion and, also, to what extent do these studies contribute to the analysis of religion?

E.B. Well, they're a very important part of it. I mean, you can't study religion from a social perspective without studying conversion. But I mean it isn't all of it. With the kind of life people lead today, in the movements or in religion, or with the police or with their parents... There are a whole lot of aspects. Conversion is one, in the analysis of religion, and it is an important one. How does one conceive a conversion? Well, it's changing one's belief about God, or a world view, from one position to another. Beliefs as it may imply some sort of commitment to particular kinds of practices and behaviours.

J.M. In your opinion, which methodology and techniques must we use in properly addressing the religious conversion processes?

E.B. Well, I think we use, we need to use, quite a lot of different techniques. I, in my own work, have used different methods. I have used different observation techniques. I have used questionnaires and I have used in-depth interviews, which you can also use reading literature and talking to other people apart from those who are immediately concerned with the conversion, like parents, friends... I think that all these techniques and methods approach different aspects of the conversion process, and some of them get some aspects, some others you have to have a combination of them all.

J.M. Within religious conversion, sociologists have worked mainly on its causes. Could you tell me, without specific references to each religious community, which are the most common factors that lead potential individuals to religious conversion? So, should we speak about conditionant factors or about a configuration, a set of conditionant factors?

E.B. Well, again I think it would be wrong to generalize, and we don't have any statistical data about what is statistically the most common, but obviously there are a whole lot of areas and factors -just something making sense. Some people have religious experiences, some are ideologically looking for and seeking some alternative and better way of understanding the world. Some people join because they see people who seem to them good or happy or what have you. Some people may join because they want to make the world better, because they want a better relationship with God, because they want to improve themselves... There

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are a multitude of different beliefs, but I think, sometimes, the emotional, spiritual and religious motivations are played down at the expense of some of the other ones. But I think it's very seldom single motives that make somebody convert. I think it's usually a combination. But there are different combinations for different people joining different religions.

J.M. Then, should we speak about conditionant factors, a set of conditionant factors?

E.B. Yes, if you wish.

J.M. Brainwashing or free choice. Do you think this dichotomous approach is suitable?

E.B. Well, I don't find brainwashing a very helpful term, nor indeed mind control. But on the other hand I, think free choice by itself, is a bit naive. I think there is always some sort of social dialectic in that both the person who is converting and the people who already belonged to the religion to which he or she is converting are involved. I think one has to see that there have to be some alignment, that nobody is likely to convert without other individuals playing some sort of a role. But on the other hand, I don't think that people convert mainly because other individuals want them to convert. In my experience, in my research... I have always found that there are people who can resist the pressures or influences of others, and those that go along with it do it because they feel there is something in it for them, although they may be put under suitable pressure and they may then decide that there isn't something in it for them, in which case they can, and do, leave. And there's very high statistical rate of rejection and high rate of turn over of people who accept things which seems to point to the idea of brainwashing very effective. But I wouldn't want to say that it's completely free choice because we're all influenced the whole time by other people.

J.M. Niebuhr and Wilson defend different points of view regarding the relation between conversion, commitment and social reproduction in the sects. Which of them would you back?

E.B. Well, they all three occur.

J.M. Considering the contributions of Wilson and Niebuhr in this theme, which of them would you back, do you prefer, do you agree?

E.B. It isn't a question of which you prefer. I mean one may be more useful.

J.M. Perfectly, considering both theoretical perspectives, which do you think could be more useful?

E.B. Well, I think they both contribute something and they're asking slightly different questions and concepts. They're more or less useful, and rather than more or less accurate in themselves. One has to look at particular cases too... So if I understand your question, I would disagree that it's a legitimate question to ask.

J.M. Well... I agree with you that both are really important sociologists who have contributed a lot to the analyses of religion. What's your opinion about the difference of commitment between converts and people who are born into a religious community?

E.B. Well, that's an empirical question, that you can't answer just making a generalization because it varies. Sometimes it's stronger with people who have been converted, sometimes with people who have been born into the movement. But they're very different kinds of commitments very often and I don't think just sort of saying if somebody's converted they're more committed. I mean in one sense they probably will be because they've made a choice, but that's purely a supposition. Whereas somebody who's born into it might not think that they might be more committed at a far deeper level, but not necessarily. That, as I say, is an empirical question where you would have to look at particular cases and you can't make a generalization.

J.M. I'm afraid I've another general question. Religious rejection has been also analyzed by social scientists. Which would be the most important factors playing in these processes?

E.B. Well, again, you can't generalize the question. What I'm saying is not that I can't answer your question, but I can only answer your question in specific instances because people leave NRM for different reasons. Some of them become disaffected because of the people who are in the movement. Some of them don't believe that the teachings of the movement are true any longer. Some see some other lifestyle or career that they want to follow and so they'll leave. And... well, we do know that there are a number of different

reasons that's why people leave. That would be my answer.

J.M. Like in conversion processes...

E.B. They have maybe been deprogrammed. That's one of the reasons people leave. There are a lot of different processes for people joining or for people leaving. People are different and they go into different movements and they leave different movements for different reasons, and because of different processes and different pressures.

J.M. Leaving a sect or NRM could imply several problems to that individual. Individuals must adapt to a new world. In your opinion, which are the most common problems that the ex-members find when leaving these kind of organizations? Which are their more common routes?

E.B. Well, again it depends on which organizations they are leaving, and how long they've been there for. If you're leaving something like the Church of England, which you haven't been very much involved in, or if you're leaving a movement, a human potential movement say, which hasn't demanded very much of your time or commitment, then you're not likely to have many problems. If, however, you've been involved in a movement which has been very close to the rest of the society, and you've been involved in that for a very long time, then, obviously, it's going to be different, like moving to a different country and having to cope with that. So again I don't want to generalize. I think if you read the work which has been done about people who have left new religions there are a whole variety of problems that will face them. Sometimes they have got problems because everybody else of their age has got on further in the career. Sometimes they have financial problems. Sometimes they have problems relating to other people; perhaps it's people of a different sex. Sometimes they're not used to making decisions for themselves... There are a large number of different things that need to be taken into account. And again they may have problems in defining what has happened in the way that the people treat them, because they have been in a new religious movement. The people think that they know what the person has experienced, whereas actually that may not fit what's the case at all. They may be people like you who want to generalize.

J.M. How do you assess the phenomenon of itinerant religious converts?

E.B. Well, I see it in so far as I've observed that it happens that there are people who are seeking and who don't find anything satisfactory in a lot of the movements that they try. Sometimes they do eventually find somewhere and settle down, sometimes they don't... and I don't quite know what else you want me to say about that.

J.M. No more questions, thank you very much. I'm really grateful for the opportunity to speak with you and I wish to know you personally under better circumstances.

E.B. Well, I'm sorry that I'm so incredibly busy at the moment, and good luck with your research.