

Conversion: Toward a Holistic Model of Religious Change

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The remarkable and unexpected religious resurgence of the last two decades has triggered much discussion and dismay. For therapists, social scientists, and clergy, no topic has created more controversy than the nature of the conversion and recruitment processes employed by various religious leaders, organizations, and their agents. At the same time, disciplinary myopia has presented a major obstacle to quality scholarship. This paper provides a model which can serve as a framework in which the nature of the conversion process can be seen more adequately. Systematic, careful, and rigorous comparison and assessment of the dynamics of conversion is mandatory before a sophisticated theory of conversion can be developed.

A viable model of conversion is possible only when it takes into account the religious system's paradigm or model of conversion, appreciates the metaphors and images of the transformation envisioned, and delineates the methods and techniques utilized by the religious community to accomplish its goals. Furthermore, any assessment of a scholarly model of conversion must carefully examine the strengths and limitations of the underlying disciplinary assumptions and models, the guiding metaphors and images which shape the interpretation, and the research methods which influence the modes of understanding of the phenomenon. Many studies of conversion have been severely limited because their general orientation was restricted to one disciplinary perspective, one religious tradition or subgroup within a tradition, and one guiding set of assumptions (Ikenga-Metuh, 1985; Richardson, 1985; Kilbourne & Richardson, 1988).

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Definitions of conversion abound. Some restrict conversion to sudden, drastic changes in beliefs, behaviors, and affiliations, while others include gradual and less inclusive forms of alterations. The debates about the precise nature of conversion engage both scholars and believers. It is my view that no single, pure form of conversion exists, but that conversion is a malleable phenomenon, subject to the structural, ideological, and personality demands of the potential converts, proselytizers, and circumstances. "Genuine" conversion is defined and elicited by a particular group's set of normative prescriptions and proscriptions. The scholarly enterprise, therefore, should be descriptive rather than normative. Scholars should observe, understand, interpret, and explain conversion as it is actually advocated and practiced. The debates about whether or not conversion is sudden or gradual, total or partial, active or passive, internal or external, can be put in perspective in two ways. One is to approach the topic descriptively. Another is to see the processes involved as actually occurring on a continuum between the polarities advocated by different factions (Scroggs & Douglas, 1967; Travisano, 1970; Lofland & Skonovd, 1981).

A major theme of this paper will be that conversion is a process of religious change that takes place in a dynamic force field of people, events, ideologies, institutions, expectations, and experiences. It is assumed that (a) conversion is a process, rather than a single event; (b) conversion is contextual and cannot be extricated from the fabric of relationships, processes, and ideologies which provide the matrix of religious change; and (c) factors involved in the conversion process are multiple, interactive, and cumulative. While there are unique aspects of particular conversions, it is also assumed that there can be broad descriptions of conversion that are useful in the comparison and assessment of conversion theories. There is no one cause of conversion and no one simple consequence of the process.

Holistic Model

The model proposed here is a heuristic framework, enabling a student of the phenomenon to ask a wide range of questions and explore various problems. Through a survey of literature, interviews with converts, and participant-observation research, I have sought to outline a range of issues that should be considered in the analysis and assessment of conversion.

Four Features of the Model

Conversion is a process of change that takes place in a dynamic force field. No model can be totally inclusive of the whole of reality, but I would suggest that the study of conversion must include, at the very least, the following components: cultural, social, personality, and religious systems. For conversion to be understood in all its richness, variety, and complexity, the domains of anthropology, sociology, psychology, and religious studies must be taken into account.

Cultural, social, personal, and religious domains carry different value or weight according to the particular situation. In some instances, the social mechanisms of group control may be so effective that they overpower the influence of culture, person, and religion. In other situations, the religious sphere is the dominant force and thus overwhelms the others. In the study of conversion, therefore, all these dimensions must be given serious consideration, but one must be aware of the variable relevance and potency of each domain. Researchers from particular disciplines tend, even when they are open to the influence of other factors, to give undue weight to their own point of view. Psychologists focus primarily on the individual convert, sociologists generally see conversion as the result of forces mobilized and shaped by social institutions, and religious persons emphasize the dominant influence of God and minimize the impact of other factors. Anthropologists are the least likely to be so limited by one narrow perspective. As a holistic human science, anthropology may sometimes serve as a model to those of us immersed in disciplines which demand loyalty to one point of view.

In examining these four components—culture, society, individual person, and religion—the following questions need to be considered: what relative weight should be given to each component, given the particular conversion under consideration? In what ways do these factors interact with one another? What significance does the convert attribute to these elements? What significance does the observer give to each component? If these assessments are different, explore the divergence. Which theoretical orientation should one utilize within anthropology, sociology, psychology, and religious studies/theology? What are the methods used in the studies under consideration? What are the goals of the scholars (denigration, advocacy, or trivializing of the phenomenon of conversion)?

The role of religion in conversion often poses a special problem.

Reading much of the literature on conversion in psychology, sociology, and anthropology, one would scarcely know that conversion was a religious experience. The religious dimension of conversion is often ignored for several reasons. First, exploring the role of religion is simply difficult methodologically. How can we understand, predict, and control that which is generally invisible to the outsider, mysterious and sacred to the insider, and ridiculed or trivialized by outsiders? Second, many of us do not want to give serious consideration to the religious factor. It would mean that we might have to reconsider our own world-view and lifestyle, and confront the possibility that we are limited creatures dependent upon a deity who requires moral responsibility. No one, especially a secular intellectual, wants to be subject to the authority of a transcendent being.

Despite these reasons to avoid consideration of religion as a part of the conversion process, I would argue that in order to be phenomenologically true to the conversion experience, we must take the religious sphere seriously. I do not urge that we capitulate to a theological point of view, but I do encourage us to find ways of taking religion seriously. Otherwise, our examinations of conversion will remain one-dimensional. If nothing else, we should take into account the religious ideology that shapes the conversion process, the religious imagery that influences the consciousness of the convert, and the religious institutions which are often the matrix in which the conversion takes place. Taking religion seriously does not require belief, but it does require that we confront the reality that conversion is a process which involves a rich web of religious people, forces, ideas, institutions, rituals, myths, and symbols (Garrett, 1974).

Historical Dimension

Psychology, anthropology, and sociology are generally synchronic disciplines (focusing on a particular time without reference to antecedents) rather than longitudinal studies. Diachronic approaches, like history, are concerned with changes over time. Historians have demonstrated conclusively that conversion, even within a specific tradition, is different in various times and places. Bulliet (1979) and MacMullen (1984), among others, have shown persuasively that converts have variable motives at different times in a historical context. For instance, the initial converts to a new movement are different from those who convert when a movement is successful and prominent. In other words, conversion is phenomenologically and motiva-

tionally different depending on whether it is an innovative movement or an established movement which is given respect and authority in a society. Such assertions are not designed to question the validity, value, and sincerity of particular conversions, but to point to the specific contours of the process in different times and places in history.

Some argue that the morphology of conversion is universal, but the consequences vary with particular locations and times. Brauer (1978) avers that conversion among Puritans in England triggered dissent and disengagement from the political system, whereas conversion in New England was a requirement for political and legal status. The former was revolutionary while the latter induced acceptance and conformity. This assessment is at least partially true in terms of consequences, but I would question that the motivations, morphology, and methods of conversion would be identical. Some historians argue, and I tend to agree, that the conversion process itself is shaped by historical circumstances (Cohen, 1986; Murphey, 1979).

Stage Model

The model I am proposing must not only be multidimensional and historical, it must be process-oriented—seen as a series of elements that are multiple, interactive, and cumulative over time. No single process or stage model has been articulated that is agreeable to everyone, but the work of Lofland and Stark (1956) and Tippett (1977) provide useful heuristic tools. I advocate an adaptation of their stage models as a strategy for organizing complex data, not as universal or invariant (see Rambo, 1987). A model is a tool which should be suggestive and organizational, not limiting. I would also argue that the stages are not to be seen as always occurring in the same order. Reality is far more complex, and conversion often is characterized by a spiraling effect—a going back and forth between the stages—and thus not a unidirectional movement. It should be noted that extensive debate has surrounded the Lofland and Stark model (see Bankston, et al., 1981; Griel & Rudy, 1984; Snow & Phillips, 1980). Gerlach and Hine (1970) believe that the first stage is really Stage Four, the Encounter. They claim it is only then that the potential convert is aware of options or is given words with which to express dissatisfaction thus making possible movement to new alternatives.

Despite these potential limitations, I present the stage model here as a way to organize more systematically some of the issues which emerge in the study of conversion.

Stage 1: Context

The context is not merely a stage, but the total environment in which converting takes place. I have already discussed the dimensions of culture, society, individual person, and religion. In the context, these factors must be specifically taken into account. The range of issues to be considered in the context include: What is the precise nature of the macrocontext, mesocontext, and microcontext? What are their interrelationships? Do they facilitate one another? Do they hinder one another? To what degree is there integration and coordination within these domains?

The *macrocontext* includes the world environment, political systems, religious organizations, relevant ecological considerations, transnational corporations, economic systems, etc. These forces can work to facilitate conversion, or can be powerful obstacles.

The *mesocontext* includes those aspects of the context which mediate between the macro- and microcontexts. Examples are local government, regional politics and economics, demographic patterns, and religious institutions and spheres of influence. The *microcontext* focuses upon the more personal world of the individual, such as family, friendship and kinship networks, vocation, and other aspects of a person's life which have a direct impact on the person's thoughts, feelings, and actions.

Because the context provides the avenues of communication, the range of options available to a person or community, and a person's mobility, flexibility, resources, and opportunities, the precise nature of these forces can have a direct impact on whether or not someone converts. Each domain of the context has different powers of access, support, control, and repression. A person or persons can be induced, encouraged, prevented, and forced to either accept or reject conversion on the bases of factors which are largely external to the person. These practical considerations and their complexity are rarely delineated in studies of conversion, but I believe it is imperative for students of the topic to be more systematic in detailing the contours of the context so that these patterns, themes, and issues can be made explicit.

Stage 2: Crisis

Most scholars of conversion claim that some form of disequilibrium or crisis is an important element in the conversion process (compare

Heirich, 1977). The crisis stage must also be assessed carefully. What is the nature, duration, intensity, and scope of the crisis? Seeing the crisis as existing along a continuum is preferable to viewing it as an absolute, either/or state. The reality is that there are many different types of crises. Much of the human science literature has emphasized social disintegration, political oppression, or something very dramatic as the instigator of crisis. But the crisis also can be brought on by the response of a person to powerful preaching that “convicts him/her of sin” and begins a process of self-exploration and search for a way to salvation (see Harding, 1987).

Other questions which need to be examined are: Is the crisis internally or externally caused? Does the crisis destroy the old so that something new is required (i.e., is there continuity or discontinuity with one’s previous life)?

The degree of flexibility, resilience, and creativity of the context of the crisis also needs to be considered. Some cultures, societies, persons, and religions are able to withstand a severe crisis and adapt to it in a productive manner. Others are more fragile, and may be rendered vulnerable and malleable to outside influence.

Stage 3: Quest

The quest stage encompasses different ways in which people respond to crisis and/or the way in which people orient themselves to life, especially the religious life. Three sets of factors can be examined to help us understand the quest stage: response style, structural availability, and motivational patterns. Response style describes whether a person responds actively or passively to conversion. Debates rage among scholars of conversion concerning the degree to which persons are active or passive in their conversion process. The debate has been particularly harsh between the so-called anti-cult movement and those who reject the arguments for “brainwashing” and “coercive persuasion” as forms of conversion to new religious movements (see Cushman, 1986; Ofshe & Singer, 1986; Richardson, 1985; Robbins, 1984; Conway & Siegelman, 1977; Straus, 1976, 1979).

Structural availability describes the capacity of a person or persons to move from previous structural, emotional, intellectual, and religious institutions, commitments, obligations, and involvements into new options. The various networks which shape our lives—family, job, friendship, religious organizations, etc.—are often effective in preventing change. Hence, a person may find the new option inappro-

priate. The degree of a person's involvement and engagement with previous orientations may influence the person's possible move to new options (Snow et al., 1980).

Another way of examining the degree of a person's active quest or passive vulnerability is to assess motivational structures. Epstein (1985) believes that there are four basic motivations: the need to acquire pleasure and avoid pain; the need for a conceptual system; the need to enhance self-esteem; and the need to establish and maintain relationships. The order and intensity of these motivations will vary among people as well as within an individual at different times. Thus, "availability" for conversion may be shaped, to some degree, by the motivational system of a person at a particular time and place. A person yearning for relationships may find a proselytizer's friendship a wonderful balm; this friendship could then be the beginning of the conversion process. However, countervailing forces often work against these motivations. Most people, in fact, say no to conversion. The powerful forces of entropy, resistance, rejection, and sheer fear of novelty can often negate the desire to convert.

Stage 4: Encounter

The encounter stage describes the contact between the potential convert and the advocate/proselytizer. The mode of contact can influence the conversion process. A different dynamic is operative when an active searcher comes to a person who represents a new option than when the advocate searches out a potential convert. The power relationship in each of these cases is different, and can affect the dynamics of change.

Most studies of conversion tend to focus almost exclusively on the convert. This is a fundamental mistake. Conversion is shaped, to some degree, by the interaction of the converter and the potential convert. The convert's experience can be powerfully influenced (some might even aver that it is created by the advocate (Hassan, 1988; Straus, 1981; Downton, 1979, 1980; Cushman, 1986; and Ofshe & Singer, 1986). This view does not imply that the process is necessarily imposed on the convert, but it is imperative to take the interactive nature of the encounter seriously (see Kaplan, 1986, to appreciate how the advocate is influenced by the potential converts).

Missionary strategy or the methods of persuasion and influence advocates use, like everything else we have thus far seen in conversion processes, exists on a continuum (see Beidelman, 1974). Several ele-

ments of missionary strategy can be examined. The first is the degree to which a religious movement is seeking to incorporate new members. Some religious groups are inclusive and some are exclusive. Ethnic churches, such as the Syrian Orthodox Church, have little interest in converts. Other groups, such as the Southern Baptist Convention, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, and Assemblies of God, emphasize activities geared to the intentional and systematic recruitment, training, and retention of new members.

In addition to the degree of commitment to proselytizing, one should consider the overall strategic style of the proselytizing. Several dimensions are important. For instance, the style can be diffuse or concentrated (Heise, 1967). In diffuse (or systems-oriented) strategy the advocate circulates widely within a community and seeks to persuade large numbers of people, especially community leaders, and thus convert the whole community or village. The concentrated (or personalistic) style tends to focus upon individuals who for one reason or another are marginal to their community.

A third strategic consideration is the actual mode of contact with people. Is the contact public or private? Is the contact personal or impersonal? Snow, Zurcher, and Ekland-Olson (1980) have explored these questions in a very helpful manner. It is not possible in this paper to explore all the nuances of missionary strategy, but it should be mentioned that the advocate can be flexible and innovative in finding effective modes of proselytizing (Rochford, 1982). Presentation of the religious option can vary in both content and form, and specific audiences targeted. Different personnel can be used for the purpose of locating, cultivating, persuading, indoctrinating, and ultimately converting people to a new religious option.

The type and degree of benefit the religious community, ideology, and/or way of life provides to the potential convert is another important aspect influencing the encounter. First, the religious option may offer the convert a comprehensive, coherent, and compelling *cognitive framework*. Second, the religious option can offer a range of *emotional gratifications*, such as a sense of belonging or community, relief of guilt, development of new relationships, and—something seldom mentioned in studies of conversion—excitement and stimulation. A third set of attractions presented by a religious community is what has been called “*techniques for living*” (Needleman, 1970). The new option provides the person with methods and techniques for the religious life and, sometimes, for life in general. A fourth attraction is *leadership*. The leader can function in many ways; but more often

than not, the leader embodies the virtues and powers which are articulated by the religious ideology, or has accomplished particular feats, or has extraordinary powers of discernment and persuasion (see Rambo, 1982b).

A fifth attraction is *power*. One theme that emerges in many conversions is that the convert feels filled with power, has access to power, or is somehow connected with either an external source of power or an internal sense of power often perceived as divine (see Beckford, 1983).

The focus of the last few pages has been the advocate's strategy, and the motivations and attractions offered by the religious option. Lack of space does not permit an exploration of the interaction between the advocate and the convert, but let me simply outline how this could be accomplished. One way to interpret the interaction of the advocate and the potential convert is to see the connections, continuities, and discontinuities between the elements outlined in stages three and four. Given my basic assumption that conversion is a process of religious change that takes place in a dynamic force field of people, ideas, institutions, etc., it is clear that the majority of people, except in very unusual situations (such as when subjected to coercive measures), reject new religious options. Enmeshment with the previous community and family rarely allows for movement to the new (Ejiju, 1987). Therefore, what enables the conversion process to transpire is a complex process in which a receptive potential convert comes into contact, under proper circumstances and at a crucial time, with the appropriate advocate and community. The trajectories of the potential convert and the advocate generally do not meet in such a way that the conversion process can germinate. Of course, the process of interaction is far more complex than this brief discussion can indicate (see Kaplan, 1986).

Stage 5: Interaction

The fifth stage moves beyond the mere contact between advocate and potential convert. In this stage, the potential convert either chooses to continue the contact and become more involved or the advocate is able to sustain the interaction in order to persuade the person to become a convert. Once again we must examine the degree of passivity and activity of the potential convert and the degree of manipulation and persuasion used by the advocate. Some groups, such as Orthodox Jews, do not encourage converts, and the potential con-

vert must be very direct and assertive in seeking a Rabbi willing to provide courses in Judaism. Many Rabbis discourage the potential convert. Other groups, such as Southern Baptists or the Unification Church, are eager to bring in new members (although they are not indiscriminate) and will seek ways of persuading and encouraging the potential convert.

To understand the interaction stage it is important to examine the methods used by a group to persuade. Crucial issues to consider are the modes and patterns of communication, and the role of encapsulation strategies. In other words, to what degree is the potential convert isolated or restricted from communication with outsiders and alternative ideologies? There are various forms of encapsulation: physical, social, and ideological (Greil & Rudy, 1983, 1984). Every group uses some form of encapsulation, so the issue is not use but degree and kind.

Some groups achieve physical encapsulation by taking people into remote areas or to areas where communications can be controlled so that no outside sources of information are available to the potential convert.

Social encapsulation means directing the potential convert into social patterns which limit contact with others. An example would be churches which expect people to spend all of their discretionary time in prescribed activities, such as Bible study, worship, prayer, and other social events at the church. Some groups foster social encapsulation by the wearing of distinctive clothing which serves as an obvious barrier to social contact and/or a reminder to the followers and to outsiders of the member's role.

Ideological encapsulation involves the use of a world-view, belief system, and ideology that "innoculates" the person from alternative, competitive systems of belief. The members and potential converts are reminded of the purity and sacredness of their beliefs and the perniciousness of the beliefs of the outside world. In some cases, people are trained explicitly to criticize the assumptions, methods, and values of the "enemy" ideology.

In addition to exploring the degree and type of encapsulation, another way to assess the nature of the interaction is to describe the extent of personal modification expected of the convert. Ziller (1971) proposed a theory of personality change that encompassed different levels of the personality: self, roles, behaviors, values, and attitudes. These components are arranged in order of importance; the self being the most powerful and least directly accessible.

Ziller's model is useful in identifying the possible elements required to change in conversion processes. Some groups expect total rejection of the former self and the creation of a new self. Previous roles, behaviors, values, and attitudes must also be jettisoned, and new components, in accordance with the group's ideology, must be embraced and enacted by the potential convert. Many religions emphasize the radical nature of change in conversion, but not all actually specify the changes explicitly or require modifications in the totality of a person's life. The question has to be asked: to what extent and how quickly are elements of a person's life to be modified in order to be acceptable to a normative community?

Stage 6: Commitment

The sixth stage is a crucial juncture for most converts. In this stage a decision is required and, in many cases, some sort of public demonstration of the status change is expected. Not all groups have such requirements, but some groups require compliance with extensive rules when the convert makes a decision to remain in a group (Gartrell & Shannon, 1985; Tremmel, 1971).

From the institution's point of view, commitment methods are designed to create and sustain loyalty to the group (see Kanter, 1968). From the convert's point of view, commitment rituals provide public affirmation of the consummation of a process.

A common method for publicly displaying commitment is the personal testimony (see Beckford, 1978a; Taylor, 1976, 1978). Some groups use testimony as an opportunity to discern the person's appropriateness for membership. If the convert is attuned to this, the conversion experience can, to some degree, be molded in the image of the group's requirements. A person eagerly seeking membership may consciously or unconsciously generate, emphasize, and/or select for testimony experiences and metaphors that conform to the group's requirements (Straus, 1979, 1981; Metzner, 1986).

Another crucial set of expectations are the rituals in which the convert must participate. Many traditions utilize various rituals of rejection, transition, and incorporation. These rituals are powerful in that they not only shape a person's experience of the conversion process, but also provide a powerful means by which to consolidate a person's beliefs and involvement in a group (see Morinis, 1985; Stromberg, 1985). Rituals both express a person's transformation and allow the person to participate in that transformation. Systematic description,

analysis, and interpretation of the variety of these rituals and their precise settings, metaphors, and methods will enable scholars to better understand conversion.

Stage 7: Consequences

This stage examines the results of conversion. Three levels of analysis are important: the convert's perception of the consequences, the group's evaluations of valid conversions, and the scholar's interpretations of results.

The convert makes assessments of the effects of conversion throughout the process. The convert is aware of the results of his or her experiences, and the assessments of these results play an important role in facilitating or obstructing the trajectory of conversion. I would urge that scholars elicit, when possible, the convert's own assessment of the consequences (Downton, 1979).

Second, the religious community has its own set of prescriptions and proscriptions for the authenticity of a conversion. It is important to articulate these as clearly as possible and make an assessment of the person's conversion based on the internal criteria developed by the group. Such an undertaking will highlight the fact that this process is, after all, within a religious community and tradition.

Third, from the scholar's point of view, it is impossible to provide any ultimate evaluation of conversion, but we can assess the consequences of a particular conversion. It should be mentioned immediately that evaluations, whether from theological orientations or from the human sciences, are normative. Assessments of conversion are from a particular perspective in which values are present, either explicitly or implicitly. No perspective is purely "objective." In the field of conversion studies, evaluations are *always* made from a value orientation.

I propose that scholars of conversion make as explicit as possible their own biases (Wilber, 1980; Conway & Siegelman, 1978). Important questions to ask are: Am I religious or not? Am I religious in the same or similar way as the person I am assessing? If I am not religious, what is my personal response to the nature of the religious conversion I am studying? Am I repulsed or attracted? What is my fundamental agenda in studying such phenomena?

In addition, the scholar should articulate as explicitly as possible the criteria by which his/her own discipline operates. What would constitute mental health in psychology? To what degree does the con-

version promote mental health—from the scholar's point of view? I think it is important for the scholar to recognize the cultural values which shape particular orientations to mental health within the disciplines of psychology and psychiatry. The scholar should also recognize that assessments on the basis of an external value system may not be adequate to the task, but being explicit and candid about values and biases can help make the assessments as fair as possible.

Given the above caveats, let me propose some questions for assessment:

Is the conversion progressive or regressive from a particular frame of reference (Salzman, 1953)?

What is the degree and direction of change?

What intellectual, moral, emotional, and religious changes have taken place (Conn, 1986)?

To what extent does the person conform to the group's norms?

To what extent does the person perceive change?

What has been the impact of the change on the person's network of kinship and friendship ties?

What is the person's degree of involvement in the new group? total/partial; depth/surface; and compliance/new self?

This paper has proposed a complex set of variables which need to be considered by the scholar of conversion. Conversion is a complex, multifaceted process in a dynamic force field engaging people, events, ideas, and institutions. The goal of the paper has been to outline some of the contours of a holistic model of conversion. I would hope that scholars from different disciplines would not only be more open to, but give systematic consideration to issues beyond their own specialty. Moreover, I would hope that scholars in the human sciences would become more interested in the religious dimensions of conversion and that theologically oriented students of conversion would take more seriously the rich particulars, complexities, and varieties of the process of human transformation.

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