

Psychology of Conversion of Youth & Call to Religious Life

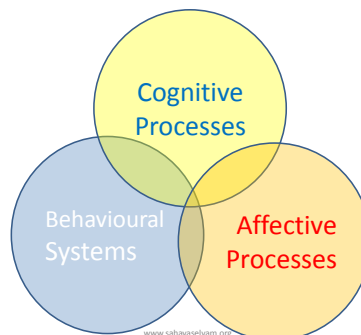
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Three components of Psychology



What is psychology?

- Scientific study of cognitive, affective processes and related behavioural processes..
in individuals and groups;
in humans and animals (comparative psychology);

General Method of Psychology

What do these statements mean for you?

1. Psychology is Scientific:

Systematic, methodical, evidence-based, replicable, 'universal', cumulative.

2. Psychology is empirical:

Evidence for arguments based on sense data.

Psychology and/of Religion

- Psychology *and* Religion attempts to facilitate a dialogue between the two fields while maintaining their independent discourses (Hood, 1994);
- Psychology *of* Religion is a branch of psychology that uses the theoretical framework and methods of general psychology to study religious phenomena and their elements, thus seeking an opportunity to contribute to mainstream psychology.

Psychology of Conversion

- Conversion was one of the subjects studied by psychology at the very beginning of psychology itself in 1890's.
- Early Psychologists such as: Edwin Starbuck, Stanley Hall, & Pratt
- Then religion was not rejected by psychology!
- After some break there is revival of the study of conversion in psychology: Rambo, Lofland...

Psychology of Conversion

- Conversion is studied within psychology of religion from the perspective of **social psychology**;
- Conversion is studied particularly **in the context of young people** joining New Religious Movements, or becoming serious about their own religion; some times also falling out of religion (deconversion);
- Most studies have focussed on the **psycho-pathological elements** contributing to conversion: influence of deprivation (Stark, 1965; Brainbridge, 1992) or brain-washing (Richardson 1985; Machalek & Snow, 1993);
- Several studies have suggested that most **conversions do not last** – unless supported by the same context.

Scope of this presentation

- To understand some insights from the psychology of conversion...
- To examine the implication of psychology of conversion for young people who are joining religious life...
- To consider also, by extension, the implication for those who are religious already.

What is Conversion?

For Coe (1916) conversion entails:

- Transformation of the self;
- Comes through a definite process;
- Makes radical changes: noticeable through time!
- Leads to a higher direction;
- Occurs in a context.

Coe, G. A. (1916). *The psychology of religion*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

The object of Conversion

- **Quest for meaning:** Why do I believe those that I do? Related to also the meaning and purpose of life: Why am I here?
- **Quest for identity:** Who Am I? Also related to our belonging need: what do I belong to this group?
- **Reparatory:** release from previous life of sin and guilt.

Types of Conversion

Sudden Conversion:

- Dramatic – emotional and experiential
- More likely to join sects and cults!
- Susceptible to brain-washing!

Gradual conversion:

- More intellectual rather than emotional, might involve experience. Less dramatic;

Unconscious Conversion (Scobie, 1973)

- Without being aware...

Deconversion & Apostasy

- 'Falling out of religion/belief'

Social Conversion:

- Non-personalised – part of the group action!

Compare the vocation of Peter & Paul

• Peter: Gradual

- Lk 5:1-11 - Depart from me Lord...
- Mt 17:19 - Transfiguration
- Jn 18:15-27 - Denial
- Jn 21:15-17 - Feed my sheep

• Paul: Sudden and dramatic

- Acts 9

Youth & Conversion

- Many studies attest adolescence as a typical stage for religious- sudden conversion.
- Starbuck approximated a **mean age of 16.4 years**, attributing conversion to those who possess a "... high degree of sensibility, are passively suggestible, and who expect to experience it", particularly among adolescents and women.
- More recently, some studies have shown the average **age of conversions to be 18**.

Edwin D. Starbuck, *Psychology of Religion: An Empirical Study of the Growth of Religious Consciousness* (LLC, Kessinger Publishing, 1901/2006).

Lee, P. C. (2008). Christian conversion stories of African American women: A qualitative analysis. *Journal of Psychology and Christianity*, 27(3), 238.

Conversion & Religious Experience

- Religious conversion (both sudden and gradual) could be related to religious experience.
- Pre-supposes an experience of whatever someone considers Transcendent (God);
- Also role of grace!



William James: Saintliness

1. **Asceticism**. The self-surrender may become so passionate as to turn into **self-immolation**.
2. **Strength of Soul**. The sense of enlargement of life may be so uplifting that personal motives and inhibitions, commonly omnipotent, become too insignificant for notice, and new reaches of patience and fortitude open out.
3. **Purity**. The shifting of the emotional center brings with it, first, increase of purity. The sensitiveness to spiritual discords is enhanced, and the **cleansing of existence from brutal and sensual elements** becomes imperative.
4. **Charity**. The shifting of the emotional center brings, secondly, increase of charity, tenderness for fellow creatures.

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Family & Conversion: Attachment Theory

1. Secure Attachment

- The child misses the mother, cries; on return runs to the mother, hugs; feels secure again and begins to explore the world.

2. Avoidant Attachment

- The child misses the mother, cries and stops; on return does not enthusiastically run to the mother, shows indifference (I-can-manage-without-you attitude); avoids mum and is angry.

3. Ambivalent Attachment

- The child misses the mother, cries in an exaggerated manner; on return runs to the mother; seems not interested in anything; could be violent to mum.

What is your attachment style to God?

Several authors see one's relationship with God as being similar to one's relationship with the primary care-giver.

1. Secure Attachment

- The person expresses deep longing for God; prays focusing on God; feels secure of the presence of God, and explores the world and functions therein in a creative manner, positively contributing to it.

2. Avoidant Attachment

- Might believe or not believe in God; Gives up prayer when God does not respond; feels self-sufficient; finds it difficult to relate to God in an intimate way.

3. Ambivalent Attachment

- Longs for God, but does not translate into prayer; not consistent in prayer.

Attachment & Conversion

Several authors see one's relationship with God as being similar to one's relationship with the primary care-giver.

1. Secure Attachment

- Gradual Conversion

2. Avoidant Attachment

- Sudden conversion.

3. Ambivalent Attachment

- Mixed – inconsistent.

(Kirkpatrick & Shaver, 1990)

Radicalisation & Conversion

- Sudden conversion is likely to be associated with Radicalisation.
- Radicalisation involves brain-washing; emotional-based; lack of integration of the rational faculty;
- Faith is equated with affective side of humans (emotional) and not integrated with rational self.
- Radicalism and Radicalisation could be different.

Lofland:

Motifs/features of Religious conversion

- **Intellectual:** people pursue alternate theodicies, and seek personal fulfilment by reading books, watching television, attending lectures and in other impersonal ways.
 - **Mystical:** sudden burst of insight such as visions, voices, or other paranormal experiences.
 - **Experiential:** active exploration through trial and error of religious options.
 - **Affectional:** interpersonal bonds such as the personal experience of being welcomed by members of religious groups.
 - **Revivalistic:** crowd conformity to induce new behaviour and beliefs together with emotionally powerful music and preaching.
 - **Coercive:** involves intense and coercive pressure on the person to participate.
- Lofland, J., & Skonovd, N. (1981). Conversion motifs. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 20(4), 373-385.

Rambo’s Integrative Model of Conversion

Rambo, L. R. (1993). *Understanding religious conversion*. New Haven: CT: Yale University Press.

Process	Factors
Stage 1: Context	Factors that facilitate or hinder conversion
Stage 2: Crisis	May be personal, social, or both
Stage 3: Quest	Intentional search on part of potential convert
Stage 4: Encounter	Recognition of other R/S option
Stage 5: Interaction	Extended engagement with new R/S option
Stage 6: Commitment	Identification with new R/S reality
Stage 7: Consequences	Transformation of beliefs, behaviours, or identity as result of new commitment

Conversion & Call to Religious Life

- At the core of every ‘vocation story’ is a story of conversion!
- This conversion could be gradual or sudden.
- One of the aims of religious life is personal-continued conversion (formation).
- We focus on conversion prior to joining religious life.

Conversion & Call to Religious Life

- **Method of our discussion:** conjectural – hypothetical for want of empirical data;
- **Our hypothetical conclusions** are based on known theories and models that explain conversion.

1. Impact of Sudden & Gradual Conversion

- **Late vocations** are likely to be marked by sudden conversions;
- Sudden conversions are likely to yield **extreme positions:** radicalism, fanaticism, fundamentalism;
- Even gradual conversions may be **marked by some key moments** – of intense God-experience; but they are not very dramatic! They may yield deep spirituality.

2. Impact of Family on Conversion- Vocation Caregiver-Child Relationship as a predictor

- People who have had **Secure Attachment** as infants are likely to have gradual conversions – fewer surprises could be expected.
- Might consider the matter of vocation for a long time!
- People with **Avoidant Attachment** are likely to have sudden conversion and might decide suddenly to join or leave religious life;
- People who have had **Ambivalent Attachment** could be highly unpredictable!

3. From 'religious indifference' to sudden seriousness (msimamo mkali)

- People who join religious life quite early, but have not gone through a gradual process of conversion – deepening of their relationship with the Divine; evolving personal spirituality:
- Might have a 'big event' (a retreat, a book, a workshop, meeting of a person) and might go overboard – mwenye msimamo mkali!

Implications

Points to consider:

- Candidates who have not had a secure attachment in early childhood are likely to be unpredictable in their spirituality.
- Candidates who are spiritually indifferent are also likely to adapt extreme forms - become 'radicalised' or de-converted;

Dynamic nature of human being

- Awareness
- Acceptance
- Alchemy: learning some skills!

Thank You

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