

***From Damascus to Emmaus:
A Critical Comparison of
Two Types of Conversion***

Essay for
Patterns of Spiritual Growth and
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From Damascus to Emmaus: A Critical Comparison of Two Types of Conversion

“A Road to Damascus experience!” it is often called. Conversion, that is. It epitomises a radical, usually permanent, paradigm shift in the life of an individual. The phrase, stemming of course from St Paul’s experience in Acts 9:1-19, is frequently though not exclusively tied in with religious experience, and more specifically, religious conversion. (Not exclusively, because as Hefner picks up, conversion has resonances within anthropology, sociology, comparative politics, ethical history, and our understanding of the civilized world¹.)

Religious conversion is perceived as radical, revolutionary, and enduring (or dramatic, decisive and determinative, as Kerr and Mulder put it²). Radical because of the changes in behaviour of the individual that conversion precipitates; revolutionary as it frequently means a turning around of direction of life style or practice; enduring, because it is no mere flash in the pan, but a permanent change in how the individual appears and acts as perceived by those who knew them before.

This type of conversion, archetypically demonstrated by Paul, and espoused by many evangelists of the genre of, say, Billy Graham, has been considered for a long time the norm for radicals (e.g. New England Puritans, as in Kerr and Mulder³) or much evangelical theology. Yet, there is a resurgence, even among evangelicals, of a different Biblical model, that of the “Road to Emmaus”.

Hawkins also quotes Norman Pettit, in *The Heart Prepared*, where another biblical individual, Lydia, demonstrated a more gradual model of conversion, and certainly

¹ *Conversion to Christianity*, R W Hefner 1993 UCP p4

² *Conversions*, H T Kerr & J M Mulder Hodder 1983 p11

for Puritan preachers such as Richard Rogers and Richard Sibbes ‘the conversion of Lydia both explained and justified conversions that did not conform to the Pauline model, since it exemplified an individual for whom conversion came gradually, and after the Lord “opened” her heart.’⁴

There are a number of ways in which these two main archetypes of conversion are rather different. Where the Damascene experience was unexpected, sudden, with a stranger, in public, individually personal, blinding; the Emmaean experience was gentle, slowly revealing, among friends, in private, corporate, enlightening. At first glance, these biblical type-patterns seem to ally closely with ecclesiological patterns too: individuals from evangelical traditions can tend to experience more of a dramatic, Damascus type experience; those from more contemplative traditions experience an unfolding of relationship. Part of the purpose of this exploration was to discover how genuine this proves to be under scrutiny. After an assessment of the definition and process of conversion, later explored through the personal testimony of some key Christian writers, we will examine the appropriateness of the distinction in the metaphors of Damascus and Emmaus.

Conversion

‘Conversion’ comes from the Latin *convertere*, to turn around. In religious terms it means turning to God⁵. In the section defining conversion, John Smith following Jonathan Edwards points out:

An inseparable part of the meaning of ‘conversion’ and related terms in this context is that the person must be aware in some vivid way of being ‘moved’, of being ‘reached’, of ‘being called’, of ‘being saved’, of being brought out of – to use the wonderfully expressive language of Jonathan Edwards – ‘a cold

³ Kerr & Mulder p15

⁴ Hawkins p93 quoting Pettit 1996 pp51-55

⁵ John E Smith, *The Concept of Conversion* in Walter Conn, *Conversions*, 1978, p51

and lifeless frame' into a new and intensely vital condition. It is surely no accident that the early Wesleyans – whether this was true for Wesley himself or not – could not understand how conversion could take place for an individual without his *knowing* that it has taken place; in short, they could not divorce conversion from the *experience* and knowledge of being changed.⁶

Religious conversion, particularly if it is dramatic, is sometimes linked with severe distress, depression, or high stress. Lee Kirkpatrick quotes Clark (1929), Galanter (1979), Kirkpatrick & Shaver (1990) and Ullman (1989), all of whom noted the frequency with which converts described their pre-conversion lives as rife with emotional trauma (though there is no evidence given of personality types in this context). Kirkpatrick postulates an *attachment theory* of conversion, which indicates that these times of stress are the very ones that cause us to form our closest attachments, and within the context of Christian conversion, that is where subjects will 'find God'.⁷

William James, studying conversion at the end of the 19th century in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, and much quoted since in this area, was aware of two patterns of experience, and he used two Greek words to encapsulate them - *lysis* or as he called it, *lysis* (a loosening, a path, a gradual solution) & *crisis* (a decision). Hopson & Openlander quote James, picking up his two religious types in a slightly different way – the healthy-minded, and the sick soul. (It ought to perhaps be remembered that James' work was among the extra-ordinary individual experiences, rather than the typical 'ordinary religious believer' and they form the basis of his research and comment.)

James associates the healthy minded with the "once-born", for whom a religious conversion experience is not necessary in order to experience the sense of being at

⁶ John Smith, in Conn, 1978, p56

peace with the world. The task of the sick soul is the unification of the self; thus, a conversion experience (i.e., “twice-born”) is more characteristic of the sick soul.⁸

For James, these follow a medical model of healing, and perhaps that is not so far from the biblical understanding, as the Greek word $\sigma\omicron\zeta\omicron$ *sozo* can mean to save, make whole, or to heal. Hawkins, through James, introduces two important categories in to the definition of conversion - the ‘gradual’ and the ‘sudden’.

The *lysis* type of conversion is conscious and voluntary; the change ‘consists of building up, piece by piece, of a new set of moral and spiritual habits’. The *crisis* conversion, on the other hand, ‘is unconscious and involuntary, and depends on the yielding up of the will: the act of yielding ... is giving ones self over to the new life, making it the centre of a new personality and living, from within, the truth of it which before had been viewed objectively.’⁹

In contrasting the ‘*once-born*’ and ‘*twice-born*’ individual¹⁰ in his schema, James identifies the twice-born as those who have a variety of signposts in life to redirect them, specific experiences of conversion at definite times. The once-born are those “fortunate” (*sic*) whose experience of conversion is life long, with few noticeable crises or breaks, rather a gaining of confidence in God that goes from strength to strength. (Incidentally, the concept of twice-born also has the connotation of ‘*second blessing*’, the phrase used by some in the Pentecostal or Charismatic movements to denote the coming of the Holy Spirit on an individual in a particularly powerful way on some occasion after conversion; but this is an area too wide for this discussion.)

⁷ Lee A Kirkpatrick, in Ralph Hood, *Handbook of Religious Experience*, 1995, p457/8

⁸ Ronald E Hopson & Kurt Openlander in Ralph Hood, *Handbook of Religious Experience*, 1995, p59

⁹ Anne Hawkins, *Archetypes of Conversion*, 1985, p21

¹⁰ Taken from *The Varieties of Religious Experience* 1902, quoted Kerr & Mulder p14, also in Hawkins, and in Conn.

In the light of some of the earlier identification of conversion with times of trauma, it would be wrong to move on without underlining Hopson and Openlander's observation that 'James attributes the initial effectiveness of the Protestant Reformation to the *optimistic* (my italics) doctrine of Luther and Wesley. This view contrasts with that of many scholars, who suggest that the genesis of Luther's protests was in part his depression.'¹¹

In trying to ascertain differing levels of activity going on in conversion, Bosch quotes Beverley Gaventa, (1986:4-14):

[There is a] distinction between *alternation* (a relatively limited form of change which actually develops out of one's own past), *transformation* (a radical change of perspective which does not require a rejection or negation of the past or of previously held values, but nevertheless involves a new perception, a re-cognition of the past – in the language of Thomas Kuhn "a paradigm shift"), and *conversion* (a pendulum-like change in which there is a rupture between past and present, with the past portrayed in strongly negative terms).¹²

Indeed, the whole area of conversion has been studied extensively, and Lewis Rambo outlines four areas of psychological study and research in relation to conversion:

1. Psychoanalytical study, following Freud, focussed on internal emotional elements
2. Behaviourist approach, emphasising the immediate environment, after William Sargant
3. Humanistic/transpersonal psychological approach, allowing self realisation and fulfilment, after William James
4. Social/holistic approach, eclectic, synthesising other approaches, loosely after Robert Ziller, Theodore Sarbin, and Nathan Adler.¹³

Each of these areas has its own particular style of operation, and outcome.

¹¹ Ronald E Hopson & Kurt Openlander in Hood P58.

¹² David Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 1991, p126

¹³ Lewis Rambo, in Maloney & Southard, *Handbook of Christian Conversion*, 1992, p 161ff

Conversion From...

Much discussion on conversion necessarily revolves around the conversion *from* one major religion *to* another, and historically that has played an important part in the placing of Christianity in its worldwide context. Hefner explores the idea of conversion to the world religions as part of the civilizing process, as it is a recurring pattern¹⁴, and the power of the great religions to influence society and individual is both powerful, and long lasting. He identifies them as civilization's longest lasting primary institutions, outliving political empires, and economic systems.

Bosch too, observes that much of the conversation about conversion is actually about the relationship between the Christian faith and other faiths. Are other faiths able to “save” (his quotes)? This saving usually refers to something that takes place for the individual after death, but for Bosch that is not in itself the key.

‘Conversion is, however, not the joining of a community in order to procure “eternal salvation”; it is, rather, a change in allegiance in which Christ is accepted as Lord and center of one's life. A Christian is not simply somebody who stands a better chance of being “saved”, but a person who accepts the responsibility to serve God in this life and promote God's reign in all its forms. Conversion involves personal cleansing, forgiveness, reconciliation, and renewal in order to become a participant in the mighty works of God. (cf Cragg 1959, Newbigin 1969)’¹⁵

Speaking Personally

My initial plans for this study were to use historical examples of each – preferably in a way that reversed our usual perceptions of that individual. The first significant

¹⁴ Hefner 1993, p6, p34

¹⁵ Bosch, 1991, p488

spiritual autobiography of a conversion was that of St. Augustine in his *Confessions*; and later, the Augustinian monk Martin Luther. Or perhaps we should even go back to St. Paul:

‘What is it that changed a Pharisee of the Pharisees (cf Gal 1:4; Phil 3:4-5) into Christ’s apostle to the Gentiles, a persecutor of the early Christian movement into its chief protagonist, a person perceived Jesus as an impostor and a threat to Judaism into one who embraced him as the center of his life, indeed the universe? Paul himself gives only one answer: it was the encounter with the risen Christ.’¹⁶

Bosch asserts that when we look back at Paul’s conversion, we are often doing so through Luther’s eyes, and applying a western concept of conversion on to Paul in a way that he himself would not have perceived it. Bosch cites Stendahl as identifying this rather as Paul’s *call* rather than *conversion*.

Several scholars have argued that we should not use the word *conversion* with reference to Paul’s Damascus road experience at all. Their reasons are essentially two-fold. First, conversion suggests a changing of religions, as previously mentioned, and Paul clearly did not change his; what we call Christianity was in Paul’s time a sect within Judaism. Second, it is unwarranted to portray Paul, as still sometimes happens, as tormented and guilt-ridden because of his sins, as experiencing an inner conflict which eventually led to his conversion, which is a view dispelled by Stendahl.¹⁷

Archetypal Insights

Some of the clearest work in identifying individuals with conversion processes has been done by Anne Hawkins. She uses the phrase *Archetypes*, which is based partly on Jung’s work, in turn taken from Plato’s transcendent *Idea*. Jung calls them

¹⁶ Bosch, 1991, p125

¹⁷ Bosch, 1991, p125

categories of the imagination, containing the character of typical images – hence archetype. Indeed the phrase has some echoes in the work of St Augustine too. However, Jung’s method is a bit reductive, and stereotypical in Hawkins view. The individual is sometimes contorted to fit the archetype that is closest, even if it is not wholly accurate. It is possible that this can lead to a ‘spurious likeness in what is analysed, and a monotonous sameness in analysis’. Hawkins also discovers a second objection to Jung’s method: the ‘archetypal analysis can lend itself to the inexact, the intellectually nebulous, and the pseudomystical.’¹⁸

Aware of the limitations of that method, Hawkins explores Augustine in her own way, firstly by a comparison with Paul. It appears Augustine would claim a Damascus road experience, following the Pauline crisis paradigm, though other aspects of Augustine’s life indicate a much more gradual process. This may have been partly as Augustine wished to emphasise the Christian as against the Greek pattern. Augustine identifies for himself his conversion as a crucial seminal event. ‘Accordingly, the model that emerges is the triadic pattern of spiritual searching, followed by conversion, followed by spiritual certainty. This triune sequence can be seen as the basic model of the conversion archetype.’¹⁹

Hawkins goes on to explore a contrasting archetype – that of John Bunyan, which is consistent with Calvinist-Lutheran ideas of regeneration being a life-long process made up of a series of definite stages. ‘This pattern in Bunyan’s *Grace Abounding* might be called the “double conversion” for it consists of a dyadic scheme of *crisis* events within an overarching *lysis* conversion model.’

¹⁸ Hawkins, 1985, p15

¹⁹ Hawkins, 1985, p21

Hawkins demonstrates this further in Bunyan, with the outline of *Grace Abounding* as having two temptation sequences, followed by two conversion sequences;

Introduction	childhood & youth pp5-6 <i>Grace Abounding</i>
Temptations	a series of some six temptations pp15-40
First Conversion	receiving evidence of election p40
Temptations	'sell him, sell him' etc. pp41-66
Second Conversion	the battle of the two texts p67
Conclusions	analysis of the last temptation pp74-82

Bunyan is though sometimes used as an example of James' *lysis* conversion, even though in many other respects he would exhibit the expectation of being closer in theology to the Puritan or evangelical and have a clearer one-off conversion *crisis* experience. On reflection, his story shows a number of problems in too easily fitting into the *lysis* archetype: and Hawkins quotes Margaret Bottrall (*Every Man a Phoenix* 1958, pp89,94, and others) as perceiving: '[Although *Grace Abounding*] is a recapitulation of the long quest for salvation that culminated in Bunyan's conviction that he was one of the elect,' a *lysis* perspective; nonetheless asserts that "'by his own reckoning" his spiritual rebirth began on the day when he encountered the Bedford women' – demonstrating Bottrall's identification that it is after all based on a *crisis* experience.²⁰

This *Process Conversion* as it is sometimes known, demonstrates an ebb and flow, or an upward spiral. Rambo, throughout his article, identifies it as a long process of conversion moving from *context*, through *crisis* and *quest*, to *encounter* and *interaction*, to *commitment*, which may in turn lead to *consequences*.²¹

²⁰ Hawkins, 1985, p22

²¹ Rambo, in Maloney & Southard, 1992

Consequences of Conversion

Hawkins points out that though their autobiographies or personal testimonies are clearly important to them and illuminating to us, Augustine, Bunyan, and Merton (whom she also studies) all go on to write larger, more “global” works afterwards. ‘It may be that in the process of re-ordering the world within, one is led to discover, or create, an orderly world without.’²² Conversion led them on to a deeper understanding of self, which they were then in a position to use in later life.

‘Self’ is an important principle to Smith too. In his chapter on the concept of conversion in Conn, he produces a schema that is focussed on the individual’s attitude to the self. He identifies three ‘selves’, the *enduring self*, the *questing self*, and the *free self*, and conversion can really only take place if these three selves are in place:

It makes no sense to speak of a changed life, a new self, etc, unless we have a defensible theory expressing what it means to be self. The change involved is unintelligible unless there is an *enduring self* lasting in some sense through change, and marked by unity, identity, and uniqueness.

The self has a capacity to be ‘*questing self*, and to have a concern for itself, its ground and goal focussed by self-knowledge. ... The self’s ‘ultimate turning back to God would be unintelligible unless the self is seeking for a truth and reality which it does not have.’²³

Returning to, in our terms, Emmaus and Damascus, Smith says ‘The quest may be calm and largely speculative, - or it may be fraught with anxiety.’

Hawkins also sees that the conversion is not the end in itself:

... Conversion, whether *crisis* or *lysis*, can be thought of as a process that brings about a radically different sense of the self as it restores a “right” relationship between the self and its God. Similarly, in “conversionlike”

²² Hawkins, 1985, p158

²³ John E Smith in Walter Conn, 1978, p59

experiences, what is changed is both the relationship to one's self and one's relationship to the other - whether the "other" is conceived as God or as the external world.²⁴

It appears that a number of commentators see conversion as either *crisis* or *lysis*, (even both for the one individual) but the key factor is that both of these demonstrate a sense of journey, or process, in relationship with self, with others and with God, and what is important is what flows from and sense of conversion in the individual.

Crisis? What Crisis?

Does this then call into question the accuracy of some of the *emotional crisis catalysing conversion* theories? These say that what takes place in conversion is a response to an emotional upheaval, or other great stress, (see Kirkpatrick et al above). Nevertheless, sometimes even that is not as straightforward as expected. Hopson and Openlander (above) having already asserted that it is unlikely that the start point for Luther's protests were grounded in his depression. Kirkpatrick also quotes Ullman's rather surprising discovery (Ullman 1989:xvi) 'What I initially considered primarily a change of ideology turned out to be more akin to a falling in love...Conversion pivots around a sudden attachment, an infatuation with a real or imagined figure...The typical convert was transformed not by a religion, but by a person.'²⁵

Hawkins, in trying to understand other areas of discontinuity in life, has used conversion as an example.

What I am suggesting is that the paradigms of a religious conversion might prove helpful in understanding other kinds of drastic or radical discontinuity. ... The idea of life as an arduous journey, the sense of the divided self, the

²⁴ Hawkins, 1985, p157

²⁵ Lee A Kirkpatrick, quoting Ullman, in Hood, 1995, p457

ways in which other people take on deep, symbolic roles for us at certain times - these archetypes of action and figure that enact as they represent our yearnings, our guilt, our feelings of relatedness, our sense of purpose. It is these feelings that are the raw materials of a conversion experience, but they are also the substance of any kind of personal change.²⁶

So is there a place to think of crisis conversion at all, or is conversion part of a wider process of change taking place in most individuals most of the time? There has been a shift in perceptions in recent years, away from the huge evangelistic mission meetings of say Billy Graham, towards a personal encounter. (Even the ‘telly-evangelists’ have switched their style to meet the need of the bed-sit couch-potato Christian... ‘Place your hand on the screen...’)

For some Christians, even within the mainstream evangelical tradition, their experiences of conversion are beginning to prove to be much more like the Road to Emmaus than the Road to Damascus. This emphasis has been picked up by commentators such as John Finney²⁷ (who sees a statistical change from crisis conversion to lysis conversion), and even in the type of ‘Introduction to Faith’ or RCIA courses such as *Emmaus*²⁸, which assist people on a journey of discovery more than seeking to bring them to a point of conversion.

Perhaps what is really being expressed, in a way parallel to the danger identified by Hawkins, of contorting an individual to fit an archetype, is that the boundaries are not clear-cut, and individuals have experiences that are perceived in different ways at different times, according to their own needs, and the needs of those around them, or even studying them.

²⁶ Hawkins, 1985, p157

²⁷ *Finding Faith Today*, John Finney Bible Society 1992

²⁸ *Emmaus*, Cottrell et al 2001, p vii

Jerusalem Road

Indeed Warren would even begin to doubt the validity of the original question. As both Paul, and the two disciples on the road, both change direction and head towards Jerusalem, could it not be the **Jerusalem Road** rather than Damascus or Emmaus that is important.²⁹ They were on the Jerusalem Road, but going the wrong way, and each has a process of engagement over time, and each has moments of blinding revelation. Perhaps conversion can be understood more clearly as we look back at where we have come from.

²⁹ Robert Warren, end note reference, 2002

References/Endnotes

Robert Warren

I contacted Robert Warren, to check a statistic with him, and outlined the reason for my email, and the thrust of my essay title. After answering my specific question, and possibly unaware of some the other content of the essay, he responded with the following additional comments.

“I would want to argue with making a distinction between the Emmaus Road and the Damascus Road since

- they both involved a journey engaged in over a period of time
- the search of those on both roads began long before either got onto that particular road
- both include moments of revelation (breaking of bread, opening of scripture: blinding light, experience of healing)

“Also, I note that

- they were both on the Jerusalem Road,
- it was just that they were going in the wrong direction!
- yet God, graciously, joined them on the road - heading in the wrong direction
- and conversion was evidenced by their returning to Jerusalem.

In this connection, the real contrast is with Christ’s journey to Jerusalem, which takes up most of the gospel. He was already heading in the right direction, needing no ‘conversion’ experience.”

Robert Warren, by email, May 2002

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