

## **Abstract**

Religious conversion is an interesting phenomenon that crosses religious beliefs. This phenomenon intersects with many various disciplines, from medicine through the scientific disciplines such as anthropology, sociology, religious studies, psychology and theology. Religious conversion may on the one hand be a demonstration of deep spiritual experience and on the other, the result of strong pressure from others. We can get closer to the truth only through the authentic testimonies of the converts. This is why I have chosen the theme of the religious conversion in the context of "pure experience". We can see differences among conversions to various religions. But it is necessary to say, that I am interested in conversion to Christianity. But the Christianity of two thousand years ago is not the Christianity of today. The Apostle Paul joined a marginal movement at a time when such acceptance was punishable by death. Today, however, converts have joined millions of faithful around the whole world. And this is why religious conversion to Christianity is a lively phenomenon.

In my thesis I would like to clarify the question: "*What is religious conversion?*" Is it a manifestation of the power of God, or is it a clearly human decision? Has the conversion some connection with the social environment, or is it a deeply personal act? And finally, is the conversion a single action or does it mature in the heart of a person over a long time? I would like to describe selected themes of religious reversal associated with selected stories of converts. I will also focus on the stories of famous converts, such as Paul of Tarsus, Augustine of Hippo or Quintus Septimius Florens Tertullianus. My dissertation focuses on the authentic reports of these "second births" and compares this information with theoretical constructs of religious conversion.

The road from Damascus and conversion of Apostle Paul had an important role in the early Christian experience. It was a unquestionable manifestation of the presence of God. For a long time, until the nineteenth century, was "Pauline - type experience" a universal prototype for any other conversions. In this case we are talking about sudden conversion. This process is more emotional than rational, and the convert is a passive element acting under external forces. For this type of conversion, a dramatic transformation of self is typical.

But the contrasts can be found everywhere. If there are sudden conversions, there must also be gradual conversions. This process is typical for late adolescence or early adulthood. More than wild emotion, the intellect and rational thinking are in play. And this

is why we are talking about spiritual transformation rather than religious conversion. The transformed person is here active and searching participant. This transformation is not permanent; it may be repeated several times. Intellectual searching can be found in the case of Augustine of Hippo. The various types of spiritual transformations of his life can be seen in his extensive work. He was affected in his life by Manichaeism, Neo-Platonism and Christianity.

We can explain religious conversion in different ways, starting with psychodynamic models that are based on the power of unconsciousness. While Freud recognized the phenomenon of conversion negatively, as a defense of the ego, Jung recognizes the healing power of spirituality. Neurobiology and medicine have always seen sudden conversion as something pathological. Some other approaches are more focused on the influence of social groups. We see this in a positive sense, for example, with the theory of "social drift", and in a negative sense with "brain washing" models of conversion. Some theories are based on personal crisis of converts. These theories assume that some individual crisis sets the convert on a religious quest.

The big problem that I see with much of the literature I have read, is the relationship of psychology and theology. For over a thousand years they grew side by side as a part of philosophy. But during the last century have these sciences very alienated. On the one hand for psychology, exact science with sophisticated methodologies, test batteries and medical equipment is theology too incomprehensible and abstract. On the other hand, theology sees psychology as too reducing and limited by their paradigms. They cannot stand it when psychologists are trying to squeeze God in tables and percentiles.

I think that this is a huge issue in itself. Can psychology of religion succeed as a discipline in these days? I believe so, but only if it update the subjects of their studies. The mechanism of the conversion is all the time important in their variations. Especially in religiously pluralistic societies such as ours. People still change their beliefs, change their social groups and this is why I have focused on religious conversion.