
The Psychological Aspects of Religious Conversion

Religious Conversion

What thoughts and images come to mind?

“Conversion” in general means change.

- Originally “turn” or “turn about”

What is “religious conversion”?

- A change from one set of core commitments to another
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James and Conversion

Check your Understanding

1. What are two types of “transformations”?
2. What is the “habitual centre of personal energy?”
3. What hinders conversion?
4. What promotes conversion?
5. What are two ways conversion occurs?
6. Which of these does James explore? Why?

James and Conversion

1. Types of “transformations”
 - ❑ Temporary
 - ❑ Permanent
2. Habitual center of personal energy
 - ❑ Thoughts and experiences one is devoted to and works from.
 - ❑ When this “center” changes, conversion occurs
3. What hinders conversion?
 - ❑ Habits and formed ideas

James and Conversion

4. What promotes conversion?
 - Emotional states, “especially violent ones”
 5. Types of Conversion
 - Active (choice)
 - Passive (self-surrender)
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Types of Conversion

1. **Sudden Conversion:**
 - Dramatic change
 - Emotionally oriented
 2. **Gradual Conversion:**
 - Gradual change
 - Mentally/Intellectually oriented
 3. **Religious Socialization:**
 - Lifelong learning (no “change point”)
 - Socially oriented
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Explanations for Different Conversion Types

1. **Sudden Conversion** –
Resolves repressed (unconscious) conflicts
2. **Gradual Conversion** –
Resolves *conscious* conflicts or
Conscious search for answers
3. **Religious Socialization** –
Reinforcement
Modeling

Lofland and Stark's Step Model

Conversion to a New Religious Movement (NRM)

Background (predisposing) Factors:

1. Tension between actual and desired states.
(example: financial, sexual, moral, religious)
2. Religious orientation is used to solve tension.
3. Tension is not solved by traditional religion,
and the person chooses to seek answers in an
unusual religious experience.

Lofland and Stark's Step Model

Situational Factors:

4. A transitional period of life.
(E.g., finishing schooling, children leaving home)
5. Strong emotional bonds form quickly.
6. Previous emotional bonds diminish.
7. Intensive interaction and increased time commitments to the group or movement.

Sect-Church Theory

1. Sect-Church Theory

2. Glock's reformulation.

- a. Specific "deprivations" lead to specific "church-like" movements.

<u>Deprivation</u>	<u>Example</u>	<u>Form of religious group</u>
Economic	Less financial resources	Sect
Social	Racial discrimination	Church
Organismic	Physical handicap	Healing movements
Ethical	Moral degradation	Reform movements
Psychic	Unmet needs for meaning	Cult

Other explanations of conversion

1. Conversion as relief from neurotic stress and worry.

*As feelings of religious group affiliation increase emotional distress decreases. Thus, feelings of peace and comfort come from being a part of the group.

2. Conversion as creativity: An analogy.

*Connection between creative insight and the (sudden) conversion process.

*Stages of Insight: Preparation, Incubation, Illumination

*Stages of Conversion: Existential Crisis, Self-surrender, New vision and new life.

Other explanations (continued)

■ The Systematic Stage Model

Offered by Lewis Rambo as an effort to integrate the information on conversion.

(Paloutzian, pp. 158-159)

Psychological Variables in Conversion

- ❑ Greater psychological distress.
 - Higher rates of abuse, unhappier adolescence, and greater personal distress in converts vs. nonconverts.
 - Some suggest more hysteria, authoritarianism, suggestibility, and dogmatism.
 - ❑ Adolescence and the “Ripe Age”
 - Adolescence might be a “ripe” time for religious conversion.
 - Also, the middle age years are believed to be a potential time of searching and converting.
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Effects of Conversion

- ❑ What changes when people convert? (Rambo, 1998)
 - Social relationships
 - Attributions for events
 - Role in community or society
 - Personality?
 - ❑ Purpose in Life
 - The Purpose in Life Test
 - Related to Victor Frankl’s theories
 - Feelings of a purposeful life change after conversion. (graph in Paloutzian, p. 185)
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Effects of Conversion

□ Values

- Rokeach identified 36 values that people might hold.
- Participants ranked the values and completed the PIL.
- Several values correlated with PIL:
 - Negative relationship: Pleasure, excitement, & comfort.
 - Positive relationship: Salvation (i.e., result of conversion)

References

Rambo, Lewis (1998) "The Psychology of Religious Conversion."
Paper delivered at the International Coalition for Religious
Freedom Conference on "Religious Freedom and the New
Millenium." Berlin, Germany, May 29-31, 1998.

Text of the above presentation can be found:
<http://www.icrf.com/conference/Germany/rambo.htm>
