

Concepts and Dimensions of Conversion and Religious Experience

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The word *conversion* has different meanings for different people in different contexts. The various contexts are the occasion and object of *conversion*. That is, conversion takes place somewhere/sometime (occasion) of something (object).

The Latin word *convertere*, from which our English term is derived, means “to turn or to change”. The whole of phenomena is a panorama of change. As Heraclitus rightly observed, “Nothing is permanent except ‘change’”. Conversion in the physical context is a reality. Every physical change has a physical cause. For instance, the United States Energy Research and Development Administration displays in show cases the “underground conversion” of coal “to synthetic natural gas”. Here, as per Aristotelian classification of causes, coal is the material cause, whereas the other factors that cause the conversion are the efficient causes.

It is also proved that in the human being, mental causes can be efficient causes of psychosomatic sicknesses, as has been proved by psychoanalysts. Whether the term ‘mental causes’ refers to material causes or immaterial causes is a problem of metaphysics. Some neuro-signals and resulting chemical changes are observable in the process of the conversion of repressed feelings in physical maladies. It has also been proved that use of drugs like LSD, cocaine, *charas*, etc are instrumental in the producing of mental changes and subjective alteration of reality. Arguments from both protagonists of religious sects and protagonists of secular schools of opinion prove the variety of views held regarding these metaphysical issues. For example, what one would consider to be a subjective alteration of reality would be considered as an intuitive apprehension of reality by another.

What would be considered as the result of physical changes by one would be considered as mental result of physical and mental changes by another.

Though change is understood as characteristic of the phenomenal world, it is not at all assumed to be the characteristic of pure knowledge, or Truth. Though the philosophy of dialectics and relativity arose in past centuries, the inner assumption of One Truth is an unlost reality. Even relativists assume that their statement that absolute truth doesn't exist is the truth. Truth by definition is unchangeable. The ideal 'Truth', however, is not what mankind has totally apprehended. There are 'truths' that he knows but not the whole truth. And so we find a variety of belief-systems that govern lives of myriads of human beings all over the world. Beliefs may either be true or false.

Since religious experiences are dependent on religious 'truths', and religious 'truths' are usually beyond scientific investigation, religious beliefs vary a lot and each claims credence of itself. Religious experiences leading to religious conversions or religious conversions due to conviction of certain religious beliefs are often observable. Whether a particular religious belief is true or false is dependent on the kind of criteria used for the measurement. Not all religions accept Logic as criteria, though.

What religious conversion really means is debatable, since some speak of being a 'Christian' in heart though not in name, or of being a Christian in name and a 'devil' in heart. These groups of people unanimously tie conversion to religious experience.

Legally, religious conversion refers to a person's abandoning of a particular religion and adoption of another through ceremonial means. While it has been seen that certain religions are experientially adhered along other religions (e.g.

Confucianism and Taoism), legally a person is understood as belonging to only one religious group. The boundariless Hinduism, however, gives opportunity to follow/absorb all beliefs of other religions together. But, legally, a Hindu is a Hindu. A Hindu who believes in Christ along with the Hindu deities and who has not given his life to Christ in a publically evidenced way is not accepted as a Christian by the Christian community. And yet, it is not necessary that a legally accepted conversion is indicative of a genuine religious experience.

And so, while conversions of physical nature are easily definable, 'religious conversion' is not very easily definable. Not because definitions don't exist but because definitions vary. Observable religious conversions have a varied dimension. Evangelical Christians emphasize on the need of conversions in the lives of nominal Christians and call real conversion a 'born-again' experience. Most evangelicals stress on 'change of heart' (*man parivartan*) rather than 'change of religion' (*dharm parivartan*). In other words, it is emphatically said that the real thing is the change of the internal and not of the external.

This change of the internal is to comply with the values, beliefs, and position of the particular religion converted to. The above rule is not a requisite of every religion or sect, however, in totality; only a few beliefs suffice.

When considering physical changes or natural changes, either accidental (that is, non-supervised) or planned (that is, backed by intelligence), it is evident that, scientifically speaking, all physical changes can be traced to some efficient and sufficient causes. And so, where an effect is known the cause may be known and where a cause is observed, its effect may be predicted. Now, regarding religious conversions, can a criterion be grounded on the basis of causality? For example, if an SC (of the lower caste) has

converted from Christianity to Hinduism or an SC has converted from Hinduism to Christianity, can the cause of the conversion (e.g. economic or social emancipation or privileges) be counted as evidence of conversion or non-conversion? Evangelicals will say "Yes". I would say that the cause-effect criterion only shows that the person in question is not really religiously converted if he does so for mere economic or social reasons. He internally remains the same – materialist, hedonist, or utilitarian – in his belief and manipulates the externals to comply with his internal beliefs. To be religiously converted requires religious material, formal, and efficient causes (causes that are religious in nature). If, for example, a person switches to another religion, because it is that religion's beliefs, rituals, and festivities that appeal to him, he is religiously converted. But if he switches to that religion because of some social or economic advantages, he is not religiously converted; because the core of any religion is its way of belief, way of worship, and way of behavior. If liquid water turns into vapour, we know what a liquid is and what a gas is and what it is that distinguishes them from each other. In the same manner, if a liquid substance changes into a gaseous substance, we know that here has been conversion from one 'form' to another, since we know what a liquid is and what a gas is. In the same manner, once we know what it means to be a Christian, according to Christianity, and what means to be a Moslem according to Islam, we can recognize whether a conversion has taken place and what it means to be converted. Nevertheless, genuineness depends upon conformity to the standard – that is the fundamentals. However, since Hinduism has no fundamentals it is as Ebe Sunder Raj illustrates the tray into which anything not falling into fundamentally distinguishable cups falls [*The Confusion Called Conversion*, 1998. 119-123].

Concepts of religious conversion as related to religious experience differ from religion to religion. Pluralism proponents may, for example, assert that religious

conversions – changing of one's religion – are unnecessary since all religions are infrastructurally oriented to a similar goal.

Beliefs, affection, contemplation, discernment, etc are involved in the process of conflicts leading to conversion. While the belief system of the average human being is constantly exposed to change, loyalty to a particular religion – regardless of its certain teachings and practices – is often prompted by affection or judgment of the immediate good which does not lead to conversions. This is true of secularists and humanists. The Biblical concept of conversion stresses both a change in thinking as well as a change in living. Conversion means forsaking the old way of living for a new. It is a change of alliance, attitude, and lifestyle; of will, mind, and emotion from falsehood to God.

The Biblical concept of conversion is bound to the concept of sin and a just God. Conversion is turning one's back on sin and turning to God. The New Testament concept involves turning from false gods, sin, and deception to the Living God and the righteousness of the Christ of the cross. A Christian who lives in sin is a backslider, while one who renounces Christ is an apostate.

But simply defining conversion as turning from sin to God is insufficient, since each religion has its own definition, concept of sin and God. Christian conversion is the change of a person to the New Testament pattern. In other words, it means changing by abandoning non-biblical beliefs and practices and accepting biblical beliefs and practices through volitional surrender to and trust in Christ. Normally, it is seen that people are seen converted to Roman Catholic Christianity or Evangelical Christianity or Pentecostal Christianity. There are also a number of cults that claim to be Christian, but which the main groups reject as heretical. And so, though the outsider may judge a religious conversion to

one of the groups as Christian conversion, whether the event was a real conversion to Christianity is judged differently by the different groups. I have personally been to some places where Protestant groups regard Roman Catholics as not Christians. There was once a time when the Pope himself was considered to be anti-Christ by many and his religion non-biblical. Such are the problems and complexities involving names of religions and the concepts of religious conversions and religious experiences.

According to William James, religious conversion as religious experiences may be a sudden event in one case and a gradual process in another. Evangelist Billy Graham views conversion as occurring in various forms of which no two are exactly alike. Those who relate conversion to baptism do not have the above complexities. But when conversion is considered to be something other than a ceremonial rite alone, the dimensions of the psychological, the spiritual, and the physical come into focus.

The Evangelical position maintains that religious experience is truly speaking spiritual. And religious conversion is the conversion of the whole man – in his thought, action, and relationship. In other words, a man is to change wholly in order to be a true Christian.

Robert Raines delineates the many dimensions of life directly touched by conversion. He states that conversion begins in **awakening** (i.e., speaking of Christian conversion). While Buddhism and Hinduism place *awakening* at the end of the road, Christianity places *awakening* at the beginning of the road. Buddhism and Hinduism say follow this road and you will reach the state of *awakening*. Christianity begins with awakening. Raines further states that conversion continues by the **decision**. The will of man is free to choose and is responsible for its choice. Raines goes on to say that conversion matures by **growth**. The whole Christian life is a

process of conversions. But the conversion by allegiance to Christ, repentance, and experiencing through faith forgiveness is the 'new birth', 'reconciliation'. The changes following this are the result of growth. It is analogous to the birth and growth of a child to maturity. My understanding of conversion maturing by growth is that the growth into maturity is the process of the realizing of the goal of conversion. The change must go on till the end is reached, and this will go on as long as the Christian is alive on this earth. Phenomenon means the changing. Raines further states that conversion endures in discipline and takes place in *koinonia*. Fellowship is important for change in that direction. He points out that in all of these areas, God in His love, mercy, and grace is the Converter of persons in so far as they respond with their will to the divine will. The individual's choice is important, but God is the real Converter. Theologically speaking, the sinful man is dead and cannot respond to God. Ultimately, conversion is the prerogative of the Holy Spirit.

In the New Testament accounts, we find mainly two ways of experiencing conversion:

1. Individual responses and experience
2. Group response and experience

While the Ethiopian eunuch is a case of individual conversion experience, the Samaritans and the Jailor are cases of group conversions. In strong social and family units as those in ancient times, group conversions are normality. The group as a whole changes to the new set of values, allegiance and trust in the one God, change of lifestyle etc. Depending on the culture and social structure in which a man lives, the conversion experience may be that of a people movement by caste, clan, tribe, or family; or it may be that of individual persons independently turning from sin to forgiveness. There is no reason to undermine the validity of group conversions. Group consciousness is a strong feature of many tribes.

In almost every case of conversion in the New Testament, *baptism* is mentioned as the ceremony of conversion.

At last we may differentiate between nominal conversions and real conversions. Real conversions are preceded by real causes (beliefs, motives, means; material causes, formal causes, efficient causes, and final causes – **formal**, the religious form to which one is converting; **material**, beliefs, rites, worship etc; **efficient**, God and individual; **final**, motives, purpose). Nominal converts look at religion as a means to realize non-religious goals (or goals not prescribed by the concerned religion). Real converts look at religion as the way to realizing its goals.

True conversion has a multi-dimensional impact on the person. This is because the major dimensions of the intellectual, attitudinal, and affectional lives undergo change. The conversion may be a point or gradual and is often accompanied or followed by a ceremonial rite. Continuance, adherence, endurance, and conviction are present in true conversion. Conversion experience expresses itself in overt behavior.

The various dimensions and causes of conversion are important for an understanding of conversion. A person intellectually, attitudinally, and affectionally related to one religion may later find that particular religion unsatisfying to his intellect and affection and might later change to another religion, if he finds it satisfying. At this stage, the previous community to which he belonged would consider him an apostate, not a backslider.

An apostate doesn't necessarily renounce the ethical life, which is almost commonly acceptable to all religions.