

# THEOLOGY OF CONVERSION

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**Abstract:** Conversion is a word with a variety of meanings. There is no religion, on the one hand, that do not promote conversion and thus use proselytism to do it. On the other hand, some religions that believe conversion (to their own faith) is an act of God, a sign that everyone should embrace and leave whatever religious belief they might have previously, consider a 'sin', an act that should be forbidden, the conversion/leaving for other, divers religion. How is it regarded by religions and scientific thought and at what point it became obsolete?

**Keywords:** conversion, religious experience; pluralism; Christianity; Islam; Judaism; religion; philosophy

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## 1. Introduction

Conversion is indeed a word of a multitude of meanings. With same engagement and power of speech religions are all addicted to conversion and thus they all emerged and promote a certain kind of theology of conversion. Even if *religious* conversion is appointed as the primary source of conversion, there are still, besides this, other types of conversion that follow same path and they all were discussed by specialized writers. For example conversion of *knowledge, of Consciousness, of Heart, intellectual*

*conversion, moral one*<sup>1</sup>, etc. Sometimes regarded as a *virtue* that follows a divine call, other times it is stigmatized as a *sin* that aim to corrupt the heart of a believer. When deemed as a virtue blessings and promises follow it very closely for all those who obey this divine call to end their perdition which depict their previous state. On the contrary, when regarded as sinful, conversion is always doomed and nearly pursued by damnation from the divinity. It is surprising how the same 'divinity' asks for a conversion in the first place and the condemn it when repeated. Following the path of this ongoing conversion, it is rather peculiar to observe the endless chain of blessings-damnations that follow conversion to its bitter end. Let's imagine a guy that was baptized in a religion (A) from childhood without any personal involvement into it. When becoming aware of his religious Self, same person decides to convert to another religion (B) that resonates with himself. In this frame all his acquaintances from A will frighten him with terrible enforcements if he leaves A. Also, people from B encourage him to convert, a.k.a. move on to a better, genuine belief. They (B) leave him know that, in case of accomplished conversion, he will be blessed and saved, ensuring everlasting life through this choice he made. Furthermore, if he eventually come to a point of re-conversion to (C), those 'man of God' that encouraged him to convert in the first place, tell him now that conversion is a sin and God will have no mercy on his soul if he is to be corrupted by conversion. However, people from C assume now the same position of B when he converted from A to B. As you can easily see in this story of repeated conversion, this act is fluctuating and rather unstable as a religious concept as a role play with subjective bias.

## 2. How Theologians Define Conversion

For most Catholics, the word "conversion" means first and foremost "change of religious affiliation", and "convert" is primarily a noun, designating someone who joined the Catholic Church as an adult, either from some other Christian denomination, or from some other religion,

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1 See: Ioan-Gheorghe Rotaru, "Este oare Dumnezeu mulțumit de starea mea spirituală?" ["Is God satisfied with my spiritual condition?"], in *Argeșul ortodox*, Săptămânal teologic, bisericesc și de atitudine al Arhiepiscopiei Argeșului și Muscelului [*Argeșul ortodox, weekly publication on matters of theology, church life and attitude of the Archdiocese of Argeș and Muscel*], Curtea de Argeș, anul XI, nr.594, 1-30 iuliy 2013, p. 5.

or from no religion at all. For many Protestants, especially evangelicals, conversion means first and foremost “experience of redemption from sin,” and convert is primarily a verb, usually in the past tense and passive voice, describing a personal experience of “having been converted” at a particular point in their lives when they “first accepted Jesus Christ as my personal Lord and Savior.” For social scientists of religion, conversion is a psychological experience of dramatic religious change, usually involving both a change of religious attitude and of religious affiliation, to be studied and accounted for.<sup>2</sup>

### A. *What is conversion?*

As stated in almost all religious theology, *becoming... (Whatever an appointed religion namely is) is more than just a one-time conversion experience; it is a lifetime of ongoing conversion.* Thus, a conversion is admissible under two circumstances by all religions: 1. that conversion is a one-time experience, and 2. that it is one-way act, from heterodoxies to the religion implied. Any other possibilities are forbidden and seen as acts of heresy, thus considered a sin that is followed by punishment *from divinity* (or its human substitute) – but this is another case we are not engaging right now for debates.

Bernard Lonergan saw in it more than a simple act of *moving from a religious group to another*, he implied that ‘conversion’ has more to do with authenticity and self-transcendence. “Religious conversion is being grasped by ultimate concern. It is otherworldly falling in love. It is **total** and permanent **self-surrender** without conditions, qualifications, reservations. But it is such a surrender, not as an act, but as a **dynamic** state that is prior to a principle of subsequent acts. It is revealed in retrospect as an undertow of existential consciousness, as a fated **acceptance** of a **vocation** to holiness, as perhaps an increasing simplicity and passivity in prayer. It is interpreted differently in different religious traditions.”<sup>3</sup> There are some key-words in this text, rather poetic, that caught our attention when speaking about conversion (from a Catholic point of view). Firstly, conversion is an attempt of *total self-surrender*,

2 R. t. Lawrence, “Conversion, II (Theology of)”, in *New Catholic Encyclopedia*. Retrieved from <https://www.encyclopedia.com/religion/encyclopedias-almanacs-transcripts-and-maps/conversion-ii-theology>, accessed at 9.4.2019.

3 Bernard Lonergan, *Method in Theology*, 226.

where individual cannot refuse or deny his call from divinity to engage religiousness in that specific path that is opened before him. This particular surrender has all what is necessary to make individual take *a leap of faith*, non-rational, unconditional, without reservations. He simply cannot ask for argumentations, explanations and has none of these in return to offer to those who ask *why?* That is the reason why Lonergan compares conversion with falling in love, irrational, but total and full engaged. Conversion is not learning, like learning calculus, taking precautions, considering alternatives and giving arguments.

The motif of acceptance or not denying it is that self-surrender of conversion is the answer to an intimate call, one made inside each heart by God, the source of this call – “I would not have looked for you if you had not found me”. Thus it is a privilege that you actually *hear* God’s voice and should consider this call as your vocation to holiness, even more intimately related to your nature, your reason of being and that is undeniable for you, “it is hard for thee to kick *against* the pricks” (Acts 9.5). This is a theology based on a Catholic distinction St. Augustine makes between *operative and cooperative grace*, the former is God’s work over individual, a change of heart from stone to flesh; operative grace is religious conversion. While the latter is the effectiveness of conversion, the gradual movement towards a full and complete transformation of the whole of one’s living.<sup>4</sup> This makes the difference between *surrender* (passive) and *dynamic state* (active), both defining conversion as an act of self-transformation.

For that matter [being irrational as falling in love, and surrendering to this inner call], it is almost impossible and indisputable to call that specific religious target of conversion *wrong, bad or evil*. It is practically an intimate relationship that bounds these two, individual and his divinity who’s calling for him, and no one can label with those tags a love that is true and profound. Certainly, anyone can label as evil someone, but cannot say the same for within a relationship. For example, a carnivorous is mischievous, but in relation with its offspring it is good and positive. In ‘love’s case things go the same, a partner can be good – as suitable and opportune – for one, regardless his life of crime that he might live outside that relation. That is the reason for this *theology of conversion* refrains from hindering or creating directives as to where religious conversion

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4 *Ibidem*.

should be directed, or from which affiliations one should abstain. In the religious pluralism perspective, any possible route is acceptable and rather good if one feels the inner call for self-surrender into it.

### *B. How a conversion works?*

Unlike other *conversions* (intellectual, moral, consciousness, and other), this one (religious) implies all others and therefore ends in a lot of conflicts, internal and external. <sup>5</sup>“**Intellectual** conversion is the radical change in my intellectual horizon when I move from the world of immediacy, or perceptions, to the world as mediated by meaning, as revealed to me in the processes of experiencing, understanding, judging, and believing. **Moral** conversion is the radical change of my criteria for decision making from satisfactions to values...”

“Religious conversion is not just a process of becoming ‘religious,’ but a totally radical reorientation of one’s entire life, of one’s very self.”<sup>6</sup> The radicalness of religious conversion can be facilely seen in all the proselytes reactions, behavior and social engagements; their intransigence to any deviation from the core teachings of their new religious environment is well-known and usually used to defend it ‘vigorously’. There are oral knowledge and recently scientific studies over the difference regarding the practices and voluntary implications between those who are ‘born’ into a certain religion and those who convert to it. The moral force and the vitality of practicing that religion daily is the basic need for those who convert, while for the others is usually optional or at the most a daily routine. We both encountered dissidents of our religions converted to them in USA and we were positively amazed of how they live our faith, passionately and more intense.

It would be difficult to dispute our universal attraction to religion. However, if we all possess this disposition, why do some people never become converted? Why do some lose their faith while others gain

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<sup>5</sup> Ioan-Gheorghe Rotaru, *Om-Demnitare-Libertate. Adopta-rea pentru prima dată pe pământ românesc, în Principatul Transilvaniei, a Principiului Libertății Religioase și evoluția acestuia într-un timp relativ scurt de 25 de ani (1543-1568)* [*Human being-Dignity-Freedom. The first recognition of the principle of freedom of religion on Romanian land, in the Principality of Transylvania, and its surging evolution over the span of 25 years (1543-1568)*], Cluj-Napoca, Editura Risoprint, 2019, pp.269-271.

<sup>6</sup> Walter E. Conn, *The Desiring Self: Rooting Pastoral Counseling and Spiritual Direction in Self-Transcendence*, New York: Paulist Press, 1998.

faith in adulthood? Clearly, there are individual differences that require explanation and our main thesis in this regard is that not all religions are for all kind of people. If not so, it would not be necessary to have lots and lots of them (religious beliefs); one would be more than enough to fulfill our religious basic need. Instead we have many types and a variety of religious beliefs and behavior; whence the impression that all religions are necessary because each one addresses another type of people, characters and personalities.

### 3. Conversion AS A RELIGIOUS experience and muslim perspective on conversion

Conversion experience and spiritual transformation is one of the most perplexing and complicated incidents that can happen in one's life. It can change a life forever.

Conversion is etymologically linked to the Latin word *conversio*. In Latin *conversio* is usually used to translate two Greek terms indicating spiritual change: *epistrophê* and *metanoia*. *Epistrophê* indicates the backward motion by which the human soul returns to its original abode or the immutable One. *Metanoia* designates a forward process of repentance and irreversible spiritual rebirth.<sup>7</sup>

In Islamic literature, "when applied to a non-Muslim who identifies himself with Islam, the term *iẖṯida* - which means to arrive at righteous guidance, identifying oneself with the right - is used rather than conversion, and the person who commits *iẖṯida* is called *muhṯedi*. The term *iẖṯida* denotes entrance to Islam whereas conversion is used in a wider sense to refer to entrance to any religion."<sup>8</sup> When applied to a Muslim who does not identify himself with Islam anymore, the term *iẖṯidat* - which means apostasy, rejecting the faith of Islam after having accepted it - is used.

The experience of conversion will differ according to a person's religious tradition, the nature of the religion, his/her culture, gender, age, profile and so on. Conversion has an individual nature but nevertheless

7 Matteo Soranzo and D. Robichaud, "Philosophical or Religious Conversion? Marsilio Ficino, Plotinus's *Enneads* and Neoplatonic *epistrophê*", ed. Simona Marchesini, *Simple Twists of Faith: Changing Beliefs, Changing Faiths*, Verona: Alteritas, 2017, pp. 135-166, 140.

8 Ahmet Albayrak, "Conversion", *The Qur'an: An Encyclopedia*, ed. Oliver Leaman, New York: Routledge, 2006, p. 152.

we can identify six conversion motifs: (1) *Intellectual conversion* – the person seeks knowledge about religious or spiritual issues. A person can find his or her religion intellectually unsatisfying and may later change to another religion. This example of conversion is negligible. Because those conversions which needs intellectual capacity are very few and beliefs above reason can be find in every belief system. (2) *Mystical* – Involving some specific religious experience, a sudden and traumatic burst of insight, induced by visions, voices, or other paranormal experiences (3) *Experimental* – involves active exploration of religious options. (4) *Affective* – stresses interpersonal bonds as an important factor in the conversion process. One is converted due to being loved and nurtured by a group or the leaders. (5) *Revival* – uses crowd conformity to induce behavior. One is converted in the context of a revival meetings feature emotionally powerful music and preaching and (6) *Coercive* – one is managed and forced into conversion by several means.<sup>9</sup>

Conversion, therefore, can be admitted as a particular form of religious experience. Firstly, the effects of a conversion are life-changing and the consequence of a conversion on a individual level is almost always a greater and truthful understanding of faith. The person becomes assured of genuine God. "Conversion, as lived, affects all of a man's conscious and intentional operations. It directs his gaze, pervades his imagination, releases the symbols that penetrate to the depths of his psyche. It enriches his understanding, guides his judgments, reinforces his decisions."<sup>10</sup>

Secondly, it is an experience within the scope of a religious community in which converts are welcomed with love. Moreover, religious conversion and mystical experience are very similar. Main difference is that while conversion involves partly voluntarily to leave behind the previous sinful life, as a self-surrender conversion mystical experience by its nature necessarily does so. "Reflection on mystical experience together with reflection on conversion could be a foundation and basis of a theology of the future."<sup>11</sup>

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9 Lewis R. Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion*, London: Yale University Press, 1993, pp.14-15.

10 Bernard Lonergan, *Method in Theology*, p.131.

11 William Johnston, *The Inner Eye of Love: Mysticism and Religion*, New York: Fordham University, 2003, p.59.

According to several psychological and sociological researches there are special personality characteristics and predisposing conditions that may make pre-converts prone to conversion experiences compared to other individuals.<sup>12</sup>

American sociologists John Lofland and Rodney Stark in their work suggest that dramatic religious changes follow a common pattern. For all kinds of conversions an individual must: “1. Experience enduring, acutely felt tensions 2. Within a religious problem-solving perspective, 3. Which leads him to define himself as a religious seeker; 4. Encountering the Divine Precepts at a turning point in his life, 5. Wherein an affective bond is formed (or pre-exists) with one or more converts; 6. Where extra-cult attachments are absent or neutralized 7. And, where, if he is to become a deployable agent, he is exposed to intensive interaction.”<sup>13</sup>

Understanding and evaluating the behaviours and feelings of the converts can be disputable. Human behaviours are complicated, subtle and sometimes specious. They can be rightly understood when placed within a social and emotional context, so that distinguishing internal spiritual effects from external social forces is having importance to determine how a person might have acted without inner and external causes.

William James wrote, “to say that a man is ‘converted’ means, in these terms, that religious ideas, previously peripheral in his consciousness, now take a central place, and that religious aims form the habitual centre of his energy.”<sup>14</sup> That means conversion experience is a new understanding of self, a progressive change in convert’s outlook of life and living. Hope, happiness, security and resolve are the characteristic emotions of conversion.

If we read narratives of people who were the subjects of conversion were in a state of imbalance: we see that after the conversion experience they reach the mental level in which they realize a sense of emotional and spiritual balance in their lives.

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12 Libby Ahluwalia, *Understanding Philosophy of Religion*, UK: Folens Publishing, 2008, p. 37.

13 John Lofland and Rodney Stark, “Becoming a World-Saver: A Theory of Conversion to a Deviant Perspective”, *American Sociological Review*, Vol. 30, No. 6 (December 1965), pp. 862-875, p. 874.

14 William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature*, New York: Routledge, 2004, 155.



For James there are five features of an affective conversion experience: 1. A loss of all the worry; the certainty of God's grace and activity in a person's life and a feeling of overwhelming harmony and completeness. 2. Perceiving truths not known before: the mysteries of life become lucid but unutterable in words. 3. Objective change which the world often appears to undergo: 'an appearance of newness beautifies every object.' 4. Ecstasy of happiness: 'No words can express the wonderful love that was shed abroad in my heart. I wept aloud with joy and love. 5. Saintliness: living a life of moral goodness.<sup>15</sup>

As stated by William James, conversion can be described but its reliability can only be justified by its results, "a happy relief and objectivity, as the confidence in self gets greater through the adjustment of the faculties to the wider outlook."<sup>16</sup> Before the conversion experience, the recipient probably might have some philosophical and theological objections to the legitimate religious understanding of his/her time or the current system of ideas. Before his conversion Jonathan Edwards labelled the Reformed dogma of predestination as horrible but thereafter he wrote: "God's absolute sovereignty and justice, with respect to salvation and damnation is what my mind seems to rest assured of, as much as of any thing that I see with my eyes."<sup>17</sup>

According to Walter Conn, religious conversion is beyond embracing new religious teachings, veritas, ethos and practices, it is rather "the radical reorientation of one's entire life that occurs when God is allowed to move from the periphery to the center of one's being. When this radical religious conversion is seen from the perspective of total self-surrender, the relativization of human autonomy is stressed."<sup>18</sup> So Conn's vertical conversion indicates a transformation of the individual, religious or not, and the reconstruction of the self in accordance with seek after transcendence.

Lewis R. Rambo argues that conversion does not involve simply psychological affairs because it is essentially theological and spiritual. There are operative forces, but the meaning is religious to the convert.

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15 *Ibid*, 194-202.

16 *Ibid*, 157.

17 Avihu Zakai, "The Conversion of Jonathan Edwards", *The Journal of Presbyterian History* (1997-), Vol. 76, No. 2 (Summer 1998), pp.127-138, p. 128.

18 Walter E. Conn *Christian Conversion: A Developmental Interpretation of Autonomy and Surrender*, Oregon: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2006, 30-31.

“Interpretations that deny the religious dimension fail to appreciate the convert’s experience and attempt to put this experience into interpretative frameworks that are inappropriate, even hostile, to the phenomenon.”<sup>19</sup> Conversion reveals Abraham’s God who is omnipotent, omniscient, benevolent, wholly good, the Creator and Sustainer of all things etc. When considered from this aspect, conversion means “a radical shifting of gears that can take the spiritually lackadaisical to a new level of intensive concern, commitment, and involvement.”<sup>20</sup>

Consequently, religious conversion is a spiritual experience through which the convert became aware and convinced about the long-awaited transformation of his/her self-identity. During the conversion process theology may help the person to fulfill the secular and spiritual needs through religious sensation such as “the feeling of unwholeness, of moral imperfection, of sin, to use the technical word, accompanied by the yearning after the peace of unity.”<sup>21</sup>

The matter is whether conversion experience roots in outside the individual or inside the individual. This philosophical problem can’t be evaluated here easily. Because it is primarily dealing with the problem of proving the validity of religious experience. Within the boundaries of mere reason, we may just say, it’s hard to say that conversion is based on religious experience. Because religious experience, if it is authentic, already contains conversion.

For most of the believers of all religions and the convert himself or herself conversion is to be understood metaphysically as the act of God revealing himself through religious experience. But for unbelievers and secular minds it will be understood psychologically as an activity of a confused mind searching the truth and finally somehow achieving the heavenly answers that lead to the personal salvation.

In Islam tradition, “guidance is bestowed only by Allah, the only source of guidance: ‘He whom Allah leadeth, he indeed is led aright, while he whom Allah sendeth astray they indeed are losers’ (7.178). ‘Then Allah sendeth whom He will astray, and guideth aright whom He will. He is the Mighty, the Wise’ (Ibrahim 14.4) (see also 2.120; 10.35; 17.97; 18.17). However, Allah does not force people to accept righteous

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19 Lewis R. Rambo, 10.

20 *Ibid*, 2.

21 W. James, 159.

guidance; rather, he expects individuals to make their own preferences through their free will (*irada*).”<sup>22</sup>

Prophets invites people to divine guidance: ‘And thus have We inspired in thee [Muhammad] a Spirit of Our Command. Thou knewest not what the Scripture was, nor what the Faith. But We have made it a light whereby We guide whom We will of Our bondmen. And lo! Thou verily dost guide unto a right path’ (42.52); ‘Go thou unto Pharaoh Lo! He hath rebelled’ (79.17).

All human beings are born with *fit’rah*, the nature (of Islam). So, conversion to Islam can also be viewed as a return to that state, to the pure nature. “The formal ceremony usually involves the recitation of the *shaha’dah*, the profession of faith, in the presence of witnesses, followed by the practice of the other Pillars, most notably *sala’t* (prayer). For males, circumcision is often required, and in some communities the practice of adopting a “Muslim name” is common.”<sup>23</sup>

Conversion in Islam indicates “a radical call to reject evil and all that associates the human with the divine, and on this foundation engages the convert in the task of personal and social transformation.”<sup>24</sup> Conversion is radical, complete and decisive.

As Judaism and Christianity, Islam also demands renunciation and a new beginning. It demands not merely acceptance of a ritual or ceremony, but the commitment of the will to a theology, in fine, faith, a sinless new life in a new religious community, *ummah*.

## Conclusion

To be properly converted necessitates acceptance of all components of the religion in question. If an individual convert to another religion, because it is that religion’s beliefs, rituals, and practices that are attractive to him, he is religiously converted. But if he or she converts to that religion because of some social or economic causes, he is not religiously converted; because religions like Judaism, Christianity and Islam are composition of certain beliefs and acts. They are a way of life. They are a matter

22 Ahmet Albayrak, “Conversion”, 152-153.

23 Gordon D. Newby, “Conversion”, *A Concise Encyclopedia of Islam*, Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2004, 49.

24 Peter B. Clarke, “Conversion”, *Encyclopedia of Islam and the Muslim World*, ed. Richard C. Martin, USA: McMillian, 2003, 163.

of faith and conviction. In order to become a believer, it is necessary to accept all its basic teachings with one's heart and soul.

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