

Fall 2018

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Recommended Citation

Burston, D. (2018). A Leap of Faith. What is Conversion? A Psychologist's Perspective. *Spiritan Horizons*, 13 (13). Retrieved from <https://dsc.duq.edu/spiritan-horizons/vol13/iss13/12>

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A LEAP OF FAITH. WHAT IS CONVERSION? A PSYCHOLOGIST'S PERSPECTIVE

Introduction

What is religious conversion? What are the motives that prompt people to convert? And what impact does the process of conversion have on people's mental health? I have spent many hours reading and reflecting on these questions for the last two decades. Like other people interested in the varieties of religious experience and identity, I had pondered these questions from time to time, but my interest in this issue was really piqued by some of the controversies surrounding the canonization of Edith Stein in October of 1998. That same year, Stephen Dubner published a memoir entitled, *Turbulent Souls: A Catholic Son's Return to His Jewish Family* (New York: Harper Collins, 1998) which chronicles the dramatic conversions of Dubner's Jewish parents to Catholicism (that occurred long before his birth), and his own conversion back to Judaism as an adult.

An additional stimulus to my reflections was provided by the fact that by 2000 I was actively researching the life of Erik Erikson, a famous Jewish psychoanalyst who very nearly converted to Lutheranism. I was struck by the similarities and differences between Erikson's spiritual journey and that of his younger contemporary, Karl Stern, a prominent Jewish psychiatrist in Montréal who converted to Catholicism and chronicled his spiritual journey in a book entitled, *The Pillar of Fire* (1951). As a result, my biography of Erikson, entitled *Erik Erikson and the American Psyche: Ego, Ethics and Evolution* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2007) dwelt at some length on Erikson's engagement with Lutheran Christianity. And by a happy coincidence, I found that many of Erikson's ideas about identity and human development were readily applicable to Stern's lengthy and often anguished conversion process in my next book, *A Forgotten Freudian: The Passion of Karl Stern* (Karnac, 2016).

What follows, however, is not a meditation on Erikson's ideas, or a discussion of any one person's spiritual journey, much less an attempt to summarize all the controversies and complexities that surround the issue of conversion in the psychological literature. Far from it! It is simply an attempt to distill some of the insights and ideas I gleaned from reading many first-person conversion narratives, and sampling large

swaths of the literature on conversion in the fields of psychiatry, the psychology and sociology of religion, comparative religion and European history.

Awakenings

From the standpoint of steadfast believers, conversion is usually defined as a process that leads someone to grasp – or at any rate, to glimpse - an eternal and immutable truth, and conduct their life accordingly, or one that leads the person astray, should they happen to abandon the “right path.” After all, every religion tends to privilege its own belief system as “true,” or nearer the truth than others. But that is a luxury that psychologists who study religion simply cannot afford. Why? Well, consider the following. When believers share their findings or beliefs about the meaning or nature of conversion, they tend to do so with other believers who constitute their primary audience and reference group. Psychologists, by contrast, must share their findings with other psychologists, who may not share their theological frame of reference, or indeed, have any religious convictions at all. Besides, science provides its practitioners with no relevant or plausible criteria by which to adjudicate the rival claims of different religions in this regard, so even if the psychologist is a person of faith, when investigating a phenomenon like conversion, the psychologist (*qua* psychologist) must place all spiritual and faith traditions on “a level playing field,” irrespective of their personal beliefs or convictions. Otherwise, their methodology will be deemed suspect or biased by their colleagues, and their findings will never be persuasive to other psychologists or to practitioners of other human sciences, like anthropology, sociology, history and so on.

So, bracketing off a religious community’s claims to be in sole possession of the truth is a methodological necessity for psychologists in this field. Once this step has been taken, their next task is to bracket off all local and parochial variations, and to look for overarching themes or “general structures” - commonalities that occur repeatedly across time, place, and religious affiliation, which accurately describe (and may help explain) the phenomenon in question in generic human terms.

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Comparative religion is a vast and growing field, but even in psychology alone, the literature on conversion is vast, and often somewhat misleading. Why? Because many authors assume that the act of conversion – the public avowal of a newfound faith, accompanied by solemn ceremonies and celebrations to welcome the “new arrival” - is invariably preceded by an epiphany or “conversion experience,” which the New Testament describes with the Greek word *metanoia*. The implicit model for such depictions often appears to be Paul’s conversion on the road to Damascus. One reason that this misconception is so widespread is the popularity of what are commonly called “conversion narratives” – first person accounts of the needs, feelings, and experiences that lead a specific person to embrace a particular faith. People who take the time and trouble to compose memoirs like these generally have had an extraordinary experience prior to their conversion that they wish to share with others, either to bear witness to their faith, or as a

tool of persuasion, or perhaps just to assure themselves and others of the reality of spiritual experience. Their experience of ecstatic illumination may be relatively brief, lasting only an evening (e.g., William James) or longer, lasting several days (e.g., Karl Stern.) Either way, if they are gifted writers – and as it happens, many of them are - narratives like these can be very moving and memorable documents.

However, history demonstrates that this “road to Damascus” template for conversion is oversimplified and misleading. It produces generalizations born of over-reliance on one genre of religious writing, and perhaps a good deal of wishful thinking. In actual fact, people repudiate their ancestral faith and/or embrace a new religious identity for all kinds of reasons, as we shall see.

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So, to get a little closer to the issue at hand, we would be wise to differentiate between conversion – which is a very public affair - and a religious awakening, which is usually an “inner” or private experience, sometimes barely communicable in language.

A religious awakening often occurs when an individual reaches an existential impasse or crisis of some kind, and – usually after prolonged reflection – suddenly feels transported out of their normal, everyday way of “being in the world,” elevated, as it were, to a different plane of consciousness. For those inclined toward pantheism, or an immanent conception of the Deity, the transformation they experience and describe entails a heightened sense of the sacred that suffuses the entire world, God in nature, everywhere, in everyone. For those whose concept of the Deity is more transcendent, it usually entails a feeling of suddenly having been called or in some sense *claimed* by God – a feeling of being personally addressed by God that is utterly compelling. Either way, however, a person who has had a religious awakening of this kind feels liberated, free of doubt and anxiety – at least temporarily - and suddenly in possession of “truths” about human existence that were inaccessible or obscure to them beforehand. Though the ecstasy or fervor of the moment may wear off, in time, a religious awakening like this is usually a transformative and life changing experience, one that gives the person’s life new meaning, purpose and direction.

A third kind of religious awakening, common in Gnosticism, is in some sense the opposite of the pantheist variety. Instead of experiencing God in nature, everywhere, in everyone, the person has what I call a *negative epiphany*, in which the experience of God’s absence, rather than his presence, envelopes the person with a sudden (and sometimes shattering) intensity. Whereas the first two types of religious experience tend to evoke feelings of awe and reverence, a negative epiphany elicits feelings of revulsion and dread. As Hans Jonas, author of *The Gnostic Religion*, points out, God, in these scenarios, is either a *deus absconditus*, a hidden God who is indifferent to human suffering, or worse yet, a malevolent “*archōn*” (often equated with the biblical Jehovah!) who imposes his laws arbitrarily on human subjects on the material plane, while masquerading as the Supreme Deity, who goes by an entirely different (Greek or Latin) name, like Abraxas or Pleroma, etc. In Gnostic lore, the task of the newly awakened soul is to hearken to an “alien voice” that alerts him (or her) to their fallen and degraded estate, and summons them from

spiritual captivity to their true spiritual destiny and home, by extricating the soul from the body and the evil realm of matter, that is governed by an arrogant and arbitrary demiurge who is hostile to their spiritual quest.

Obviously, negative epiphanies are rarer than the first two varieties, and a fuller exploration of their roots and ramifications is beyond the scope of this essay. But with all that said, it is also important to note that not all religious awakenings of a theistic or pantheistic nature lead to conversions, or to the public embrace of a new religious identity. In some instances, the person who has had an experience of this (positive) kind may embrace the religion that they (or their parents) abandoned in their childhood with renewed commitment and fervor - a very common occurrence in Orthodox Jewish communities, for example. Or alternatively, they may feel called upon to create a new religion, one which may – and often does – draw inspiration from more than one earlier faith tradition, for example, Mani, Mohammad, Guru Nanak, Bahá'u'lláh. Or again, they may become religious reformers, dissidents or innovators, who are critical of the reigning religious “establishment,” for one reason or another, and are determined to renew or revive their religious communities. In the process, they may end up creating new communities or denominations, and new modes of piety, albeit still within the parameters of their ancestral faith, for example, Martin Luther, the Ba'al Shem Tov, Pascal, Kierkegaard, Tolstoy, Rabbi Zalman Schacter-Shalomi.

Finally, the least common outcome of a religious awakening - one which may be a purely twentieth century European variant - is a strange kind of religious stalemate, in which the person feels a strong temptation to convert to a new faith, yet deliberately refrains from doing so. Though they are the least common of all, perhaps, cases like these are among the most interesting and least understood. Good examples of this before World War II were Jews like Henri Bergson, Franz Werfel and Simone Weil who made an “inner migration” from Judaism to Christianity, but refused to convert publicly lest they betray their families, neighbors and many innocent brethren whose very lives were threatened by anti-Semitic persecution. After the war, psychoanalyst Erik Erikson found himself in a very similar position – having embraced Jesus, but refusing to be baptized out of respect for the dead. Hugh Schonfield, author of *The Passover Plot*, was even more unusual than his contemporaries. In 1938, when he had his moment of ecstatic illumination, he was convinced that Jesus is indeed the Messiah, but like the elderly Tolstoy, he still did not believe in the divinity of Jesus, and so was never tempted to convert to Christianity.

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In *The Pillar of Fire* (1951), Karl Stern, a convert from Judaism himself, devoted several pages to exploring the dilemma of Jews like these, albeit from a theological, rather than a psychological perspective (Stern, 1951). While not minimizing the poignancy of their inner conflicts, he gently scolded them for their lack of clarity or conviction. Unlike Stern, I believe that these poor souls had enormous integrity, and are entirely worthy of our respect, whether we are Jewish, Christian, or something else entirely. When you ponder the horrors they anticipated, experienced, or narrowly escaped themselves, and the anguish

they endured for the sake of their convictions, it dawns on you that theirs was not the easy path. Yes, they courted ostracism and disapproval from both religious communities, but they were no less spiritual, sincere, or honorable people for living patiently with these divided loyalties.

A Leap of Faith? Conversion in Social and Historical Perspective

Just as a religious awakening can lead a person down several different paths, the motives that prompt people to convert, or embrace a new religious identity, are extremely diverse. Many are not even religious, really. One example, which is rare nowadays, but was commonplace in medieval Christendom and the Muslim *umma*, are forced conversions, where the convert is faced with a choice of embracing the religion of his (or her) captors or overlords, or embracing martyrdom, should they refuse. In such instances, the motive to convert is inextricably intertwined with the person's will to live. Reluctant converts like these often hold onto as much of their ancestral faith as they can in secret, and often end up blending the beliefs and rituals of their ancestral faith with their new publicly avowed religion, like the semi-pagan inhabitants of Britain and Europe in the "Dark Ages," or the Jewish/Christian *conversos* of Spain, Portugal, and Holland, who were hounded by the Inquisition, many of whom fled to the "New World" in the late fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.

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Another common motive for conversion is the desire to marry someone of another faith. If an interfaith marriage is out of the question, one party may seek admittance into their beloved's religious community. It is difficult to generalize about cases like these. Sometimes, they are motivated by love, pure and simple. But often other, opportunistic motives enter into the picture, consciously or otherwise – for example, the desire to distance oneself from one's original community, or the hope that one's offspring will enjoy more freedom, greater status and have greater economic opportunities than they might otherwise enjoy, or both.

Another motive for conversion, which is still fairly common in East Asia, is prevalent among the Dalits in India, who embrace Buddhism, Islam, or Christianity because these religions do not regard them, their families, and their ancestors as sub-human or "untouchable." They believe that their present social status is not the result of "bad karma" or some hereditary taint or degeneracy. Conversions like these are seldom prompted by a religious awakening - which is, by all accounts, an involuntary experience – but are usually the result of a deliberate choice, and a perfectly intelligible (and eminently healthy) desire to improve one's mental health by affiliating with a community that treats one with greater dignity and respect.

Another motive for conversion that was commonplace in late eighteenth and nineteenth century Europe and America concerns people whose choice of a new religious affiliation or identity was facilitated precisely by their *lack* of faith, and their simultaneous

desire to gain acceptance into the cultural mainstream. The most famous example of this kind of conversion is probably that of the celebrated poet, playwright, and essayist Heinrich Heine (1797-1856). Heine was born in Düsseldorf to parents who were Jewish, but not particularly observant. Though he attended Hebrew school, learning a smattering of Hebrew, most of his early education was in Catholic schools. Düsseldorf was under French occupation from the time of his birth until 1815, so he spent his formative years under French influence, and was eternally grateful for the Napoleonic Code, which permitted Jews to participate fully in civil society and the professions. Later on, the Prussian government restored anti-Semitic restrictions on the Jewish community, so he converted to Lutheranism in 1825 as “the ticket for admission to European culture.”

Heine was an extremely gifted poet and a brilliant satirist, and perhaps, on the whole, quite a decent human being. But he did not possess a shred of piety, Jewish, Christian, or otherwise, and his motives for conversion were purely secular - the desire to avoid discrimination and Jew-baiting. Lacking the consolations of faith, he eventually regretted his decision to convert, because as he later discovered, this empty gesture did little or nothing to deter the anti-Semitic taunts and abuse directed at him by his critics as he became more famous and successful.

At the other extreme from converts like Heine are converts like Karl Stern (1906-1975) who converted from what one of Stern’s critics called “a raging hunger to believe” – a trait that he shared with his younger contemporary, Cardinal Jean Marie (Aaron) Lustiger (1926 -2007). Like Heine, Stern was born Jewish and suffered through a lax and indifferent religious education as a child, only to come under a good deal of Catholic influence. (He was born in rural Bavaria, a Catholic enclave, at the time.) Having experimented with Orthodox Judaism, Marxism, and Zionism as a youth and young adult, Stern finally converted to Catholicism in 1943, but only after dithering on the doorstep of the church for more than a decade. Unlike Heine, however, Stern’s piety was deep and genuine. He had an epiphany in 1938, while living in London, and privately embraced Jesus long before he identified publicly as a Christian.

But Stern is not “typical” of this type of convert. On the contrary, most people who convert to another faith because of unrequited spiritual longings are not fortunate enough to have an ecstatic religious experience of this kind. Sadly, however, I cannot discern why some people in this category have experiences of this nature, while others do not. The ones I am intimately familiar with - all from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries - were all sensitive, spiritually anguished, highly intelligent and accomplished people - mostly adult males, ranging in age from their twenties to their fifties. But the farther back you go in history, the more variability you find. Male and female, educated and uneducated, rich and poor, young and old. It is difficult to discern a clear pattern here, that is, one that covers the whole gamut of human history and experience.

Nevertheless, even in the absence of a compelling or transformative religious awakening, many converts in this category are acutely disappointed in the religious communities they were born into, which have failed to meet their spiritual needs in one way or another. They may have undergone a religious education that was too harsh, too

lax, or utterly uninspiring, and found out later, as adults, that their religion – be it Judaism, Christianity, or the Church of Latter Day Saints – “makes no sense” to them. In short, rightly or wrongly, they see their newfound faith – and the people who share it – as more rational, or as less irrational, hypocritical, or intolerant than the faith they abandoned. People like these are in search of a theological perspective that gives them a feeling of cosmological coherence, a moral universe that “makes sense.”

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Another, more troubling motive for conversion is hatred and self-hatred. Obviously, converts who opt for a faith that “makes more sense” may harbor ambivalent feelings toward the faith or denomination they were born into. But they seldom vilify or condemn it outright. Though cases like these are comparatively rare nowadays, there is also a certain type of convert whose main motive for converting is prompted by deep disappointment and/or disgust with his (or her) previous religious community. He (or she) is less motivated by the desire to live, to improve their mental health or to thrive in the cultural mainstream – all of which are defensible motives, even in the absence of deep religious conviction – than by a desire for revenge on those who reared them, a desire that may or may not be conscious. The hidden injuries of childhood and adolescence often play a very large role in their motivation. Among Jews in this category, the internalization of prevailing anti-Semitic prejudices usually plays a significant role as well. Suddenly, all those hateful stereotypes and taunts about Jews that haunted one’s childhood and adolescence seem fitting and necessary, even (or especially) when applied to one’s own family and former friends, as adults.

Alternatively, there are also instances where the convert’s newfound “faith” apparently gives them license to unleash the hateful side of their natures on a wide range of potential targets – Muslims, Jews, Catholics, Masons, Blacks, Whites, sexual and gender minorities, communists, humanists, *et cetera*. Though it may masquerade as genuine piety or religious fervor, a conversion rooted in hatred or self-hatred is always morbid. It should be greeted with the utmost suspicion by all concerned. Indeed, conversions like these should be vigorously deplored and discouraged, because they can do nothing to improve the person’s mental health or to elevate or deepen their spiritual life.

Finally, there is another category of converts whose motives for conversion are primarily *unconscious*. In other words, they have a “hidden agenda,” one that is hidden from themselves, as well as from others. Converts like these can be found among all of the types already listed above. For example, a man whose life is threatened may persuade himself (temporarily) that he believes Jesus is the Messiah, or Mohammad the last of the Prophets, only to recant later, when the danger has vanished or subsided. Why? Because his life was at stake, and in order to convince his persecutors of his sincerity, he had to persuade himself first! Similarly, a woman who wishes to convert to relieve her unborn children from social stigma, or to enhance their educational and economic opportunities, may insist that these desires are irrelevant to her newfound faith, because this risks arousing

feelings of mistrust and disapproval from members of the community she wishes to join, and because she cannot tolerate thinking of herself as a hypocrite. Along slightly different lines, a person who consciously craves a deeper sense of cosmological coherence or a theological frame of reference that “makes sense” may also be motivated by a measure of unconscious grandiosity, or a desire to demonstrate and assert their spiritual superiority over their parents, and their parents’ family and friends.

In fairness, of course, most people who convert have “mixed motives,” that is, are motivated by more than one desire or consideration, some of which they seldom admit to themselves, for a variety of reasons. Indeed, I am convinced that if we eliminated people like these from the field entirely, there would hardly be anyone left standing! But I am not talking about cases like that. At this juncture, I am referring only to cases where the *dominant* motive for conversion is unconscious, even when it is quite evident to others. Unless they have clinical training and/or extant supervision, clergy should refrain from probing too deeply in cases like these. On the contrary, they would be well advised to refer the potential convert for counselling or psychotherapy before the conversion process gets well underway.

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Conclusion

So, to summarize the preceding, a religious awakening need not necessarily result in conversion. Nor must the public embrace of a new faith be preceded by the kind of ecstatic religious experience celebrated in conversion narratives. On the contrary, cases like these, while not uncommon, are *not* the norm, despite the moving testimonials of many converts. Unfortunately, we lack the data to ascertain how often these different phenomena – religious awakenings, on the one hand, and actual conversions on the other - are correlated in any given period of history, including our own. And though we can document the emergence or disappearance of certain types of conversion in different cultural settings, we cannot reliably ascertain how often all converts are motivated primarily by one reason or another, or by some combination of motives. We can only offer educated guesses, because the data that would enable us to quantify any of this are completely lacking. But in the absence of such information, we do know that people who have religious awakenings (of one sort or another) often take paths that do not result in conversion (as people commonly understand that term.) And conversely, we know that many people who do convert do so for a variety of reasons, even in the absence of a compelling religious experience or of deep religious conviction. Of course, this does *not* mean that their motives, whether conscious or unconscious, are necessarily trivial or reprehensible, unless they are rooted in hatred or self-hatred masquerading as piety.

Finally, and in light of the preceding, we are now in a position to address the question “Is conversion good for people’s mental health?” That depends on the individual and the kind of spiritual counsel and support they encounter along their way. If the process

of conversion makes the convert into a better person – someone less fearful, conflicted, confused, and ashamed, someone who is kinder, more patient and generous, more hopeful, helpful and connected to others, then answer is “yes.” If not, then the answer is simply “no,” irrespective of the church they join, the rituals they perform, or the doctrines they profess to believe.

*“Is conversion good for people’s mental health?”
That depends on the individual and the kind of spiritual counsel and support they encounter along their way.”*

Recommended Reading

Stern, Karl. 1951. *The Pillar of Fire*. New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co.

Jonas, Hans. 1963. *The Gnostic Religion*. New York: Beacon Press.

Based on a dissertation supervised by Rudolph Bultmann long before the discovery and translation of the Nag Hammadi Library, this book remains the best introduction to a rare kind of religious awakening and its cultural-historical repercussions.

Neuhaus, David. 1988. “Jewish Conversion to the Catholic Church.” *Pastoral Psychology* 37/1, pp. 38-52.

Fr. David Neuhaus, SJ, currently the Patriarchal Vicar of Hebrew-speaking Catholics in Jerusalem, himself a convert from Judaism, compares the conversions of Edith Stein, Eugenio Zolli and Karl Stern, and reflects on the conflicts and controversies that accompanied them.

Simon, Sherry. 1999. “A. M. Klein et Karl Stern: le scandale de la conversion.” *Études Françaises*, 37/3, pp. 53-67.

Concordia University Professor Sherry Simon compares Karl Stern’s conversion to Catholicism (and its impact on Montreal’s Jewish community) with author A. M. Klein’s attitude toward conversion, embodied in his book *The Second Scroll*, whose hero, Melech Davidson, develops a profound admiration for Christian art, and flirts with the idea of conversion, only to reject it, finally.

Burston, Daniel. 2007. *Erik Erikson and the American Psyche: Ego, Ethics and Evolution*. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield.

An intellectual biography of an influential psychoanalyst and developmental psychologist whose leanings toward Christianity and rumored abandonment of Judaism precipitated a firestorm of controversy in the mid-1970s.