

FACETS OF CONVERSION

Conversion: Perspectives on Personal and Social Transformation, edited by Walter E. Conn. Alba House, New York, 1978. Reviewed by Douglas DeCelle, Dayton, Ohio.

Walter Conn has given students of the phenomenon of conversion a useful resource in his anthology, Conversion: Perspectives on Personal and Social Transformation. The book's format--a collection of expurgated essays from a variety of Christian perspectives--suits the complexity of the topic. "Conversion" as a concept defies neat circumscriptive definition. Any serious student of this phenomenon quickly learns that conversion cannot be stereotyped or boiled down to, say, three easy steps. Indeed, this is precisely how Christians have commonly misunderstood conversion, or worse, used it as a tool of exclusivity and manipulation. We are much closer to the truth when we recognize that conversion not only differs from convert to convert, but also differs from theological tradition to tradition. By gathering a variety of essays from many quarters of the Church, Conn's methodology corresponds with the multiplicity of the subject.

Put differently, conversion resembles a cut gem. Each person experiences it or sees in it something different. Different considerations reveal different colors and intensities of light. In different theological "settings," in the "light" of different personal perspectives, conversion displays a multitude of different "facets." These facets are evident in Conn's book. Some facets appear--though articulated differently--in virtually every essay. Others appear only once.

This paper will begin by listing these facets according to their frequency of appearance in Conversion. We will move on to consider those elements commonly associated with conversion, but which receive scant attention in the book. Finally, this paper will evaluate Conn's work as a resource for Christians seeking understanding of conversion.

I. MAJOR THEMES

A. Conversion Extends Throughout Life. A striking majority of Conn's authors echo Charles Curran's sentiments that conversion is a lifelong process. "Conversion is a continuous turning, a growing, a becoming."¹ Dom Marc-Francois Lacan rightly exegetes Jesus' comment about turning and becoming like children (Mt. 18.3) as an imperative for disciples never to cease the conversion process.² Robert Thouless provides an impressive list of notable

¹ p. 226.

² p. 110.

church leaders who have been converted later in life or who had multiple conversions.³ Wayne Oates suggests that when we think of the Christian life as a pilgrimage, it is easy to conceptualize conversion not only as the initial turning which sets a new course, but also as a repeated experience along the way.⁴

Everywhere and repeatedly in Conn's book is resistance to the idea of the "conversion-experience" where conversion pertains only to a threshold stage marking entry into the religious life. Instead, conversion echoes throughout the Christian journey sometimes finding its most dramatic expression in the midst of the pilgrimage.⁵

B. Conversion as Initiated by God. This theme appears nearly as frequently as the first one. The idea here is that conversion entails the initiative and transcendent work of God. Put negatively, it is never entirely a human achievement. Says John E. Smith:

...It is essential to the repentance and dependence upon God contained in the idea of conversion that some change take place which is beyond the power of the finite human will to effect. Thus conversion transcends human will and consciousness while still remaining related to both.⁶

William James, a pioneer in the psychological study of conversion, sees conversion as a process of resolution of interior conflict and division.⁷ Nevertheless, he speaks with balance and sensitivity of converts' need for self-surrender to a force beyond their conscious selves. He then acknowledges that this force is "the direct supernatural [operation] of the Deity".⁸ So, even while setting forth his influential "divided self" explanation of conversion, James does not wish to close the door on divine agency.

The Catholic theologians in Conn's collection favor the term

³ p. 144.

⁴ p. 159.

⁵See Haring, p. 221 and Hiltner, p. 181.

⁶ p. 60.

⁷ p. 123.

⁸ p. 129.

"grace" in speaking about the source of conversion. Says Rahner: "From the biblical and dogmatic point of view, man's free turning to God has always to be seen as a response, made possible by God's grace, to a call from God."⁹ Similar citations could be drawn from Fuch's,¹⁰ Lacan,¹¹ or Haring.¹² Gustavo Gutierrez finds a rich word to express God's gift of loving self-communication which elicits active response--"gratuitousness."¹³ The sense of gratuitousness lifts people from bondage and passivity to encounter and liberation.

Nowhere in Conn's book is conversion explicitly presented as a purely human work. In essays which explain conversion in psychological categories, the authors will introduce a transcendent element. Oates, for example, says:

Conversion is not a ritual, an outward deed, or a purely subjective experience inasmuch as God is working in the processes of [a person's] life to will and to do his good work."¹⁴

C. Conversion as Rejection of Sin: Not surprisingly, many of Conn's authors mention the rejection of sin as an element in conversion. Gregory Baum's essay is the most striking in this regard. Baum views conversion almost exclusively as renunciation or metanoia. He devotes the first two-thirds of his piece to establishing the existence of collective sin and describing its nature. Baum then suggests that conversion must entail not only forsaking one's personal sins, but one's complicity with evil structures. Baum makes scant mention of any positive element in the Gospel to which the repentant sinner turns.

Joseph Fuchs also accents the metanoia element, attempting to understand conversion by understanding sin. Fuch's definition of conversion reveals this:

Conversion is a change in the whole person, for the whole person is a sinner, enduringly committed to be a

⁹ p. 204.

¹⁰ p. 258 and 261.

¹¹ p. 79.

¹² p. 219.

¹³ p. 310.

¹⁴ p. 150.

sinner.¹⁵

Several of the Catholic theologians see conversion as a turning which reverses or stands in direct opposition to "mortal sin." Charles Curran is representative:

Conversion is the change of heart by which a person becomes a friend of God and a recipient of his love. Mortal sin is the opposite of conversion. Mortal sin is the change of heart by which a person turns away from his [or her] relationship of love with God. Mortal sin marks the refusal of life, the refusal of light, the refusal of Christ. Sin, like conversion, involves a profound change of heart.¹⁶

It is curious why so many authors describe conversion by the sin which it rejects rather than by the faith which it embraces. William James, discussing E. D. Starbuck's work on conversion, asserts that while conversion entails both a turning from and a turning to, converts are much more aware of their present plight in sin. "...With most of us the sense of our present wrongness is a far more distinct piece of our consciousness than is the imagination of any positive ideal we can aim at."¹⁷

D. Conversion as Total Transformation. Several authors addressed the totality of change entailed in conversion. Gutierrez puts it most simply, "All conversion involves a break"¹⁸ Kung reminds the reader that Jesus expected a new person. The convert is deeply renewed in awareness, attitude, thought, and action.¹⁹

The classic Christian image for this transformation is death. So total is the discontinuity with the convert's past, that in some sense he or she has died. Pasquier creatively suggests that conversion, like death, entails Elizabeth Kubler-Ross's stages of reckoning--denial, anger, bargaining, helplessness, and finally acceptance.²⁰

¹⁵ p. 256

¹⁶ p. 229.

¹⁷ p. 127-8.

¹⁸ p. 309.

¹⁹ p. 273.

²⁰ p. 197-8.

Perhaps the most famous discussion of conversion's totality of change is that of Arthur Darby Nock who argues that "prophetic religions"--Christianity among them--evoke a "deep reorientation"²¹ of the person's soul. Nock contrasts "adhesion" with conversion, saying that the former is mere acceptance of new worships, while the latter is comprehensive personal change.²² Of course, it was this totality of change in so many people that had great impact on the Mediterranean World during the early centuries of the Church.

E. Conversion as Human Work. Without denying the divine initiative which makes conversion possible, several authors speak of the cooperative human participation in the process. Karl Rahner speaks extensively about the human role in conversion. He says, "Conversion is a fundamental decision."²³ To be related to God with one's whole being is, of course, a choice, entailing a degree of personal reflection at a more or less definite point in a lifetime.²⁴

For other authors, the nature of human participation is paradoxical. Karl Barth wrestles with the paradox of free choice versus "the compulsion of conversion."²⁵ Unlike "mere compulsion" which would be demonic, God creates in the convert a true ability or freedom which Barth calls a "compulsion of permission and ability."²⁶

James, Pasquier, Thouless, and Oates favor the concept of "surrender" to describe the nature of the human side of the conversion equation. Oates introduces a word study of the word group clustered around the verb "to convert," observing that the verb "is regularly used in the passive sense: 'To be converted,' 'was converted,' 'have been converted,' and so on are examples."²⁷ This suggests an act of yielding or surrender. Curiously, the human role in conversion may be to quit resisting; to "stop trying;"²⁸ to "accept;"²⁹ to "relax;"³⁰ to lie down, "face in the

²¹ p. 69.

²² p. 69.

²³ p. 204.

²⁴ p. 204.

²⁵ p. 46.

²⁶ p. 46.

²⁷ p. 160.

²⁸ p. 126.

dust, being able to utter 'your will be done.'"³¹

F. Conversion and Moral Action. The new ethics brought about through conversion is, surprisingly, a minor theme in Conversion until the reader reaches the liberation theologians at the book's end. Bernard Lonergan, in the opening essay, asserts that religious conversion entails intellectual and moral conversion. Karl Barth comments that the convert's...

conversion and renewal is not...an end in itself as it has often been interpreted and represented in a far too egocentric Christianity. The [one] who wants to be converted only for his [or her] own sake...rather than to God the Lord and to entry into the service of his cause on earth and as his witness in the cosmos, is not the whole [person].³²

Lacan, writing about conversion in the Old Testament, describes renewal as Israel's return to the covenant. Implicit in this is a simultaneous return to the standards of social justice contained in the Law and the Prophets. In his essay about conversion in the Synoptics, Lacan focuses on the Gospel According to Matthew as the most ethical of the three. Matthew is ever urging his community "to produce the fruits"³³ of conversion by missionizing and establishing "true justice."

The minor theme of ethics becomes dominant in Conn's final section, "Personal Conversion and the Transformation of Social Structures." Gustavo Gutierrez's comment is representative:

A spirituality of liberation will center on a conversion to the neighbor, the oppressed person, the exploited social class, the despised race, the dominated country. Our conversion to the Lord implies this conversion to the neighbor. Evangelical conversion is indeed the touchstone of all spirituality. Conversion means a radical transformation of ourselves; it means thinking, feeling, and living as Christ--present in exploited and alienated

²⁹ p. 60.

³⁰ p. 128/

³¹ p. 199.

³² p. 39.

³³ p. 108.

man. To be converted is to commit oneself to the process of the liberation of the poor and oppressed, to commit oneself lucidly, realistically, and concretely.³⁴

Paolo Freire does not use the word "conversion" in his essay. He substitutes "conscientisation" which refers to the process of becoming aware of one's oppression and assuming commitment to transform the oppressing system.³⁵ In this view, the "conversion" process is entirely oriented around social action.

The limited discussion of social ethics prior to Conn's final section is possibly attributable to the fact that most authors discuss conversion as personal transformation which precedes commitment in the social sphere. The liberation theologians, on the other hand, regard conversion as an awakening to the reality of injustice and oppression. Thus, in their scheme, the social element is embedded in the conversion itself.

G. Conversion as Specific to Certain Groups. This is a vague theme that takes several forms in Conn's various essays. Several authors, for example, inquire into the degree that conversion is a Christian or even religious phenomenon. Arthur Darby Nock asserts that conversion is preeminently a phenomenon of prophetic religion. Several other authors, on the other hand, mention non-religious conversions. Hiltner discusses the conversionist nature of Alcoholics Anonymous. He also lists additional secular conversions including conversion to everything from democracy to the John Birch Society.³⁶

Three of the authors--Smith, James, and Oates--explicitly associate conversion with conservative Protestants. Oates provides a thumbnail sketch of "institutionalized conversion" beginning with the Great Awakening and moving to the present.³⁷

Haring and Curran identify the Sacrament of Penance with conversion. Rightly understood, penance marks a "profound change of heart that involves the core of human existence,"³⁸ which is to say, it is conversionist.

³⁴ p. 309.

³⁵ p. 299.

³⁶ p. 183.

³⁷ p. 163.

³⁸ p. 230.

Finally, three of the authors discuss the most common age for conversion. James and Thouless comment on E. Starbuck's study which concludes that adolescence is the prime time. James refers to Starbuck's work with appreciation--Thouless, with criticism.³⁹ Seward Hiltner takes an altogether fresh course. He suggests that mid-life (over 35) is the most promising time.⁴⁰

The above are examples of the minor trends in Conn's book which link conversion with certain religious traditions or age groups. This, however, is not characteristic of the book's general tenor. The reader's predominant impression is that no group monopolizes this complex and powerful experience.

H. Other Facets. Several minor dimensions of conversion appear in Conn's anthology which bear mentioning, again in descending order of prominence. Conversion, at least in part, is transformation in the way one understands life and its meaning.⁴¹ Several authors, notably Oates, mention multiple types of conversions.⁴² Oates suggests that conversion can represent "rapidation" of psychologically regressive processes.⁴³ Thus, there are positive (maturational) and negative (psychopathological) conversions--among others. Some authors maintain that conversion has preparatory elements. Thouless, for instance, speaks of an unconscious incubation at work in the soon-to-be convert before any conversion event.⁴⁴ Other themes crop up in two or three essays which are too minor to mention in a discussion of this scope.

II. ABSENT OR VIRTUALLY ABSENT THEMES

Curiously, several elements popularly associated with conversion are barely touched by Conn's authors. For example, the intensity of emotion associated with revival meetings or life-changing experiences receives little explicit discussion. Oates' definition of conversion mentions intense emotion:

³⁹ p. 139.

⁴⁰ p. 184.

⁴¹ Lonergan, Lacan, Oates, Pasquier, Henriot and Freire.

⁴² James, Thouless, Oates, and Fuchs.

⁴³ p. 155f.

⁴⁴ p. 138.

...The word conversion is used to refer to an abrupt change toward an enthusiastic religious attitude, with highly emotional features being conspicuously evident, whether they are lasting or not.⁴⁵

On the face of it, this definition is unexceptional. But in context with Conn's other authors, it is among the few places where emotion is emphasized.

The same can be said of religious experiences which may accompany conversion. James mentions "...voices...lights...visions...automatic motor phenomena."⁴⁶ Thouless adds "trances."⁴⁷ Otherwise, religious experience is also a minor facet in Conn.

III. Assessment

This gathering of essays is a useful contribution to the orientation of readers to the nature and complexity of conversion. I found it helpful, after studying them, to re-read Conn's introduction which contains many classic questions about conversion. For example, "Has every Christian experienced a conversion? Or, "Are conversions primarily adolescent phenomena?" Reviewing these reveals how much ground Conversion covers and how many issues Conn's author's have considered.

Any anthology--and Conn's is no exception--will be uneven in quality. By far, Conversion's strong essays outweigh the weak ones. Some of these writings are more than strong. Paul E. Johnson and Jacques Pasquier have ably married psychology and theology into powerful essays that greatly illuminate the human struggle and its possibilities. Wayne Oates' essay was probably the most informative in the collection. He combined exegetical information, reference to previous study of conversion, some church history, and a considerable collection of examples and references.

Conn's book is further strengthened by its sensitivity to the contemporary situation in theology. The opening essay by Lonergan, and later that of Baum, are both informative, introductory discussions of the non-traditional mode in which theology is being conducted today. Add to this Conn's inclusion of the liberation theologians, with their sensitivity to collective sin. This all

⁴⁵ p. 150.

⁴⁶ p. 132.

⁴⁷ p. 145.

helps the reader achieve some freedom from limited or privatized notions of conversion that may have prevailed in more traditional settings.

Conversion's weakest point is its biblical section. Why Conn does not draw on more and stronger essays here is a mystery. Why he consigns the Bible to one interpreter--Lacan--when the design of an anthology is to hear many voices, is also puzzling. Further, Lacan ignores much of the New Testament witness to conversion. The Pauline corpus and the Acts of the Apostles are neglected. Thus, Paul's conversion, among others, receives no careful attention.

Further, what we have from Lacan is weak. His work--like that of many who mine the Bible for information on conversion--devotes insufficient attention to hermeneutical problems which arise when the Scriptures are explored for information about contemporary issues. In fact, the English words "convert," "conversion," "converted," etc. rarely appear in the New Testament and never in the Old. In instances when they do appear there is virtually no consistency from translation to translation. Translators show no consensus on which Greek words to render into "conversion." Thus, a crucial interpretative issue in studying the Bible on conversion is always to keep clear which words are biblical words and which words are our words about biblical words.

Lacan fails on this point, uncritically imposing the contemporary concept of "conversion" on the biblical text wherever he sees fit. For example, Lacan presents King David's contrition, following the Bathsheba affair, as an "exemplary" conversion. The reader may ask, "Why David? The text doesn't announce David as a convert. Why not Moses at the burning bush, Abraham, or Isaiah at the point of their commissionings?" On what grounds does Lacan choose this incident rather than any other incident?

It is useful to remember that New Testament scholars have questioned Paul's "conversion"--the so-called prototypical conversion--for thirty years. If "conversion" might be inappropriate in describing Paul's experience, surely we must be cautious in the use of this term with respect to any biblical personality. This observation is also valid for texts which supposedly describe conversion. "Conversion" is much more our word than the Bible's word. And Lacan fails to acknowledge this.

If Conn would have included essays which dealt with this hermeneutical issue, his anthology would have been stronger. Krister Stendahl⁴⁸ wrestles with this as does Alan Segal.⁴⁹ Both

⁴⁸Krister Stendahl, Paul Among Jews and Gentiles and Other Essays (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1976)

authors, and frankly, many others, would have strengthened the biblical section.

A second weakness concerns Conn's neglect of worthy materials which might have made his collection more ecumenical. The reader is left to wonder why this group of writings was selected while others were not. Nowhere in the book does Conn acknowledge the rationale for his choices. I wondered, for example, why samples from the revivalistic or pietistic wing of Protestantism were omitted. If Conn wished to include voices from all quarters, he fails here. If, on the other hand, he wished to offset the overpowering presence of revivalists, televangelists, and the like, he leaves it to the reader to find examples of their thinking.

I deem this a weakness because Conn declines to steer the reader into dialogue with the religious right whose influence on any discussion of conversion is unavoidable. Had Conn included a snippet out of, say, Billy Graham's How to Be Born Again, the reader would be well-equipped to compare and contrast one view of conversion with wider ecumenical witness.

Despite this missed opportunity, Walter Conn has served his readers well in gathering an array of thinkers on conversion. A wide audience of readers might never have heard these voices above the clamor about conversion coming from a narrow quarter of the Church.

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⁴⁹Segal, Alan F., Paul the Convert: The Apostolate and Apostasy of Saul the Pharisee (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990). Of course, Segal's book was published after Conn's. I only mention him as an example of a scholar sensitive to the interpretive problems connected with conversion.