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Conversion / Change / Transformation of Lifestyle

1 Introduction

“You must change your life!” (Rilke 1995). The inner voice rousing young Rilke while contemplating one of Rodin’s sculptures is also meant to address the poem’s reader, testing her readiness to move forward and make a new start. In traditional Protestant milieus such an openness to fundamental change would be framed in terms of Christian doctrine and addressed as the need to be born again. In postmodern spirituality, on the other hand, manifestations of this state of mind and heart seem to be the religious seeker or shopper. In recent decades, transitions within and between religious traditions, denominational contexts or spiritual milieus have drawn much interest in the scientific study of religion. Today, various academic disciplines join in the attempt to describe and interpret these different versions of conversion. Section 2 briefly depicts the branches into which this research has spread over time. In section 3 I introduce my own approach of reflecting on conversion. Here, my academic and cultural background becomes especially apparent. The case study in section 4 focuses on conversion in the sense of a (re-)vitalization of piety, which, in certain traditional Protestant milieus, is still experienced, practiced, and discussed as giving one’s life to Jesus. Section 5, finally, discusses new research perspectives for Practical Theology and Religious Studies in the field of conversion.

2 Versions of Conversion

When the scientific study of religion was established at American universities at the turn of the nineteenth century, conversion was among its first subjects. Early American Psychology attempted to explain what was going on during the revivals of the so called Second and Third Great Awakening (Wulff 2002 and Zock 2006). Aiming to reach beyond Christian teaching, scholars had to develop new scientific methodology. Data was first obtained in the form of diaries, spiritual autobiographies, and letters. Leuba and Starbuck were the first to use standard questionnaires, which were based on an evaluation of conversion narratives (Leuba 1896 and Starbuck 1897). These conversion narratives, for their part, followed patterns common in evangelical and revivalist contexts. Conversion was modeled according to the ordo salutis in its reformed tradition. Consequently, the topos of a personal crisis being solved at the climax of the transformative event trickled down into scientific theory. An example for this is William James’ well-known definition of conversion (James 1991, 157):
James thought conversions to be a process, over the course of which personal priorities were rearranged. Yet, there were also other types of conversion, which, according to his informants, were experienced as highly disruptive and emotionally overwhelming. James explained these seemingly sudden conversions in terms of parapsychology. From this point of view, they could be equally understood as unfolding gradually over time. However, they did so subliminally and remained unnoticed until the point at which the converts themselves became aware.

Following Leuba, Starbuck and James, the paradigm of crisis and solution became a standard explanation for conversion which eventually led to pathologizing. Following Freud (1948), research in the tradition of psychoanalysis often was reductionist in its thinking that conversions were a rather unsuccessful attempt to repress personal conflicts. Another strand of psychological research tried to understand to what extent insecure attachment patterns influenced the convert’s readiness to break former ties (Ullman 1989).

During the second half of the twentieth century, Psychology’s interest in conversion began to dwindle. At about the same time, Sociology of Religion began to investigate conversion (Bruce 2006). The topic was brought to the attention during a public debate on “New Religious Movements” which had appeared on the scene in the 1960s. Suspected of brainwashing, these movements were heavily attacked by so-called Anti-Cultists (Bromley 1983), accusing them of subjecting converts to great emotional stress in order to make them ripe for emotional and financial exploitation. In contrast to this conception by the Anti-Cultists, sociologists painted a different picture: that of a convert actively engaging in the religious groups’ (re-)socializing influences (Wilson 1978 and Bromley and Shupe 1979). Far from being a victim of unorthodox discipling methods, these converts were seen to simply be perusing their options. Taking on the identity of a religious seeker and experimenting with different worldviews and lifestyles on the spiritual marketplace, they were seeking new ties, which might foster their personal development and help them grow beyond themselves. According to Rodney Stark and Roger Finke, this exploratory testing had its own method: converts who wanted to maximize their social, emotional, and religious capital, had to rationally balance their own interests with those of the group (Stark and Finke 2000).

Leaving undecided whether rational-choice explanations reach to the very foundation of religious practices, researchers were confronted with the fact that a path, once chosen, seemed to be far from irreversible for the convert. In this experimental climate, Peter L. Berger coined the phrase of the heretical imperative (Berger 1979). James T. Richardson, in contrast, suggested giving up the notion of conversion as a one-time experience and proposed focusing on conversion careers (Richardson 1980).
instead. In his view, it was about time to announce a change of paradigm. For the old conception of a convert seized by sudden and overwhelming emotions had now been replaced by converts actively engaging in spiritual identity management.

However, also the figure of the flaneur on the religious scene turned out to be highly dependent on the ideology of religious groups or, more irritating still, of the research’s design. In a meta-study, which studied the motivations and expectations attributed to converts, John Lofland and Norman Skonovud were able to show that the experimental convert was merely one out of seven different types. Alongside these active conversions were those described as either passive, intellectual, mystical, affective, coerced or revivalist (Lofland and Skonovd 1981).

In view of never-ending typologies of converts it seemed advisable to look for approaches which considered the religious group’s expectations in tandem with the convert’s motivations and reflect upon the correlation between these factors. Research drawing on ethnomethodology and social constructivism allowed light to be shed into a group’s universe of discourse, such that conversions from and to religious milieus could finally start to be understood in terms of the group’s own logics. Consequently, studies focused on conversion narratives, assuming that converts presenting themselves as members of a group were generally expected to relate experiences consistent with the group’s ideology of transformation. Based on an analysis of various conversion narratives, David Snow and Richard Machalek (Snow and Machalek 1983) were able to show that participants carefully studied the group’s rhetoric and opinions on the decisive transformative event, thereby gradually learning how to convincingly tell their own stories in-line with the group’s language. Drawing on (Luckmann 1986), Volkhard Krech (Krech 1998) identified different narrative patterns for different religious groups, which worked like a frame whereby rather obscure feelings could be made sense of, interpreted, and finally articulated.

However, telling one’s story does not imply that the narrated event has already taken place. According to Peter Stromberg (Stromberg 1993), the event of accounting for one’s conversion could also be a way of making it occur. Emotions can be evoked at the very moment they are vocalized. In Stromberg’s study, conversion narratives had the dual function of representation and enaction.

These and similar studies in the line of social constructionism opened doors to a change in perspective. Contrary to established opinion, the essence of conversion was no longer sought in highly individualistic and therefore inexpressible personal feelings. Rather, conversion was viewed as being culturally situated and socially shaped – the result of a group’s endeavor to make meaning. This was even true for the personal crisis and its solution for it turned out to be told of only in such milieus, where conversion meant deliverance from corruption and sin and was assumed to be the only remedy of the convert’s problems. Brought about, or at least supported by language, conversions were now seen as highly group-specific discourse. The ritualistic dimensions of telling one’s story did not go unnoticed; nevertheless, they remained unexplored until brought to the attention by the ethnosciences. In the last three decades, one strand of the debate specialized in conversions taking place in
the sequel of macro-cultural transformation (Gooren 2014). Studies on the micro-level focused on the extralinguistic realities of conversion – the ritual, bodily and artefactual dimensions of conversion gradually came into view, opening new ways of understanding conversion as culturally inflected experience and practice (Glazier 2003; Sachs and Norris 2003; Jaggi 2012).

3 Conversion as a Social Practice

As a member of a Protestant mainline church in Germany, I talked frequently with people of the same institution, who considered it important to state at some point in our conversation, that they had been born again or had given their life to Jesus. Their emphasis made it clear that what was spoken about in metaphorical terms was indeed essential to the person’s identity. To me it seemed that having given one’s life to Jesus or having been born again was akin to a key to a symbolic universe of its own – open for those who were willing to enter on its terms, while being firmly locked for ‘the rest of the world’ which, from this point of view, seemed to be on the outside and often described as being different, if not sinful. To find out more about what made people think that way, I set out to explore what I call conversionist piety. Whilst doing so, I have come to develop an approach, which might be called Conversion as a Social Practice (Krause 2018). In this framework, questions in the vein of the following could be posed:

- What exactly do people mean when they state that they are born again or have given their life to Jesus? What self-understandings are associated with these claims?
- What do people feel, or are meant to feel, when they are born again? Which experiences are accounted for, and what are the possible ways of cultivating them?
- Are there any practices which support the experience and self-concept of being born again? What are people who have given their life to Jesus expected to do?
- Does their behavior have any implications on how they treat their body? And if there is something like a ‘converted body’, what does it look like? Are there any artefacts involved in the process of its formation?

Conversion, as can be easily seen, is conceptualized as something multidimensional. Consequently, narratives, experiences, bodies, and artefacts are equally considered, for all of them carry and produce meaning. Whilst previous research on conversion generally focused on either of the above-mentioned aspects, the following case study holds the assumption that in conversionist contexts – as in every-day life and practice – discourse, emotion, body, and artefact are inextricably enmeshed; interwoven in a network of socially constructed meaning. Among the born-again, discourse, emotions, bodies and artefacts may take different shapes, yet they still interact reciprocally, whilst constituting what might be called the conversionist reality of ‘pious universes’.
Conversion as a Social Practice draws on concepts from the sociology of knowledge, practice theory and the ethnohistory of emotions. Integrated in a cultural-sociological framework, these theoretical perspectives provide the Practical Theologian with useful tools to describe and interpret religious cultures – in this case, more specifically, conversionist cultures of discourse, emotion, and body.

With this theoretical background on the one hand, and data from my sample on the other, ‘giving one’s life to Jesus’ or ‘being born again’ could be conceptualized as a process of entering into a symbolic universe. In other words, members of the conversionist milieus in my sample generate, share and pass on meaning – a knowledge in the widest sense of the word, which supports their views and ways of life. This knowledge consists of doings, sayings, and feelings. It is therefore analyzed with the help of a threefold concept, differentiating conceptual knowledge, emotional knowledge, and body knowledge. For the sake of analytical clarity, the three are described one after the other. It is important, however, to note that in the process of (conversionist) meaning-making, doings, sayings, and feelings are indissolubly enmeshed.

- **Conceptual knowledge** is knowing about group-specific beliefs, norms, and values, which are normally made explicit only in teaching contexts. In ordinary life, conceptual knowledge is embedded in everyday speech, in stories, proverbs or jokes. Because conceptual knowledge is essentially discourse, it can be subjected to debate.

- **Emotional knowledge** is knowing about and knowing by. What is known about are emotional repertoires – conventions and cultural agreements about how particular feelings are generated, regulated, expressed, and named. In conversionist contexts emotional knowledge about can be both knowledge about the experiences crucial in the event of ‘being born again’, and the practices of stirring them up. In contrast, knowing by emotions is best described as awareness. It is gained whilst engaging in emotionalizing practices. Knowledge about, which has transformed into knowing by, is highly persuasive, for it bears the evidence of personal experience, which is very difficult to call into question.

- **Body knowledge** is knowing about norms and techniques of the body. In conversionist milieus there are a lot of dos and don’ts, which regulate the regenerate’s conduct and ways of bearing. Knowledge about the body merges into the body’s knowing how as soon as these norms are transformed into routine and become visible in the body’s habitus and performance. More accurately a skill than a knowledge, knowing how is a pre-conscious kind of knowledge is. It can therefore be called implicit or embodied knowledge. Self-evident in its nature and tacitly working within the body and out of it, it is difficult to put in words. In situations of conflict, it might even be beyond debate. For conversionist knowledge once turned into flesh and blood has become a fact speaking for itself. The same is true when it imprints itself into artefacts. Transformed into the body’s materiality it enables a person to an intuitive way of being in and being aware of the world, which could be referred to as a knowing by the body.
Considering this, entering the symbolic universes of pious milieus does not only require picking up relevant knowledge by listening to the talk of the people. It also involves absorbing the group's views and ways of life through engaging in group-specific practices. Simultaneously they learn, how to bring conversionist realities about. Acquisition of conversionist knowledge therefore cannot be reduced to its cognitive nor to its emotional or bodily dimension, but rather is an interplay between all three dimensions.

4 Giving One’s Life to Jesus. A Case Study in Humility

Objections against conversionist milieus and their beliefs and practices are frequently voiced, both in academic theology and in the context of the church. Cultural distance proves to be helpful when trying to look upon a subject of research in a manner, that is non-judgmental from the outset. Other than that, it sharpens the eye to the unexpected. For this reason, the case study chosen here is a historical one. It draws on a rich archive of sources of various types going back to the colonies of British New England between the 1660s and the 1750s and allows for an exploration of the ways in which ‘pious universes’ are formed and developed over the course of three generations in different social contexts. And it sheds light on how the beliefs and practices brought to the New World by Puritan settlers were transformed into what would later be called Early Evangelicalism.

It was the wish to reform the church by reforming the people, which made the first settlers join hands and set up holy commonwealths on the shores of North America. To understand what reform meant and what giving one’s life to Jesus had to do with it, it was deemed necessary to understand and, more importantly, to learn, humility, which seemed to be everything at once: a virtue, a value, an emotion, and an outward bearing and demeanor. It is therefore fitting to focus on humility in the following when describing beliefs and practices of New English pious milieus.

The conceptual knowledge of New English cultures of piety can be traced through various representations of the order of salvation. These are explained in theological treatises and sermons, catechisms, and manuals of devotion, but they have also found their way into spiritual (auto-)biographies and fiction. Variable in details, these versions of the ordo salutis are generally based on the doctrine of law and gospel. Accordingly, conversion is depicted as a turn from darkness into light. Within this framework, different emotions are arranged like the links of a

1 Usually, the anti-intellectual impetus of conversionist beliefs and practices is criticized. Apart from that, missionary activities are thought to undo, what ecumenical and interreligious dialogue has achieved.
They are told of in conversion narratives, which are usually modeled according to the following pattern: At first, the convert-to-be is depicted as an unrepentant sinner. Various evil deeds are named to prove his moral depravity. Then, a call to repent is received, which is generally ignored for some time. At some point, however, the message trickles down, triggering contrition and remorse. In this state, named humiliation, the convert pictures himself in danger of eternal damnation. Filled with terror he enters a struggle with his Maker, which ultimately involves subjecting himself to God’s sovereign will. His heart is overpowered by the strong desire to receive Jesus as his savior and to entrust his life unto him. After an often long and distressing period, this is experienced as the decisive turn – humiliation is transformed into faith which is often described as coming from death to life or being born again. Unfortunately, this happy state is of short duration. Again, humility dampens the joy of salvation. This time, however, it is experienced differently. Whereas previously he was forced to act by terror and fright, the convert now for the first time thoroughly regrets his transgressions. But true repentance is soon overshadowed by scruples and doubt or, even worse, backsliding into sin. Converts are therefore expected to talk about the measures they have taken to secure their faith and to lead a sanctified life. Narratives generally end with modest statements of their success – humble declarations of humble people who have come to realize that assurance can never truly be achieved as long as they live.

Obviously, humility is addressed twice: once before uniting with Jesus and once afterwards. While at first it is very much an experience of being crushed into submission to God’s will, humility after the turn is meant to be experienced as a pleasant sensation: a melting of the heart in the sight of God’s love. Opening the convert’s eyes to his former hardness of heart, this time, humility triggers genuine regret. Humility, as a result, is experienced as a mixed feeling, offering the convert both, sadness, and comfort.

Making mind and heart switch between darkness and light humility was highly valued and sought after. Pastors and laypeople dedicated to the salvation of souls aimed at cultivating humility through pious emotion management, involving spiritual disciplines which were also called humiliating exercises. Best known is probably the practice of hell-fire preaching. Through vivid descriptions of eternal torments preachers urged their flock to humble themselves and repent before all is lost. Congregations not yet inured against such practice and accustomed to reacting with call-and-response, translated the representations they received from the pulpit into bodily performances of mortification. Sinking to the ground, moaning, and wringing hands were common, as were tears, which were thought to be the water that rises

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2 A prominent example is Perkins (1595). For its reception in the New England context see Ball (1992).
from a frozen heart that had begun to melt. Similarly, collapsing was viewed as a bodily manifestation of dying to sin.

The impressions received in the meetinghouse were contemplated and expanded upon in the privacy of the closet or through devotional fellowship. Manuals on the art of meditation were printed and sold to the public at small cost next to hymnbooks. In some places, singing schools were set up, teaching people how to engage emotionally and bodily with the feelings conjured up in hymns by Isaac Watts (Watts 1709) or Elizabeth Singer-Rowe’s devotional poetry (Singer-Rowe 1737). These exercises were supplemented by techniques of the body supporting the impression that the spiritual issues ruminated upon were indeed present as tangible realities. In his spiritual autobiography, Nathan Cole describes inserting his finger into his pipe while pondering the torments of hell, hoping thereby to enter a state of humility, preparing him for receiving saving grace (Crawford 1976, 94).

Running the risk of being misused by the inexperienced or spiritually over-ambitious, humiliating exercises were not exempt from criticism. Authors of devotional literature therefore admonished their readers to practice with care else they might run the risk of going mad. Cases of spiritual melancholy were frequently reported. In the face of this, opinions differed as to whether humiliating exercises were either dangerous, or whether they were simply indispensable to assist in being born again for they triggered the crucial emotions without which no saving conversion was expected to come to pass. Both, advocates, and critics were fully aware of the fact that these humiliating exercises were strongly persuasive. Engaged in skillful practice, people obtained, so to speak, intuitive access to the spiritual realities their minds and hearts were set upon: a knowledge gained through personal experience.

Yet, emotions are of a fleeting nature. It was therefore crucial to turn them into the hard facts of every-day life and practice. Expected to sanctify their lives, people who had given their life to Jesus embarked on a course of bodily transformation, which essentially consisted in making humility a habit. Eating and drinking, but also clothing and relaxing the body was done unto the Lord, turning the body into an instrument fit for his service. Sanctification therefore implied not to make the body an end of itself but to carefully exert discipline and self-control in all matters of sensuality; modestly answering the body’s basic needs, and vigilanty taming inappropriate appetites. An attitude of conscious self-regulation and restraint was desired, which could be described as mortification, self-denial, or humility.

In keeping with this ideal, lavish luxury and wasteful abundance were abhorred. Men and women who paraded costly clothing and fine ornaments were made to pay a penalty for making as how of pride (Shurtleff 1853, 126.183.274f.) which, contrary to the humility and meekness of a lamb of God, exhibited discontent with one’s calling

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4 Widely read in New-England was for example Richard Baxter’s *The Saints Everlasting Rest.*

5 Best known are probably the cases described in Jonathan Edwards’ *Faithful Narrative.*

6 Particularly evident in Richard Baxter’s *Christian Directory,* which was also very popular in New England.
and vocation. No less reprehensible were elaborate hairstyles and the use of cosmetics (Mather 1691). Wigs were fiercely attacked, not least for their time-consuming maintenance. Since time was a precious gift of the Lord, it was better dedicated to his service. For the same reason, Native American practices of community building by doing each other’s hair were harshly criticized (Clark 2003, 97f.115f.).

Humility also had to inscribe itself into the body through nourishing. People were expected to consciously observe which quantities of food and drink supported their health, and modestly restrain themselves from consuming too much. The mindful attitude towards food, and the diligent handling of it could even be made a topic for introspection. An increasing willingness to submit to the ‘duty of mortification’ and exert self-discipline at the table was interpreted as a sign of growing in grace. The image of the reformed alcoholic-turned-sober, still prominent to this day, was a popular figure in missionary tracts (Brainerd 1746, 13f.)

In the context of missions, English techniques of clothing and nourishing the body became sacrosanct. In the eyes of the missionaries, indigenous people were not only to be converted spiritually; they were to be changed in body and soul which included shaping the body according to standards of piety. For a converted body not only displayed humility; it was also thought to be a vehicle for triggering humble feelings and attitudes because “holiness in visible realities is apt to affect the World more deeply, than in Portraiture or Precept only.” (Baxter 1677, 2f.). Made material in bodies and artefacts, conversionist values, attitudes and emotions thus gained the evidence of tangible realities. Pious care of the body became looked upon as a means of grace comparable to other spiritual exercises such as praying, contemplating the scriptures, or listening to sermons.

5 Reaching Beyond

In some Protestant contexts giving one’s life to Jesus or being born again is placed at the center of Christian identity. The historical case study presented here suggests that this event is connected to unique cultures of discourse, emotions, and the body. Of course, the beliefs and practices of protestant conversionist milieus today have changed significantly. However, there seems to be a certain likeness to modern Evangelical and Pentecostal spirituality, which suggests that we are dealing here with an interesting and multifaceted cultural pattern, still inspiring Christian communities, and churches worldwide. It would be interesting to trace these different versions of conversionist piety in synchrony and diachrony – and maybe even in parody.⁷ The three-dimensional model of knowledge presented in this article might stimulate further empirical research. This in turn would help Practical Theology to find suita-

ble criteria for the assessment of conversionist believes and practices and encourage church professionals to exert spiritual leadership sensibly and responsibly.

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