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Reflecting on Conversion: Are Social Sciences Taking the Place of Theology?

Rozważania o nawróceniu.
Czy nauki społeczne zajmą miejsce teologii?

ABSTRACT: Conversion has been of major interest to psychology and sociology. In contemporary psychology of religion and spirituality, it is viewed as a particular case of spiritual transformation. Down through the centuries, theology has seen conversion as the fruit of collaboration between human endeavor and God's grace. This dimension of conversion has not been the subject of psychological research. Nonetheless, the scientific findings regarding conversion may help us better understand human nature's interaction with Divine grace. This paper will present the history of conversion and selected theories and conceptualizations of conversion originating in human sciences which can be helpful in understanding human experiences around religious conversion.

KEYWORDS: conversion, theology, psychology, sociology

ABSTRAKT: Nawrócenie stało się przedmiotem dużego zainteresowania psychologii i socjologii. We współczesnej psychologii religii i duchowości uważa się je za szczególnie przypadek duchowych transformacji. Z teologicznego punktu widzenia nawrócenie jest owocem współpracy między ludzkim wysiłkiem a łaską Bożą. Ten wymiar nawrócenia nie jest przedmiotem badań psychologicznych. Niemniej odkrycia naukowe dotyczące nawrócenia mogą pomóc w lepszym zrozumieniu interakcji natury ludzkiej z łaską Bożą. W artykule zaprezentowana zostanie historia badań nawrócenia w kontekście nauk społecznych, jak również wybrane teorie oraz konceptualizacje nawrócenia, które mogą być pomocne w lepszym zrozumieniu doświadczeń duchowych w życiu współczesnych ludzi.

SŁOWA KLUCZOWE: nawrócenie, teologia, psychologia, socjologia

Researching the human being – an interdisciplinary conundrum

An interdisciplinary exploration of human phenomena is a challenging task, and it is easy to commit methodological mishaps along the way. Yet, we are curious to know more about who we, human beings, are. In this quest, the human being is the focal point of many sciences. Our reflection and empirical research are frequently accompanied by misunderstandings stemming from the complexity of this subject matter.

For millennia, the human being attracted the attention of philosophy, theology and medicine; these scientific disciplines have acquired a vast array of knowledge and developed a number of theories with which to disclose the mystery of being human. Psychology is a relatively recent branch that explores the human being. Its beginning was marked by a strong anti-religious bias. It is no wonder then that Christian theologians and philosophers viewed psychological findings regarding religion with much suspicion. The psychology of religion and spirituality has only recently become more open to analysing spirituality in a more positive and objective way. And yet, even today, a surprising number of mental health professionals do not feel competent enough to confront the spirituality of their patients. Most American clinicians are more secular (non-believers) than the rest of the population.¹

The second part of the twentieth century witnessed dynamic changes in understanding spirituality, which must be taken into account while studying religious conversion. In the past, spirituality was viewed “from above” in that it was defined metaphysically by dogmatic and moral theology, which laid down explicit guidelines about how to live an honest life. With the development of psychology and sociology, spirituality has begun to be defined “from below” as one of the human phenomena.² Spirituality seen “from above” represents an “ontological approach” which speaks to the nature of spirituality and relates it to God.³ Spirituality viewed “from below” can be understood as a phenomenological or pragmatical approach which is mainly interested in the experiential

¹ Cf. K.I. Pargament, J.J. Exline, *Working with Spiritual Struggles in Psychotherapy: From Research to Practice*, New York 2022, p. 140.

² Cf. A.K. Jastrzębski, *Concepts of Spirituality at Universities of Today*, “Roczniki Teologiczne” 66/5 (2019), p. 99.

³ Cf. D. Oman, *Defining Religion and Spirituality*, [in:] *Handbook of the Psychology of Religion and Spirituality*, R.F. Paloutzian, C.L. Park (eds.), New York 2013, pp. 23–47.

side of spirituality as it develops across the lifespan of an individual and parallels his general development.⁴

By the same token, we shall examine the study of religious or spiritual conversion. From a theological perspective drawing on the teaching of Jesus as it is recorded in the New Testament one can speak of *metanoia*, which means a change of heart as a response to a call for repentance. It is characterized by the rejection of one's previous opinions and attachments and an all-encompassing change comprising the intellectual, ethical, and affective dimension of one's personality. Theologians always link conversion with God's power and grace. Psychologists, however, see it as a psychological process, for example, as a positive change of the self after a struggle with a moral failure.⁵ Sociologists in turn understand conversion primarily as a process of changing group identity. One has to be careful not to confuse these different methodologies and levels of explanation. Even if we use the same word, the realities being studied vary from one discipline to another; they relate to the same event in human life, but look at it from different vantage points and use dissimilar scientific tools. In our everyday life we can sometimes say that someone "converted" us to drinking green tea. What we mean by this is that someone convinced us, persuaded us or provided us with an adequate rationale for doing so.

A theological perspective

Methodologically speaking, the theological approach to understanding conversion is well-structured thanks to the dogmatic expressions of Catholic faith, such as those found in the Catechism of the Catholic Church. In no. 1422, we read:

Those who approach the sacrament of Penance obtain pardon from God's mercy for the offense committed against him, and are, at the same time, reconciled with the Church which they have wounded by their sins and which by charity, by example, and by prayer labors for their conversion.⁶

⁴ Cf. A.K. Jastrzębski, *The Normative Aspect in the Contemporary Understanding of Spirituality*, "Wrocławski Przegląd Teologiczny" 28/2 (2020), p. 97.

⁵ Cf. J. Iyadurai, *Religious Conversion and Personal Transformation*, [in:] *Encyclopedia of Psychology and Religion*, D.A. Leeming, K. Madden, S. Marlan (eds.), New York 2020, pp. 1992–1994.

⁶ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, London 1999, no. 1422.

And in no. 1423: “It is called the sacrament of conversion because it makes sacramentally present Jesus’ call to conversion, the first step in returning to the Father from whom one has strayed by sin.” Christian life is in fact a call to conversion. Although we recognize our own human fragility in this regard, we receive God’s grace that keeps alive our hope that all things will be made new in Christ. We can advance His Kingdom on earth through adherence to the Gospel call to love, reconciliation, and peace.⁷ In this perspective we can distinguish dogmatic conversion that implies becoming a believer from moral (ethical) conversion that focuses on the *metanoia*, a change of heart.⁸

From the Christian perspective, self-pride is the cardinal sin that creates a gulf between the person and God and reflects arrogant self-assertion. At this stage, the human self elevates itself above God and takes on a central place in one’s life. In the state of sin, people believe they can usurp God’s authority and freely follow their own desires. They are convinced that they are their own gods. Without God’s grace, people fall prey to thoughts, feelings and actions that are destructive to themselves and others. (Moral) conversion takes place when one realizes that God should be placed at the center of one’s life and makes appropriate changes to allow this to happen. Henceforth, one becomes concerned with carefully discerning God’s will and recognizes God’s commandment to deny the self and to love others the way Jesus Christ did, who Himself laid down his life to save others.⁹ For instance, the *Spiritual Exercises* of Ignatius of Loyola are shaped in such a manner as to help participants examine their lives in great detail and become deeply aware of their personal need for conversion in light of past failures.¹⁰

One last methodological comment needs to be made in regard to theology. Because theological reflection is rooted in a long tradition, there is not much space for improvisations or for developing independent theories. Of course, each generation of theologians underlines different aspects of conversion, but the core truths remain unchanged. This is not the case with psychology and sociology, where academic freedom is almost unlimited. In order to better understand this, let us now examine the history of psychology.

⁷ Cf. *Catechism...*, op. cit., p. 133.

⁸ Cf. *Leksykon duchowości katolickiej [Lexicon of Catholic Spirituality]*, M. Chmielewski (red.), Lublin–Kraków 2002, p. 568.

⁹ Cf. A. Mahoney, K.I. Pargament, *Sacred Changes: Spiritual Conversion and Transformation*, “Journal of Clinical Psychology” 60/5 (2004), pp. 481–492.

¹⁰ Cf. D. Perrin, *Studying Christian Spirituality*, New York 2007, p. 251.

A historical background of psychological research into conversion

From the very beginning of the development of the psychology of religion, conversion was one of its major points of interest. In the American Protestant context, it was a sought-after experience, very popular during revivals. Psychologists studied conversion in view of the biblical narrative of Saul/Paul as a prototype of a sudden radical transformation. In those early days, the majority of psychologists were very critical of spiritual phenomena. This was partly due to the popular cultural view of parapsychology and spiritualism prevalent at the time.¹¹ William James advocated independent research of both religious and psychic phenomena.¹² At the other extreme, Sigmund Freud reduced religion to an illusion and equated religion with madness.¹³

Edwin Starbuck and James H. Leuba elaborated questionnaires and personal testimonies to study conversion. First psychologists focused on dramatic cases of sudden conversion and investigated them by means of psychological principles. Nonetheless, as the 1960s approached, revivals declined in American culture and as a result psychologists became less interested in conversions¹⁴ and instead turned their attention to emerging behaviorism that did not regard subjective human phenomena as important.¹⁵ Yet, concomitantly, James's classic work *The Varieties of Religious Experience* continued to influence psychologists studying religion as it set a less critical tone for contemporary empirical work in this field. James tried to understand conversion by researching prominent case studies and attempted to convince his peers that any reductive view of mysticism was insufficient both methodologically and conceptually.¹⁶

With the new cultural fervor of the 1960s, the psychology of religion regained its momentum. The emergence of what became known as new religion prompted psychologists to again immerse themselves in conversion. In this

¹¹ Cf. R.W. Hood Jr., *The History and Current State of Research on Psychology of Religion*, [in:] *The Oxford Handbook of Spirituality and Psychology*, L. Miller (ed.), New York 2012, p. 10.

¹² Cf. W. James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, New York 1990, p. 377.

¹³ Cf. D.M. Black, *Wstęp [Introduction]*, [in:] *Psychoanaliza i religia w XXI wieku. Współzawodnictwo czy współpraca? [Psychoanalysis and Religion in the 21st Century: Competition or Cooperation?]*, D.M. Black (red.), tłum. A. Skórzak, Kraków 2009, p. 30.

¹⁴ Cf. R.W. Hood Jr., *The History...*, op. cit., p. 11.

¹⁵ Cf. A. Taves, *Psychology of Religion Approaches to the Study of Religious Experience*, [in:] *The Cambridge Companion to Religious Experience*, P.K. Moser, C. Meister (eds.), Cambridge 2020, p. 25.

¹⁶ Cf. W. James, *The Varieties...*, op. cit.

case, a sociological approach applied by social psychologists became more prominent. This methodological reversal substantially altered classic views of religious conversion.¹⁷ It was no longer deemed to be a sudden process resulting in the radical transformation of one's personality, but rather an active search for meaning in which people freely explored the religious landscape, while seeking membership in various religious groups. This was seen as a continual process of actively searching for meaning and purpose. In this approach, people's personalities were transformed to a far lesser degree than their worldviews.¹⁸

Along with the renewed interest in conversion, a new research subject emerged: deconversion i.e., a process of leaving one's religious group by exiting religion altogether or by joining an alternative religious group. In certain instances, and from the perspective of social sciences, deconversion, although appearing to be a more complex research subject than that of conversion, still represents its mirror image.¹⁹

It has to be noted that theologians do not accept such a term. From a theological perspective one can deepen one's conversion or distance oneself from God, even becoming an apostate, when one abandons one's own spiritual heritage and drifts away from the truth. Hence, apostasy is for theologians what deconversion is for social scientists. Out of respect for different research terminology, we will use the designation deconversion from this point onwards.

A contemporary social science perspective

A wider range of perspectives, including those of psychology and sociology coupled with theological categories of grace, atonement, and repentance will guide our reflection on conversion and help us to broaden our understanding of this phenomenon from the point of view of human experience.²⁰ According to Streib and Keller:

In the second half of the 20th century, a new conversion model emerged. Conversion now is characterized by an active subject, making meaning. It is a gradual

¹⁷ Cf. R.W. Hood Jr., *The History...*, op. cit., p. 11.

¹⁸ Cf. R.F. Paloutzian, J.T. Richardson, L.R. Rambo, *Religious Conversion and Personality Change*, "Journal of Personality" 67/6 (1999), pp. 1047–1079.

¹⁹ Cf. H. Streib, R.W. Hood Jr., B. Keller, R.-M. Csöff, C. Silver, *Deconversion: Qualitative and Quantitative Results from Cross-Cultural Research in Germany and the United States*, Göttingen 2009, pp. 17–32.

²⁰ Cf. D. Perrin, *Studying Christian Spirituality*, op. cit., p. 37.

and rational process of acquiring and testing new behaviors which are followed by the acceptance of beliefs, regard for the social context of conversion, and the possibility of a succession of affiliations or “conversion careers.”²¹

Generally speaking, religious conversion is now understood as the process by which an individual shifts away from previously held religious beliefs and accepts the beliefs of a new spiritual tradition. As we mentioned before, contemporary researchers tend to define conversion as a process that involves a series of events rather than a single dramatic experience.²²

As a complex human phenomenon, the psychological and sociological processes of religious conversion encompass a host of descriptions, perspectives, and theories. What we know about conversion is that it is a process of change that incorporates the sacred into the very core of individuals’ identities, worldviews, and orientation both to their own existence and to that of the world outside themselves. The process of conversion varies widely based on personal qualities, family environment, and social, societal, religious, cultural, and historical contexts and the interactions among these factors.²³

Modern social sciences are more flexible regarding the order of events implied in conversion. Contrary to older theories, they also advocate more inclusive views of why conversion takes place.²⁴ The first theories of conversion (e.g., James or Starbuck) characterized the causes of conversion as external, irresistible, and supernatural. Also, the consequences of conversion were considered as irrevocable. The contemporary theories of conversion put greater emphasis on the search for meaning and self-identity within the social context. They view converts as active and conscious participants in their own conversion. This is because of a constant interaction between converting individuals and the external spiritual forces that they perceive along with the influence of religious group members.

²¹ H. Streib, B. Keller, *The Variety of Deconversion Experiences: Contours of a Concept in Respect to Empirical Research*, “Archive for the Psychology of Religion” 26 (2004), p. 185.

²² Cf. B.J. Zinnbauer, K.I. Pargament, *Spiritual Conversion: A Study of Religious Change among College Students*, “Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion” 37/1 (1998), pp. 61–180.

²³ D.W. Snook, M.J. Williams, J.G. Horgan, *Issues in the Sociology and Psychology of Religious Conversion*, “Pastoral Psychology” 68/2 (2019), pp. 223–240.

²⁴ Cf. J.T. Richardson, *The Active vs. Passive Convert: Paradigm Conflict in Conversion/Recruitment Research*, “Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion” 24/2 (1985), pp. 163–179.

Converting individuals are seen as seekers of meaning and satisfaction in their careers, relationships, and their relation to God.²⁵

Lewis Rambo defines conversion as “a process of change that takes place in a dynamic force field of people, events, ideologies, institutions, expectations, and orientations.”²⁶ He indicates seven stages of conversion: context, crisis, quest, encounter, interaction, commitment, and consequences. The context has both macro and micro dimensions. On a macro level, it includes the wider world; on micro levels it includes one’s family and friends, neighbors, ethnic group and religious community. Crisis may be catalyzed by near-death experiences, illness and healing, or even by simple dissatisfaction with life. This stage is also recognized as important in the theological context as a moment of recognition of one’s transgressions.²⁷ Interaction includes the four following dimensions: relationships, rituals, rhetoric, and roles. Finally, testimonies of conversion generally demonstrate language transformation and biographical reconstruction.²⁸

Social sciences offer a variety of definitions and there is no consensus regarding the operationalization of religious conversion. Fortunately, there is some agreement on what religious conversion is not.²⁹ It is important to state that most of the research on religious conversion has been done by anthropologists and sociologists with a focus on changes in religious group membership. On the other hand, psychologists put emphasis on the interior experience of religious conversion. They term this as spiritual conversion. “Taken together, spiritual conversion radically alters a person’s understanding of the sacred, the self, relationships, and one’s place in the universe.”³⁰

Some changes, such as a transition from one religious institution to another might be considered a conversion in some instances but not in others, depending on the degree of reformulation of a new identity. For a conversion to take place, it is not always necessary that the religious system to which one is converting be totally new; what is more important is that it becomes more central in one’s life. Research demonstrates that conversion involves a radical change to one’s consciousness or identity.³¹ According to Pargament, conversion only happens

²⁵ Cf. D.W. Snook, M.J. Williams, J.G. Horgan, *Issues in the Sociology...*, op. cit., p. 224.

²⁶ L.R. Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion*, New Haven 1993, p. 5.

²⁷ Cf. *Leksykon duchowości katolickiej*, op. cit., p. 568.

²⁸ Cf. L.R. Rambo, S.C. Bauman, *Psychology of Conversion and Spiritual Transformation*, “Pastoral Psychology” 61/5–6 (2011), pp. 879–894.

²⁹ Cf. D.W. Snook, M.J. Williams, J.G. Horgan, *Issues in the Sociology...*, op. cit., p. 225.

³⁰ A. Mahoney, K.I. Pargament, *Sacred Changes...*, op. cit., p. 483.

³¹ Cf. D.A. Snow, R. Machalek, *The Convert as a Social Type*, “Sociological Theory” 1 (1983), p. 279.

when there is a change in both the destinations and the pathways of a person's life in relation to God. One type of conversion can be called "group religious conversion" and represents a process by which a person adjusts their fundamental values and makes significant lifestyle changes to fit into the group. Practically, it means adopting new daily habits, routines, and relationships in order to be part of the group and to assume a new identity and draw force from it.³²

The consequences of conversion

There are some clear results of conversion. First, converted individuals start to tell their life stories in a different manner, which is called biographical reconstruction and involves new attributions regarding life events. This is also seen in the pastoral practice. In this context, narrative approaches to conversion suggest that developing new identities influences the way people interpret the events that both precede and follow the conversion in light of their subjective psychosocial experiences as a new believer.

Testimonials of conversion tell us of a miraculous transformation, from darkness to a great light, from being lost to being found. There is a sharp contrast between earlier suffering and current improvements. The conversion narrative always includes a wide gap between the past and the present, between corruption and redemption. The power of transformation through enlightenment is proven through this gap.³³

Second, there are perceptible effects of conversion in one's life such as positive changes in one's mental health and well-being, changes in behavior, and changes in one's group memberships. These elements can be linked to the moral dimension in the theological model. Third, in up to 80% of cases, there is a period of stressor crisis that precedes conversion.³⁴ It may be the breakdown of an individual's identity and value system leading them to seek out a new faith.³⁵ Crisis forces one's current beliefs to be challenged and often leads

³² Cf. J. Zinnbauer, K.I. Pargament, *Spiritual Conversion...*, op. cit., p. 166.

³³ B. Beit-Hallahmi, *Conversion*, [in:] *Encyclopedia of Psychology...*, op. cit., p. 508.

³⁴ Cf. D.W. Snook, M.J. Williams, J.G. Horgan, *Issues in the Sociology...*, op. cit., p. 226.

³⁵ Cf. P. Halama, *Empirical Approach to Typology of Religious Conversion*, "Pastoral Psychology" 64/2 (2015), pp. 185-194.

one on a quest for new beliefs,³⁶ or, in the theological model, to repenting for one's sins.³⁷

Subsequently, one must make a major life change in order to reduce or eliminate the tension. James already indicated that religious changes often come as a result of times of significant tension, involving spiritual, emotional, and intellectual discomfort. Nonetheless, the role that crisis plays in leading to conversion has been criticized by some as being too deterministic.³⁸ There are studies confirming that crisis, stress, and tension can be important predictors of conversion, although crisis does not automatically cause religious conversion.³⁹ There are also various views on the permanence of conversion and its consequences. In some cases, conversion and its effects are permanent, but in others one has to continually renew one's commitment, otherwise the effects of conversion may be lost over time.⁴⁰ This is also an important aspect for pastoral work. Some cases involve an observable change in actual behavior. Sinners do not always become saints, but often become capable of true love. Even a temporary improvement along these lines is impressive.⁴¹

Research on conversion tends to point to a spectrum of affective elements. According to some theories, emotional states are essential in conversion, whereas in others, conversion is rather a rational process where one carefully weighs the costs and benefits before making any decision.⁴² Nonetheless, most rational theories do not exclude the emotional dimension. They view emotional benefits as part of the expected rewards of conversion and confirm that conversion is not primarily a result of dramatic emotional experiences. In fact, many people experiencing conversion report that they feel elation and excitement, relief from guilt, gratification from finding a congruent worldview, and a sense of peace and well-being.⁴³

³⁶ Cf. L.R. Rambo, *Theories of Conversion: Understanding and Interpreting Religious Change*, "Social Compass" 46/3 (1999), pp. 259–271.

³⁷ Cf. *Leksykon duchowości katolickiej*, op. cit., p. 568

³⁸ Cf. H. Gooren, *Reassessing Conventional Approaches to Conversion: Toward a New Synthesis*, "Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion" 46/3 (2007), pp. 337–353.

³⁹ Cf. J. Koziol, *Z Bogiem albo bez Boga. Psychologia religii: nowe spojrzenie [With God or Without God. Psychology of Religion: A New Perspective]*, Warszawa 1991, p. 21.

⁴⁰ Cf. D.W. Snook, M.J. Williams, J.G. Horgan, *Issues in the Sociology...*, op. cit., p. 235.

⁴¹ Cf. Beit-Hallahmi, *Conversion...*, pp. 507–510.

⁴² Cf. H. Gooren, *Reassessing Conventional Approaches...*, op. cit., pp. 337–353.

⁴³ Cf. D.W. Snook, M.J. Williams, J.G. Horgan, *Issues in the Sociology...*, op. cit., p. 236.

The social dimension of conversion

Social theories of conversion include the theories of relative deprivation, globalization, colonization, and the intellectualist theory. The relative deprivation theory suggests that people who feel that they are deprived of economic and social resources in comparison to their neighbors will attempt, through religious conversion, to obtain the benefits that they believe they deserve, such as social belonging and meaning in life. The perception of deprivation rather than social inequity itself is the most important factor in this theory. From the theological point of view this would be seen as unauthentic conversion. The globalization theory explains religious changes through the speed and ease with which people can globally communicate and travel, which allows religious groups to gain an audience with potential followers anywhere in the world. The colonization theory indicates that centuries of colonization introduced many cultures to each other that would not have otherwise come into contact. This happened in Africa, Asia, and the Americas. As a result, thousands of indigenous peoples became members of major world religions, particularly Christianity.⁴⁴

Each world religion has a theological view of conversion unique to its beliefs along with a set of criteria to assess valid and good conversion. We described the Christian understanding earlier. People converting to a particular religion will be influenced by the way they perceive and interpret their conversion. Consequently, the nature of a person's conversion is at least somewhat shaped by the religion to which they are converting. In some situations, conversion tends to occur relatively independently of the influence of other individuals, groups, or sociocultural factors.⁴⁵ In theology, such cases are the mark of the mysterious ways in which God's grace works in the human heart.

In this context, Rambo prefers to talk about joining a new religion rather than about an encounter with God. For a theologian, such an attitude is obviously reductionist, but it is perfectly in line with sociological methodology. Rambo also points to five potential benefits found in conversion: "(1) a system of meaning (cognitive); (2) emotional gratifications (affective); (3) techniques for living (volitional); (4) charisma (leadership); and (5) power."⁴⁶

According to social psychologists, any transformative experience must occur within the context of socialization. Conversion is rarely limited to a change in religious beliefs; social and cultural transformation usually accompanies it.

⁴⁴ Cf. L.R. Rambo, *Theories of Conversion...*, pp. 259–271.

⁴⁵ Cf. D.W. Snook, M.J. Williams, J.G. Horgan, *Issues in the Sociology...*, op. cit., p. 229.

⁴⁶ L.R. Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion...*, op. cit., p. 81.

The affective bonds between the group and the individual play a vital role in conversion. Only by entering group dynamics can social influence and social learning activate the transformation within a new member. The social influence theory also indicates how the individual experiences gradual transformation through relationships when this person is under stress or on a quest for meaning. Nonetheless, the social influence theory only partially explains the origins of conversion because it does not refer to a sudden conversion or conversion in isolation, without any group context, and does not take into account the divine-human encounter to which people generally attribute more significance.⁴⁷ Yet, there are some interesting points to be considered here for pastoral theology.

Lofland and Skonovd present six types of conversion: (1) intellectual conversion which involves the search for knowledge without significant social contact; (2) mystical⁴⁸ conversion which was a popular area of research in the early days of psychological study of conversion characterized by dramatic insight, induced by visions, voices, or other paranormal experiences; (3) experimental conversion which means an active pursuit of different religious groups, their theologies, and rituals in order to find the best fit for oneself; (4) affectional conversion with the accent put on personal experience of being loved and affirmed by religious group or leader; (5) revivalist conversion relying on crowd conformity inducing conversion behavior; and (6) coercive conversion, involving external pressure exerted on the person to convert.⁴⁹

Deconversion or apostasy

As we have illustrated above, conversion has been an important subject in the psychology of religion from its beginnings. This is not the case with deconversion, which is a rather new concept in the field of social sciences. In theological terms this phenomenon has been defined as apostasy, defection, disaffiliation, falling from the faith, and so on. As a new social science concept, deconversion is associated with the negative connotations of leaving one's spiritual tradition. It may mean abandoning a former spiritual tradition or religious belief and even actively opposing it. Apostasy and defection are usually associated with

⁴⁷ Cf. J. Iyadurai, *Religious Conversion...*, op cit., pp. 1992–1994.

⁴⁸ Here, 'mystical' is understood differently than in theology. The accent is not put on one's union with God, as in Christianity, but on exceptional psychic phenomena, which were considered as secondary by many mystics such as Saint Theresa from Avila.

⁴⁹ Cf. J. Lofland, N. Skonovd, *Conversion motifs*, "Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion" 20/4 (1981), pp. 373–385.

blaming the individual for the breaking of loyalty to their faith group. *Prima facie*, deconversion is associated with intellectual doubt, emotional uneasiness or distress, and criticism of a given spiritual tradition or at least its concrete incarnation within a given group of believers.⁵⁰

Along these lines, John Barbour distinguishes four characteristics of deconversion from the vantage point of social sciences: (1) intellectual struggling which takes the form of doubt or denial regarding the truths of one's beliefs; (2) moral criticism as expressed in rejection of the entire way of life practiced in a religious group; (3) emotional suffering such as feelings of grief, guilt, loneliness, or despair; and, finally, (4) exiting the community.⁵¹

Kimberlee Everson proposes a different set of characteristics of deconversion and its consequences. People who deconvert gain new identity, change their lifestyle and their participation in social groups. Deconversion may be triggered by despair and by a desire for more meaning in life. In such situations people tend to turn to media, internet searches or mentors in order to find answers.⁵²

Apostasy or deconversion seems to be closely associated with losing one's faith. Silver and colleagues, in their qualitative study, described six types of disbelief: (1) intellectual atheism/agnosticism, with a strong motivation to study, discuss and understand; (2) activist atheism/agnosticism characterized by an active attempt at converting others to disbelief or sociopolitical activism; (3) seeker agnosticism with a philosophical focus on the inability to confirm or disconfirm the existence of God; (4) antitheism or new atheism as a conviction that belief in God is not only unwarranted but also harmful and should be extinguished; (5) non-theism, or an apathetic disbelief without caring whether or not religion is true; (6) ritual atheism where without actually believing in God people participate in some religious practices.⁵³ New atheism is also referred to as militant atheism as its proponents can be aggressive about their cause.⁵⁴

Empirical research shows that nonreligious people are mostly young, male, white, liberal, highly educated, biblical skeptics, raised in nonreligious homes,

⁵⁰ Cf. H. Streib, B. Keller, *The Variety...*, op. cit., p. 181.

⁵¹ Cf. J.D. Barbour, *Versions of Deconversion: Autobiography and the Loss of Faith*, Charlottesville 1994, p. 2.

⁵² Cf. K.K.C. Everson, *Becoming Religious Disbelievers: Retrospective Viewpoints*, "Pastoral Psychology" 68/3 (2019), pp. 163–164.

⁵³ Cf. C.F. Silve, T.J. Coleman, R.W. Hood Jr., J.M. Holcombe, *The Six Types of Nonbelief: A Qualitative and Quantitative Study of Type and Narrative*, "Mental Health, Religion and Culture" 17/10 (2014), pp. 990–1001.

⁵⁴ Cf. J.P. Baggett, *Protagoras's Assertion Revisited: American Atheism and its Accompanying Obscurities*, "Implicit Religion" 14/3 (2011), p. 289.

or divorced. Unbelievers in God seem to be unhappy with religious political activism and tend to support gender issues. They are usually dissatisfied with religious interference in politics and lifestyle choices, or simply want to withdraw from a group where they are in conflict with other members of their congregation. Unbelief among adolescents can be related to their doubt whether religion can make people better, rebellion against being told what to believe, a nonreligious family background, and lack of conviction about received truths.⁵⁵

Some of the possible causes of disbelief include: (1) low levels of meaningfulness in life leading through a time of quest towards nonbelief, (2) lack of social obligations, (3) conflict in a congregation, and (4) trauma coupled with emotional reactivity. Disbelievers have some understanding about their experiences. Becoming an unbeliever is a gradual process. For some, it begins with a crisis; for others, it is the influence of a college professor, the internet, or a book. Later stages may turn one into an activist or a new atheist.⁵⁶

According to Streib and Keller deconversion consists in:

- (1) Loss of specific religious experiences (Experiential Dimension); this means the loss of finding meaning and purpose in life; the loss of the experience of God; of trust and of fear;
- (2) Intellectual doubt, denial or disagreement with specific beliefs (Ideological Dimension); heresy (sensu Berger) is an element of deconversion;
- (3) Moral criticism (Ritualistic Dimension) which means a rejection of specific prescriptions and/or the application of a new level of moral judgement;
- (4) Emotional suffering (Consequential Dimension); this can consist in a loss of embeddedness/social support/sense of stability and safety;
- (5) Disaffiliation from the community which can consist of a retreat from participation in meetings or from observance of religious practices; finally, the termination of membership which eventually follows.⁵⁷

Streib and colleagues present various deconversion trajectories: secularizing, oppositional exit, religious switching, integrating exit, privatizing exit, and heretical exit. According to their findings, most deconverts chose a secularizing exit, which means an abandonment of religious belief and membership in organized religion. Next comes privatizing exit when people disconnect with

⁵⁵ Cf. K.K.C. Everson, *Becoming Religious Disbelievers...*, op. cit., p. 158.

⁵⁶ Cf. K.K.C. Everson, *Becoming Religious Disbelievers...*, op. cit., p. 159.

⁵⁷ H. Streib, R.W. Hood Jr., B. Keller, R.-M. Csöff, C. Silver, *Deconversion...*, op. cit., p. 191.

their faith group and continue developing a private spirituality. Some of these trajectories may overlap or occur simultaneously.⁵⁸

In addition to this dynamism, one also needs to consider the developmental aspect of deconversion. It is possible to move from one religious group to another without moving to the next developmental stage or level of spiritual growth. On the other hand, people can transition to the next stage of spiritual growth without changing their religious group. In some circumstances, both of these events can happen at the same time.⁵⁹

The theme of deconversion or apostasy has become very significant in our society. From the theological vantage point, it requires us to underline the approach that the methodology of social sciences ignores i.e., the relationship between God and the human person; however, it can still supply pastoral practitioners with pertinent information useful in helping people to mature in their faith, through observing inauthentic attitudes and confused motivations imbedded in their spiritual paths.

Some critical thoughts

In the end, we need to come back to the essential question of whether social sciences can inform theology, especially in its practical and pastoral applications. No doubt, thanks to recent studies and empirical research in social sciences, our understanding of why and how people convert has grown remarkably. What is the methodological status of this acquired knowledge? Are the conclusions drawn from these studies valid?

Although recent research in psychology and sociology supplies us with a number of historical and contemporary factors shaping the nature of spirituality, social sciences have used simplified and generic understanding of spirituality and religion without taking into account history, tradition, geographical and ethnical specificity. Even without a profound knowledge of theology, we can see that the writings of spiritual authors such as St John of the Cross or St Ignatius Loyola, propose ways of understanding spirituality that should be

⁵⁸ Cf. R.F. Paloutzian, S. Murken, H. Streib, S. Rößler-Namini, *Conversion, Deconversion, and Spiritual Transformation: A Multilevel Interdisciplinary View*, [in:] *Handbook of the Psychology...*, op. cit., p. 410.

⁵⁹ Cf. I.W. Jindra, *Religious Stage Development among Converts to Different Religions*, "The International Journal for the Psychology of Religion" 18 (2008), pp. 195–215.

seriously considered.⁶⁰ The most empirical research in spirituality has formulated Judeo-Christian mainline Protestant concepts of religion in white, North American populations.⁶¹ In the United States, most samples were collected from older white Christian adults, so that any generalization of such findings remains questionable.⁶²

These facts should make us cautious when attempting to transpose the research results and conclusions to other settings such as in Poland. There are of course some similarities, but there are also major different approaches. These are termed as vertical in theology and horizontal in social sciences.⁶³ Also theology is concerned with what is human in spiritual transformations without, however, neglecting the vertical dimension, which is the relationship with God. In any case, the reconciliation of both approaches can be fruitful, granting an adequate methodological awareness.

There is a great need for further research on conversion and it should be fine-tuned and include a theological perspective. The methodological differences existing in theology and social sciences should always be kept in mind. Psychology is interested in the experiential dimension of conversion in individuals while sociology is attracted in to group dynamics underlining such experiences (horizontal dimension). By means of statistical tools they both try to discover regularities and dominant trends in society and in individuals. As it is, theology is more interested in the unique ways in which individuals approach God, and in the supernatural reality of God's grace at work in the human heart (vertical dimension).

Some attempts have been made to reconcile these different views. For instance, Lynne Taylor underlines God's role in conversion in terms of two emotions: a sense of yearning and a desire to be a better person. Certain attributes of God such as God's love, power, patience, acceptance, and forgiveness are seen as important factors contributing to their conversion. People observe God

⁶⁰ Cf. S. Dein, C.C.H. Cook, H.G. Koenig, *Religion, Spirituality, and Mental Health: Current Controversies and Future Directions*, "Journal of Nervous & Mental Disease" 200 (2012), pp. 852–855.

⁶¹ Cf. P.C. Hill, *Measurement assessment and issues in the psychology of religion and spirituality*, [in:] *Handbook of the Psychology...*, op. cit., pp. 50–51.

⁶² Cf. C.L. Park, A.C. Sherman, H.S.L. Jim, J.M. Salsman, *Religion/Spirituality and Health in the Context of Cancer: Cross-Domain Integration, Unresolved Issues, and Future Directions*, "Cancer" 121/21 (2015), pp. 3789–3794.

⁶³ Cf. A.K. Jastrzębski, *Recent Developments in Understanding Spirituality as Exemplified by the Concept of Self-Transcendence*, "Verbum Vitae" 39/2 (2021), pp. 514–515.

working in the world or through others; they are also aware of God being present or speaking as well as helping them to recognize God's actions in their past.⁶⁴

It should be acknowledged that religious conversion helps people align themselves with purpose, meaning, and identity in connection with God. It would be wise to include the role of religion in the study of conversion as this could improve the assessments of its findings. From the perspective of faith, many disorders occurring in the human psyche are the result of sin, disobedience to God, and bad choices; a full recovery from these disorders can only take place through conversion. In this case, psychological help should only be seen as a component of the process. Social sciences are descriptive by nature as they do not address the normative aspect present in moral theology. As a rule, psychotherapy does not lead to conversion. In the Christian view, only Christ can bring about a genuine transformation in a human life, integrally touching and changing from within the whole human person.

In summary, factual, accurate and unbiased research on conversion in social sciences can enrich our knowledge of the phenomenology of spiritual transformations and inform us of the affective, behavioral, and cognitive elements that play an essential role within the studied population. Pastoral theology should be critically open to these new insights emerging from social sciences. These will help us to better grasp the complexity and multidimensionality of conversion along with the psychological fragility of the person undergoing such a major spiritual transformation and, consequently, accompany them with compassion and charity.

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⁶⁴ Cf. L.A. Taylor, *Multidimensional Approach to Understanding Religious Conversion*, "Pastoral Psychology" 70/1 (2021), p. 39.

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