

REVIEW

Understanding Religious Conversion. Lewis R. Rambo, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1993, 240 pages, \$27.00 (cloth).

Reviewed by Raymond F. Paloutzian
Department of Psychology
Westmont College

When one sets out to understand religious conversion, one has embarked on a formidable task that requires explaining all of the processes that determine the changes in the heart, mind, and religious group and identity of a person. To this question of how to explain conversion, each academic discipline whose ideas are woven together in this book—psychology, sociology, anthropology, and religious studies—has its own answer within the orbit of its own level of analysis. Thus, Lewis Rambo highlights the idea that human beings are individuals embedded in immediate social contexts as well as in larger cultures and religious traditions, so that any attempt to explain conversion must be interdisciplinary. The complexities of such an undertaking are apparent to anyone trained in the discipline of psychology.

Rambo has laid the groundwork for this task in *Understanding Religious Conversion*. He put on paper an exhaustive description and clear organization of the many factors that must be considered. The book is written with delicacy and craftsmanship, using vivid examples from many religions, that leaves the reader with a sweeping yet integrated picture of how the factors involved in conversion are knit together.

Rambo presents a “systemic” stage model, in contrast to a sequential (stepwise) stage model. He eschews a strict step-by-step model because, he says, the process of conversion is one in which multiple factors all interact simultaneously and cumulatively over time. For example, it is too simplistic to say that a convert must first live in a particular context, then confront a crisis, then begin a quest following the crisis, then encounter agents of change (advocates for the new belief) at the right time, and then make a distinctive commitment at one point in time (the moment of true conversion). The human mind and heart do not work in so linear a fashion.

This means that there is no one way to define conversion, either psychologically or theologically. There are two reasons for this. The first reason is the need to

accommodate the wide range of human experiences called conversion that occur among the world's religions. Rambo's approach will probably not sit well with those whose theological orientations insist that only one sequence of experiences (e.g., an acute experience of guilt followed by public confession of faith), or a particular doctrinal confession, or a specific ritual display of commitment, is normative for a valid or genuine conversion. On the contrary, his approach is pluralistic and inclusive: "conversion is what a group or person *says* it is" (p. 7).

The second reason is that Rambo's approach is (and must be) interdisciplinary. He blends ideas, levels of analysis, and research from psychology, sociology, anthropology, and religious studies into a seamless narrative in which each concept is applied to the sort of conversion for which it is suited. Sensibly, when discussing one person's religious quest, the focus is on cognitive and emotional processes operating in the individual, even though this occurs in a larger context. Similarly, when discussing the conversion of a nation, concepts applicable to social and cultural analysis are most prominent. Rambo's stages (better thought of as phases or facets) of conversion are called *context*, *crisis*, *quest*, *encounter*, *interaction*, *commitment*, and *consequences*.

The context stage includes the micro- and macrolevel settings in which people find themselves. This includes global factors such as one's culture and whether it would even permit someone to adopt a nonnormative religion; what cultural institutions there are (e.g., is it primarily a Catholic, Protestant, or Muslim country?); and whether espousing alternative beliefs is easy or difficult, safe or unsafe, and so on. Personal aspects of the context include factors such as whether the individual motifs of conversion are intellectual, mystical, or moral revivalist.

The crisis stage includes two broad sets of factors. The first set concerns the nature of the crisis, such as its intensity, duration, and whether it is internal or external to the person. The second set is comprised of catalysts for or against conversion, personal and social forces that prompt, promote, or inhibit it. A personal desire for transcendence, a near-death experience, or an external social crisis (e.g., the death of a loved one or a leader) that prompts one's religious quest, are examples of such forces.

The quest stage is defined by various degrees of active or passive searching along emotional, intellectual, or religious avenues. Motives to experience pleasure and avoid pain and suffering, and needs for a satisfactory philosophy of life, self-esteem, or power, reflect some forms the quest can take.

In the encounter stage, the person confronts the new belief, practice, or religious group or tradition. Encounters may be either sought out by the convert, or be imposed against his or her will. They may appeal to emotions or intellect, may be specific or diffuse, and in general, may vary in all the ways in which people try to persuade each other.

Because no conversion is sustained in a vacuum, the new convert's interaction with the new religious group must intensify. Such interaction constitutes the next

stage, although it occurs in varying degrees all through the process. New relationships with new emotional bonds are formed, new rituals are learned and enacted, new rhetoric provides a new system of meaning, and new roles give the person a new mission. These processes serve to fix the boundaries of encapsulation through which converts become separated—physically, socially, and ideologically—from their former lives.

The commitment stage is typically regarded as the true moment of conversion. That is, some say that to be converted equals making a commitment to a new religious belief at a specific point in time. But Rambo does not see it in such a singular fashion. Commitment is, he says, a matter of degree. Commitments take different amounts of time, involve greater or lesser degrees of surrender, can be made early or late in the overall process, and can be partial or total. For example, what one is committed to may differ at different points in the process: One may first adopt a belief and then search out its meaning, or, in contrast, one may search through alternative points of view before adopting a belief. One may also initially commit oneself to the process of questing but not to a belief and accept a belief later. The notion that a commitment must only occur in a moment is wrong.

The final stage, consequences, is where one looks to see what happens because individuals or societies convert: Were the expectations fulfilled? Were there unforeseen harmful outcomes? Some consequences are predictable: People display a personal bias in defending a commitment they have made, even in the face of disconfirming information. Even with benefits for individuals, other social consequences may not be anticipated and can be negative, as when Indian villagers became Buddhists, and reaped resentment and violence from those in the Hindu caste system. Paradoxically, one unintended sociocultural consequence is nationalism. In their efforts to proselytize a new tribe or region by confronting the indigenous people with a religion new to them, missionaries create conditions in which the target people can react by adhering more firmly to their own national identity.

The book is synthetic. Gone are the days of conversion being described by a one-size-fits-all series of steps. Instead, we have here a rich, complicated model more in line with how human beings actually function. This is the benefit of Rambo's schema. On the other hand, to empirically test it all will be difficult.

Rambo states an interesting conclusion: It may be impossible to discover what a "pure" conversion experience is; "Conversion is malleable" (p. 170). Arguments over either-or assertions about conversion are inadequate; "Debates about whether conversion is sudden or gradual, partial or total, internal or external, and the like, can be resolved by acknowledging a spectrum of possibilities" (p. 170). Although this conclusion is not surprising to a behavioral scientist, Rambo's way of integrating the perspectives of several disciplines is a worthy contribution as a descriptive synthesis of the material. It points the way to empirical research. I am pleased to recommend it.

