

PSYCHOLOGY OF CONVERSION

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I. Introduction

Conversion is the human side of regeneration, as regeneration is the divine side of conversion. For students of religion and religious psychology there is no subject that has held more fascination than the phenomenon called conversion. Yet in recent years a kind of shamefacedness becomes apparent among those scholars who mention it. It is a fact that conversion has been abused by many evangelists. It has been over emphasized, forced on people, and often distorted. Whether we study conversion from the stand point of the psychologist or from the accounts that are given in the Bible and other religious documents, it is clear either way that it is at once a profound experience and a extremely complex process.

II. The Nature of Conversion

Conversion is a turning from one state to another, as the word means. The soul has a general capacity for such change. However it may be predisposed by native disposition and determined by choice and crystallized in character and hardened in conduct by habit, its state is never fixed and final, but it may be, slowly or suddenly, changed and modified, revolutionized and reconstructed, melted down and recast into a new disposition and life. In this plasticity of the soul lie the hope and power of conversion.¹

We commonly think of conversion as a purely religious hange, but it may

¹ J. H. Snowden, *The Psychology of Religion* (New York: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1916), p. 143.

also take place at other levels of thought and feeling or in other fields of life. Every one has changing moods from grave to gay, from deep depression and permission to exultant hope and jubilant optimism, or one's life may encounter a crisis and even after flow in a different channel, and such changes are of the nature of conversion.

A. A Psycho-physiological Theory of Conversion

The physiological theories are involved in discussion of conversion as a form of brain-washing. Since the physiological theories discussed by Sargant have attracted a good deal of attention and controversy. Sargant clarifies his position by saying that he is concerned with the brain and nervous system, which man shares with the dog and other animals.² He sees important similarities between what is happening in the brains of people subjected to various forms of so-called brain-washing and those who are suddenly converted at highly emotional evangelistic meetings. Physical and psychological stresses skillfully applied can indeed produce dramatic changes in behaviour and beliefs.

Such behaviour is seen by Sargant as very similar to that occurring at religious meetings.³ Sargant makes one important admission:

I do not discuss some types of purely intellectual conversion, but only those physical or psychological stimuli, rather than intellectual arguments, which seem to help to produce conversion by causing alterations in the su-

² John W. Drakeford, *Psychology in Search of a Soul* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1964), p. 243.

³ Malcolm A. Jeeves, *Psychology and Christianity: The View Both Ways* (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 1976), p. 136.

bject's brain function. Hence the term "psychology" in the title.⁴

Conversion to him is akin to the process of brainwashing. He uses a Pavlovian model of conditioning-crisis-breakdown-reorientation to explain conversion. Emotional arousal, followed by suggestion, is thought to result in a physiological recognition in the brain. The traumatic stage is called "transmarginal inhibition."⁵

It cannot be denied that certain revivalistic techniques reviewed by Sargant render the person open to suggestion. However, there seems to be little evidence that suggestibility as a personality trait is a prerequisite for the conversion experience.⁶

B. Psychological Aspects of Conversion

1. The Power of the will in Conversion

The factors of tension and conflict, so prominent in Sargant's speculation, point to psychological basis for conversion experiences. W.H. Clark comments, "We must, then, regard religious conversion psychologically considered, as a special case of a wider psychological variety."⁷

Human personality is such that men and women have a capacity for a conversion experience. Personality's system, the unregulated urges, the value system, and the ego are in a constant state of tension. Between the unregul-

⁴ William W. Sargant, *The Battle for the Mind* (New York: Doubleday & Co., 1957), p. 13, quoted in John W. Drakeford, *Psychology in search of a Soul*, p. 246.

⁵ Cerdic B. Johnson & H. N. Malony, *Christian Conversion: Biblical & Psychological Perspectives* (Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1982), p. 153.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 156.

⁷ Water Houston Calrk, *The Psychology of Religion* (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1958), p. 202.

ated urges and the value system stands the egos or self, which must make its decision in consideration of the drives of the unregulated urges, the demands of the value system, and the reality of the total life situation. The solution may only come with the upset in the balance of power of the system of personality. The upheaval and consequent reorientation by the self may represent a psychological aspect of conversion.⁸

The problem of the freedom of the will can hardly be described as settled. Both among psychologists and theologians there are differences of opinion, and it may seem that to assume such freedom will lead the psychologist onto marsh ground. But the common-sense belief most generally held is that the will is a reality. It would certainly appear to play its part in certain conversions.

William James distinguishes two types of conversion, the volitional and self-surrender, in his book, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*.⁹ The former is largely identified with gradual growth, since growth through active striving is more apt to be slow and logical; while the latter is characterized by stress and emotion.

In case of sudden conversion the will has a real part, although at times it may be small. In the volitional type of conversion, the will is far more prominent, as the designation would imply. This case is fought out rather than surrendered, and are therefore more gradual than the surrender type. The volitional type is undoubtedly more permanent, but the lasting quality of the self-surrender type depends on the circumstances connected with it, this case resulting from the sensational revival being far less permanent.

⁸ John W. Drakeford, *Psychology in Search of a Soul*, p. 248.

⁹ William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (New York: Longmans, Green, & Co., 1905), p. 202.

The volitional effort in the direction of the good influences all the mental faculties, and gives direction to the turn which the whole self is to take; consciously, as well as subconsciously, its work is valuable and shows in every part of the process.¹⁰

Conversion is not an arbitrary act and does not violate the supreme law of truth and duty; but it is an act of the whole mind in which the will can select its object and fix its attention upon it until it grows into power, and it makes the object of its ethical faith and life; and on these grounds we can appeal to the sinner to exercise this liberty and responsibility and power in believing religious truth and turning from sin unto God.¹¹

2. Subconsciousness and Conversion

Both elements, Consciousness and subconsciousness, are present in all normal cases of conversion. Indeed, it is often said that there is no such thing as sudden conversion. When it appears to be sudden and shows itself as an unexpected decision to follow a certain line of conduct, or abandon certain practice which are habitual, what really happened is that this comes about as the result of a process of incubation in which certain psychic forces which suddenly manifest themselves have long been maturing and gathering strength.¹²

Subconsciousness plays an important part in conversion. The truth that is pressed upon the mind in conversion, the ideas of sin and

¹⁰ George B. Cutten, *The Psychological Phenomena of Christianity* (NY: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1909), pp. 252-253.

¹¹ Snowden, *The Psychology of Religion*, p. 180.

¹² W. B. Selbie, *The Psychology of Religion* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1923), pp. 195-196.

faith and obedience, penetrate this reservoir and draw forth the accumulated associations of the past to reinforce the truth and give it converting power. These revived associations are usually connected with the early home life and teaching and experience of the hearer.¹³

3. Psychotherapy and Conversion

Psychotherapy and conversion may be circumstantially related, but the Christian therapist with an interest in the healing of the whole person must be sensitive to the needs of the client as well as the potential for healing in both psychotherapy and the experience of conversion.

Like changes in therapy, conversion to the Christian faith involves many factors. There is the need for a change of mind and behavior. The decision to change comes in response to the spoken word that may be either confrontational or supportive or both. The similarities in the process of change between conversion and therapy are most circumstantial.¹⁴

Two levels of change are suggested in the comparison between conversion and psychotherapy. The first level comes with psychotherapy. The learning of life's skills, symptom alleviation, and deeper changes at the level of meaning and self-realization may result from therapy. The change that has ultimate ramifications in terms of destiny and realization of personhood comes with conversion. In the end there is a circumstantial relatedness between conversion and psycho-

¹³ Snowden, *The Psychology of Religion*, p. 166.

¹⁴ Johnson & Malony, *Christian Conversion: Biblical & Psychological Prospects*, p. 154.

therapy. That is not to say that the one may not impact the other. Conversion may cause the person to develop a sense of his/her identity. Psychotherapy may prepare the person for the removal of some obstacles to faith.¹⁵

C. Biblical Account of Conversion.

The Bible is essential to a full understanding of conversion. The word conversion denotes a turn on the part of a person. The turn is from something toward God. The apostle Paul writes, "You turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God."¹⁶ The emphasis here is on the person who turns, the human side of conversion.

The divine side of conversion emerges in words such as repentance and faith. The apostle Peter expounds the divine purpose in the death of Jesus and says, "God exalted him to his own right hand as Prince and Savior that he might give repentance and forgiveness of sins to Israel."¹⁷

The apostle Paul was aware of the parallelism of the divine/human aspects of the work of salvation when he said to, "continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose."¹⁸ Individual conversions are seen to occur because they fit into God's

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 155.

¹⁶ I Thessalonians 1:9

¹⁷ Acts 5:31

¹⁸ Philemon 2:12-13

plan and are expression of his power. The dominating motif is the presence and the work of the Holy Spirit.

The biblical preoccupation with the divine side of conversion is also supported by the fact that a person's response to the gospel is seldom described in terms of his/her subjective feelings. What subjective feelings are recorded are unique to each individual, rather than constituting a fixed component of the conversion experience.¹⁹

It is important to emphasize the divine side of conversion before the human side. The biblical examples of conversion begin with God's initiative. They may vary in the content of truth responded to, or in subjective feelings, or in both. But each conversion is seen as a unique personal response to a unique call of God.

God is seen as the author of conversion out we cooperate in the experience. During the period of incubation the person is awakened to his/her need for a relationship with God.²⁰ The agents of this awakening are God's general revelation (His power and order in the world), special revelation (the Word), and the Holy Spirit. There is a moment when the person turns to God. The person is not always aware of the actual moment but at this point comes to repentance and faith. The Holy Spirit imparts new life to the individual.

¹⁹ John & Malony, *Christian Conversion: Biblical & Psychological Perspectives*, p. 76.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 109.

III. The Means of Conversion

A. Three Steps in Conversion

Study of documentary records of conversion suggests that the convert passes through at least three will-defined stages.

1. A Period of Unrest

The first is a period of unrest, the causes of which may or may not have definition in the consciousness of the subject. In the old-fashioned theology this usually made its appearance as a "conviction of sin," and it is sometimes referred to as a sense of unworthiness and incompleteness.²¹

While this unrest may be in varying degrees artificially stimulated, it nevertheless often arises from a certain measure of insight into one's soul and a sense of the great gap that inevitably exists between a presumably religious person and the God he worships. The practice of some form of confession just prior to a conversion crisis is a reaction to this sense of unworthiness, and the resulting exteriorizing of it through confession goes far toward explaining the ultimate sense of joy and relief that ensues.²²

2. The Conversion Crisis

The second is an act of faith in turning toward God and Christ.

²¹ Water Houston Clark, *The Psychology of Religion*, p. 193.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 194.

Faith is a kind of knowledge: knowledge that rests on relation to a person as contrasted with knowledge that rest on sense perception or on logical demonstration. It is not a less trustworthy kind of persuasion than sense perception or logical proof and may be just as solid and sure.²³

While the first stage of the conversion process tends to be characterized by conflict and active mental struggle, the second stage is often ushered in by relaxation, or "surrender" as piety usually denotes it.²⁴ Logically following self-surrender is faith. This is a consistent with its lately formed determination to accept the new life.²⁵

Faith puts us in saving relations with Christ and become the vital artery through which he can pour his grace into us. Faith is the hand by which we grasp the hand of Christ, and then he lifts us out of our sin into newness of life.

3. A Sense of Peace, Release, and Inner Harmony

After the storm comes the calm, the decision made with difficulty may still leave some questionings and apprehensions, but the predominant feeling is of oneness with God, of sins forgiven and problems solved, of relaxation and sense of harmony.²⁶

Obedience is predominantly an act of the will, and the will has already been active in repentance and faith, each of which involves thought, feeling, and will. Obedience fixes and deepens faith in the

²³ Snowden, *The Psychology of Religion*, p. 159.

²⁴ W. H. Clark, *The Psychology of Religion*, p. 194.

²⁵ Cutten, *The Psychological Phenomena of Christianity*, p. 246.

²⁶ Drakeford, *Psychology in Search of a Soul*, pp. 257-258.

mind, intensifies its feeling, and thus causes faith to grow into clear vision and greater vigour and final victory.²⁷

Conversion runs the three-cycle round of thought, feeling, and will in its complex act of repentance, faith, and obedience. The soul in conversion perceives the truth as to sin and turns from it; faith believes in God and in Christ and commits the soul to him; then it feels and may be flooded with a sense of its guilt and of trust in Christ; and this stream of feeling pours upon the will and moves it to action in obedience. This cycle of Psychology is fundamental in conversion and in all our christian living and preaching, and a clear understanding of it is the first importance in our christian experience and work.

B. Conversion and Revivals

A familiar fact that is confirmed and elucidated by psychology is that revival is a powerful means of conversion. The contagion of a crowd works largely through the subconscious nature, tapping the deep primal instincts and passions and letting them loose in an overwhelming flood of power. Religious interest in a church or community is kindled by some spark and begins to spread and blaze and may grow into a conflagration. Christianity started off under the powerful impulse of the greatest revival in its history on the day of pentecost.²⁸

A revival follows all the laws of social psychology. It spread largely through the power of suggestion in reaching the subconscious

²⁷ Snowden, *The Psychology of Religion*, pp. 163-164.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 167-169.

nature. Revival preaching never deals in new theology but in old theology, the primary facts of sin and salvation; and it especially penetrates the subconscious life of the hearers by touching on their childhood teaching and memories.²⁹

A revival renews religious interest and life in all Christians, and it is a harvest season when many souls are brought to decision and action. The preaching and all the influences used in revival should be primarily addressed to the reason and conscience so as to lead men to change their minds, and then the feelings will take care of themselves, and the will will follow with the appropriate action.³⁰

IV. The Age of Conversion

The age of conversion as well as the type of conversion may respond to expectations of the religious group. Studies of conversion have been made by psychologists since 1881. The average age of conversion has been occurring earlier.³¹ Clark says,

The first great student of the psychology of adolescence, G. Stanley Hall, was much ridiculed in 1881 when in a public lecture in Boston he pointed out that this (adolescence) was the most characteristic age for conversion. Since then the researches of many students have conformed this judgment.³²

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid., p. 173.

³¹ Paul E. Johnson, *Personality and Religion* (NY: Abingdon Press, 1957), p. 126.

³² W. H. Clark, *The Psychology of Religion*, p. 207.

Starbuck's early investigations found a close relationship between puberty and conversion, with the typical conversion age for males being 16.4 years and for girls, 14.8 years. Other studies agree in general with Starbuck that the common age for men is somewhere around the sixteenth year, with the occurrence of conversion in women about two years earlier.³³

But of recent days some dissenting voices have been heard. Ferm has attacked the view that adolescence is the time for conversion on two grounds. Ferm contends that if a survey were made in mature years, the age level of conversion would have been raised. He is convinced that the current revival movement is characterized by conversion at a higher age than formerly.³⁴

A survey of adult leaders in the Southwestern Baptist convention showed the average age of conversion to be 13.2 years for women and 15.3 years for men.³⁵ But the age when most conversions took place was found to be 12 years, which was quite different from the average. Most investigators seem to feel that the average of conversion is going down.

E. T. Clark points out that when conversion occurs by the more gradual process the "awakening", or the beginning of a more lively sense of the values of religion, occurs earlier by three or more years than with the crisis type.³⁶ However, it is difficult to get a

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Robert O. Ferm, *The Psychology of Christian Conversion* (NY: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1959), p. 219.

³⁵ Drakeford, *Psychology in Search of a Soul*, p. 260.

³⁶ Elmer T. Clark, *The Psychology of Religious Awakening* (NY: The Macmillan Company, 1929), p. 65.

confirmation of age from well-validated studies.

V. Types of Conversion

Conversion is subject to all the variations of individuality, and therefore manifests different forms or types. These may be classified in various ways, and any such classification is more or less arbitrary.

A. Childhood and Adult Conversion

Childhood conversion usually take place as the result of the atmosphere and training of a Christian home and may unfold by a process of contagion and education. Dr. Elmer Clark found, in his investigation into the religious development of 2,174 students, that 1,906 of them had been brought up in homes where both parents were religious and 237 with a religious mother, and in 31 only were neither or of the parent religious.³⁷ It is important to arouse religious idealism in the suggestible early years of life and to encourage a child to share a sense of reality with personality who are sincere in their belief and emotions.³⁸

Young converts early become settled in their faith and habits in the Christian life. Of course many of them fall away in mature years, but a large percentage of them remain steadfast through life,

³⁷ Ibid., p. 96.

³⁸ L. W. Lang, *A Study of Conversion* (London: George Allen and Unwin LTD., 1931), pp. 30-31.

and on the whole they form the most stable and fruitful christians. Adult converts, being more reflective in their decisions and experiences, usually exhibit characteristics somewhat different from those of children converts,³⁹ and these will appear in the types that follow.

B. Gradual & Comfortable, and Sudden & Violent Conversion

W. H. Clark's definition envisages the possibility of either aspect being predominant. "Most clearly and typically it denotes an emotional episode of illuminating suddenness, which may be deep or superficial, though it may also come about by a more gradual process."⁴⁰ When conversion takes place in mature years it often occurs, as the result of religious training which gradually ripens into conviction of duty and results in action under some favoring circumstance or influence.

A typical instance of gradual conversion is that of Lydia under the preaching of Paul at Philippi (Acts 16 : 13-15). This is a beautiful instance of a gradual and comfortable conversion, unattended with any excitement or special personal distress.⁴¹ The off-quoted example of a sudden conversion is the experience of Saul of Tarsus on the Damascus road, but Jung sees elements of gradualness in the event:

³⁹ Snowden, *The Psychology of Religion*, p. 190.

⁴⁰ W. H. Clark, *The Psychology of Religion*, p. 191.

⁴¹ Snowden, *The Psychology of Religion*, p. 191.

Although the moment of a conversion seems sometimes quite sudden and unexpected, yet we know from repeated experience that such a fundamental occurrence always has a long period of unconscious incubation. It is only when the preparation is complete, that is to say, when the individual is ready to be converted, that the new view breaks forth with great emotion. St. Paul had already been a christian for a long time, but unconsciously; hence his fanatical resistance to the christians, because fanaticism exists chiefly in individuals who are compensating for secret doubts.⁴²

There were sudden and violent conversion on the day of Pentecost, as great modern revivals witness them by the hundreds and thousands. The condition of sudden and violent conversion also vary. They may arise as the result of some peculiar happening in the personal life, or in connection with revival excitement and contagion, or as the consequence of some word or sermon or song that drops into the sub-consciousness and taps the deep early training and accumulated experiences.⁴³

A happy compromise is that the two ideas of dramatic suddenness and gradual evolution may be two sides of the same coin. In some experiences of religious awakening, the element of suddenness is most apparent, while in others that of gradualness is uppermost!⁴⁴

E. T. Clark derives religious awakening into three categories:

⁴² C. G. Jung, *Modern Man in Search of a Soul*.

⁴² C. G. Jung, *Modern Man in Search of a Soul* (NY: Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1933) quoted in Robert H. Thouless, *An Introduction to the Psychology of Religion* (NY: Cambridge University Press, 1923), p. 189.

⁴³ Snowden, *The Psychology of Religion*, p. 193.

⁴⁴ Drakeford, *Psychology in Search of a Soul*, p. 267.

the classical or definite crisis type, represented by 6.7 percent of his subject; emotional stimulus (27.2 percent) by which Clark denotes either a turning point with emotion involved or simply a point in normal growth which stands out for some reason in the subject's memory; and gradual awakening (66.1 percent), Which involves no specific event.⁴⁵

C. Intellectual and Emotional Conversion

Some conversions are predominantly intellectual in their process and others emotional, although of course both of these elements are always involved in this change.

In cases where the change is mainly intellectual, conversion takes the form of a clarification of thought, by means of which new insights are gained and a new system of value is framed. The subject is divided and unhappy, because he is unable to win a satisfying view of the universe a view that shall reveal to him the ultimate drift and meaning of life.⁴⁶ Intellectual conversion will sometimes bring peace to a man troubled in mind as he passes from what we should call a fuller and richer theological belief to one much lower and poorer. This due to the fact that he had been straining to live beyond his convictions, and that, therefore, a falling back upon what he could honestly brought him actually never to God. The revelation of these earlier inconsistencies may have come to him sudde-

⁴⁵ E. T. Clark, *The Psychology of Religious Awakening*, p. 200.

⁴⁶ A. C. Underwood, *Conversion: Christian and Non-Christian* (London: George Allen and Unwin LTD., 1923), p. 144.

nly, by a word from a friend, but he gains religiously by it. So too, strange as it may at first appear, peace of mind may really come to a troubled soul by giving up all religious beliefs.⁴⁷ The intellectual convert may be slow in arriving at truth and duty and action, but he usually has deep roots and is established in the truth and rooted and grounded in Christ. He is not easily shaken in his matured convictions and stands strong and fruitful.⁴⁸

On the other hand, the emotions have their place and right in human action and especially in conversion. The primary thing in such conversion is not an clarification of thought but the reorganization of the emotional life round a new center. Naturally, such conversions occur with most frequency in Christianity where loving devotion to the Deity as a central tenet.⁴⁹

Religious truth awakens these emotions and this is a legitimate and normal process. But some souls are sensitive and vibrate more easily and deeply than others in their emotional nature, and in them the intellectual factor may be slight and the feeling factor predominates.⁵⁰ Emotion is good and necessary, but the emotional convert needs to be rooted and grounded in the truth that he may have roots that will endure and feed his life through all changes of spiritual weather and vicissitudes of temptation and trial.⁵¹

⁴⁷ George Steven, *The Psychology of Th Christian Soul* (London :Hodder and Stoughton, 1911), p. 146-147.

⁴⁸ Snowden, *The Psychology of Religion*, p. 195.

⁴⁹ Underwood, *Conversion: Christian and Non-Christian*, p. 148.

⁵⁰ Snowden, *The Psychology of Religion*, p. 197.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

All of these and other types of conversion are to be expected and respected as right and good, each in its own way. We are all disposed to think that other people ought to conform to our type, and we may try to compress them into our world. God has given us gifts differing and he fulfills himself in many ways.

VI. Conclusion

The gospel is designed for man in his need, and man is adapted to receive the gospel. The Christian who knows the nature of man is constantly aware that he is psychologically arranged, or one might properly say, fashioned from all eternity, so that it is in accordance with his nature to receive the evangel when he hears it. Thus, it may be said that conversion is natural. When conversion is artificially stimulated, it is man reacting according to his nature and constitution. When conversion is the entrance into new life, that means a commitment, not to an ideology, but to the Divine personality, Jesus Christ, the only name under heaven given among men whereby we must be saved.

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