

Lebel Lecture in Christian Ethics, March 6, 2006

What are they Saying about Conversion? New Insights, Many Models By Douglas H. Shantz, PhD, University of Calgary

Introduction

1. The Importance of this Topic

There are several factors behind my choice of topic this evening. For one, conversions are in the news. There have been media reports of such famous converts as Anne Rice the novelist, Naomi Wolf the feminist, and Antony Flew the philosopher. Last October 31, *Newsweek* magazine reported, “Anne Rice: Queen of the Occult Finds God.” At age 64 Rice, the onetime chronicler of vampires and witches, has apparently returned to the Catholic Church she left at age 18, and says all her future books will be written “only for the Lord.” After experiencing a diabetic coma in 1998, the death of her husband of 41 years in 2002, almost dying herself in 2004, and sinking into despair, she now views Christ as the ultimate hero.¹ Her most recent book is, *Christ the Lord: Out of Egypt*, a novel about the 7 year old Jesus as narrated by Christ himself.

This past January 22, 2006 an article in the *Sunday Herald* began: “Naomi Wolf, one of America’s foremost feminist thinkers, has found a spiritual awakening in God after experiencing a ‘mystical encounter’ with Jesus.” “The most widely read feminist of her generation,” Wolf is best known as the author of *The Beauty Myth*, her 1991 book against the cosmetics industry. In therapy recently for writer’s block, while practicing meditation, she experienced a holographic (three dimensional) image of Jesus. “It was just this figure who was the most perfected human being that there could be—full of light and full of love. It was the most profound experience of my life.” She is interested in

Jesus as teacher and Rabbi. She now believes that she is on a spiritual path, and is answerable to a higher authority for helping people however she can. The article concludes that, in America, “finding God is an acceptable resolution to mid-life crisis.”²

Over the past several decades British professor Antony Flew has gained a reputation as an outspoken atheist and powerful opponent of religious belief. Flew argued in his essay, “Theology and Falsification,” that *if* there is no way to falsify the assertion that God exists, then theological claims cannot be taken seriously. We must be able to state under what conditions we would be entitled to say that God does not exist. In “The Presumption of Atheism” (1984)³, Flew argued that Atheism should be the default position. “The onus of proof” lies with those who defend God’s existence to provide sufficient reasons to believe; but no sufficient proof has been forthcoming. Flew was convinced that belief in God could not be justified.

However, in late 2004 at age 81, Flew admitted he now accepts that the existence of God is probable. Flew’s God is not the loving Father of the Christian faith, but an intelligent designer.⁴ “It now seems to me,” writes Flew, “that the findings of more than fifty years of DNA research have provided materials for a new and enormously powerful argument to design.”⁵ He still rejects all revelation, including the Bible and Qur’an, and denies the afterlife. A contributor to the pages of *Christian Century* magazine commented on Flew’s newfound belief.

Flew has admitted God on the frugal terms of deism, yet further concessions may be in store. For what is to prevent a deist God from taking an interest in the cosmic process he began? What rule could restrain the creator from sending down prophet,

¹ David Gates, “The Gospel according to Anne,” *Newsweek* October 31, 2005.

² Torcuil Crichton, “Naomi Wolf: I had a vision of Jesus,” *Sunday Herald* 22 January 2006.

³ See Antony Flew, *God, Freedom and Immortality: A Critical Analysis* (1984).

⁴ Carol Zaleski, “Beyond disbelief,” *Christian Century* (January 25, 2005), p. 33.

⁵ See www.existence-of-god.com/flew-abandons-atheism.html

lawgiver and redeemer to restore his creation? For former believers, deism is a halfway house on the way to atheism; for former atheists it is a traveler's inn on the road to full-bodied faith.

Two such former atheists would be CS Lewis and Mortimer Adler. The article concludes, "In every age, such a disciplined philosophical conversion is cause for rejoicing."⁶

But it is not just the rich and famous who are converting. A recent article notes that while most people remain adherents of one religious faith throughout their lifetime, "nearly one third of American adults have switched religions at least once." The author argues that "social interaction works to maintain or change an individual's preferred religious choice."⁷ Those who spend little time with family and relatives are more likely to switch their religion. Childhood religious socialization by itself is inadequate; it is highly vulnerable to influences later in life. The author found that Catholics are less likely to switch their religious allegiance. That is because members of distinctive denominations that "fill a unique niche," of churches which create and satisfy unique preferences, are less likely to find their preferences satisfied elsewhere.⁸

For many of us the subject of conversion comes close to home. There is a good chance that either we ourselves or our close acquaintances have experienced a religious conversion. When I was about nine years old both of my parents had adult conversion experiences. Three years later our family switched from attending the United Church to the Baptist Church. I soon discovered that this meant no more games of cribbage with Dad, and no more movies. Sermons in the Baptist church aimed to convert the

⁶ Carol Zaleski, p. 33.

⁷ See Notre Dame sociologist Matthew T. Loveland's article, "Religious Switching: Preference Development, Maintenance, and Change," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 42:1 (2003), p. 147. Loveland cites the research of Wade Clark Roof, "Multiple Religious Switching: A Research Note," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 28 (1989), pp. 530-535.

⁸ Matthew T. Loveland, pp. 154f.

uncommitted, typically concluding with an invitation to accept Jesus as personal Saviour. It is perhaps not surprising that I have had a life-long interest in conversion, what it is, and how it affects people's everyday life.

There are other factors behind my choice of subject for this evening. Conversion has had a prominent place in Christian missions, Christian history and Christian thought down through the centuries. In the Acts of the Apostles, the verb "to turn" appears frequently; eighteen times it means "turning in repentance from sin and towards God." Luke's account of the first conversions in Acts sees conversion as the work of God, not of human agents (Acts 3:19, 15:3, 26:18, 20).⁹ The story of Christian expansion in medieval and modern times includes conversions of whole people groups and mass baptisms. Christian history is full of famous converts: St. Martin of Tours, St. Augustine, Hildegard of Bingen, St. Francis of Assisi, Clare of Assisi, St. Dominic, Martin Luther, Menno Simons, Teresa of Avila, Blaise Pascal, John Bunyan, John Henry Newman, Thomas Merton, C.S. Lewis, Malcolm Muggeridge and Dorothy Day among a host of others. It was 17th century English Puritans and German Pietists who gave the conversion experience a central and normative place in their understanding of the Christian life. In his *History of the Re-born* (1717), Johann Henrich Reitz compiled over 100 conversion stories that typically covered such matters as the subject's family background and nurture, reading, temptations, trials and doubts, "how God wonderfully lead and converted them," and gave them assurance of His love. Reitz described "their Christian

⁹ Brian Stanley, "Conversion to Christianity: The Colonization of the Mind?" *International Review of Mission* Volume 92 No. 366 (2003), p. 319.

life and blessed death.”¹⁰ The 18th century evangelical revivals in Britain and America continued this emphasis.¹¹

In recent years the phenomenon of Christian conversion has attracted considerable scholarly attention. “The topic of religious conversion has been at the center of discussion in several academic disciplines,” including anthropology, sociology, religion and history.¹² New books continue to appear on the subject.¹³ For all of these reasons conversion is a timely subject and deserving of our attention this evening. Exciting work is being done these days that should “spark new thinking about religious conversion across disciplines and various sub-fields of history.”¹⁴

2. The Purpose, Main Argument and Approach of this Talk

My purpose this evening is to shed some light on what we mean when we speak of people converting to Christianity. What exactly is conversion? What are the nature, causes and consequences of conversions? Is conversion to Christ ultimately one thing or many things? Is there an ideal, normative conversion experience out there? In North America many associate conversion with the kind of thing that happens at an evangelical service or a Billy Graham crusade. One is invited to make a “decision for Christ,” “to ask

¹⁰ See Douglas H. Shantz, “‘Back to the Sources’: Gottfried Arnold, Johann Henrich Reitz and the Distinctive Program and Practice of Pietist Historical Writing,” in C. Arnold Snyder, ed., *Commoners and Community: Essays in Honour of Werner O. Packull* (Kitchener: Pandora Press, 2002), pp. 81, 87.

¹¹ See D. Bruce Hindmarsh, *The Evangelical Conversion Narrative: Spiritual Autobiography in Early Modern England* (Oxford: Oxford University, 2005).

¹² Robert Hefner observes, “Recently the topic of religious conversion has been at the center of discussion in several academic disciplines...Peter [Berger] has shown me the importance of dialogue like that attempted here between anthropology, sociology, religion, and history.” See Robert W. Hefner, “Preface” in *Conversion to Christianity: Historical and Anthropological Perspectives on a Great Transformation* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), pp. viif.

¹³ See, for example, Kenneth J. Collins and John H. Tyson, ed., *Conversion in the Wesleyan Tradition* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2001), Gray Temple, *The Molten Soul: Dangers and Opportunities in Religious Conversion* (Church Publishing, 2000), and Christopher Lamb and M. Darrol Bryant, ed., *Religious Conversion: Contemporary Practices and Controversies* (Cassell, 1999).

¹⁴ Mills and Grafton, “Introduction,” (2003), p. x.

Jesus into your heart,” “accept Christ as your personal Saviour,” or to begin “a personal relationship with Jesus Christ.”¹⁵ Is this the norm? The ideal?

I will *not* be addressing the matter of the rightness or wrongness of trying to convert people to Christianity from no belief or from other beliefs. Also, I am not assuming that conversion is part of universal Christian experience. Clearly conversion language is more central to some Christian traditions than others. As William James put it, there will always be in our churches the once-born and the twice-born.

I will argue three things: *First*, that conversion is a complex matter, with wide variations in the nature, causes and consequences of conversion experiences. Conversions can and do happen in all Christian settings, as people convert to Roman Catholicism, to Eastern Orthodoxy, to various Protestant expressions of the faith. *Second*, it is clear that the meaning of conversion changes in different historical and social settings. That is because conversion experiences are culture-dependent. The Christian message and convert’s response tend to reflect the expectations of a particular Christian community in a particular time and place. *Finally*, there is an ecumenical implication to my presentation: that we accept people in the Christian family without requiring some normative conversion experience for them to qualify as a Christian.

My approach this evening will be, first, to canvas recent studies on conversion and to identify some of the new insights that have been gained into this fascinating subject. Among these insights is the complexity of conversion, and the various forms it can assume under different cultural conditions. I will then illustrate this diversity by examining models of conversion taken from three different periods in the Christian past.

¹⁵ William James, p. 230.

New Insights into Conversion: the last 25 years

There are two things to notice about recent scholarship on conversion. *First*, is the sheer volume of research devoted to this topic in the last twenty-five years, to the point that some have actually called for a moratorium, a “cease fire,” so scholars can catch up and properly assess each other’s work.¹⁶ This scholarly interest in conversion can be traced to several factors. One is the rise of new religious movements in the 1970s and 1980s, when North America was “gripped by an epidemic of personality change.” One contemporary writer suggested that “we are living in an age of conversion.”¹⁷ This period witnessed such famous conversions as that of Charles Colson, President Nixon’s right hand man, a conversion recounted in Colson’s 1976 book, *Born Again*. Another factor is the resurgence of born-again evangelical Christianity in the 1980s and its entry into public life in a big way with the Moral Majority. Finally, the 1990s have seen the rapid worldwide spread of the Pentecostal movement accompanied by various forms of dramatic religious manifestations and conversions.¹⁸ All of these factors have kept religious conversion in the forefront of public and scholarly attention.

The *second thing* to observe is the inter-disciplinary nature of conversion scholarship. There is a wide array of options available to scholars of conversion in terms of disciplinary foci, methodological strategies, and interpretive frameworks. Lewis Rambo points to recent scholarship in such fields as anthropology, sociology, history, psychology, psycho-analysis, and theology. I shall especially highlight two classic

¹⁶ John Lofton and Norman Skonovd, “Conversion Motifs,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 20:4 (1981), p. 374. They write that “the literature on the topic is becoming so rich and diverse in these and other ways that we believe a pause and provisional stock-taking is now in order.”

¹⁷ David A. Snow and Cynthia L. Phillips, “The Lofland-Stark Conversion Model: A Critical Reassessment,” *Social Problems* 27:4 (April 1980), p. 430.

scholarly studies and five more recent ones, and note the insights they offer into the nature of Christian conversion.

1. Two Classic Studies by William James and Arthur Darby Nock

Lewis Rambo notes that William James' *Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902), and A. D. Nock's *Conversion: the old and the new in religion from Alexander the Great to Augustine of Hippo* (Clarendon, 1933) are still the two most cited books in the field of conversion studies.

William James' *Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902)

William James offered two insights relevant to our topic of conversion. First, he spoke of two ways of looking at life, the way of the "healthy minded" who need to be born only once, and the way of the "sick souls" who must be twice born in order to be happy. These give rise to two forms of religion: one is the religion of pure naturalism, of optimistic moralism, and the other the religion of pure Salvationism, of renunciation and despair of happiness in this life as the path to supernatural good.¹⁹ The difference lies in how easily these two types can rid themselves of the consciousness of evil. "If we are sick souls, we require a religion of deliverance; but why think so much of deliverance if we are healthy-minded?" In the conclusion, James reflected that our world needs both kinds of people; without both a Ralph Waldo Emerson and a John Wesley, a D.L. Moody and a Walt Whitman, "the total human consciousness of the divine would suffer."²⁰

Second, James posited two types of conversion: one conscious and voluntary, the other unconscious and involuntary. In the *volitional type* there is gradual change,

¹⁸ Lewis R. Rambo, "Current Research on Religious Conversion," *Religious Studies Review* 8:2 (April 1982), p. 146.

¹⁹ William James, *Varieties of Religious Experience* (London: Collins, 1960), pp. 172f.

consisting of the building up of a new set of moral and spiritual habits. In the *self-surrender (involuntary) type* one bows to outside forces, the subconscious effects being more abundant, startling and instantaneous, arising from a moment of crisis.²¹

Roman Catholics, and most Protestants, set little store by instantaneous conversion. “For them Christ’s blood, the sacraments, and the individual’s ordinary religious duties are supposed to suffice to salvation, even though no acute crisis of self-despair and surrender followed by relief should be experienced.”²²

As examples of instantaneous conversion, James cited the German Moravians, English Methodists and English and American Revivalism. For Methodism, unless there is a crisis of self-surrender, salvation is not received. “Revivalism has always assumed that only its own type of religious experience can be perfect; you must first be nailed on the cross of natural despair and agony, and then in the twinkling of an eye be miraculously released.” The experience is viewed as a miracle, not a natural process.²³

It is clear that William James was fascinated by and had sympathy for the non-conformists. “James was always attracted by cranks and geniuses and unclassified waifs, none of whom were impounded with the conventional ninety and nine, safely walled in by historic creeds and codes.”²⁴

Arthur Darby Nock’s essay, “Conversion and Adolescence” (1939)

A.D. Nock observed that in the modern age, adolescence has often been associated with a moral and religious crisis leading to conversion; “a moment in which

²⁰ William James, p. 466.

²¹ William James, pp. 209-211.

²² William James, p. 229.

²³ William James, p. 230.

²⁴ Arthur Darby Nock, “Introduction,” *Varieties of Religious Experience*, pp. 16f. At this point Nock cites Willard L. Sperry’s *Religion in America* (), p. 94.

the individual acquires the conviction of a personal call from God and in which he seems to himself to make fully his own that which he had before simply accepted.”²⁵ Nock asks if there was anything comparable in ancient Greece and Rome. What was the attitude of young people in antiquity to religious and philosophical movements?

There are many stories in the ancient world of people converting to a life of philosophical contemplation. When men became philosophers, they “abandoned their other occupations and donned the garb of their chosen school (Pythagoreans or Cynics) and adopted its special mode of living.” Much of the appeal to a philosophic life was directed to the young, but to older men as well.²⁶ His research led him to conclude that ethical and religious stresses and enthusiasms in youth were quite rare among the Greeks and Romans. “At all stages of life, we find little which corresponds to the demands made by early Christianity on young and old alike.”²⁷

2. Typology of Conversion Motifs in John Lofland and Norman Skonovd (1981)

Lofland and Skonovd define conversion as “a radical reorganization of identity, meaning, and life.”²⁸ But they note that as soon as one examines conversions closely one finds “differences which are inherent in the central or key features of conversions themselves.” They find that “conversions actually vary in a number of acute, qualitatively different ways which are best differentiated by their respective ‘motif experience.’”²⁹

²⁵ A.D. Nock, “Conversion and Adolescence,” in Zeph Stewart, ed., *Arthur Darby Nock: Essays on Religion and the Ancient World* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972), p. 469.

²⁶ A.D. Nock, pp. 472f.

²⁷ A.D. Nock, p. 480

²⁸ John Lofland and Norman Skonovd, “Conversion Motifs,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 20:4 (1981), p. 375. The authors cite the popular definition of conversion used by Richard Travisano dating from 1970.

²⁹ Lofland and Skonovd, p. 374.

Lofland and Skonovd identify six conversion motifs, or defining experiences, that make each type of conversion distinctive. The *Intellectual* or “self-conversion” motif is drawn out over a period of weeks and months, and culminates in a moment of illumination and results in entry to a religious movement. The *Mystical* or Pauline motif is the best known, the critical period is quite brief, and it culminates in high levels of emotional arousal, with the subject having a sense of being acted upon. In the *Experimental* motif, conversion grows out of curiosity and is the pragmatic result of a period of trial, with genuine conviction following after intense involvement. The *Affectional* conversion was dominant in the 1960s and ’70s where the central motif was personal attachments and accepting the opinions of one’s friends, with belief sustained by participation in an emotional milieu. The *Revivalist* conversion is one that occurs in the context of an emotionally aroused crowd, such as the revival meeting. Finally, the *Coercive* conversion is marked by “brainwashing,” a high degree of external pressure over a long period of time, and a conversion that arises out of fear and participation. This type is relatively rare.³⁰

In conclusion, for Lofland and Skonovd conversion is not a single, universal process; there is a range of types of conversion, and no one type is normative.³¹ “Conversion motifs differ significantly from one historical epoch to another and across societal boundaries.”³² For example, in advanced societies, intellectual and experimental conversion are on the increase, and revivalist in decline. Also, certain religious groups seem to have an affinity for some conversion motifs over others.

³⁰ Lofland and Skonovd, pp. 376-383.

³¹ Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion*, p. 16.

³² Lofland and Skonovd, p. 383.

3. John Lofland and Rodney Stark on Seven Conditions of Conversion (1965, 1980)

Sociological literature on conversion is “the most extensive and the most sophisticated” of all the social sciences.³³ A famous study by John Lofland and Rodney Stark, “Becoming a World Saver,” examined the followers of Sun Myung Moon and found an accumulation of *seven necessary conditions* among these converts.³⁴ The study has been called, “the single most influential article ever written on the sociology of conversion.”³⁵ Lofland and Stark found three “predisposing conditions”: a person must experience acutely-felt tensions in their life, have a temperament disposed to a religious problem-solving perspective, and become a religious seeker. There are also four “situational factors”: an encounter with the religious movement at a “turning-point” in life, formation of an “affective bond” with one or more believers (the most important factor of all, the key to conversion), an absence or loss of older attachments and friendships, and finally, continued “intensive interaction” with other converts. The addition of each new condition increases the likelihood that conversion will occur. Lofland and Stark claimed that their model was “universal.”³⁶

Critics of their model questioned its universal applicability, suggesting that “the conversion process may vary depending on whether the group is communal or non-communal, mainline or ‘idiosyncratic.’” These critics agreed with Lofland and Stark that

³³ Lewis R. Rambo, “Current Research on Religious Conversion,” p. 148.

³⁴ See John Lofland and Rodney Stark, “Becoming a World-Saver: A theory of conversion to a deviant perspective,” *American Sociological Review* 30 (1965), pp. 862-874.

³⁵ Lewis R. Rambo, “Conversion,” in Mircea Eliade, ed., *The Encyclopedia of Religion, Volume 4* (New York: Macmillan Publishing, 1987), p. 78.

³⁶ David A. Snow and Cynthia L. Phillips, “The Lofland-Stark Conversion Model: A Critical Reassessment,” *Social Problems* 27:4 (April 1980), pp. 430f.

of the seven necessary conditions for conversion, the two key ones were the “affective bonds” and “the process of intensive interaction” with other converts.³⁷

4. Lewis Rambo’s Stage Model: Lewis R. Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion* (New Haven: Yale University, 1993)

Rambo’s work is noteworthy because he respects the religious perspective while also incorporating the importance of multiple factors in conversion.³⁸ Rambo sees conversion as “a complex, multifaceted process involving personal, cultural, social and religious dimensions.” For the most part, says Rambo, “conversion takes place over a period of time.” It is sometimes permanent and sometimes temporary.³⁹

Rambo builds upon the work of Lofland and Stark and offers his own “stage model” of conversion. “I propose an adaptation of their stage models as a strategy for organizing complex data, not as a universal or invariant tool.” “Conversion is approached as a series of elements that are interactive and cumulative over time.”⁴⁰ Rambo also has seven stages in his model: context, crisis, quest, encounter, inter-action, commitment, and consequences. *Context* is the background of influences and relationships in which a person lives. *Crises* can bring on awareness of one’s limitations and a sense of disorientation, triggering the search for new options. Most converts are actively involved in a *quest*, in seeking solutions to their problems. In the *encounter* stage there is a coming together of people searching for new options with those who seek to provide some answers. Next, *interactive relationships* open up avenues to a new reality, such as rituals, language, and new experiences. The conversion comes about through a *decision to*

³⁷ Snow and Phillips, p. 444.

³⁸ Lewis R. Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion* (New Haven: Yale University, 1993), p. xv.

³⁹ Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion*, p. 165.

commit, sometimes accompanied by rituals of incorporation. The conversion often issues in *consequences* such as a new sense of mission and purpose, and new patterns of belief.⁴¹

Rambo concludes that conversion is “malleable,” reflecting different circumstances and personalities. “Debates about whether conversion is sudden or gradual, partial or total, internal or external” are fruitless. One must acknowledge “a spectrum of possibilities.”⁴²

5. Robert W. Hefner and Peter Wood in Robert W. Hefner, editor, *Conversion to Christianity: Historical and Anthropological Perspectives on a Great Transformation* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993)

A key observation that Robert Hefner makes is that “conversion assumes a variety of forms because it is influenced by a larger interplay of identity, politics and morality.” “Christianity has demonstrated a remarkable ability to take on different cultural shadings in local settings.”⁴³ This cultural variation in conversion is amply illustrated by the essays in this volume which discuss the meanings of Christian conversions in South Africa, Java, Mexico, the Amazon, Papua New Guinea, Central Australia, Thailand, and China.

It is clear that conversion encounters are always two-sided: social and intellectual, extrinsic and intrinsic, structurally determined and personally chosen. Religion is “dually constructed”—emerging from the ideas and intentions of individuals and from the

⁴⁰ Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion*, p. 17.

⁴¹ Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion*, pp. 165-170.

⁴² Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion*, p. 170.

⁴³ Robert W. Hefner, “Introduction,” in Robert W. Hefner, editor, *Conversion to Christianity: Historical and Anthropological Perspectives on a Great Transformation* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), pp. 4f.

institutions that routinize the world in which people act, often outside their awareness.⁴⁴

“The relative importance of each may vary in different settings.”⁴⁵

In conclusion, Peter Wood notes that, “Conversion to Christianity means different things to different peoples and entails divergent social consequences... The Christianity that conversion produces in different human communities is complexly diverse.”⁴⁶ He observes that some conversions are motivated by political or by economic expediency; in other cases Christianity has been outmaneuvered or co-opted by local traditions.

Wood asks, Is Christianity one thing or many things? Are people converted to one unified “metropolitan” Christianity, or to a culturally particularist Christianity? He offers the provocative suggestion that Christianity “is not a coherent ‘world religion’ with many different manifestations and local variants, but a congeries of mythic, doctrinal, ritual, epistemological and sociological elements that have had separate and uneven influences in different cultural contexts.”⁴⁷

6. Brian Stanley, “Conversion to Christianity: The Colonization of the Mind?” *International Review of Mission* Volume 92 No. 366 (2003), pp. 315-331

Brian Stanley’s stimulating 2003 article in the *International Review of Mission* calls for scholars to approach African conversions to Christianity from the perspective of the indigenous receptor, not that of the missionary. Once the indigenous standpoint has been adopted, it is no longer acceptable to deny independent agency to “indigenous actors.” “The adoption of the *convert’s perspective* leads to the collapse of a view of

⁴⁴ Hefner, p. 27.

⁴⁵ Hefner, p. 24.

⁴⁶ Peter Wood, “Afterword: Boundaries and Horizons,” in Robert W. Hefner, editor, *Conversion to Christianity: Historical and Anthropological Perspectives on a Great Transformation* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), p. 305.

⁴⁷ Peter Wood, p. 307.

conversion as capitulation to Western domination.”⁴⁸ Stanley welcomes the fact that academic interest is now shifting from political interactions between missionaries and colonial governments to the actual dynamics of conversion to Christianity in modern mission history.⁴⁹

Stanley finds that “the process of conversion to Christianity was less tightly regulated by the missionary than many critics suppose and than many missionaries desired.”⁵⁰ There are two sides to this. First, it is clear that converts respond to what they see in the gospel, which is not always what missionaries want them to see. This is mainly because the gospel message has been heard, received or rejected within the language and “intellectual categories” of the host culture.⁵¹ Stanley notes that one mark of “true converts” is their ability to apply the Bible to their own situation. It was not just something learned by rote.

Second, scholars of modern Christian missions have begun to write about the “conversion of the missionaries,” meaning the transforming effect upon missionaries’ own worldview that comes from living in alien cultures. Successful missionary encounters with other cultures are in fact “dynamically interactive and two-way” encounters.⁵² Stanley gives the example of a Baptist missionary to north-east India in the early 20th century who reported the following:

Our first message as soon as we could speak the language, was of a Saviour from sin. But the people had no sense of sin and felt no need for such a Saviour. Then we

⁴⁸ Brian Stanley, “Conversion to Christianity: The Colonization of the Mind?” *International Review of Mission* Volume 92 No. 366 (2003), pp. 317f.

⁴⁹ Stanley, p. 319.

⁵⁰ Stanley, p. 326.

⁵¹ Stanley, p. 325. In modern Africa, for example, “most Christian converts heard the gospel from other Africans, many of them young people.” Historians describe African churches as the product of a “youth movement.”

⁵² Stanley, p. 322.

found a point of contact. We proclaimed Jesus as the vanquisher of the Devil—as the One who had bound the “strong man” and taken away from him “all his armour wherein he trusted,” and so had made it possible for his slaves to be free. This, to the Lushais, was “Good News” indeed and exactly met their great need.⁵³

Finally, Stanley wants to make it clear that Christian mission is not proselytizing, the substitution of one religion for another. Rather, it is a matter of the convert’s reorientation towards God.⁵⁴ And this is ultimately a matter that remains in God’s hands.

7. Summing Up: New Insights into the Key Aspects of Conversion

We have seen that Christian conversion is not one thing. In fact, conversions differ dramatically depending upon the historical and social setting in which they occur. A key observation of Hefner was that “conversion assumes a variety of forms because it is influenced by a larger interplay of identity, politics and morality.” “Interpretations of conversion must begin by acknowledging its experiential variation and then go on to explore its genesis in different social and intellectual milieus.”⁵⁵ This exploration we now undertake.

Many Models of Conversion

This section examines two examples of Christian conversion in order to determine how the experience and meaning of conversion change in different historical settings. In each case the analysis considers *the conversion story (experience)*, followed by examination of the *distinctive marks of conversion in this setting (meaning)*.

1. Conversion in the Late Middle Ages: Converting the Converted

By the year 1400 Christian peoples had dominated Europe for centuries, in some parts for 1,000 years. As baptized Christians they knew only baptized Christians. Few

⁵³ Stanley, p. 322.

⁵⁴ Stanley, p. 320.

had ever witnessed a conversion to Christianity or even met a convert. The only sources of knowledge about such conversions were the conversion narratives found in *Saints Lives* and ancient martyr stories, available by then (1400 AD) in the commonly spoken (vernacular) European languages and in paintings.⁵⁶

Nevertheless, another kind of conversion was a frequent event in medieval Europe, as people converted from common life to the religious life. For a thousand years, “a baptized person who turned away from the demands, desires and distractions of ordinary human life, who turned toward a life apart, wholly intent upon God, that person was said to ‘convert.’” “A ‘convert’ turned away from ordinary Christian life, even peasant labor or a family household, to pursue more intense forms of religiosity, freely chosen.”⁵⁷ Society preferred converts who “settled into approved and regulated structures, religious houses subject to a rule and a superior.” With such conversions, the professed entered upon “a recognized legal estate, adopted a rule for their lives, gained a measure of social prestige, and could look forward to a heavenly reward.”⁵⁸ Thus medieval society was comprised of “the already converted,” the baptized, and those who took vows and entered a religious order, the social and legal form of conversion.⁵⁹

⁵⁵ Hefner, p. 17.

⁵⁶ John van Engen, Chapter 2, “Conversion and Conformity in the Early Fifteenth Century,” in Kenneth Mills and Anthony Grafton, ed. *Conversion: Old Worlds and New* (Rochester: University of Rochester, 2003), p. 30.

⁵⁷ John van Engen, p. 31.

⁵⁸ John van Engen, p. 31.

⁵⁹ Van Engen, pp. 35-37. It is important to note that these religious converts “generated tension.” For, “each act of conversion was an act of repudiation, a rejection, implicit or explicit, of surrounding society, meaning the christened, the already converted.” The implications of such conversions were dramatic. “*First*, these converts repudiated the social world around them, including their families, neighbours, the parish church and countrymen—all baptized Christians. *Second*, they repudiated the normal world of commerce and material goods, which they now saw as a source of mortal sin. *Thirdly*, converts had to break their own natures, including turning from human love to divine love. *Finally*, converts became focused upon spiritual solace, comfort and reward rather than material rewards.”

However, in the later Middle Ages, many converts opted for more intense forms of religious life, without vows. One thinks of the Beguines, Hospitalers, tertiaries, hermits, and others. John van Engen shows that “around the year 1400 the intensity of the dynamic of conversion accelerated, generating widespread experimentation.”⁶⁰ These experimental notions of conversion around the year 1400 “nearly shattered all the working systems for accommodating converts.”⁶¹ Van Engen examines three such movements of conversion in the late middle ages: Henry Suso and the Observants, the Lollards (followers of John Wyclif), and the Modern Devotion of Geert Grote and Thomas a Kempis. We shall look at just the last of these medieval examples.

The Conversion Story of Geert Grote (1340-1384)

The son of a prosperous Deventer cloth merchant, Geert Grote (1340-1384) studied law and theology at the university of Paris. While still a young man he inherited considerable wealth and property from his father. Grote was moving on a steady track toward both academic distinction and worldly honour and influence. He was appointed Canon of Aachen by the Pope.

However, in 1372, at age 32, Grote fell ill and retired to a Carthusian monastery near Arnhem, the Netherlands, to reflect upon his life and to find some future direction. The Carthusians had a reputation at this time for providing spiritual counsel to the thoughtful laity who regularly “sought them out in their cloisters.”⁶² While Grote did not feel drawn to join the Carthusians, the experience did set him on a dramatically new course of life. A Carthusian monk challenged Grote: “You ought to become another

⁶⁰ Van Engen, p. 56.

⁶¹ Van Engen, pp. 33, 34.

man” [Alius homo fieri debes]—a fine definition of what it means to convert. In response to the monk’s challenge, Grote forsook his career in the world.

Grote’s conversion expressed itself in a *Propositum*, personal notes explaining to himself what he was repudiating in the world (benefices, office, study, influence), and some positive resolutions (a plan of reading books of devotion, attending services, fasting, and frugal living).

I will seek no further benefice [church appointment]. I will not waste time in geometry, arithmetic, rhetoric, astrology, which are arts reproved by Seneca and are much more to be rejected by a spiritual man or a Christian. I will take no degree in medicine. I will pursue no studies to increase my fame; avoid all public disputations such as those in theology or arts at Paris—I shall not even attend them, they are useless and full of discord. I will not study for a degree in theology; I can learn equally well without a degree.⁶³

Every day he would set aside some time to read these resolutions to himself. He adopted no other kind of religious *Rule*.

Dissatisfied with both parish life and the religious life, Grote sought to carve out a space between the world and the religious, between the parish and the cloister.⁶⁴ And he convinced many other “brothers and sisters” to join him in his way of life.

Master Grote acted as a private citizen rather than a religious under vows, owned and acquired books to pursue his ends, embodied devotion in a communal household rather than a cloister, preached as a deacon rather than a priest. This was a form of devotion “new in our day,” thus “modern” in the sense of “present-day”...Brothers or sisters lived on ordinary city streets, walked with people to church and to market, kept up relations with family and friends, yet lived a life apart in religious practice, in dress, in social structure... Their ideal was to found distinct households of the converted, men and women living separately in communes, supporting themselves with the work of their own hands, including book-copying.⁶⁵

⁶² Richard Kieckhefer, “Convention and Conversion: Patterns in Late Medieval Piety,” *Church History* 67:1 (March 1998), p. 34.

⁶³ R.W. Southern, *Western Society and the Church in the Middle Ages* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1970), pp. 334f.

⁶⁴ Van Engen, p. 50.

⁶⁵ Van Engen, pp. 50f.

This ideal of ordered communal religious households outside of the usual religious orders attracted opposition, especially from a Dominican Inquisitor who sought to shut them down in the 1390s. The Brethren argued that they left parish and religious life untouched; they had carved out another space “in between” where they pursued mutual charity, communal sharing, and preaching. As a deacon Grote required the Bishop’s permission to preach. When opposition to Grote became too inconvenient, the Bishop withdrew his permission.

Distinctive Marks of Grote’s Conversion in this setting

Setting:

Grote lived in tumultuous times. By the late Middle Ages even those converted and living in religious orders were perceived as corrupt. Denis the Carthusian complained that “the whole church, from the people to the clergy, extending to the religious, had become a ruined city, no longer affording any spiritual security.”⁶⁶ There was a call for converting the converted, ie. those in religious orders.⁶⁷ Some joined monastic life, living under a rule; others created new forms of religious life; others remained active religious innovators; still others became lay brothers, living in the world but under a modest rule of life. We observe the dynamics of people like Grote moving from ordinary into more intense forms of religious life within the Christian community around the year 1400.

Inter-active Relationships:

The *Vita* explains his conversion as follows: “God called Gerard, whom He had chosen for Himself, from the way of iniquity to a life of holy conversation through a

⁶⁶ Van Engen, p. 40.

⁶⁷ Van Engen, p. 40.

religious man of the Carthusian order.”⁶⁸ In terms of key relationships, we must point to the Carthusian monk who challenged Grote: “You ought to become another man” [*Alius homo fieri debes*]. It was within the Carthusian community that he found counsel and the answers he sought from God.

Conversion Motif:

Southern described Grote as “a fourteenth century academic drop-out in a moment of crisis.” During his weeks of illness Grote reflected and recorded his thoughts. “He had no plans, no theories, no visions; he just wanted to be free.”⁶⁹ Grote’s conversion resembles Lofton’s “Experimental” conversion (#3), motivated in large measure by curiosity and a desire to experiment with a new way of life. As Southern observed, “Like every successful religious innovator of the Middle Ages Grote combined extreme conservatism on social and dogmatic questions with considerable freedom and novelty in organization and sentiment.”⁷⁰

For the Modern Devotion there was no single act of “conversion” to religious life through vows. Their conversion was something to be continuously cultivated and affirmed. A Kempis wrote:

Every day we owe to renew our purpose and stir ourself to fervour as though we had this day been first converted. Our Lord said that the kingdom of God is within you. Turn thyself to God with all thy heart and forsake this wretched world...Learn to despise outward things and to convert thee to inward things, and thou shalt see the kingdom of God come into thee.⁷¹

Real conversion meant a turn toward peace within. “Since there was no cloister wall, theirs had to be a self-conscious turn inward and away.” Their writings include constant

⁶⁸ *Thomae Hemerken Opera Omnia* (Freiburg, 1922), p. 36. “...revocans dilectum sibi Gerardum a via iniquitatis ad sanctae conversationis statum, per quondam religiosum Carthusiensis ordinis virum.”

⁶⁹ R.W. Southern, pp. 335f.

⁷⁰ R.W. Southern, p. 336.

admonitions to resign oneself to God through the day, to send up short prayers to God as one works, and to examine oneself in the evening. This radical break with customary life aimed at peace and comfort within.

Consequences:

In the late Medieval setting, Grote established a movement of “converts forging a way for themselves, a private way, through a world overwhelmed by custom and conformity.”⁷² They became known as the “Brothers and Sisters of the Common Life.” They sought to promote interior conversion among their neighbours, and aimed especially to convert the youth. The youth could still be guided and molded, and then become “the teachers of the whole of Christendom.” The Brethren established residences for young students, “housing and overseeing them, guiding them in studies and in devotions.”⁷³

The outlook Grote promoted was best expressed in the classic text, *The Imitation of Christ*, by Thomas a Kempis. This outlook would be taken up later by Ignatius of Loyola and the Jesuits, and would influence early modern reformers such as Erasmus, Luther and Calvin, all of whom attended schools run by the Brethren of the Common Life.

2. Conversion in a British University Setting: CS Lewis (1898-1963)

The Conversion Story of CS Lewis

In the Preface to *Surprised by Joy* (1955) CS Lewis explained his purpose in writing: “This book is written partly in answer to requests that I would tell how I passed

⁷¹ Van Engen, p. 52.

⁷² Van Engen, p. 57.

⁷³ Van Engen, pp. 54f.

form Atheism to Christianity and partly to correct one or two false notions that seem to have got about...The book aims to tell the story of my conversion.”⁷⁴

Lewis tells a story of loss of faith, and a gradual return to faith and to the Anglican church of his youth. Lewis was born in Belfast, Ireland in 1898. His mother died on August 23, 1908 when Lewis was just nine years old, a factor in his later loss of childhood belief. Lewis explains how at the age of 13 he was sent off to a preparatory school. It was a small school with only 20 boarding students. “The food was good and we were well cared for.” He made rapid progress in Latin and English studies. It was at this school, Lewis writes, that “I ceased to be a Christian.” This development had not begun when he arrived; “the process was complete very shortly after I left.”⁷⁵ He attributes this “disaster” in large measure to a growing pessimism related to his mother’s death and to his inherent clumsiness.

The most interesting thing about Lewis’s return to faith is the way it combined both rational arguments and imaginative yearning for “joy.” Lewis says that through his reading of George MacDonald and other writers, his imagination was “baptized.” “The rest of me took longer.”⁷⁶

Lewis became an Oxford tutor in English literature in 1925, at age 27. It was while teaching at Oxford, Lewis writes, that “my Adversary began to make his final moves.” Early on in his teaching for the Oxford English Faculty, Lewis made two friends, both Christians. They were Hugo Dyson and J.R.R. Tolkien, a committed Roman Catholic Christian.”⁷⁷ “These [Christian] people seemed now to pop up on every side,”

⁷⁴ C.S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy* (London: HBJ, 1955), p. vii.

⁷⁵ Lewis, pp. 58f.

⁷⁶ Lewis, p. 181.

⁷⁷ Lewis, p. 216.

Lewis wryly remarked to himself at the time. In 1929 Lewis's father Albert passed away. In spring of that same year Lewis "admitted that God was God, and knelt and prayed: perhaps that night the most dejected and reluctant convert in all England."⁷⁸

At this point Lewis began attending Christian worship services again. "As soon as I became a Theist I started attending my parish church on Sundays and my college chapel on weekdays." But the thing that moved him toward Christianity was the notion that pagan myths and legends and world religions may all be pointers to the same story.

The question was no longer to find the one simply true religion among a thousand religions simply false. It was rather, "Where has religion reached its true maturity? Where if anywhere have the hints of all Paganism been fulfilled?"⁷⁹

On September 28, 1931 Lewis came to the belief that Jesus Christ is the Son of God. It happened as he was being driven to the zoo one sunny morning: "When we set out I did not believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God, and when we reached the zoo I did... Emotional is perhaps the last word we can apply to this event."⁸⁰ Certainly Lewis's coming to faith was no typical evangelical conversion.⁸¹

Distinctive Marks of conversion in this setting

Setting:

One of the fascinations of Lewis's story is the picture of this brilliant Oxford don wrestling with these great issues, and then thinking and writing about them so honestly.

⁷⁸ Lewis, p. 229.

⁷⁹ Lewis, p. 235.

⁸⁰ Lewis p. 237.

⁸¹ Wesley Kort recently made this point. "Lewis's conversion...is not first of all an acceptance of Christ into his life; it does not arise primarily from a desire for heaven or a fear of hell; it is not primarily inclusion within the church or Christian community; and it is not based on acceptance of biblical authority." Rather, Lewis converted to Christianity because "it provided Lewis a personally fulfilling but publicly defensible account of the world and the place of humans in it." See Wesley A. Kort, *C.S. Lewis Then and Now* (New York: Oxford University, 2001), pp. 24f.

Lewis described a spiritual battle going on in the back of his mind as he sat at his work desk in the evenings, night after night, month after month.

Inter-active Relationships:

It is clear that some significant people were present in Lewis's life at key moments as he weighed the matters of belief. Lewis was a convivial fellow, and always had close companions on his intellectual journey. Most notable of these was J.R.R. Tolkien.

Conversion Motif:

Lewis's conversion is a classic example of Lofton's "Intellectual" conversion (#1), drawn out over months, even years, and culminating in religious conviction. His brother Warren's observation on Lewis's conversion is worth noting: "This seemed to me no sudden plunge into a new life, but rather a slow steady convalescence from a deep-seated spiritual illness of long standing—an illness that had its origins in our childhood."⁸² This picture tempers somewhat the common image of Lewis as a crusty, life-long atheist who reasoned himself into Christian belief by brilliance alone.

Consequences:

From undramatic beginnings Lewis became a legendary Christian apologist, possibly the greatest of the twentieth century. From his pen flowed such bestsellers as *The Problem of Pain*, *The Screwtape Letters*, *Mere Christianity*, *Miracles*, *Surprised by Joy*, *A Grief Observed*, and of course the *Narnia Chronicles*.

So far as his outward life was concerned, his conversion had various consequences: it was the occasion of a notable literary development, of wide popularity coupled with hostility in some quarters, and of certain war-time lecturing engagements

⁸² W.H. Lewis, "Memoir of C.S. Lewis," in W.H. Lewis, ed., *Letters of C.S. Lewis, Revised* (London: Collins, 1988), p. 39.

with the RAF and the BBC. It was in connection with his religious rather than his scholarly writing that his name became a household word in the forties and fifties.⁸³

Such was Warren Lewis's estimate of the impact of CS Lewis's conversion.

3. Summary of Two Models of Conversion

The Modern Devotion in the Low Countries promoted a distinctive form of conversion. In the late Medieval setting, Grote's Experimental conversion meant a turning away from parish and cloister to an inward piety of daily devotion to Christ. This conversion expressed itself in communal attachment to like-minded individuals and in daily work, especially book-copying and care of young students.

In England's Oxford University setting, Lewis's Intellectual conversion meant a return to the Anglican Church of his youth, and expressed itself in a writing career that communicated faith in a variety of genres including children's literature, books defending the Christian faith, and autobiography.

Conclusion

It is clear that exciting work is being done these days and that it has sparked "new thinking about religious conversion across disciplines and various sub-fields of history."⁸⁴ This evening's study has yielded a threefold conclusion about conversion. *First*, that conversion is a complex matter, with wide variations in the nature, causes and consequences of conversion experiences. *Second*, that the meaning of conversion changes in different historical and social settings. That is because conversion experiences are culture-dependent. The Christian message and convert's response tend to reflect the

⁸³ W.H. Lewis, p. 40. On Lewis and his broadcasting career with the BBC, see Justin Phillips, *C.S. Lewis at the BBC: Messages of Hope in the Darkness of War* (London: HarperCollins, 2002). Phillips observes that, "We should not allow his later reputation to overshadow the short but hugely influential broadcasting career C.S. Lewis had between 1941 and 1944. The great flourishing of Christian apologetics owes much to the BBC's role as facilitator and innovator."

expectations of a particular Christian community in a particular time and place. *Finally*, there is an ecumenical implication: that we accept people in the Christian family without requiring some normative conversion experience for them to qualify as a Christian.

⁸⁴ Mills and Grafton, "Introduction," (2003), p. x.

Appendix:

Recently, some scholars have argued that study of conversion has gone out of fashion, that scholarly attention is shifting to other concerns. These scholars are more interested in studying “cultural interaction,” “cultural transmission,” “cultural diffusion,” “religious change,” “selective borrowing,” and so on. There are several reasons for this shift of interest. *First*, these scholars associate conversion with colonial conquest, with a “totalizing mission enterprise,” and an alien “takeover of human identity, imagination, and consciousness.” They link it with “uncompromising demands made by the powerful upon the vulnerable.” Oxford scientist Richard Dawkins recently suggested that childhood conversions represent a form of child abuse. *Second*, these scholars wish to avoid an approach that sees western Christians as the only active participants, reducing impacted non-Christians and subaltern (inferior rank) actors to “solely reactive or passive roles.”⁸⁵ *Third*, they assume that complete religious conversion was and is impossible to achieve, and investigations that assume conversions are possible are simply misguided. We shall come back to these concerns a bit later.

⁸⁵ Kenneth Mills and Anthony Grafton, “Introduction,” in Mills and Grafton, ed. *Conversion: Old Worlds and New* (Rochester: University of Rochester, 2003), p. x. For example, see Lamin Sanneh’s work on Christianity in West Africa: *West African Christianity: The Religious Impact* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1983) and *Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1989).

Lebel Lecture in Christian Ethics, March 6, 2006

What are they Saying about Conversion? New Insights, Many Models By Douglas H. Shantz, PhD, University of Calgary

I. Introduction

1. The Importance of this Topic
2. The Purpose and Main Argument of this Talk
“The meaning of conversion changes in different historical and social settings. That is because conversion experiences are culture-dependent. The Christian message and convert’s response reflect the expectations of a particular Christian community in a particular time and place.”

II. New Insights into Conversion

1. Two Classic Studies by William James and Arthur Darby Nock
2. John Lofland’s and Norman Skonovd’s Typology of Six Conversion Motifs (1981): Intellectual, Mystical, Experimental, Affectional, Revivalist, Coercive
3. John Lofland and Rodney Stark on Seven Conditions of Conversion (1965, 1980): Acute tensions, religious temperament, becoming a seeker, turning point, affective bonds, loss of old attachments, intensive interaction
4. Lewis Rambo’s Seven Stage Model: Lewis R. Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion* (New Haven: Yale University, 1993): Context, Crises, Quest, Encounter, Interactive relationships, Decision, Consequences
5. Robert W. Hefner and Peter Wood in Robert W. Hefner, editor, *Conversion to Christianity: Historical and Anthropological Perspectives on a Great Transformation* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993)
6. Brian Stanley, “Conversion to Christianity: The Colonization of the Mind?” *International Review of Mission* Volume 92 No. 366 (2003), pp. 315-331
7. Summing Up

III. Many Models of Conversion

1. Conversion in the Late Middle Ages: Geert Grote (1340-1384) and Converting the Converted
2. Conversion in a British University Setting: CS Lewis (1898-1963)
3. Conversion of an American Socialist: Dorothy Day (1897-1980)
4. Summary of Three Models of Conversion

IV. Conclusion

