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Psychology of Conversion and Spiritual Transformation

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Abstract This article provides an overview of the four major psychological approaches used in the study of religious change. A heuristic stage model of conversion consisting of seven stages: context, crisis, quest, encounter, interaction, commitment, and consequences (Rambo 1995) serves as a framework for integrating the research of these four approaches, providing a fuller understanding of the multilayered processes involved in conversion. The authors hope that the phenomenon of spiritual transformation and conversion will continue to draw the attention of psychologists who increasingly appreciate the complexity and dynamism of religious/spiritual transformation. For the psychology of religion in general and the psychology of conversion and spiritual transformation in particular to be viable and valuable, psychologists will need to join with researchers in the human sciences and religious studies to develop methods and theories worthy of this complex subject. Additionally, through collaboration with psychologists in the People's Republic of China, the authors look forward to exploring together the fascinating and important issues that emerge as we seek to understand the nature of conversion and spiritual transformation in China.

Keywords Conversion · Psychology of conversion · Spiritual transformation · Psychology in China

Conversion has been an important topic in the discipline of psychology since its inception in the late nineteenth century. William James, Edwin Starbuck, G. Stanley Hall, and other early figures were fascinated by the phenomenon of religious change.[1] Sudden, dramatic

[1]The best single resource for the study of the history of conversion in the psychology of religion is David Wulff's comprehensive and definitive article: "A Century of Conversion in American Psychology of Religion" (2002). For an excellent survey of some of the persistent issues in the psychological study of conversion, see James R. Scroggs and William G. T. Douglas, "Issues in the Psychology of Religious Conversion" (1967).

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conversions, taking place both for individuals and in revival meetings, were the most widely known forms of religious change in the late nineteenth century and were understood to involve primarily adolescents and young adults.

Research and publications regarding the psychology of conversion diminished significantly from the 1930s until the 1970s. The reasons for this decline are complex and beyond the scope of this paper. The ascendency of behaviorism, on the one hand, and the hegemony of psychoanalysis in the therapeutic domain, on the other, played a role in reducing interest in conversion. In Protestant circles, the Pastoral Counseling and Pastoral Psychology movement had only a limited interest in conversion processes. Much has changed since the time of these early classic studies of conversion. During the last three decades research has expanded to include a wide range of scholars in anthropology, history, psychology, religious studies, and sociology. Many of these scholars focused on new religious movements and on religious change in various parts of the world, including the resurgence of various religions and conversions instigated by missionaries and other advocates of particular religions. Within the last decade, many psychologists have advocated the need to go beyond the confines of particular religions to include various forms of spirituality (Mahoney and Pargament 2004; Paloutzian 1981, 2005, forthcoming; Paloutzian et al. 2006; Pargament 1997; Pargament and Mahoney 2002; Zinnbauer and Pargament 1998). These scholars consider spirituality to be a more inclusive category or phenomenon than traditional religious institutions.

The psychological study of conversion in the West can be divided into two broad categories. The first—experimental—seeks to understand, predict, and control conversion phenomena. This approach explores, for example, the roles of depression, suggestibility, motivation, or other variables in the conversion process (Gorsuch 1984; cf. Kildahl 1965; Spellman et al. 1971). The other major type is more theoretical and global in its quest to understand the human predicament and uses broader case-study and clinical methods (e.g., Nelson forthcoming). This approach may be called descriptive or phenomenological (cf. Tarachow 1955). While these two approaches are suggestive, their limited scope makes clear the need for a broader theory of conversion, a theory that takes into account the extension of the boundaries of psychology to include the resources of anthropology, sociology, and other human sciences (cf. Rambo 1999; Tweed 2006).

This paper will offer an overview of psychological approaches that have been used in the study of religious change. Our underlying assumption is that conversion is a process of religious change that takes place in a dynamic force field involving people, institutions, events, ideas, and experiences. The study of conversion must take into account not only the personal dimension, but also the social, cultural, and religious dynamics in which a person is embedded. For conversion to be understood in its variety and complexity, the relevance of anthropology, sociology, psychology, and religious studies must be acknowledged and explored.

The field of psychology is a cluster of orientations, theories, and research methods. Diverse though it is, psychology focuses on the individual and his or her patterns of perception, cognition, emotion, relationships, and behavior. As a science and a therapeutic technique, psychology seeks to describe, understand, predict, and control persons (cf. Matarazzo 1987).

The psychological study of conversion can be analyzed in terms of four different approaches. The first and probably largest has been the psychoanalytic study of conversion. Many psychoanalysts have sought to untangle the web of factors which make conversion interesting to the clinician. The psychoanalyst focuses on internal emotional elements, especially as they are shaped by the individual's ambivalent yearnings for and hostilities toward his or her mother and father (cf. Salzman 1953).

The second approach is behaviorist or experimental. This approach emphasizes the impact of the immediate environment on conversion. The behaviorist William Sargent, a British psychiatrist, popularized a Pavlovian understanding of conversion in his famous book *The Battle for the Mind* (Sargent 1957).

The third approach is represented by the humanistic and transpersonal psychologists. William James' *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902) launched this orientation. The humanistic/transpersonal perspective stresses the way conversion empowers a person to achieve self-realization or fulfillment. Unlike the psychoanalytic and behaviorist approaches, this third group generally holds a more affirmative attitude toward religion and the conversion experience.

The fourth approach, which I (Rambo) call the social/holistic, is more difficult to characterize because the scholars in this category rarely study conversion per se and therefore cannot easily be grouped in a school of thought delineated in terms of conversion. This is an eclectic, holistic approach which attempts to synthesize the other three approaches. Robert Ziller (1970), Theodore Sarbin, and Nathan Adler are representative of the social/holistic approach. These psychological theorists were influential in my (Rambo 1995) initial efforts at finding a more inclusive, holistic approach to understanding the dynamics of human change processes.

Stage model conversion

Each theoretical perspective offers valuable insights into the conversion process. The psychoanalytic point of view elucidates the emotional factors in conversion, the behaviorist point of view the environmental factors, the humanistic/transpersonal tradition the growth-producing or positive sources and consequences of conversion, and the eclectic/holistic point of view the cognitive and social elements of conversion. By itself each is limited and, in some cases, interprets conversion as a manifestation of psychopathology. The views of the fourth group are most compatible with our my own, presented below, yet together these four points of view provide an overall understanding of the diversity and complexity of conversion and spiritual transformation phenomena. Each perspective offers illuminating insights, much as in an orchestra you need violins, cellos, flutes, drums, trumpets, and so forth, in order to have a symphony.

A heuristic stage model of conversion may serve as a framework to integrate the research of these four psychological approaches, providing a fuller understanding of the multilayered processes involved in conversion. A stage model is appropriate for conversion understood as a process (see Kahn 2000; Kahn and Green 2004; Strähler 2010; Tippett 1977). A "stage" is a phase or period during a sequence of interactions. Each stage is characterized by a cluster of themes, patterns, and processes. Lofland and Stark (1965) envision their stage model as a sequence of elements that are multiple, interactive, and cumulative over time. In contrast, the stage model proposed here is not unidirectional. The stages do not always follow each other sequentially, and stages can reciprocally interact.

A "model" is an intellectual construction designed to organize complex data and processes. Although this model has been developed through research and its usefulness has thus been demonstrated, one should see not see it as universal and invariant but rather as an attempt to organize the complex data and vast literature on conversion. The following stage model consists of seven stages: context, crisis, quest, encounter, interaction, commitment, and consequences (Rambo 1995).

Context: dynamic force field

The context is the total social, cultural, religious, and personal environment. The context is a dynamic force field that provides the matrix in which religious and spiritual transformation takes place. The context comprises the macro context and the micro context.

The macro context is the cultural and social milieu of the larger environment. For instance, in the United States and Great Britain the macro context combines industrialization, extensive mass communication, high mobility rates, and the vicissitudes of Christianity's influence and power. Such a situation allows people within a culture an enormous, sometimes overwhelming, range of options. This pluralism can create perplexity and alienation; consequently, people may be receptive to choosing a new religious option to lessen anxiety, find meaning, and gain a sense of belonging (Barrow et al. 2010; The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life 2009).

The micro context is the more immediate world of the family, ethnic group, religious community, and local neighborhood. These groupings play an important role in the creation of a sense of identity and belonging. Micro contextual groups interact with the macro context in various ways; some approve and facilitate context; others reject or seek to alter the macro context. The micro context can counteract the influence of the macro context, intentionally or unintentionally. For instance, isolation from the wider world can intensify the impact of a religious group on a person and religious community.

Psychologists typically do not directly address the macro context of religious conversion because their emphasis is on the individual. Until recently, psychologists tended to focus on issues that ignored or downplayed cultural and social variables. However, we cannot talk about a person's psyche adequately without contextualizing. The person growing up in a small, remote town lives in a very different world than the person in an urban environment with its supermarket of social, moral, and religious options. A Christian or a Buddhist in the People's Republic of China will have a different set of symbols, rituals, and myths with which to experience religious/spiritual life than a Christian or a Buddhist in Korea or Indonesia. The context not only provides the social/cultural matrix which shapes a person's myths, rituals, symbols, and beliefs, it also has a powerful impact in terms of access, mobility, and opportunity for even coming into contact with religious and spiritual options. The increased mobility and multiple modes of communication (especially the instantaneous flow of information via the internet) profoundly shape the modern world. Not only is it easier for the advocate to move into new areas to propagate religious or spiritual practices and beliefs, but increased mobility also enables a potential convert to move more readily from old patterns of social relationships, which may feel constricting, into new options. The vast numbers of people around the world who are moving from rural to urban areas are exposed to new modes of thought, experiences, relationships, ideologies, religions, and so forth (see Yang 2006).

Psychiatrist Robert Jay Lifton (Lifton 1968, 1999) recognizes the role of the larger matrix in the creation of psychological reality. Lifton argues that in the modern world, because of the erosion of cultural tradition, high rates of mobility, instantaneous communication networks, and increasing secularization, the self is no longer clearly defined and has become fragmented and fragile. The fragility of the self Lifton describes can be a powerful motivation for conversion to various forms of religion and spirituality.

Stephen Sales' study in the early 1970s (Sales 1972) is the only one we know of that seeks to study empirically the relationship between the larger environment and motivations for conversion. Sales studied the economic fluctuations in Seattle, Washington, and the

rates of church attendance in various types of churches in that area. He found that conversion rates to authoritarian churches increased when economic problems arose.

Crisis

Conversion scholars generally agree that a crisis or disorientation precedes conversion. The crisis may be religious, political, psychological, or cultural, or it may be a life situation that opens people to new options. During the crisis, myths, rituals, symbols, goals, and standards cease to function well for the individual or culture. Such a crisis creates disorientation in a person's life. Others view the crisis as an opportunity for revitalization, a time when myths, rituals, and symbols are rediscovered, people transformed, and energies mobilized to create new possibilities (Lex 1978; Vokes 2007; cf. Wallace 2003).

A substantial amount of the psychological literature on conversion processes is influenced by psychoanalysis. This approach tends to interpret conversion as a form of pathology. From this perspective, the motivation to convert is a deficiency generated from fear, loneliness, or desperation. The conversion itself is seen as an adaptive mechanism which attempts to resolve psychological conflict. Research by humanistic/transpersonal psychologists offers an alternative view. Fulfillment motivation can operate just as strongly as deficiency motivation. Some people are spiritual questors, always growing, learning, developing, and maturing. Rather than passive victims of aggressive advocates, these people are actively searching for new options, stimulation, ideas, and depths of involvement.

Psychoanalysts generally see conversion as a search for the resolution of emotional issues. Given the fact that their data base is derived from clinical settings, many of their converts are diagnosed as "mentally ill." Research psychologists, on the other hand, tend to study psychologically "healthy" people and thus view conversion as a quest for intellectual, spiritual, and emotional transformation and growth. Henri Ellenberger, in his magisterial study of the history of psychoanalysis, noted that the data base from which figures such as Freud, Adler, and Jung created their theories were very different and impacted the formation of their theories and practices (Ellenberger 1981). Psychologists of religion thus need to pay very careful attention to the data base for our research.[2]

One of the few comparative studies which attempts to move beyond this dichotomy by examining a more diverse sample of converts was conducted by Chana Ullman. Ullman studied ten converts each to Jewish orthodoxy, Roman Catholicism, the Hare Krishna movement, and the Baha'i faith, comparing and contrasting factors such as the degree of trauma or family conflict in the converts' lives during childhood and adolescence, their degree of interest in religious and existential questions, and their degree of involvement in religious groups. Though Ullman at first theorized that the main motivation for conversion was the need for cognitive meaning, she found that the main issues were emotional, involving problematic relationships with fathers, unhappy childhoods, and a past history of disrupted, distorted personal relationships. We consider her work to be one of the best examples of excellent empirical research and theoretical sophistication in the psychology of conversion (Ullman 1982, 1987, 1988, 1989).

[2] It is crucial that we understand the database from which a theory is constructed. For instance, in much of American academic psychology most research projects are undertaken with college and university students. While this database has provided much important information, it is important to note that the age group is relatively restricted and that there is limited racial, ethnic, and class diversity and that, in many universities and colleges, the student population is restricted to people from a particular region or state.

Joel Allison conducted a comparative study of 20 male Protestant seminary students. He compared seven who had had intense religious conversions, seven who had had mild conversion, and six who had had no conversion experience at all. He found that almost without exception those who converted had had absent, weak, or alcoholic fathers. Those who did not convert came from intact families. He theorized that conversion for the first group was adaptive and growth-producing; they were able to move away from dependence upon and enmeshment with the mother by identifying with strong father figures, namely God and Jesus. Allison's is one of the few psychoanalytically oriented studies to view the adaptive element of conversion as constructive (Allison 1966, 1968, 1969).

The most recent and substantial empirical research in the psychology of conversion has been generated by Lee Kirkpatrick and various colleagues (Kirkpatrick 1992, 1995, 1997, 2005; Kirkpatrick and Shaver 1990) Guided by a nuanced appropriation of attachment theory, Kirkpatrick has provided the field with one of the most sophisticated and sustained approaches to conversion in the last 20 years.

Ullman, Allison, and Kirkpatrick provide us with excellent models for how to do comprehensive, comparative research among adult populations in order to provide a more accurate empirical picture of religious and spiritual change.

Quest

Quest is a process in which people seek to maximize meaning and purpose in life. Under abnormal or crisis situations this active searching intensifies; people look for resources for growth and development in order to "fill the void." Social scientists have recently begun to see people as active agents in the creation of meaning and in their selection of religious options.

The classical psychology of religion literature has portrayed the convert as passive. This passivity can be transpersonal, external, or internal. Either God intervenes to bring about the conversion, or the person is enticed by a converting agent who is able to exploit the convert's vulnerabilities and draw him or her into a religious movement. The convert is portrayed as responding to unconscious needs so powerful he or she cannot resist.

Recent thought in the sociology of religion suggests that the image of the passive convert is inadequate. Henri Gooren, James Richardson, and Roger Strauss, for example, argue that the convert is actively searching for new experiences, new depths of spiritual understanding, and transformation. Both passive and active modes exist. A person's mode of response falls along a continuum that ranges from complete passivity on one end to intentional, consciously self-directed activity on the other. Psychologists need to conduct studies which explore the full range of response mode (see Rambo 1995, pp. 45–46, 56–59; Gooren 2005, 2006, 2007, 2010).

Walter Conn has studied the research and theories of developmental psychologists Lawrence Kohlberg, Erik Erikson, Jean Piaget, Robert Kegan, and James Fowler (Conn 1978, 1986a, b, 1998, 2007). He believes their work may offer a key to a person's inherent motivation for self-transcendence and conversion. Conn argues that developmental research and theory portrays persons moving through a series of developmental stages in which humans strive to mature cognitively, affectively, and morally.

Conn offers evidence of a primary human yearning for transcendence. He cites such yearning as evidence that this innate drive to go beyond one's present level of development can be the motivating factor in conversion rather than a mere defensive coping mechanism resulting from an absent father or un-nurturing mother. Conn sees conversion not as an aberrant process, but as one integrated into healthy questing and growth. While there are

limitations to developmental theory, the question arises whether the developmental stages are as universal and invariant as some claim. Conn's work nevertheless offers a sophisticated approach to a normative theory of conversion.

Whether a person is active or passive in the conversion process and whether a person's drive to convert is compensatory or constructive are only some of the variables psychologists examine when studying motivation (see Buxant et al. 2009). There are many theories of motivation. Some theories attempt to identify one overriding motivational factor, such as conflict resolution or guilt. People are motivated, however, by a wide variety of factors, and these factors can change over time. Seymour Epstein offers a model which attempts to integrate the many possibilities (Epstein 1985). Epstein believes there are four basic motivations: the need to acquire pleasure and avoid pain, to possess a conceptual system, to enhance self-esteem, and to establish and maintain relationships. The strength of each of these motivations, Epstein suggests, will vary among people as well as within an individual at different times and in different circumstances. A religious movement which offers warm fellowship, for instance, will appeal to someone searching for relationships. Persons with a deep need to understand themselves and the world better may be motivated to convert because a religious movement provides a coherent, compelling conceptual system.

I would add to Epstein's model a motivation rarely discussed in the literature of the psychology of conversion: power. James Beckford suggests that the focus on religion's function as a generator of meaning and identity, prominent in the late sixties and early seventies, overlooked the role of power in religious experience, ideology, and institutions. Beckford catalogues different kinds of power which are recognized as playing a role in religion, such as the power to heal, the power to be successful, the power to gain control over one's life, and the power over death (Beckford 1983).

The motivations that operate in the quest stage extend through the encounter and interaction stages as attraction to a new religious orientation. Ultimately, they operate through the commitment stage as reasons to solidify commitment. Motivations to convert are multiple, complex, interactive, and cumulative (see Donahue 1985). Robin Horton's seminal essays on conversion in Africa provide a nuanced, interdisciplinary approach to bridging the gulf between personal, internal motivations and the socio-cultural, religious milieu (Horton 1971, 1975a, b). Recognition of this diversity is an important step toward a deeper psychological understanding of transformational processes.

Encounter

The encounter stage involves contact between the potential convert and the advocate and takes place in a particular setting. Many factors influence the outcome of the encounter. Most psychologists and human scientists believe that congruence or compatibility of ideology, age, sex, education, and similar attributes play an important role. The encounter stage includes not only the affective, intellectual, and cognitive needs of potential converts but also the needs of the advocate (missionary).

Scholars of conversion have focused their studies almost exclusively on the convert; but an essential and dynamic interplay exists between the advocate and the potential convert. Both sides strategize, maneuver, and engage in mutual interaction during the encounter stage. The advocate is assessing the potential audience, trying to create persuasive tactics to bring converts into the religious community. The convert also behaves to enhance his or her own *perceived* best interests. The ways that advocate and convert reciprocally meet each other's needs is an important topic requiring further research (Goody 1975; Rochford 1982;

Snow et al. 1980). Missionary strategy, like response style, exists along a continuum. Some groups are self-conscious and assertive about their recruitment strategies. Others are less so. Some groups do not reach out to incorporate new members at all. Some do so in a limited manner. Whatever the strategy, the encounter occurs within a dynamic force field in which both advocate and convert should be understood as active agents (see Najarian 1982)

Susan Harding has examined the vital and persuasive role of language in conversion and thus recognizes the centrality of the advocate's method in the conversion process. She examines how rhetoric is used by fundamentalist Christian advocates to insinuate themselves into the psychology of the potential convert. As the advocate tells the story of the Bible and about various Christian beliefs, he or she personalizes it in a way which draws the potential convert into the new rhetorical and interpretative framework. For instance, the metaphors of the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ may be related to the convert's recent divorce or a death in the family and the need to "resurrect" to a new life. In this way the convert's life history is incorporated into the ideology and narrative being presented so that the group's story becomes the convert's story in a powerful, personal way (Harding 1987, 2000).

Peter Stromberg stresses the importance of this interaction between theological system and personal life. He calls the juncture at which a religious or spiritual narrative becomes personalized the "impression point." When the convert connects the sermon or story to his or her own life, integration is achieved. The theological system makes sense on a personal, human level. Religious symbolism is seen to parallel the convert's life experience. At this point the symbolic system becomes plausible, meaningful, and attractive, and the convert is able to identify with and adopt the system as his or her own, to enter into this new story (Stromberg 1985, 1990, 1993, forthcoming).

The work of Harding and Stromberg represents excellent examples of interdisciplinary approaches to conversion. Again, though their observations are discussed in relation to the encounter stage, the processes they describe continue to weave through and to influence the Interaction and Commitment stages as well.

Another crucial topic is the role of charisma in the conversion process. Particularly in the encounter stage, the charisma, or personal attraction, of the religious leader or advocate can have a powerful effect on the convert. Charisma, however, like conversion, is an interactional phenomenon in which the needs, expectations, and hopes of both leader and follower are involved. Just as followers need leaders, leaders need followers. The charismatic leader offers the follower such things as a role model, guidelines for living, and affirmation of the follower's value as a person. The new convert fulfills the leader's need for adoration, affirmation, and obedience. Questions about whether the effect of the charismatic leader is to victimize or empower the follower and whether the leadership is used for evil or good purposes are complicated and must be viewed within the interactional model suggested. Responsibility for charismatic power resides not in the leader alone; the acquiescence of the follower must be explored as well (see Rambo 1982; Wach 1962; Palmer 2003).

Emotional bonding between the convert and advocate is a consistent and important finding in the study of conversion. While connection with the charismatic leader is dramatic and important for some converts, the more typical connection is between advocates and converts already within the friendship and kinship networks of relationships fostered by the advocate for the sake of proselytizing. Many scholars have found that the major "pathway" for conversion is via friendship and kinship networks (e.g., Stark and Bainbridge 1980). Benjamin Weininger treats the establishment of an interpersonal connection in the conversion process as a powerful experience (Weininger 1955). In fact, for some potential

coverts the experience of finding someone who loves and cares for them enables them to transcend immobilizing conflicts and utilize their energy to thereby relearn and construct a more productive life. Establishing a bond between the advocate and potential convert makes transition to deeper involvement possible.

Interaction

If people continue with the group after the encounter, the interaction intensifies. In this stage the potential convert learns more about the teachings, lifestyle, and expectations of the group. The group provides various opportunities, both formal and informal, for people to become more fully incorporated into the group. The intensity and duration of this phase varies. Important variables which operate in this stage include the degree of control the group exerts over communication and social interaction, the nature of the persuasion process, the formation of personal relationships, and the degree to which the convert must reject the old way of life to embrace the new or may be allowed to integrate the two worlds (see Greil and Rudy 1984).

Theodore Sarbin and Nathan Adler (Sarbin and Adler 1970) delineated common elements found among people who had undergone significant transformations. They identified five recurring thematic patterns. The first is the importance of the relationship between the convert and a teacher, mentor, or guide who provides a model for the new way of life. In almost all systems of change there is a guide to the journey. The second is the centrality of ritual as a way for the convert to participate in the new religious system. Through ritual, the convert goes beyond, or even bypasses, cognitive understanding to achieve direct experience of new beliefs and practices. Social psychologists have thus demonstrated that behavior changes can produce and consolidate changes in belief systems, reversing the common assumption that changes in beliefs precede changes in behavior. A third pattern of change identified by Sarbin and Adler is proprioceptive stimuli, or one's own bodily experience. Whether the convert fasts, meditates, or experiences some form of sensory deprivation, in all systems of significant change the involvement of the body is a necessary factor. A fourth pattern employs metaphors of death and rebirth. Like Harding, Sarbin and Adler recognize that the way a person conceives change is important to the way a person changes. Metaphors of death and rebirth are congruent with Christian imagery of the death and resurrection of Christ, which may reinforce the convert's repudiation of the past and embrace of a new beginning (see Metzner 1980; McAdams 2006; Hindmarsh forthcoming). Finally, Sarbin and Adler describe the "trigger," or catalyst, as the moment or turning point when the external religious story becomes relevant and compelling to the person and begins to be internalized. Though Sarbin and Adler are describing personal change in general rather than religious conversion per se, their model for change can contribute to further understanding of the conversion and spiritual transformation processes.

The academic description and interpretation of spiritual transformation and the process of conversion can be rather bland in comparison to the actual experience for the people involved (see Smith 2007). Terms such as "identification" cannot capture the poignant, powerful, and extraordinary experiences some people have in conversion. Murray Murphey's psychoanalytic interpretation of Puritan conversion comes close to portraying the drama and intensity of some Christian conversions (Murphey 1979). In Murphey's view, conversion entails the transformation of the person's emotional world. God who was once hated and reviled is now loved and adored. The self that was once worshiped is now rejected and surrendered to God. The convert's emotional economy is transformed by establishing new patterns of life.

Commitment

A convert is often required to make explicit and public his or her involvement with and participation in a new religious option and, in some cases, alternative spiritualities. Crucial elements of the commitment stage include biographical reconstruction, testimony, rituals, pain induction, decision making, and surrender. The juncture of commitment is sometimes presented as a clear-cut fork in the road or reversal of direction. Some Christian groups require public rituals, such as baptism, to indicate the person's new membership. Potential converts often feel they are confronted with a choice between the way of life and the way of death.

Carrying forward the factors discussed in the encounter stage of adopting the story of a new group as a convert's own, in the commitment stage the new story is more fully appropriated, so that a convert undergoes an experience of biographical reconstruction. Although all ordinary human life can be seen as a subtle process of reorganizing one's biography, in religious conversion and spiritual transformations there is often a requirement, implicit or explicit, to interpret life with new metaphors, new images, and new stories (see Beckford 1978; Taylor 1978; Turner 1976; Snow and Machalek 1984; Rotenberg 1986).

In groups that require the convert to give a public testimony as a ritual of commitment, the process of biographical reconstruction is encapsulated in dramatic form. Testimony is more than a simple telling of a life story or of the experience which led to conversion. It is a creative process which explicitly links the convert's personal story to the group's story. To give a testimony in this way, the convert must be alert to the cues of the group and tell his or her story in a way that makes clear that the convert is indeed a person who fits this group. Following the testimony, the convert will employ the story, along with other interpretive strategies, as a new way of interpreting experience. Attribution theory offers another way of explaining the process of biographical reconstruction (see Spilka et al. 1985; Proudfoot and Shaver 1975).

As Theodore Sarbin, Nathan Adler, and Robert Ziller have recognized, the rituals which may be a part of the commitment stage are powerful methods by which new learning takes place. Baptism, for example, is an explicit, experiential process by which a person declares the old life dead and the new life born (see Bregman 1987). In some religious traditions, requirements to modify one's clothing, diet, or other patterns of behavior can serve this same function of reinforcing the rejection of old patterns and behaviors and the incorporating of new behaviors into a person's life.

A fascinating insight into the process of commitment is provided by Alan Morinis (Morinis 1985). Morinis examines ordeals of initiation in which groups require mutilation of the body (such as circumcision, scarification, beatings, amputation of fingers, or removal of teeth) to deliberately induce pain. He theorizes that the inducement of pain serves two purposes: to heighten self-awareness and to demonstrate that to become a part of the group the individual must sacrifice something of the self.

Although no Christian group we know of requires physical mutilation of the body as a part of the conversion process, pain and trauma are often intensely present in conversion. The stories of religious converts are steeped in agonized descriptions of struggles with sin and alienation from God. It is possible that the emphasis in conservative Christianity on sinfulness, perversity, and depravity before turning to God is one way to create the same effect as mutilation rituals.

The decision to convert, which is an integral part of the commitment stage, is often the occasion for an intense, painful confrontation with the self. It is no accident that making a decision for Christ is a major theme in evangelical theology. At the same time that a

potential convert may be attracted to Jesus Christ and the new religious community, he or she may still be enmeshed in the old way of life. The vacillation between the two worlds can be very confusing and painful (see Pruyser 1974). The decision to cross the line into a new life, on the other hand, can be the occasion for tremendous relief and joy. This feeling of new freedom can itself be a powerful psychological experience which confirms the theology being embraced.

Many converts report that surrender to God and/or Jesus Christ is a crucial turning point in their conversion process. Unfortunately, the topic is rarely given much attention in psychology, or in sociology or anthropology for that matter. Harry Tiebout, in his studies of Alcoholics Anonymous (Tiebout 1949), points in a promising direction. People will often struggle with an issue or a problem for a long period of time so that their anguish depletes them. In A.A. the person finally faces the reality that he or she is an alcoholic and is totally helpless to change that reality. Paradoxically, upon a genuine acknowledgement of that helplessness, the person is empowered to begin the process of dealing with his or her alcoholism.

A similar process is sometimes at work in Christian conversions. When a person confronts his or her predicament as a lost sinner, the surrender to that knowledge and surrendering to Jesus Christ as a deliverer is the very point at which energy becomes available for a new life. Tiebout's psychoanalytic interpretation centers on the concept of energy. Much energy is spent to maintain the struggle. With surrender, energy is released to be used in other aspects of the person's life. Marc Galanter proposes a similar process that he calls the "relief effect," which takes place when a person identifies with a group (Galanter 1978, 1989). As noted in relation to the encounter stage, initial participation in a religious group is often facilitated by the establishment of emotional bonds between the potential convert and the advocate. It appears that whether a person decides to make a long-term commitment to a group is determined, to some extent, by the degree of connection the person feels with the new group as opposed to outside connections.

As far as we can determine, no research has been done on Christian groups in this area, but Marc Galanter and his colleagues' study of the Unification Church ("Moonies") is suggestive (Galanter et al. 1979). They found that after participating in a recruitment workshop most of the potential converts acquired virtually the same level of Unification Church beliefs. In other words, all of those who completed the workshop had been persuaded to affirm the belief system. The major factor for those who remained in the group was not their level of belief but whether or not the person had stronger relationships with people in the group than he or she had with people outside of the movement.

Consequences

The nature of the consequences of conversion is determined, in part, by the nature, intensity, and duration of the conversion/transformation process. How many aspects of life are affected by the conversion? How extensive are these changes? To what extent are converts alienated from or reconciled to the wider world? Many contemporary scholars believe that authentic conversion is an ongoing process of transformation. The initial change, while important, is but the first step in a long process, a pilgrimage.

Consequences may be viewed from the convert's point of view or the outsider's perspective. How does the convert experience the consequences? What experiences, ideas, relationships, and events are generated in the conversion process and what are the effects of these experiences on the person? These effects can convince the convert of the validity and value of the conversion or they can serve to make the convert question the wisdom of her of

his conversion. These changes also affect other people in the convert's life, eliciting both positive and negative reactions which will either facilitate or hinder the conversion process (see Barker and Currie 1985). The outsider seeks to make an assessment of the effects of conversion in terms of theological validity and value and/or to make a psychological assessment as to the benefit and detriments to a person's psychological health (see Bragan 1977; G. E. Allison 1976). In order to evaluate the consequences of conversion in this way, to make an assessment of what is progressive and what is regressive (see Wilber 1980), the observer needs to be explicit about his or her own values, as one's theological, intellectual, and personal stance will inevitably shape ones interpretation of a person's conversion or spiritual transformation. For instance, can an agnostic or atheist affirm the validity and value of a conversion to fundamentalist Christianity? Can a devout, conservative Protestant scholar understand and affirm a conversion to the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints?

Beyond these obvious questions of religious orientation, scholars need to acknowledge the more subtle values inherent in their theoretical models and analytic tools. For instance, if psychologists are attempting to evaluate the mental health consequences of conversions, do they recognize the cultural values which shape their model of mental health? Do they recognize how their model might be differently constituted in other cultures? Do they acknowledge the underlying cultural, personal, and professional assumptions on which their work is based (see Woody 2009; Malony 1986)? Once biases and assumptions have been recognized, a psychological study of conversion includes an assessment which seeks to evaluate whether there has been progress, regression, or fixation in a person's level of functioning. Robert Simmonds explored these issues in his study of a Jesus movement group (Simmonds 1977). He asked whether conversion to a Jesus movement was a genuine conversion or merely the replacement of an addiction to drugs with an addiction to Jesus. Given the emphasis on "dependence on Jesus" and obedience to group leaders and group norms, there seems to have been, in this case at least, no real change in personality but merely a substitution of one addiction for another.

David Gordon's study of a fundamentalist group is also instructive (Gordon 1984). Generally speaking, psychologists are very suspicious of surrender, self-abandonment, and dependence upon a group because such notions often indicate immaturity. However, Gordon found that the people in his study had in fact made major positive changes in their lives because they had surrendered ways of functioning which were unproductive in favor of new patterns of life. Thus the "dying to self" advocated by the group was psychologically effective in enabling the people to gain new ego control and strength. These studies demonstrate that assessment is a complicated process and does not yield consistent results.

Another approach to the assessment of conversion is James Fowler's faith development theory (Fowler 1981, 1984). The conversion process for a particular person can be described in terms based on criteria appropriate to the age and stage of the person involved. Conversion and developmental processes relate to each other in many different ways. For example, movement from one developmental stage to another can be the occasion for a conversion. Likewise, a conversion/transformation can foster a movement to a new stage of development. However, many conversions are reflections of the developmental stage of the person at the time. In other words, a person's developmental level serves as a filter through which the conversion is processed, setting the parameters for what can be accomplished through that conversion and influencing what is attractive to the potential convert.

The future

It is our hope that the phenomenon of spiritual transformation and conversion will continue to draw the attention of psychologists. It is also our hope that psychologists will increasingly appreciate the complexity and dynamism of the religious/spiritual transformation and will join with others in the fields of human sciences and religious studies to develop research methods and theories worthy of the subject. We especially look forward to collaborating with psychologists in the People's Republic of China as we explore together the fascinating and important issues that emerge as we seek to understand the nature of conversion and spiritual transformation in China.

It is clear from this overview of psychological perspectives on religious conversion and spiritual transformation that the historical and cultural context of Christianity has been formative in the nature of perceptions and experiences of conversion and spiritual transformation in the United States, Europe, and the United Kingdom. For the psychology of religion in general and the psychology of conversion and spiritual transformation in particular to be viable and valuable in the People's Republic of China, psychologists need to examine the ways in which various forces have influenced the psychology of the Chinese people (Bond 2010). Psychologists—along with colleagues in history and religious studies—need to explore the influence of indigenous or popular religion (Fan and Chen forthcoming), Taoism (Komjathy forthcoming), Confucianism (Sun forthcoming), Buddhism (Yü forthcoming, 2011), Islam, and Christianity (both Roman Catholic and Protestant) beliefs and practices that shape human nature and the possibility of religious and spiritual change.

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