



CENTRE FOR MISSIONARY LEADERSHIP

A work of the Missionaries of God's Love

Towards a Theology of Conversion

Theological Foundations of Mission 7

Inspire us to give
generously of
ourselves, so that
people may be drawn
into the mystery of
love, and experience
the fullness of life.

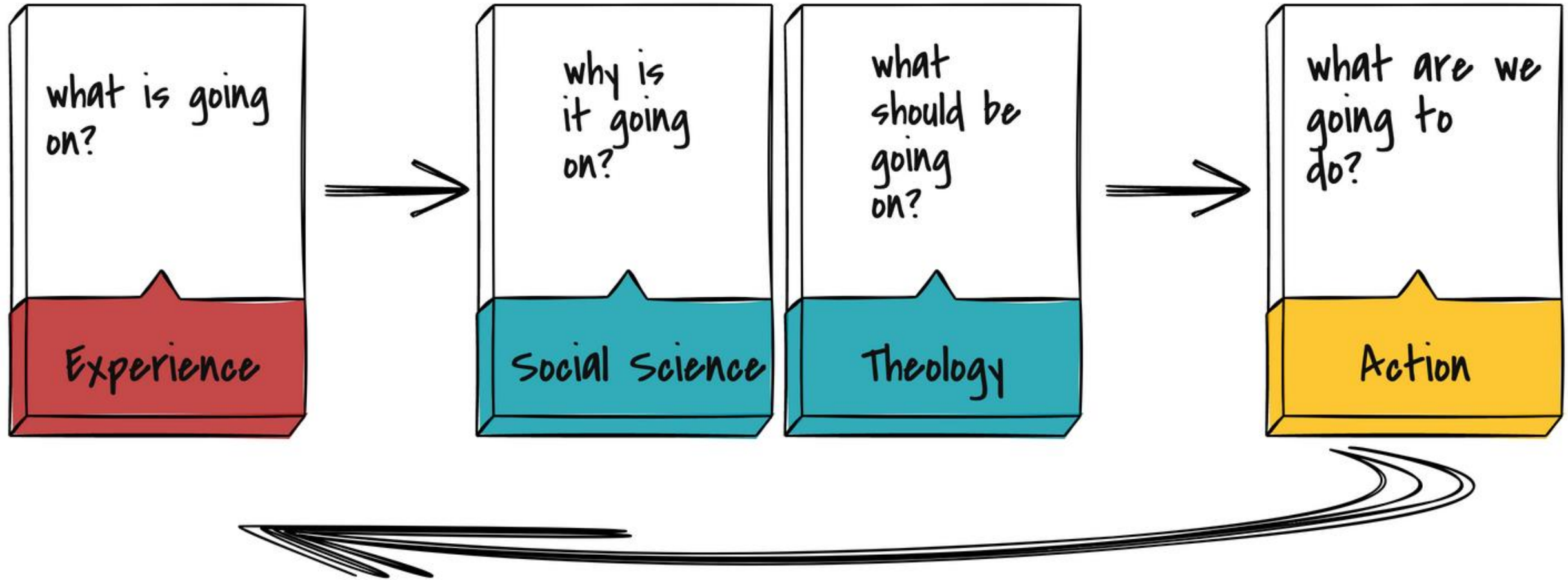


Where have we got to?

- Week 1 – The Scriptural Foundations of Mission
- Week 2 – Mission in the Early Church
- Week 3 – Introduction to the Contemporary Theology of Mission
- Week 4 – The Process of Evangelisation
- Week 5 – Understanding our Sociological Context for Mission I
- Week 6 – Understanding our Sociological Context for Mission II
- Week 7 – TONIGHT – Towards a Theology of Conversion



Pastoral Theological Method



Towards a Theology of Conversion

What do you think of when you think of the word “conversion”?



Common Meanings of Conversion

- Someone becoming a Catholic (or a Christian)
- Someone believes something different about God (change of mind)
- Resolution of an inner crisis (William James)
- Someone starts behaving differently as a result of that belief (change of heart)
- So ... conversion is commonly understood to be a religious event with moral implications
- Catholic scripture scholars and theologians have only minimally engaged with “conversion” (with some significant exceptions as we shall see)
- The influence of an Evangelical Protestant understanding of Conversion has been significant:
 - EP typically see conversion as a discrete, singular experience consisting of repentance of sin and acceptance of Jesus as one’s “personal Lord and Saviour”



So the meaning of “conversion” is
contentious

Towards a Theology of Conversion



An initial definition

Conversion is the process of change, not simply at the level of outward behaviour, but at the integrating and organizing level of one's identity which in turn shapes the thoughts and behaviour of every aspect of one's life.



Conversion in the RCIA

- The RCIA possesses an implicit theology of conversion that needs to be teased out
- The RCIA is “designed” for those who wish to respond to the proclamation of the “mystery of Christ by embarking upon the “way of faith and conversion” (RCIA 1)
- Conversion according to the RCIA:
 - Is a process rather than a singular event
 - Is a work of the Triune God rather than focused solely upon a “relationship with Jesus”
 - Possesses both a human and divine agency
 - Is transformative of the whole person (not just a change of behaviour)



Conversion in the RCIA

- The RCIA speaks of an “initial conversion”
 - Takes place during the pre-catechumenate
 - As a result of responding positively to the initial proclamation
- The signs of this initial conversion are delineated (RCIA 42):
 - The beginnings of a spiritual life (esp. prayer)
 - The fundamentals of Christian teaching have “taken root”
 - Initial signs of repentance
 - A sense of the Church
 - Some experience of the faith community



Conversion in the RCIA

- An initial conversion is to mature over the course of the catechumenate
- Signs of this conversion maturing are the pre-requisites for admission into the Elect at the rite of election (RCIA 107):
 - A conversion of mind and action
 - Sufficient acquaintance with Christian teaching
 - A spirit of faith and charity
 - Intent to be baptised (deliberate will and faith)
- Implication of the way conversion is portrayed in RCIA is that it continues beyond baptism – into life of daily discipleship



Donald Gelpi SJ's Theology of Conversion

- Gelpi considered conversion to be more than a religious event with moral implications, but was actually an affective, intellectual, moral, socio-political, and religious process that is transformative of the whole person over time.
- Gelpi defines conversion as the assumption of responsibility in a particular realm or dimension of human experience.
- Following Bernard Lonergan SJ, Gelpi considered conversion to be a human experience (and thus occurring outside of explicitly religious contexts)



Gelpi on Conversion

- **Affective conversion:** the assumption of responsibility for one's emotional, imaginative and aesthetic development.
- **Intellectual conversion:** the assumption of responsibility for one's personal beliefs and understanding and the concomitant repudiation of an uncritical stance of untested assumptions
- **Moral conversion:** the turning from irresponsible selfishness to the adoption of personal responsibility for one's decisions against a personally chosen set of ethical norms.
- **Sociopolitical conversion:** a commitment to address economic, societal or political injustice. Someone who has been socio-politically converted seeks the common good and pursues justice in societal systems and global structures



Gelpi on Conversion

- **Religious conversion:** “the decision to turn from either ignorance of or opposition to God to acceptance in faith of some historical, revelatory self-communication of God and its consequences”.
- **Christian conversion:** the decision to move from ignorance and opposition to God to a decision for faith in the God revealed in Jesus Christ and through the Spirit.



The Dynamics of Conversion (acc. to Gelpi)

1. “Affective conversion *animates* intellectual, moral, religious, and sociopolitical conversion”.
2. “Intellectual conversion *informs* affective, moral religious, religious and sociopolitical conversion”.
3. “Moral conversion helps *orient* affective, intellectual, religious, and sociopolitical conversion to realities and values that make ultimate and absolute claims on human behaviour.”
4. “Sociopolitical conversion *authenticates* affective, intellectual, moral and religious conversion by deprivatizing them”.
5. “Affective, intellectual, moral and religious conversion *authenticate* sociopolitical conversion by supplying it with personal norms that help measure institutional responsibility”
6. “Christian conversion *mediates* between affective and moral conversion”.
7. “Christian conversion *transvalues* affective, intellectual, moral and sociopolitical conversion”.



Implications of Gelpi's Theology

- Conversion is integral to human development in all these dimensions
- distinguishing religious conversion from other forms of conversion recognizes that affective, intellectual, moral and/or sociopolitical responsibility without this necessarily occurring in a religious context.
- Can help to understand why different dimensions of conversion may be present or absent in someone's life.

