

of the order, of the life of St Dominic in England, that through our society the Dominican order, a redeemed society, part of the mystical body of Christ, we may set an example to the England that has lost a sense of society, that has degenerated into a mere bureaucracy; so that we as Dominicans may bring back the life of society to the nation to whom in the beginning St Dominic sent Friar Gilbert de Fresnay, and in which, to which, the Dominican order, before the reformation, contributed so much; may our contribution be not less than that of our brethren before that religious calamity. This depends on our own personal example, our own sincerity, the fullness with which we live our Dominican life. May St Dominic grant that fulness of Dominican life in us as he would have us live it.



### A NOTE ON CONVERSION<sup>1</sup>

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**C**ONVERSION means by and large changing the main principle which governs the shape and direction of a human life. As such it may be for better or for worse; a man may commit himself to evil, he may decide against God, he can adopt Marxism, if he is a Catholic he may turn to Greek Orthodoxy or to Protestantism, if he is a Christian he may become a Jew or join a religion alien to our tradition. In short, what a psychologist may call a conversion, a moralist or canonist may call an apostasy.

Moreover, a distinction can be drawn between a religious conversion and a moral conversion. The first is a matter of our ideas concerning God and the economy of salvation, a change of mind and an intellectual conviction which usually leads to the acceptance of the teaching of a religious body, and agreement with its practices. The second is a matter of putting moral principles into practice. This shift of behaviour can happen outside a religious context, or it may go with and be intimately related to a religious conversion, or it may take place within a religion hitherto professed but scarcely lived, and is then sometimes called a

<sup>1</sup> This article first appeared, in a different translation, in the American Jesuit Quarterly *Thought*, for the spring of 1958, and is published here by kind permission of the editors.

mystical conversion and is exemplified in lives of saints. The sense is echoed in the ecclesiastical term *conversi* applied to those who have turned from wordliness to the pursuit of the evangelical counsels within the framework of monasticism.

This change of heart is also a religious conversion inasmuch as faith now comes alive; previously God may have been assented to, but now his reality and claims are the mainspring of life. The old testament does not employ separate terms for the conversion of unbelievers to the true faith and for the conversion of the chosen people to the living 'knowledge of Yahweh' and to obedience to his will. There are two words. *Shubh* in Hebrew (*epistrephein* in Greek) means to turn, to turn round, to come back, and it is transferred from the local to the moral order to mean to convert oneself; the same has happened to the Latin *convertere* and its derivatives in Western languages.<sup>2</sup> Next, *nacham* in Hebrew means to moan, to sigh, and hence to repent, to do penance. The Greek equivalent is *metanoein*, to change one's mind, to recover oneself, to change sentiments, and hence to repent, to be converted. The Latin *poenitere* has not kept the full force of the Hebrew or Greek, for, affected by *poena* or punishment, it has been narrowed to signify onerous satisfaction or affliction. When *metanoein* has the nuance of repentance then its meaning in the old and new testaments is very close to that of *epistrephein*. One must do penance or be converted at the good tidings of a herald.<sup>3</sup>

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A conversion is a personal step taken by a moral adult, that is to say, by a person who holds himself responsible and who makes the choice his own. All manner of psychological and moral movements are involved, all manner of cognitive and affective motivations enter into the *ensemble*. Environmental factors are present, sometimes as inhibitions, and so also are constitutional factors; it may well be asked whether an atavism may not sometimes influence the passage from one type of religion to another. Indeed conversion is a highly complex affair, morally, socially, historically, perhaps even genetically, and the study of it from the purely psychological point of view is of great interest, even to the narrowest theologian.

<sup>2</sup> Mark, i, 15; vi, 12. Matt. xii, 41, Luke, v, 32; xxiv, 47. Acts xx, 21, xxvi, 20. Matt. iii, 8. Luke, xv, 7.

<sup>3</sup> cf. Deut. xxx, 10. Jer. iii, 14. Osee xiv, 2. Amos iv, 8. Is. vi, 10; lv, 7. Jonas ii, 13. Matt. xiii, 15. Mark iv, 12. Luke xxii, 32. Acts iii, 19; xxvi, 18; xxviii, 27. 1 Peter ii, 25.

Their great variety makes classification difficult; nevertheless, given a sufficient documentation, conversions could be grouped under specific headings—sudden and gradual, those which follow and those which precede reasoned reflection, individual and collective. It may happen that the new synthesis dawns suddenly and the arguments are worked out afterwards. As for individual conversions, the Church prefers them; Cardinal Vaughan said, that 'the conversion of souls one by one, precisely as they enter the world and depart from it to their particular judgment, is the result that I look for'. The conversion of a religious community, as at Caldey, falls into this category when a number of individual conversions are related to and contemporary with one another. Religious psychology, however, must allow for collective conversions, for there have been in the past, and doubtless still are in the mission field, cases where whole groups follow their leader, and evangelical revivalism sometimes produces mass movements.

Psychological explanations of the fact may bring out some real aspects, but they stay at the level of phenomena and do not really reach the heart of the matter. Sometimes they treat conversion as a crisis in adolescence; sometimes they are affected by the Protestant literature emphasizing the feeling of sin being overcome through total surrender to grace. William James regards conversion as the end of unconscious incubation of sentiments and ideas which appear, or rather explode, in our consciousness when an emotional shock or a fresh insight releases the pressure of our desire to cast away ill-fitting and worn-out articles of our past. One over-simplification is the psychoanalytical teaching, which limits conversion to unstable and non-integrated personalities who can find security only by suppressing one part of themselves, or who commit themselves to a dominant object which calms them and serves to compensate for their failures elsewhere.

Psychologists give us descriptions rather than explanations, and they can be fair enough so far as they go. A conversion may doubtless resolve a period of disequilibrium and insecurity. It may come when a person has been uprooted, perhaps by a shameful experience, intensely felt, or by tragedy, grief, war, captivity, illness. In fact even a simple change of environment can be conducive. Yet we can, and should, try to go beyond the

psychological transcription of the facts. Two considerations are here relevant.

First, it is not enough to examine *how* things come about; we should also seek to understand *what* they mean. Judgments of morality and conscience have content and 'intentionality'—a reaching out for something. So we must take into account what converts feel they are after. The convergence of their testimonies is impressive. It points not only to the existence of God but also to his action on their souls. Their experience, they are certain, is not only directed to him but also conducted by him. Their accounts fit in remarkably well with the writings of the theologians on the effects of grace.

Next, one and the same fact permits of different interpretations according to our system of reference. Thus from a physiological and medical angle, St John the Baptist died of a haemorrhage, but from a theological angle his death was an act of martyrdom, and the holiness and real character of this witness can be appreciated only in the history of human salvation. Similarly, to the psychologist a conversion may appear merely as the culmination of a process which he has more or less accurately and fully observed, though he will be wise to recognize data that escape being resolved into his laws: for instance, attempts to explain the conversion of St Paul in terms of some internal conflict can be rather ridiculous. The theologian, however, introduces other criteria from the doctrines of faith and morals; revelation informs us about God and his providential deeds, about the virtues and the gifts of the Spirit. A conversion wrought by God is not merely a psychological fact, it is a religious fact; it is not merely an end, it is a beginning; it is not merely finding refuge after a storm, but voyaging out to boundless charity, a chapter in the return of rational creatures to God under the sign of the cross.

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Classical theology treats of conversion mainly in its study of the decisive act of justification.<sup>4</sup> There, above all, is manifested the gracious and sovereign mercy of God, which can work, as in the baptism of babies, without any conscious human act on our part. It is rather curious to note a swing in Protestantism from the early insistence on pure grace and man's passivity to doubts

<sup>4</sup> St Thomas. *Summa Theologica*, 1a-2ae. cxiii. Council of Trent, Sess. vi, especially c.5 and 6. cf. R. Aubert, *Le problème de l'acte de foi*. Louvain, 1945. p. 76.

about infant baptism and making much of the role of religious experience in conversion. Protestants, however, who are faithful to the old sacramental tradition keep the distinction between regeneration wrought at baptism by an act of God and conversion requiring a man's own free act (cf. Job iii, 7; Acts iii, 19).

Conversion ordinarily comes about in the conscious life of a grown-up, and supposes a process of preparation and gradual approach. Rarely is it instantaneous and identified with justification, though, of course, theologians of the school of St Augustine and St Thomas will stress the need of actual divine grace acting on the mind and will;<sup>5</sup> grace is paramount, precedes any merit on our part, and works from the beginning. Yet they also maintain the reality and the proper role of human freedom. We shall not here seek to analyse the problem of the interplay of grace and freewill, but to indicate, from the Bible and the experience of converts, how the two join in a kind of dialogue, a reciprocity which can be compared to a game of dominoes, when one places his six against another's.

Note how those who discover faith are first confronted with a sign which leads them to the truth of Jesus Christ. They declare themselves for or against, according as their profound disposition is towards opening out or closing up the self. This appears particularly in St John's gospel. What is the quality of their love? If it is responsive to the appeal and invitation of Another, then it can go as far as charity, and in the light of faith God will be loved above all. Theologians examine the typical phases of conversion-justification, namely faith, hope, the fear of God, initial love, repentance, firm purpose of amendment; but they are well aware that the movement of life is not always a respecter of classifications; it is synthetic and concrete, not entirely covered by the analytic and abstract.

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Finally let us reflect on the apologetic value of conversions. A conversion is an affair between a human person and God; to use it to grind an axe or to turn it to account can be an odious business. Nevertheless we are called to give glory to God, to be saved within the Church, through and with one another. The new testament exhibits conversions as miracles and signs for the benefit of those who do not believe. St Paul was prepared to parade his

<sup>5</sup> H. Bouillard. *Conversion et grâce chez S. Thomas d'Aquin*. Paris, 1944.

own case, and the fact of conversion to the Church belongs to the mark of holiness, to the *signum levatum in nationes* spoken of by the Vatican Council (Sess. III, c. 3).

We can begin by discussing moral miracles in a purely scientific manner. When a fact is observed which cannot be explained on the ordinary premises of human psychology and history, and when all the natural possibilities have been exhausted, then we can reasonably infer divine intervention. Rigorous proof is difficult, more so in the case of a moral miracle than with a physical miracle, since psychological science is engaged, the resources of which are neither too well defined nor even explored. Only that part is miraculous which withstands the severest critical investigation. The limited scope of this must be recognized, and I would refer back to what I have said about any method which restricts itself to phenomena. For the fact of a conversion must be taken as a whole; it is not enough to reduce its elements one by one to their natural causes—it would be like saying that Napoleon's genius consisted in defeating enemy armies separately and to leave it at that.

The whole bears witness to the presence and action of God. It is not a challenge to the purely rational intelligence merely, but to the whole man who is in search of holiness and whose heart is open to God. The moral miracle of a conversion is less a proof than a sign. Too much must not be demanded in the way of rational demonstration. Experience teaches us that the intellectual reasons at work may be not compelling. Subjectively they serve to correct the convert's perspective; objectively, they may be weak or ambiguous when placed on the plane of scientific reasons which can be exchanged among critical minds. We are dealing with a practical choice, and there no man is exactly like another in his difficulties and his needs.

Then also we should acknowledge that conversion also works in reverse, away from the Church. This poses a problem for Catholic apologetics. Here the theological setting should be borne in mind. Apologetics should not require more, or something else, in this matter than what theology requires. St Paul told the men of Athens that God made all nations of men to seek him, if haply they might feel after him and find him, though he be not far from every one of us (Acts xvii, 27). Grace works outside the visible frontiers of the Church to bring men to God and to the

salvation of which the incarnation is the key. Every conversion to God finds its truth and fulness in the Church of Jesus Christ. In this question especially, apologetics must avoid superficial haste and the spirit of triumph. It does not have to prove more than theology affirms.

Should we desire to make converts? The answer is evident. Who can blame a man for trying to bring others to share in a truth he holds, or a Catholic for trying to attract to the Church the greatest possible number, of Christians and non-Christians alike? Yet this does not imply that any means whatsoever can be adopted to secure adherence. The apostolate is not a form of propaganda like any other, it is not out for sale promotion, it is not a recruiting campaign, a search for clients. It stems from supernatural faith and charity, and therefore respects and safeguards liberty, sincerity, candour. Its purpose is to help men to fulfil themselves in God and with God, according to the plan of salvation willed by God in Christ and his Church. 'I came that they may have life, and have it more abundantly' (John x, 10).

In entering this communion a person is asked to renounce no truth he previously held or good he lived by, but to restore them and integrate them in a richer life. Conversion is a fulfilment. The term *profession of faith* is more correct and comprehensive and less offensive than *abjuration*, and the Holy Office has preferred the positive to the negative in recently approved formulas. In this light conversions to the Church can be considered without the sharpness of polemics and confessional rivalries.



## AMERICAN CONVERT WORK

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**E**ACH year in the United States 150,000 converts enter the Catholic Church. Considered by itself, this is a rather impressive figure. But when we consider that ours is a nation of some 170 million people (well over 100 million of them still outside the Church) and when we remember that there are some 40 million potential Catholic apostles, these convert statistics leave us little cause for complacency. The trial balance is