

MINX 590: Research Project

**Believing Like Never Before:
Identity and Christian Conversion in a Fragmented World**

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ABSTRACT

Believing Like Never Before: Identity and Christian Conversion in a Fragmented World

The purpose of this study is to explore the possibility that the experience of identity and faith formation has changed since the 1990s due to changes in society brought about by the growing complexity and fragmentation of society reflected in the multiplication of media sources and the methods of communication.

The study is structured in two parts:

Part 1) A literature review to cover the areas of

- a) Identity formation and faith formation.*
- b) A review of various understandings of Christian conversion, including case studies of some biographical accounts of conversion*

Part 2) An exploration through survey questionnaires and interviews of the experience of conversion, in two groups of at least five people each of:

- a) those born before 1965,*
- b) those born between 1980 and 1990,*

The findings indicate that there have been significant changes to the understanding of conversion over time influenced by changes in the social environment and the development of personal identity. These changes are subtle but they do inevitably impact on how the church should approach the task of evangelism and faith formation.

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INTRODUCTION

In this study conversion will be defined as *a reorientation of life focus towards a centring on Christ and the Christian Gospel*. An explanation and defence of this definition will be given later. We will explore the variety and breadth of understanding of what conversion means. In all Christian traditions there are formal processes and ritual events by which an individual's Christian commitment is recognised and affirmed. Behind these formal aspects of religious affiliation there is an assumption that some kind of personal change, or conversion, has taken place. It is this phenomenon of conversion which is the subject of this study. What are the consistent features of conversion; what has changed over time; and what changes are taking place today? The study examines personal conversion to Christian faith not to any one denominational expression of it.

In Part A of this study will look at personality or identity formation mainly through the work of Sigmund Freud, Erik Erikson, James Marcia, Robert Jay Lifton and James Fowler and how this connects with the phenomena of conversion. Following on from this we will look at the understandings of conversion in a range of disciplines including psychology, sociology, Christian education, theology and Biblical studies. We will then look at some case studies which will clarify the changes to the understandings of conversion through history. This will be done through the work of Richard Fletcher, Rodney Stark and Alan Kreider, and through case studies of St Paul, Augustine, Constantine and Clovis.

In Part B the results of the responses to the questionnaire and the interview findings prepared for this study will be set out and analysed in relation to the earlier learnings and some conclusions drawn. This will include an explanation of the rationale for the questions in relation to our understanding of the phenomena of conversion.

For our discussion of identity and conversion we note, but set aside, the much earlier philosophical discussions about the nature of personal identity engaged in by Descartes, Locke and Hume and to some extent summarised in Descartes' declaration *cogito ergo sum*, 'I think, therefore I am!' This discussion, although interesting is

beyond the scope of this project which is more concerned with the theological, behavioural, psychological, and personal aspects of identity and conversion rather than philosophical aspects.¹

¹ Discussion about philosophical aspects of “personal identity” can be found in a variety of sources. For background reference I have used the Oxford Companion series: *The Oxford Companion to the Mind*, and *The Oxford Companion to Philosophy*.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND CASE STUDIES

Identity Formation and Psychology

Our sense of identity enables us to answer questions such as ‘Who are you?’ and ‘Where do you come from?’ That we have a sense of identity is often taken for granted. It was not until the rise of psychoanalysis as a scientific discipline that how we acquire a sense of identity became a question capable of clinical examination. Sigmund Freud was the pioneer of psychoanalysis. His work emphasised that the foundations of personality are laid during the period of infancy. Freud developed a stage based understanding of human personality development which largely saw the carving out of a sense of personal identity as emerging from the resolution of sexuality based tensions.

Freud’s thought made great contributions to our understanding of the development of the human personality and the sense of self-identity. Although he focussed on pathological phenomena and their therapeutic treatment, others² used his insights to develop models of mental and personality health. One of his great contributions was to take the phenomena of sexuality or sexual identity and postulate that it was not something that suddenly appeared at adolescence but had its origins in infantile experience within the context of early family life. Freud’s attitude towards religion was quite hostile. A helpful article in *A New Dictionary of Christian Theology* by Rowan Williams discusses Freud’s critique of religion. Williams notes that “Freud saw religion as a psychopathological phenomenon in human history overall, analogous to neurosis in the individual...”³ In Freud’s thinking the super-ego is ultimately a projection on the external world of the constraints of childhood imposed especially by the father in relation to the child. Freud and to some extent Erikson ‘believed that humans endow God with features that they have attributed to their own fathers in childhood.’⁴

² Including Erik Erikson and James Fowler as noted in this paper.

³ “Freudian Psychology,” Rowan S. Williams, *A New Dictionary of Theology*, (ed. Alan Richardson and John Bowden. London: SCM Press, 1983.), S. v.

⁴ Chana Ullman, *The Transformed Self: the Psychology of Religious Conversion* (New York & London: Plenum Press, 1989). 46.

Freud considered the main aspects of personality substantially fixed in infancy. Erikson and others considered major personality milestones also occurred later in life, hence the stages of development of Erikson, Fowler, Kohlberg and others. Some of Freud's contemporaries noted the profound changes of conversion and have given it more serious attention. Nevertheless Freud's insights have been influential in an understanding of human development and behaviour.

Gillespie mentions the early work of G. Stanley Hall in this regard as a pioneer of the scientific study of conversion.⁵ William James in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*,⁶ and Edwin Starbuck in *The Psychology of Religion*,⁷ a little later also paved the way for a more considered psychological approach to conversion. While James asserted that conversion was more prevalent amongst those with a more "active subliminal self"⁸ he also recognised that it could not be asserted that those who had experienced conversion were supernaturally different than "natural men."⁹ Starbuck argued for conversion as "a natural psychological process."¹⁰ This view was at odds with Freud's and other psychologists who viewed it as a symptom of a pathological dysfunction or irresolution of psychological forces.

Erik H. Erikson was a protégé of Sigmund Freud and his daughter Anna Freud, initially through working alongside them in a special school in Vienna dedicated to the needs of psychiatrically disturbed children of expatriate Americans and Canadians during the 1920's. This is noted in the fictional conversation used by James Fowler in

⁵ V. Bailey Gillespie, *Religious Conversion and Personal Identity*. (Birmingham, Alabama: Religious Education Press, 1979.), 17.

⁶ James, William. *The Varieties of religious experience: a study in human nature*. (Being the Gifford Lectures, Edinburgh 1901-1902). USA: Megalodon Entertainment 2008.

⁷ Edwin Diller Starbuck, *The Psychology of Religion: an Empirical Study of the Growth of Religious Consciousness*. The Contemporary Science Series, ed. Havelock Ellis. (London: Walter Scott, Paternoster Square, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1901.)

⁸ William James, *The Varieties of religious experience: a study in human nature*. (Being the Gifford Lectures, Edinburgh 1901-1902). (USA: Megalodon Entertainment 2008.), 202.

⁹ James, *The Varieties of religious experience*, 200.

¹⁰ Edwin Diller Starbuck, *The Psychology of Religion: an Empirical Study of the Growth of Religious Consciousness*. The Contemporary Science Series, ed. Havelock Ellis. (London: Walter Scott, Paternoster Square, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1901.), 135.

order to bring together for exploration a comparison of the thought of Erik Erikson, Jean Piaget and Lawrence Kohlberg on stages of personal development.¹¹

Erik Erikson made the question of identity formation the major focus of his work and was perhaps the most notable contributor to this issue during the twentieth century. He advanced the main points of his theory of identity formation in his work *Childhood and Society* (1950).¹² His model was presented in the chapter titled 'The Eight Ages of Man'. He expanded and refined his theory in later books¹³ and revisions, notably: *Identity and the Life Cycle* (1959);¹⁴ *Insight and Responsibility* (1964);¹⁵ *Identity: Youth and Crisis* (1968);¹⁶ *The Life Cycle Completed: A Review* (1982, revised 1996 by Joan Erikson);¹⁷ and *Vital Involvement in Old Age* (1989).

The development of identity and conversion are closely related. The earlier psychoanalytical work of Sigmund Freud was a strong influence on Erikson and parallels can be drawn between Erikson's stages of development and the Freudian psycho-sexual theory of human development. However Erikson's model of human development emerged from his original thinking and extensive field studies of different people groups over a long period of time. Conversion takes place in a context, and the development of personal identity is an important, essential part of that context. Erikson's work takes seriously the psycho-social, historical and environmental contexts within which a person develops their sense of identity. Likewise both Rambo and Gillespie develop quite detailed models for the context of conversion. Rambo describes his understanding of the context as: "an overall matrix in which the force field of people, events, experiences, and institutions operate on conversion."¹⁸ Rambo's diagrammatic model shows context in the centre with crisis, encounter, commitment, consequences, interaction and quest arranged around the

¹¹ James W. Fowler, *Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and Quest for Meaning*, (New York, NY: 1981.), 42.

¹² Erik H Erikson, *Childhood and Society* (New York / London: W. W. Norton, 1950, 1963)

¹³ He also wrote numerous other related works including two in-depth studies of individuals, *Young Man Luther* about the great reformer Martin Luther; and *Gandhi's Truth* a study of Mohandas Karamchand (Mahatma) Gandhi.

¹⁴ Erik H Erikson *Identity and the Life Cycle* (New York / London: W. W. Norton, 1959, 1980)

¹⁵ Erik H Erikson *Insight and Responsibility*

¹⁶ Erik H Erikson *Identity: Youth and Crisis*. (New York: W. W. Norton, 1968.)

¹⁷ Erik H Erikson *The Life Cycle Completed: A Review*

¹⁸ Lewis R. Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion*, (New Haven and London: Yale University Press 1993.), 20.

centre with lines of interaction indicated.¹⁹ Gillespie's model is similarly presented in diagrammatic form with conversion at the centre and five spheres of influence surround it. These spheres include the social, psychological, experiential, developmental and emotional context.²⁰ All writers taking context seriously try to be as comprehensive as possible in describing the context for the development of the sense of identity. This sense of identity may be profoundly changed by conversion, however without that initial sense of identity there is, in a sense, nothing to convert. Likewise if a person has a poorly formed sense of identity, i.e. has identity confusion, then the capacity for conversion may either have significant barriers, or else may offer to the person a profound resolution of that confusion and a new sense of coherent identity that is hugely attractive.

Understanding how identity develops is an important concept in Erikson's thinking. He calls this process 'epigenesis' or 'epigenetic development' and describes it thus: "I think that the Freudian laws of psychosexual growth in infancy can be best understood through an analogy with physiological development *in utero*. In this sequence of development each organ has its time of origin."²¹ During the period of origin and growth in utero, each organ and system has its critical period of origin and development which if interrupted or marred in some way not only affects the unfolding development of that organ but may in fact endanger the development of the whole organism. In the same way Erikson contends that the psychosexual development of a person must unfold in stages and meet certain challenges and encounter the right kinds of environments for a person to develop into a mature and complete person capable of giving and receiving and contributing to society.

The stages Erikson identified as a model for identity formation are based around specific issues or polarities which must be resolved. In ascending order they are: trust vs. mistrust; autonomy vs. shame and doubt; initiative vs. guilt; industry vs. inferiority; identity vs. identity confusion; intimacy vs. isolation; generativity vs.

¹⁹ Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion*, 21.

²⁰ Gillespie V Bailey, *Religious Conversion and Personal Identity*, (Birmingham, Alabama: Religious Education Press, 1979.) 111.

²¹ Erik H. Erikson, *Childhood and Society*. (New York / London: W. W. Norton & Company, 1950, 1963.), 65.

stagnation; integrity vs. despair.²² These eight stages each have their locus of conflict and form of positive resolution which are sometimes referred to as “vital virtues.”²³

The table below shows Erikson’s stages of the life cycle, the critical ages, the issue for resolution, its prime focus and the resulting vital virtue which emerges from a successful resolution.

Stages of the Human Life Cycle according to Erikson

<u>Stage</u>	<u>Critical Age</u>	<u>Issue for resolution</u>	<u>Focal point</u>	<u>Vital Virtue</u>
One	Birth to 1 year	trust vs mistrust	Feeding	Hope
Two	1-3 years	autonomy vs doubt	Toilet training	Will
Three	3-6 years	initiative vs guilt	Independence	Purpose
Four	6-12 years	industry vs inferiority	School life	Confidence
Five	12-18 years	identity vs confusion	Peer relationships	Fidelity
Six	18-40 years	Intimacy vs isolation	Love relationships	Love
Seven	40-65 years	generativity vs stagnation,	Parenting	Care
Eight	65 until death	integrity vs despair	Acceptance of one’s life	Wisdom

Table 1: Erikson’s stages of the human life cycle showing issues for resolution, their focus and consequent ‘virtues’ when satisfactorily resolved.

Erikson acknowledges that his use of the term ‘identity’ is not precisely defined but has at least three different connotations: “At one time it seemed to refer to a conscious sense of individual uniqueness, at another to an unconscious striving for continuity of experience, and at a third, as a solidarity with a group’s ideals.”²⁴ Edmund Bourne in his 1978 survey of the research on ego-identity identified seven aspects within

²² Erik H Erikson, *Identity: Youth and Crisis*, (New York / London: W. W. Norton & Company, 1968), 94.

²³ Erikson, *Identity: Youth and Crisis*, 233.

²⁴ Erikson, *Identity: Youth and Crisis*, 208.

Erikson's notion of identity.²⁵ These include 1) the genetic sense whereby ego-identity is an outcome of childhood and the success or failure of dealing with developmental tasks; 2) the adaptive sense in the individual's capacity to adapt to their social environment by developing a realistic view of the world; 3) the structural sense of developing resilience rather than diffusion; 4) the dynamic sense in terms of relating externally to others and having a healthy internal dynamic between the id, ego and super-ego; 5) the subjective sense of being accepting of oneself as a person; 6) the sense of psychological reciprocity with others in contrast to childhood dependency; and 7) the existential sense which gives the person a sense of meaning and purpose in the real world. Bourne's survey of research on ego-identity reveals the breadth and richness of this concept.

The question of what happens when a particular issue or stage is not successfully resolved is important for part of this study as it has some bearing on the phenomena of conversion. John Head, an educationalist at Kings College London, in his helpful book *Working with Adolescents*²⁶ refers to the work of James Marcia²⁷ who expanded on Erikson's concepts and developed a research-based therapeutic approach to the outcomes of failed or inadequate attempts at identity formation. Further work on this has been done by a variety of researchers confirming and refining the work of Marcia including Donovan,²⁸ Gerald R. Adams et al²⁹ among others. Marcia's initial breakthrough was to categorise four identity states emerging from the outcome of two key processes. This is described by John Head:

“He identified two processes occurring in identity development. First, it was necessary for the individual to actively explore the possibilities, a process involving the matching of self-knowledge with knowledge of the world...

²⁵ E. Bourne, 'The State of Research on Ego Identity; A Review and Appraisal', *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, Part 1, 7, 223-52, Part 2, 7, 371-92. cited in John Head, *Working With Adolescents: Constructing Identity*, (London / Washington DC: The Falmer Press, 1997), 9.

²⁶ John Head, *Working With Adolescents: Constructing Identity*, (London / Washington DC: The Falmer Press, 1997), 13-17.

²⁷ James Marcia, "Development and Validation of Ego-identity Statuses," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 3, (1966), 551-8 cited in John Head, *Working With Adolescents: Constructing Identity*, (London / Washington DC: The Falmer Press, 1997), 13.

²⁸ James M. Donovan "Identity Status and Interpersonal Style" in the *Journal of Youth and Adolescence* Vol. 4, No. 1, 1975.

²⁹ Gerald R. Adams, Judy Shea and Steven A. Fitch "Toward the Development of an Objective Assessment of Ego-Identity Status", in the *Journal of Youth and Adolescence* Vol. 8, No. 2, 1979.

Marcia described this process as ‘undergoing crisis’. The second process involves making decisions, or what Marcia called ‘commitment.’”³⁰

As a result of these processes a person will emerge into one of four possible identity statuses: identity achievement, moratorium, foreclosure or diffusion:

An individual is placed into one of four "identity statuses," these are individual styles of coping with the identity crisis. Presence or absence of crisis and extent of commitment in the two areas of occupation and ideology serve to define the statuses. The *identity achievement* status has experienced a crisis period and is committed to an occupation and ideology. The *moratorium* status refers to those individuals currently engaged in decision making with commitments vague. Individuals in the *foreclosure* status are similar to the illustration given above, they seem to have experienced no crisis, yet have firm, often parentally determined commitments. The *identity diffusion* status has no apparent commitments. Moratoriums, in contrast to identity diffusions, are characterized by the presence of struggle and attempts to make commitments. Foreclosures are distinguished from identity achievement individuals by the lack of any crisis period in the former.³¹

It is the identity statuses described as ‘diffused’ and ‘moratorium’ that are of particular interest in this study. The characteristics of the diffused identity are described thus:

An identity diffuse person, for example, would not necessarily be expected to remain in this status. A likely progression would be from diffusion through moratorium to identity achievement. By the same token, ego identity is not achieved once and for all. Severe environmental shifts might precipitate a

³⁰ John Head *Working With Adolescents: Constructing Identity*, (London / Washington DC: The Falmer Press, 1997), 13.

³¹ James E. Marcia “Ego identity status: relationship to change in self-esteem, "general maladjustment," and authoritarianism.” *Journal of Personality* Vol. 35 Issue 1 (Mar. 1967): 119.

diffuse state, although this would be less likely to happen to an individual who had once achieved an identity than to, say, a foreclosure individual.³²

Persons in the ‘moratorium state’ are described as: “individuals currently engaged in decision making with commitments vague... . Moratoriums, in contrast to identity diffusions, are characterized by the presence of struggle and attempts to make commitments.”³³ These states indicate a failure or arresting of the process of individuation which is an important and relevant concept for us. It refers to the development of a person from the earliest stages of diffused consciousness where there is little differentiation between the ego and all its experiences to the point where a person has a highly developed sense of personal identity, mutuality with others and understanding of the wider world including God in relation to self and others. Personal identity formation is an important concept in psychology, particularly of C. J. Jung³⁴ and others. In relation to Jung I note³⁴ that we have not made use of Jung’s insights in this project, as we are looking specifically at Christian conversion, and as Cunningham comments:

“For Jung the self symbolizes the totality of man (sic), and he is not whole without God: the symbols of the self coincide with those of the deity. Whether this deity coincides with that of Christian theism has remained a matter open to continued controversy.”³⁵

This tends to preclude Jung and his interesting ideas from this study.

Ullman citing Erikson³⁶ and Gillespie citing G. Stanley Hall³⁷ recognise that the period of adolescence is a critical period for many people to experience conversion.

³² Marcia “Ego identity status.” 120.

³³ Marcia “Ego identity status.” 119.

³⁴ A helpful discussion on Jung’s understanding of individuation can be found in David Angus Graham Cook, “Jung, Carl Gustav (1875-1961),” *The Oxford Companion to the Mind*, ed. Richard L. Gregory. (USA: Oxford University Press, 1987.), S.v.

³⁵ Adrian Cunningham, “Jungian Psychology,” *A New Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Alan Richardson and John Bowden. (London: SCM Press, 1983.), S.v. 314.

³⁶ Chana Ullman, *The Transformed Self: the Psychology of Religious Conversion*. (New York & London: Plenum Press 1989.) 114

³⁷ Walter Houston Clark, “Intense Religious Experience,” *Research on Religious Development: A comprehensive Handbook*, ed. M. Strommen (New York: Hawthorn Books Inc., 1971) 532 citing G.

These later findings confirm the much earlier work of Starbuck who recognized adolescence as “the most interesting period from the standpoint of religious development, as from every other point of view. It is the great formative period.”³⁸ This is because it is a period when the young person is searching for role clarity and a sense of identity. This also corresponds to Fowler’s Stage 3 or Synthetic-Conventional stage of faith development in which a young person begins to extend their interests beyond immediate family to school, work, peers, society at large and media synthesising relationships and experiences in order to develop a personal narrative of identity and outlook. (See table 2, Stage 3)

Conversion can resolve this search effectively for many. It is also a period, prior to the much longer and stable periods of mature adult life, during which a person is freer to respond to any remaining inner tensions resulting from unresolved issues from the earlier transitions. We can say then that according to Erikson, and confirmed by the psychological models of others, by the time a person has reached their early twenties, if they have not successfully encountered and resolved at least five major life issues they will be experiencing a sense of restlessness and irresolution. Those who have not successfully passed each of life’s hurdles could be experiencing problems in one or more of these areas: trust, autonomy, initiative, industry, identity and intimacy. They will be searching for, or experiencing a lack of: hope, will (ability to make decisions), confidence, purpose and fidelity (an inability to make commitments). In many ways this is an accurate description of adolescence and even young adulthood for ‘Generation X’, and these are exactly the needs that conversion addresses.

We now turn to the writing of Robert Jay Lifton who offers some insights into the results of failure to adequately form a sense of identity in his concept of the ‘protean self’. We will also look at another insight into personality fragmentation through the concept of memes introduced by Richard Dawkins.

Stanley Hall in V. Bailey Gillespie, *Religious Conversion and Personal Identity*. (1979 Birmingham, Alabama: Religious Education Press) 17.

³⁸ Edwin Diller Starbuck, *The Psychology of Religion: an Empirical Study of the Growth of Religious Consciousness*. The Contemporary Science Series, ed. Havelock Ellis. (London: Walter Scott, Paternoster Square, Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1901.) 195.

Robert Jay Lifton and The Protean Self

Robert Jay Lifton is a psychiatrist, researcher and author who developed the concept of the ‘protean self’ from his studies and research initially into the effects of war experiences, imprisonment and so-called brainwashing on soldiers in Japan and Korea after the Second World War. In his later research and writing he has studied the effects of modern society and post-modernism on the sense of self-hood. The term ‘protean’ draws from the Greek myth of Proteus sourced from Homer’s *Odyssey*.³⁹ The value for Lifton in his use of this multi-faceted figure is that it serves as a metaphor for the concept of the adaptable, even fragmented self that he explores. He writes:

“Though variation is the essence of the protean self, that self has certain relatively consistent features. Central to its function is a capacity for bringing together disparate and seemingly incompatible elements of identity and involvement in what I call “odd combinations,” and for continuous transformation of these elements.”⁴⁰

Although using a model from ancient Greece Lifton sees proteanism as a peculiarly modern, or even postmodern⁴¹ phenomena, not just related to the traumatic after-effects of war but also a response to the nature of human society on a broad scale as set out in his opening words in *The Protean Self*: “We are becoming fluid and many sided. Without realizing it, we have been evolving a sense of self appropriate to the restlessness and flux of our time.”⁴² This view is supported by others. Lewis Rambo notes that “Lifton argues that due to erosion of cultural tradition, high rates of mobility, instantaneous communication networks, and increased secularization in the

³⁹ Lifton introduces the origin of the concept describing the figure of Proteus as taking many different forms such as a whiskered lion’s shape, a serpent, a leopard, a great boar, sousing water or a tall green tree. When chained Proteus may be represented as a source of wisdom, a pillar of strength, a preserver of values: Robert Jay Lifton, *The Protean Self: Human resilience in an age of fragmentation*, (New York: BasicBooks, a Division of HarperCollins, 1993.) 5. See also comments re Lifton’s background and use of Proteus as metaphor in James Fowler, *Becoming Adult, Becoming Christian: Adult development and the Christian Faith*. (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass 2000), 8.

⁴⁰ Robert Jay Lifton, *The Protean Self: Human resilience in an age of fragmentation*, (New York: BasicBooks, a Division of HarperCollins, 1993.) 5

⁴¹ We will look at postmodernism in more detail through the work of: Michael Riddell, *Threshold of the Future: Reforming the Church in the Post-Christian West*, (London: SPCK, 1998.), 101ff.

⁴² Lifton, *The Protean Self*, 1.

modern world, the self is no longer clearly defined and has become progressively more fragile.”⁴³ Fowler also notes Lifton’s contribution to our understanding of the development of the sense of self within and in response to the modern / postmodern psycho-historical context. Fowler observes that Lifton denies that the development of the fluid and adaptable protean self means a ‘disappearance of self,’ rather the protean self seeks to be both ‘fluid and grounded’ and is a ‘balancing act between responsive shape-shifting on the one hand and efforts to consolidate and cohere on the other.’⁴⁴

Use of the term ‘post-modern’ would benefit some explanation. This will help to define the characteristics of the milieu in which identity and faith are forming in the contemporary world. Michael Riddell is a theologian and writer with an interest in the contemporary context of mission. Riddell provides a helpful summary of postmodernism. While acknowledging that the term is ill-defined at present, he states that:

“It is a sign; a pointer in reference to other concepts, like the word ‘north’. It says simply that the previous cultural and philosophic synthesis, ‘modernism’ is at an end, and something else is emerging to take its place.”⁴⁵

Riddell identifies several outlines or features of post-modernity. These are: Urbanization– the trend in the last one hundred and fifty years for populations to gravitate to cities and to adopt the culture of cities; Pluralism – the close proximity of competing belief systems, cultures and lifestyles; Holism– the emerging concern for the environment as an integrated life-sustaining system; Juxtaposition – the setting alongside of each other disparate and incongruous items (similar to Lifton’s concept of proteanism), this is in contrast to the rationalist and modernist concern for linearity and meaning; Despair – a mood of pessimism and loathing with the accompanying paradoxical feature of living in the moment and seeking superficial pleasure;

⁴³ Lewis Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press 1993.) 31.

⁴⁴ James Fowler, *Becoming Adult, Becoming Christian: Adult development and the Christian Faith*. (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass 2000), 9, citing Robert Jay Lifton, *The Protean Self: Human resilience in an age of fragmentation*, (New York: BasicBooks, a Division of HarperCollins, 1993.) 8-9.

⁴⁵ Riddell, *Threshold of the Future*, 101.

Apocalyptic – an obsession with end-of-the-world worst case scenarios in movies and literature; Human relating – an emphasis on friendship as a substitute for transcendent values, a kind of social tribalism generated and sustained by ‘virtual’ electronic media; Technology – the embrace of technology as a ubiquitous reality, this includes not only electronic/ computer but also pharmacological technology i.e. drugs; Truth vs Reality – the deconstruction of meta-narratives of truth has led to a search for the ‘real’ a similar concept to the existential category of ‘authenticity’; Immediacy – a thirst for living in the ‘now’, for instant sensation and experience; Faith – the resurgence of interest in spirituality and experiencing God unfettered by doctrine or mediated religious authority. This is my summary of Riddell’s more extensive discussion in Chapter 7, ‘The Emerging World,’⁴⁶ and it is not the only such summary.⁴⁷ Riddell notes that this description of the post-modern world is ‘unfamiliar terrain’ but that it represents a challenge for those called to minister in it: ‘We may not be called to be citizens of the new land, but God asks that we at least enter it, and learn how to tell the abiding story of Jesus to its inhabitants.’⁴⁸

Lifton was a protégé of Erickson with whom he engaged in “decades of dialogue...”⁴⁹ and his exploration of this concept of the protean self is recognised as a helpful extension of the psychological understanding of the concept of self and identity derived from Erickson and others. Lifton’s view of the protean self is generally positive. For him the self’s capacity to be multifaceted, adaptable and capable of ongoing growth and transformation in response to a changing psycho-social environment is a very positive development. He contrasts this protean capacity with aspects of self he characterises as static or fundamentalist and totalist. The static self is really a failure of protean response and is described as “the closing off of the person and constriction of self-process.”⁵⁰ This is similar to Marcia’s description of the ‘foreclosed self.’⁵¹ It occurs as a reaction against the multiple influences and

⁴⁶ Riddell, *Threshold of the Future*, 101ff.

⁴⁷ For a more detailed treatment of this sprawling subject in relation to a variety of socio-cultural areas see: *The Icon Critical Dictionary of Postmodern Thought*. Ed. Stuart Sim, (Cambridge: Icon Books, 1998.)

⁴⁸ Riddell, *Threshold of the Future*, 116.

⁴⁹ Robert Jay Lifton, *The Protean Self: Human resilience in an age of fragmentation*, (New York: BasicBooks, a Division of HarperCollins, 1993.) 26.

⁵⁰ Lifton, *The Protean Self*, 10.

⁵¹ Marcia “Ego identity status,” 119.

changes that can shape a healthy protean response. The state of ‘totalism’ is described as when the self-process leads to “a demand for absolute dogma and a monolithic self.”⁵² It is totalism which leads to the social phenomena of fundamentalism, whether Christian, Marxist, Islamic or other forms. He also explores the ‘dark side’⁵³ of proteanism, when the protean nature can go wrong. Aspects of protean dysfunction include the diffused self, in which the continual responsiveness to new influences results in the self becoming incoherent and immobile. Another disorder is when the protean hunger for knowledge can lead to “endless forays into possibility”⁵⁴ leading to superficiality.

Lifton discusses ‘negative proteanism’ as a form of self-hood in which “fluidity is so lacking in moral content and sustainable inner form that it is likely to result in fragmentation (or near fragmentation) of the self, harm to others, or both.”⁵⁵

According to Lifton, both the dysfunctional forms of proteanism and the defensive reactions against protean influences result in forms of selfhood characterised by dissociation, fragmentation, rigidity and at their worst multiple personality disorder and a condition he describes as ‘deracination.’ This condition is “a self so rootless as to be rendered hollow.”⁵⁶ A person in this state searches indiscriminately for any form of behaviour to fill the void. In classic psychoanalytical terms the person is at the mercy of the id, lacking any central organising ego or any discriminating selective super-ego to provide guidance.

An example of this kind of effect was reported recently in The New Zealand Herald.⁵⁷ A group of young men made a series of violent attacks on randomly selected victims after watching a movie called *American Gangster*⁵⁸ on the night of January 15th 2008. They were described by the prosecutor Sarah Mandeno as “young men (who) were

⁵² Marcia “Ego identity status.”

⁵³ Marcia “Ego identity status,” 190.

⁵⁴ Marcia “Ego identity status.”

⁵⁵ Marcia “Ego identity status,” 190-191.

⁵⁶ Marcia “Ego identity status,” 211.

⁵⁷ Andrew Koubaridis. “Nightmare continues for bash victim.” *New Zealand Herald*, 20 August 2009, A, 2.

⁵⁸ In the review of this movie posted by Manohla Dargis on November 2, 2007 in the online version of the New York Times at <http://movies.nytimes.com/2007/11/02/movies/02gang.html> its rating and description states: “*American Gangster*” is rated R (Under 17 requires accompanying parent or adult guardian). Explicit and very realistic-looking intravenous drug use and bloody, bloody gun violence.”

bored, had no money and were cruising for trouble.”⁵⁹ It is not possible to examine this event in greater detail however it fits the description of the form of protean dysfunction discussed above. The whole phenomenon of youth crime begins to look like a form of protean dysfunction.

The significance of these concepts for this study is that the protean concept provides some insight into the kinds of forces and processes that may be at work in both the development of a post-modern sense of identity and the attractiveness or otherwise of conversion for the people in this study. Since proteanism is seen by Lifton as a response to rapid change and the development of a more plural, multifaceted society, aspects of proteanism are likely to be more evident in the younger subjects of this study than the older subjects, although not exclusively so. Some of the characteristics to look for in a healthily protean personality are a greater responsiveness to change, an ability to be adaptive even to the point of holding together contradictory aspects of self-hood. We may also see some negative aspects of proteanism with the possibility of people resorting to conversion as a form of escape to certainty from a world that seems too fluid and devoid of certainty.

A possible fruitful area for further study is the connection between the protean fragmentation of self-identity and the concept of memes. This concept was initially introduced by Richard Dawkins in his book *The Selfish Gene*⁶⁰ and he gave much fuller attention to the concept in *The God Delusion*⁶¹ after it gained currency as a concept amongst others, notably Susan Blackmore, Robert Aunger, Kate Distin and Richard Brodie.⁶² Dawkins is a well-known atheist and is openly hostile to religion, advocating its abolition. However the meme concept has much to contribute to understanding how religious as well as other concepts are communicated and ‘replicated’ in society. Dawkins proposed the meme as a unit of cultural memory by which cultural concepts are transmitted from person to person in a cultural environment. It is of particular interest to evolutionary sociologists, anthropologists

⁵⁹ Koubaridis. “Nightmare...” *New Zealand Herald*.

⁶⁰ Richard Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene*, (2nd Edition), Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989.

⁶¹ Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (London: Transworld Publishers 2006.) 222ff.

⁶² Cited amongst others in Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (London: Transworld Publishers 2006.) 228.

psychologists and other thinkers some of whom have contributed to the concept and it has given rise to an area of study known as *Memetics*⁶³ which posits the meme as a unit of cultural transmission modelled to some extent on the science of *Genetics* which uses the *gene* as the unit of transmission of genetic information. Another way of describing memes is that they are cultural replicators and that successful replication is their sole purpose for existing. Those that succeed survive while those that don't disappear. The concept is controversial and it seems to have as many detractors as supporters at this early stage of the concept's development. The concept is useful for consideration in this study as it proposes that there are measureable units of cultural transmission passed from person to person. This concept links up with Lifton's protean idea that self-identity is capable of becoming diffuse or fragmented to the extent that a person may gather together fragments of identity from a variety of sources in order to give some sense of volition and purpose to their life. It does not seem unreasonable to propose that these transferable fragments and the concept of replicating memes may simply be different ways of viewing and describing the same phenomena.

If Erikson's concept of identity development through the successful overcoming of developmental challenges is true to reality then clearly failure to successfully navigate these challenges must leave the sense of identity in hiatus or to some extent in diffusion or even dysfunction. Two of the identity statuses described connect well with Lifton's concept of the protean self, that is the diffused identity state and the moratorium identity state. What this suggests is that if proteanism is a generally pervasive feature of the modern or post-modern personality it is because there has either been a widespread failure in achieving resolution of developmental challenges, or else the multiplexity of contemporary life plunges those growing up in it into a continuous state of crisis. This is likely to leave contemporary people vulnerable or at least open to picking up ready made identity fragments, or successful memes that can give some semblance of order and structure to their lives, while leaving a general inner sense of dissatisfaction and irresolution.

⁶³ Further information about memetics can be sourced from the online *Journal of Memetics - Evolutionary Models of Information Transmission*, <http://jom-emit.cfpm.org/> (24 08 2009).

We move now from considering the psycho-social aspects of identity formation to the work of specifically Christian thinkers.

Faith Formation and Conversion

James Fowler is one of the foremost writers and researchers in the understanding of stage-based faith development. Fowler has acknowledged that his work is based on the earlier work of Jean Piaget and Lawrence Kohlberg from the perspective of structural development and to the ‘epistemological focus’⁶⁴ of his research; that is *how* we know what we know. From the theological perspective of faith as a way of seeing the world Fowler acknowledges the influence of H. Richard Niebuhr and Paul Tillich.⁶⁵ Fowler particularly acknowledges his debt to Tillich in his understanding of ‘faith’ as being not so much a religious matter, nor to do with credal belief, but as having to do with “things that concern us ultimately” and as such it “shapes the way we invest our deepest loves and our most costly loyalties.”⁶⁶ Likewise Niebuhr is acknowledged as a theologian who sees faith “in the search for an overarching, integrating and grounding trust in a centre of value and power sufficiently worthy to give our lives unity and meaning.”⁶⁷

Fowler sets out his theory in Part IV (pp. 117-211) of his study and these are presented in summary form in the table below:

⁶⁴ James W. Fowler, *Stages of Faith: the Psychology of human development and the quest for meaning*, (New York, NY: 1981.), 98.

⁶⁵ Fowler, *Stages of Faith*, 98.

⁶⁶ Fowler, *Stages of Faith*, 4-5.

⁶⁷ Fowler, *Stages of Faith*, 5.

Table 2: Fowler’s Stages of Faith: A Summary

Stage /Age	Description	Features	Challenges/ dangers / transition factors
Infancy 0-24 months	Undifferentiated Faith (Fowler, <i>Stages</i> , 119- 121)	No differentiation between ‘self’ and ‘world’. Basic trust. Mutuality with mother/ parents reassures self worth.	Anxiety about separation. Growing distinction of self. Failure of mutuality diminishes self worth. Transition to S.1: Convergence of thought and language, use of symbols.
Stage 1 2-6 years	Intuitive-Projective Faith (Fowler, <i>Stages</i> , 122- 134)	Development of cognitive- egocentrism. Development of language and ability to think symbolically, construct mental images. Explores fantasy and imagination. Beginning to differentiate what is real and not real.	Capturing of imagination by harmful or destructive images. Imprinting of harmful taboos, moral or doctrinal codes. Transition to S.2: Concrete operational thinking and resolution of Oedipal issues.
Stage 2 7- early teens	Mythic-Literal Faith (Fowler, <i>Stages</i> , 135- 150)	The development of narrative, story, drama and myth as ways of finding and giving coherence to experience. Ability to take the perspective of others. Reciprocity as basis for fairness and sense of justice	Disparity between literalness and reality; reciprocity principle and real experience i.e. failure of others to respond in kind, can produce over-controlling perfectionism or sense of own badness. Transition to S.3: Ability to reflect on these disparities.

Stage /Age	Description	Features	Challenges/ dangers / transition factors
Stage 3 Teenage to adult	Synthetic-Conventional Faith (Fowler, <i>Stages</i> , 151- 173)	Extension of experience beyond home and family to school, work, peers, society at large and media. Synthesising of relationships and experiences to develop personal narrative of identity and outlook. Conformist in that interpersonal relationships are principle shapers of personal identity and values. Can be a state of personal equilibrium well into adult life.	Internalisation of the expectations of others can affect ability to act and decide autonomously. Interpersonal disappointments and betrayals can lead to despair. When centres of authority such as church, employer or government institute change can be experienced as profound betrayal. Transition to S.4: marked by growing capacity to critically reflect on relativity of values and beliefs.
Stage 4 Late adolescent to adult	Individuative- Reflective Faith (Fowler, <i>Stages</i> , 174- 183)	Takes seriously the responsibility for own commitments, lifestyles, beliefs, and attitudes. Must face inevitable tensions: individuality versus group conformity; subjectivity versus objectivity; self-fulfilment versus service to others; relative values versus absolute values. Develops strength of capacity to critically reflect on identity (self) and outlook (ideology).	Excessive confidence in consciousness and critical thought. A kind of second narcissism (Freud) in which there is overconfidence in the power of thought to comprehend reality. Transition to S.5: disturbed by emergence of symbols, paradoxes, ambiguities. Memories of childhood and personal compromises haunt and disturb.
Stage 5 Unusual before mid-life	Conjunctive Faith (Fowler, <i>Stages</i> , 184- 198)	Growing integration of self bringing together and comprehending all previous stages into a second naïveté (Ricoeur). Open to paradox and truth in apparent contradictions, strives to unify opposites. Open to new depths of religious and other experience. Sense of justice freed from particularity of race, gender or culture. Capacity to be grounded in own reality while recognising its relativity and limitations.	Aware of ambiguity of self and divisions in humanity while apprehended by vision and possibility of unity. Can lead to paralysing passivity or inaction, complacency or cynical withdrawal. Transition to S.6: sense of call to radical actualisation.

Stage /Age	Description	Features	Challenges/ dangers / transition factors
Stage 6 Midlife and older	Universalising Faith (Fowler, <i>Stages</i> , 199-211)	This stage is exceedingly rare. In this stage there is an overcoming of the paradox of self preservation versus commitment to universal and ultimate values. The person becomes heedless of risk to self or their primary group or institutions, embracing a disciplined activist incarnation of their absolute values. There is a devotion to universalising compassion and justice.	May offend those with more parochial understandings of compassion and justice. Their enlarged vision of universal community may provoke dangerous reactions by those who are threatened by it. May have a disregard for personal safety or health. May be martyred for their faith.

There are several points to make about Fowler's model especially in relation to how these stages of faith development relate to conversion. Fowler explains that each of these stages has its own proper time of ascendancy, like Erikson's concept of *epigenesis*. Each stage has inherent within it processes of transition, regression and conversion generating a spiralling dynamic linked to and adding to the previous stages. "Each stage has the potential for wholeness, grace and integrity and for strengths sufficient for either life's blows or blessings."⁶⁸ Fowler asserts that "conversion has to do with changes in the *contents* of faith."⁶⁹ (Author's emphasis) These contents are described as the "unconscious images of value and power, and the conscious adoption of a new set of master stories in the commitment to reshape one's life in a new community of interpretation and action." He cites the work of Romney M. Mosley who distinguished between 'lateral conversion' and an 'intensification experience'. The former is described as a "recentering experience arising from a new commitment" while the latter is the impact of "renewing or revivifying a person's faith outlook, but with neither a structural stage nor a content change."⁷⁰ These categories are similar to the distinctions made by Stark and Finke between 'conversion' as a shift across religious traditions, while 'reaffiliation' refers to a shift within a religious tradition.⁷¹

Fowler describes six possible ways in which conversion and his model of faith development may interact. Firstly there is stage change without conversional change. Thus the move from one stage to another is not necessarily prompted by conversion. Secondly there could be conversional change without faith stage change. Thirdly, there could be conversional change that precipitates a faith stage change. A fourth possibility is a faith stage change that precipitates conversional change. The fifth possibility could be conversional change that is correlated with, and goes hand in hand with a structural faith stage change. The sixth possibility discussed by Fowler is conversional change that blocks or helps one avoid the pain of faith stage change. Fowler outlines these possibilities but acknowledges that further research was required.⁷²

⁶⁸ Fowler, *Stages of Faith*, 274.

⁶⁹ Fowler, *Stages of Faith*, 281.

⁷⁰ Fowler, *Stages of Faith*, 285, citing Romney M. Moseley, "Religious Conversion: A Structural-Developmental Analysis," Ph.D. dissertation, Harvard University, 1978.

⁷¹ Rodney Stark and Roger Finke, *Acts of Faith: Explaining the human side of religion*, (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 2000.), 114.

⁷² Fowler, *Stages of Faith*, 286.

Criticisms of Fowler's model

Fowler's work has had considerable influence especially in North America amongst psychologists, sociologists and educationalists but also amongst theologians and pastors. Significant criticisms have emerged, both positive and negative, in relation to aspects of his model. Five focal areas of criticism have emerged and are discussed in a collection of essays published in 1992 and edited by Fowler and others.⁷³ The five main areas of criticism are: 1) concerning Fowler's definition of faith; 2) his description of Stage 6 'Universalising Faith'; 3) the adequacy of the theory in relation to particular religious or doctrinal beliefs; 4) the adequacy of the account of affect (feelings), process-motion (development), the unconscious, and the imagination; and 5) the adequacy of the theory in relation to a critical socio-political analysis, especially a gender analysis.⁷⁴ We only have space to consider the first of the above points which critiques Fowler's concepts of faith formation and so relates directly to conversion.

This is the criticism about Fowler's definition of faith. There is a view that Fowler assigns too much of a cognitive value to faith so that it appears to be more an aspect of ego function than a gift from God. This is linked to other concerns that Fowler is not clear enough in his distinctions between faith, belief and trust, nor does he identify sufficiently the commonalities amongst these aspects. Others call for a greater exploration of the relation between faith structures and content. From a theological perspective there is a richly nuanced understanding of faith that is not really reflected in Fowler's theory. Amongst these nuances is the understanding of faith within the scriptures;⁷⁵ the distinction between faith and works,⁷⁶ faith as both a human decision and as a gift of God through the Holy Spirit especially as developed in the Reformed tradition via St Paul in Galatians⁷⁷ which inspired Martin Luther. To be fair these are all matters that Fowler himself has identified as areas requiring further research. By choosing as a definition of faith the 'ultimate concern',

⁷³ *Stages of Faith and Religious Development: Implications for Church, Education and Society*. Eds. James W. Fowler, Karl Ernst Nipkow and Friedrich Schweitzer, (London: SCM Press, 1992.)

⁷⁴ Sharon Daloz Parks. "The North American Critique of James Fowler." *Stages of Faith and Religious Development: Implications for Church, Education and Society*. Eds. James W. Fowler, Karl Ernst Nipkow and Friedrich Schweitzer, (London: SCM Press, 1992.) 105.

⁷⁵ "Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen." (Hebrews 11:1 NRSV)

⁷⁶ James 2:14, "What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you?" NRSV.

⁷⁷ "For through the Spirit, by faith, we eagerly wait for the hope of righteousness." (Galatians 5:5, NIV)

drawn from Tillich, it seems Fowler was attempting to ground his stage based theory in universal human experience rather than the particularities of creed and denominational doctrine. This inevitably means that the relating of Fowler's concepts to denominational particulars could be considered more properly the work of the practical or pastoral theologians of those denominations. According to Parks, his work has been well accepted amongst Roman Catholics and Unitarians,⁷⁸ but Protestants, mainly Presbyterians and Lutherans, have been more cautious considering that Fowler's model does not take sin and the concept of 'the Fall' sufficiently seriously. Methodists and some others have been more receptive however amongst Lutherans and Calvinists generally there has been concern about Fowler's too broad understanding of faith apart from the doctrinal and creedal understandings of their traditions.

Fowler's work is interesting as it offers a synthesis of the research and concepts associated with identity formation and integrates them with the other insights in relation to faith formation and conversion. His model offers an understanding that conversion is an experience which can occur at any of the six stages and is not dependent on arrival at some particular point of maturational readiness. This stands to some extent in contrast with the views of Starbuck, James and Erikson who have regarded adolescence as a particularly critical and ripe period for conversion. This may simply reflect that Starbuck and James were observing and commenting on the phenomena of conversion in a time of relative social stability or at least when the pace of social change was much slower and therefore it was the maturational development of people that had the biggest effect on creating the conditions that favoured conversion. Erikson as an observer of developmental change in a wide range of settings including wartime and post-war Europe, Boston society, and on Indian Reservations, was also working in a time of relatively slower social change in the basic institutions of society. Nevertheless his stage based development theory of identity extends into later life and is open to the possibilities of conversional or religious change later in life. "While the end of adolescence thus is the stage of an overt identity *crisis*, identity *formation* neither begins nor ends with adolescence: it is a life long development ..."⁷⁹ Joan Erikson in her concluding chapter to *The Life-Cycle Completed*, written jointly

⁷⁸ Parks. "The North American Critique of James Fowler," 109.

⁷⁹ Erik H. Erikson, *Identity and the Life Cycle*. (New York/ London: W.W. Norton, 1959.), 122.

with Erik refers to “gerotranscendence”⁸⁰ as the emergence of a form of religious awareness in extreme old age. So we can say that although adolescence may be the most important period to consider the experience of conversion, it is by no means the only time.

⁸⁰ Erik H. Erikson and Joan M. Erikson, *The Life Cycle Completed: Extended Version*. 1982, revised 1996 by Joan Erikson. (New York, London: W. W. Norton, 1997.), 123ff.

CONVERSION: A SURVEY OF DEFINITIONS

The Psychological Approach

Most of those who have studied conversion in depth have resorted to some form of definition and we will look at some of these definitions in relation to the areas and writers examined. Definitions vary according to the scope of the phenomena under study. Conversion has been studied in a variety of contexts and by people from different disciplines therefore the definitions vary accordingly. William James explored conversion as part of his extensive survey of religious experience in his influential series of lectures *The Varieties of Religious Experience*.⁸¹ He was one of the earliest to take religious experience and conversion seriously as a phenomenon to be examined scientifically using the psychological disciplines and concepts of his time. James' definition of conversion begins Lecture IX:

“To be converted, to be regenerated, to receive grace, to experience religion, to gain an assurance, are so many phrases which denote the process, gradual or sudden, by which a self hitherto divided, and consciously wrong inferior and unhappy, becomes unified and consciously right superior and happy, in consequence of its firmer hold on religious realities.”⁸²

Two insights in this definition are consistently affirmed in the work of others who approach conversion from a psychological perspective, firstly that it involves the uniting of a divided self, and secondly that it can be either a sudden event or a drawn out process. Lewis Rambo, Professor of Psychology and Religion at the San Francisco Theological Seminary, is another who approaches conversion from the psychological perspective. However he shies away from a formal definition. Rather his approach is to suggest that it is “imperative for scholars of conversion to recognize it is as a variable phenomenon subject to the structural, ideological, theological and personal demands of both advocates and potential converts.” In short “conversion is what a group or person *says* it is.”⁸³ In Rambo's major

⁸¹ William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: a study in human nature*, (Being the Gifford Lectures, Edinburgh 1901-1902). (USA: Megalodon Entertainment, 2008.)

⁸² Ibid, 161.

⁸³ Lewis R. Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion*, (New Haven and London: Yale University Press 1993.), 7.

study of conversion⁸⁴ he sets out a “multidimensional and historical but also a process oriented”⁸⁵ model for the context of conversion. This model seeks to include both the ‘macrocontext and microcontext.’ Rambo explains macrocontext as including the political systems, religious organisations, relevant ecology, and economic and cultural considerations. He explains the microcontext as being the immediate world of the person’s family, religious community and neighbourhood. Rambo thus tries to be as comprehensive as possible in considering the effects of both micro and macro forces shaping a person’s journey towards conversion and beyond. Although a psychologist he brings to bear the perspectives of the other disciplines of anthropology, sociology and theology in his study.⁸⁶ Rambo does contribute a respect for a stage of active questing in which “converts are often active agents in their own conversion.”⁸⁷ Fowler, as a Christian psychologist noted a definition advanced by Rambo in an earlier brief article as “...a significant sudden transformation of a person’s loyalties, patterns of life and focus of energies.”⁸⁸ Fowler builds on this for his own definition as:

“Conversion is a significant recentering of one’s previous conscious or unconscious images of value and power, and the conscious adoption of a new set of master stories in the commitment to reshape one’s life in a new community of interpretation and action.”⁸⁹

The Approach of Sociologists

The relationship between social science and religion has been uneasy from the beginning. Stark and Finke note that “For more than three centuries, social scientists tried not only to explain religion away but to replace it.”⁹⁰ One of the earliest social analysts, Karl Marx found that the best he could say about was religion was that it was the “the opium of the

⁸⁴ Lewis R Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion*, (New Haven and London: Yale University Press 1993.)

⁸⁵ Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion*, 17.

⁸⁶ Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion*, 165.

⁸⁷ Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion*, 56.

⁸⁸ James W. Fowler, *Stages of Faith: the Psychology of human development and the quest for meaning*, (New York, NY: 1981.), 281, citing an unreferenced brief article by Lewis R. Rambo.

⁸⁹ Fowler, *Stages of Faith*, 281-281.

⁹⁰ Rodney Stark and Roger Finke, *Acts of Faith: Explaining the human side of religion*, (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 2000.), 3.

people.”⁹¹ Marx drew upon Feuerbach’s criticisms of Christianity that belief in God was the projection of all human longings into a transcendent realm. We can see how this critique led on to Freud’s similar viewpoint and ultimately to the development of secularist and atheist philosophies in the modern era. Some of the later sociologists such as Max Weber⁹² and Emile Durkheim⁹³ were kinder in their critiques of religion; however a generally negative concept of religion as an oppressive force in society prevailed through much of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. This critique of religion predicted the eventual withering away of religion as a force in society, a projection which seemed accurate, especially during much of the modernist twentieth century when secularisation⁹⁴ peaked as a strong social force in conjunction with a corresponding decline in institutional religion. This decline is quite widespread in the Western world as noted by Ward and others. Ward notes in relation to a study of university students in Dunedin: “...out of 23,000 students only 700 were involved in any way...”⁹⁵ with local Christian churches or groups. However recent studies have led to a complete reassessment of the analysis of the effects of secularisation. A number of commentators have highlighted that the well documented decline of the institutional forms of religion has not resulted in a decline in the thirst for spirituality or for God.⁹⁶ Stark and Finke discuss the proposition of the advancement of secularisation quite extensively⁹⁷ and conclude that: “After nearly three centuries of utterly failed prophecies and misrepresentations of both past and present, it seems time to carry the secularization doctrine to the graveyard of failed theories, and there to whisper, “Requiescat in pace.””⁹⁸ A full discussion on this complex issue is beyond the

⁹¹ The context of the quote is: “*Religious distress is at the same time the expression of real distress and the protest against real distress. Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, just as it is the spirit of a spiritless situation. It is the opium of the people.*” Cited in Alister McGrath, *The Twilight of Atheism: the Rise and Fall of Disbelief in the Modern World*, (London: Doubleday 2004.), 66; citing from Karl Marx’s, *Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Law (1843-44)*.

⁹² For discussion on Max Weber’s contribution in which he interpreted the doctrine of ‘election’ or salvation in terms of economic ‘proof’, and the so called ‘Protestant work ethic’ as a basis for the rise of capitalism see McGrath, Alister. *Christian Theology: an introduction*. [3rd ed.] (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2001.), 472ff.

⁹³ For discussion on Emile Durkheim’s contribution to understanding the ‘totems’ or symbols of religion as embodiment of group values see McGrath, Alister. *Christian Theology: an introduction*. [3rd ed.] (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2001.), 541.

⁹⁴ “Secularisation”, “Secularism” and “Secular Christianity” can be explored further in *A New Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Alan Richardson and John Bowden. (London: SCM Press, 1983.) S.v.

⁹⁵ Kevin Ward, “Christendom, clericalism, church and context: finding categories of connexion in a culture without a Christian memory” *Stimulus: The New Zealand Journal of Christian Thought and Practice*, (Vol. 10, No. 1 Feb. 2002.) 398.

⁹⁶ As noted in the work of Kevin Ward, “Is New Zealand’s Future Churchless?” *Stimulus: The New Zealand Journal of Christian Thought and Practice*. Vol. 12, No. 2. (May 2004.); and Alister McGrath, *The Twilight of Atheism: the Rise and Fall of Disbelief in the Modern World*. (London: Doubleday 2004.)

⁹⁷ Stark and Finke, *Acts of Faith*, 57ff.

⁹⁸ Stark and Finke, *Acts of Faith*, 79.

scope of this project; however it is important to note it as background to the experience of the research respondents.

Rodney Stark, Professor of Sociology and Comparative Religion at the University of Washington is a sociologist who has made an extensive study of how conversion as a social phenomenon can explain the rise of Christianity⁹⁹ without the need to posit mass conversions or miraculous events. Stark, in conjunction with Roger Finke, Professor of Sociology at Pennsylvania State University produced a landmark book *Acts of Faith*¹⁰⁰ which builds on earlier work and sets out their findings in a series of formal propositions and definitions¹⁰¹ backed up with research findings and discussion. The work provides some very helpful and interesting theories and insights into conversion. For example, they define conversion as “shifts across religious traditions”¹⁰² such as from Islam to Christianity, in contrast to ‘reaffiliation’ which is a shift within a religious tradition such as from Baptist to Roman Catholicism. Although this study has chosen not to adopt this distinction, due to the additional consideration given to the theological dimension of conversion discussed further below, it is noteworthy. Two other helpful concepts advanced are of social capital and religious capital. They define social capital as the sum of a person’s “interpersonal attachments.”¹⁰³ ‘Religious capital’ is defined as “the degree of mastery of and attachment to a particular religious culture.”¹⁰⁴ While they assert that under normal circumstances most people will neither convert nor reaffiliate (Proposition 30),¹⁰⁵ in making religious choices most people will attempt to conserve their social capital (Proposition 29), and conserve their religious capital (Proposition 33).

Another interesting sociological insight from Stark in *Cities of God*¹⁰⁶ is that conversion as a concept only has meaning within a context of monotheistic religions with competing claims for absolute loyalty. As he explains: “In a religious context populated by many gods,

⁹⁹ Rodney, Stark. *The Rise of Christianity: How the Obscure, Marginal Jesus Movement became the dominant religious force in the Western World in a few centuries.* (Princeton N.J.: HarperSanFrancisco, 1997.)

¹⁰⁰ Rodney Stark and Roger Finke, *Acts of Faith: Explaining the human side of religion,* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 2000.)

¹⁰¹ These Propositions and Definitions are collected together in a helpful Appendix. Stark and Finke, *Acts of Faith*, 277.

¹⁰² Stark and Finke, *Acts of Faith*, 114.

¹⁰³ Stark and Finke, *Acts of Faith*, 118.

¹⁰⁴ Stark and Finke, *Acts of Faith*, 121.

¹⁰⁵ Stark and Finke, *Acts of Faith*, 119.

¹⁰⁶ Rodney Stark, *Cities of God: The real story of how Christianity became an urban movement and conquered Rome.* (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 2006.)

to accept a new god usually does not involve discarding an old one.”¹⁰⁷ Stark uses this proposition to explain why monotheism generated missionising activity for all monotheistic religions, including Christianity: “Because it is based on acceptance of One True God, monotheism generates strong, competitive organizations of people prepared to act on behalf of their faith.”¹⁰⁸ Amongst the significant actions of such people is to promote their faith amongst their peer and kinship groups and so facilitate conversion. This is a useful concept to consider later as we reflect on why it is that mission activity directed towards facilitating conversion has receded in the West.

Within the terms of their own analysis, which is looking at the ‘human side of religion’ what they propose is a religious economy defined as:

“A religious economy consists of all the religious activity going on in any society: a “market” of current and potential adherents, a set of one or more organizations seeking to attract or maintain adherents, and the religious culture offered by the organization(s).” (Definition 32)¹⁰⁹

This may be a satisfying and valid exercise for a sociologist and it does give insights into the dynamics of some aspects of people’s behaviour. However it has its limits when we consider the theological perspective which understands God as an active presence in history and in people’s lives.

Christian Educationalists

Christian educationalists have their own approach to conversion where their primary concern is to do with faith formation; in this context conversion is one aspect of that wider concern. The educationalists studied are wise enough to recognise that conversion cannot be induced or posited as an educational goal and this produces a dilemma for them. John H. Westerhoff III, a Professor of Theology and Christian Nurture at Duke University Divinity School for many years, in his influential work *Will Our Children Have Faith* contrasts the task of the church school with that of the small church. While critical of both he identifies a

¹⁰⁷ Stark, *Cities of God*, 3.

¹⁰⁸ Stark, *Cities of God*, 114.

¹⁰⁹ Stark and Finke, *Acts of Faith*, 193.

major crisis in the church in the late twentieth century in North America, resulting from a failure of passing on the faith effectively. He characterises the church school as having focussed on teaching religion and the churches as focussing on trying to emulate the schools and that both have fallen under the spell of what he calls the “great twentieth-century theory jump: the school must do it.”¹¹⁰ He attributes this to the influence of John Dewey an American educational reformer whose fervour for education led to a situation where education was seen as the answer for every social ill or concern. He concludes that “Educationally, religion is a means not an end; faith is the only end. Faith, therefore, and not religion, must become the concern of Christian education... You can teach about religion but you cannot teach people faith.”¹¹¹ Westerhoff’s analysis of what he sees as a failure of the ‘schooling-instructional’ model for passing on the faith is that historically “Christian education has vacillated between a concern for conversion and a concern for nurture.”¹¹² His concern is that “we can nurture persons into institutional religion, but not into mature Christian faith. Christian faith by its very nature demands conversion.”¹¹³ His definition of conversion involves a radical turning from a faith received through nurture, to an owned faith which has emerged out of a process of judgement, inquiry, questioning and even doubt and experimentation with alternatives. For Westerhoff conversion is:

“...a process by which persons are nurtured in a community’s faith (the religion of the heart), go through the despair of doubt and the intellectual quests for understanding (the religion of the head), and at last, in late adolescence or early adulthood, experience illumination, certainty, and identity.”¹¹⁴

The outcome of this process is that a person learns what it means to commit their lives to causes and persons and thereby achieve personal Christian identity.¹¹⁵

Another significant Christian educationalist Thomas Groome, Professor of Theology and Religious Education at Boston College, is the author of *Sharing Faith*, among other influential works, who describes himself as a “Christian religious educator whose ecclesial

¹¹⁰ John H. Westerhoff III, *Will Our Children Have Faith?* First published 1976. [A new revised and expanded edition.] (Harrisburg PA/ Toronto, Canada: Morehouse Publishing, 2000.), 7.

¹¹¹ Westerhoff, *Will Our Children Have Faith?* 18.

¹¹² Westerhoff, *Will Our Children Have Faith?* 35.

¹¹³ Westerhoff, *Will Our Children Have Faith?* 35.

¹¹⁴ Westerhoff, *Will Our Children Have Faith?* 36.

¹¹⁵ Westerhoff, *Will Our Children Have Faith?* 35-36.

context is the Catholic tradition.”¹¹⁶ His extensive and complex work on how people come to faith and how this relates to Christian education recognises the complex social, cultural and psychological external and internal dynamics of the human environment. His approach to Christian education as an intentional endeavour he describes as “shared Christian Praxis” which is explained in detail in Chapter 4.¹¹⁷ However, Groome makes a similar acknowledgement to Westerhoff, and alludes to Tillich that conversion is beyond the scope of the educational enterprise: “Religious conversion is ultimately the act of falling in love with God. It is being grasped by ultimate concern.”¹¹⁸

The Theological Perspective

The phrase ‘Ultimate Concern’ used above comes to us from Paul Tillich, a German-American theologian, and so we turn to a consideration of conversion from the perspective of theologians. In summary, psychologists see conversion as a phenomenon entirely explainable in terms of the internal psychological structure of personality, and Freudians in particular see conversion as an expression of a pathological process. Sociologists see conversion as a social phenomenon explainable within the context of group psychology, social, cultural and even economic dynamics. If the social scientists acknowledge the reality of the divine as a factor in the phenomenon, they perhaps quite rightly, set aside this reality as being beyond the scope of their discipline. Theologians however, deal with the phenomenon of conversion within the doctrine of salvation (soteriology) and to some extent the doctrine of humanity. For theologians, conversion is the human expression of a saving covenantal relationship planned, initiated, established and sustained by God. The appropriate theological areas to be explored are salvation and related subjects. This project is unable to examine the work of any theologians in detail as the works are extensive. An overview is offered drawing from general works of reference especially Alister McGrath’s *Christian Theology: an Introduction*.

¹¹⁶ Thomas Groome, *Sharing Faith: A comprehensive Approach to Religious Education and Pastoral Ministry*, (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock, 1991.), 2.

¹¹⁷ Thomas A *comprehensive approach to religious education and pastoral ministry*, (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock, 1991.), 135ff.

¹¹⁸ Groome, *Sharing Faith*, 130.

Conversion and Salvation

In this section we will explore a little of the relationship between the theological concept of salvation and how this relates to the phenomenon of conversion. Salvation as a concept is not necessarily religious and religions other than Christianity have concepts of salvation, a point noted by McGrath.¹¹⁹ The Christian understanding of salvation is richly complex with a long history of exploration, discussion and dispute. It has undergone adjustment over time. During the apostolic period, and especially from the writings of Paul, salvation refers to a future event that will be historic and even cosmic in its scope in which Christ will return (the 'Parousia'), the final judgement will occur, the wicked of the world will be destroyed, the evil powers overthrown and the Kingdom of God established in completeness. There is evidence that Paul and his contemporaries believed that this would all occur within their own lifetimes.¹²⁰ A shift in emphasis from salvation in the future to salvation in the past and present can be discerned in the so called Deutero-Pauline writings.¹²¹ An important consequence of this shift from future to present is the shift from the salvation of all creation in Romans 8:19-21,¹²² to the salvation of individual believers: 1 Timothy 4:10.¹²³ In the Gospels, which were written later than Paul's epistles, Christ is given the title 'Saviour' only twice.¹²⁴ Nevertheless the concept is present throughout as Christ is depicted administering salvation through faith to those whom he encounters. The coming of salvation to various individuals is evidenced in very personal terms such as healing and forgiveness of sins.¹²⁵ In some instances faith is a factor but not in others, such as the man born blind, although faith follows shortly after the healing. This personal salvation implies not only being rescued from an undesirable state of being but also being

¹¹⁹ McGrath, Alister. *Christian Theology: an introduction*. [3rd ed.] (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2001.), 407.

¹²⁰ "Parousia," and "Salvation," *A New Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Alan Richardson and John Bowden. London: SCM Press, 1983. S.v.

¹²¹ The term 'Deutero-Pauline' refers to New Testament documents whose attribution to Paul is disputed or in doubt. They include 2 Thessalonians, Colossians, Ephesians, the Pastoral Epistles, and Hebrews. In general they are considered to have been written either late in Paul's life or after his death by members of his 'school'. For further detail see: Felix Just, "The Deutero-Pauline Letters" *Catholic Resources for Bible, Liturgy, Art, and Theology*, March 28 2009, <<http://catholic-resources.org/Bible/Paul-Disputed.htm>> (14 September 2009).

¹²² "The creation waits in eager expectation for the sons of God to be revealed. For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God." (Romans 8:19-21, NIV).

¹²³ "...we have put our hope in the living God, who is the Saviour of all men, and especially of those who believe." (1 Timothy 4:10, NIV)

¹²⁴ In Luke 2:11 and John 4:42

¹²⁵ For example the woman who anointed the feet of Jesus (Luke 7:36-50), the man born blind (John 9), and the woman healed of a haemorrhage (Mark 5:26-34).

transformed to a different and better state of being. John's Gospel tends to characterise this transformation as being from darkness to light,¹²⁶ although this imagery is used also to some extent in Matthew and Luke.¹²⁷ There is no doubt that in the Gospels salvation has this personal aspect to it and so it also relates to the concept of conversion which is the intentional acceptance of this salvation. The depiction of Christ as Saviour of the world has enabled Christianity as a movement to express itself in different forms to meet different needs, offering a dispensation of universal deliverance it was adaptable to different cultures and ages depending on what people sought deliverance from. Thus at the time of Paul people felt the need of deliverance or salvation from the wrath of God in the last judgement.¹²⁸ At a later date and in a less Jewish environment salvation was sought from "the power of world rulers, astral deities and all the malign forces that were believed to control the world."¹²⁹ In the Fourth Century, salvation for Augustine was understood in terms of deliverance from feelings of moral failure, personal inadequacy and self-doubt.¹³⁰ We will further explore these cultural and historically relative aspects of salvation in some of our case studies.

As a concept salvation presupposes firstly that an undesirable state exists from which deliverance or rescue is required. Secondly it also presupposes that some effective means of deliverance is available. A third is that it requires there be a more desirable state to which the person may be delivered. Each of these points can be broken into further areas of analysis.

What is the nature of the undesirable state?

Theology describes the undesirable state as sin. In theological terms sin is understood to be the cause of human distress, divine judgement and condemnation. Christian thinkers from

¹²⁶ "This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but men loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil." (John 3:19, NIV)

¹²⁷ "If then the light within you is darkness, how great is that darkness!" (Matthew 6:23, NIV) See also Luke 11:34.

¹²⁸ "to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead—Jesus, who rescues us from the coming wrath." (1 Thess. 1:10, NIV)

¹²⁹ J. C Fenton "Salvation," *A New Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Alan Richardson and John Bowden. (London: SCM Press, 1983.), S. v. See also Ephesians 6:12 "For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms."

¹³⁰ Augustine, Saint. *Confessions*, trans. by R. S. Pine-Coffin. (Harmondsworth, Middlesex, England: Penguin Books, 1961.), Book VIII:12, 177-178.

St Paul to Augustine and Calvin through to today have recognised the power of sin and described it and its cure in various ways. We will discuss this subject in outline only. Original Sin is understood as sin that is inherited due to our shared humanity as expressed in our common lineage back to Adam and Eve and their Fall from primordial innocence before God. This form of sin is like an inherited disease, which requires healing from an outside agency. It can also be regarded as a rebellion of the will which requires a certain brokenness¹³¹ or repentance, a turning in a new direction which is at the heart of conversion. In scripture sin is also regarded as a power at work in our bodies which holds us captive. By our own power we are unable to break ourselves free from it. Another understanding of sin is that it is a judgement against human beings for having broken divine law. This is a judicial or forensic approach to the problem of sin. Other understandings of sin are sins of omission, that is, sins of inadequacy or failure to attain a required moral standard. There are sins of commission which would include the deliberate choice to commit some morally wrong or evil act. Catholics distinguish between venial and mortal sins.¹³²

Sin may also be understood in terms other than personal. Various groups have developed understandings of sin as a collective dynamic present in relationships and social systems. In recent times the most notable movement was the Social Gospel movement led and inspired by the work of Walter Rauschenbusch,¹³³ a North American theologian who criticised the church of his time for being too focussed on the individual and not sufficiently concerned with the transformation of society. He and the Social Gospel movement were among the first to analyse modern society using Gospel values to identify systemic evil and sin and to propose a renewed understanding of Christ's teaching of the Kingdom of God as a means of seeking to transform society.

Another movement influential in its understanding of the collective or social reach of sin in modern times was the development of Liberation Theology. It originated in Latin America

¹³¹ "The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise."
(Psalm 51:17, NIV)

¹³² William Hordern, "Mortal Sin," *A New Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Alan Richardson and John Bowden. (London: SCM Press, 1983.), S.v. Venial sins are sins which if unforgiven at time of death are not sufficient to impair advancement to heaven, while mortal sins are sins which if unforgiven at time of death result in such impairment.

¹³³ Walter Rauschenbusch (1861-1918), see under "Social Gospel," *A New Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Alan Richardson and John Bowden. (London: SCM Press, 1983.)

following a congress of Roman Catholic Bishops at Medellin, Columbia in 1968 at which they confessed their complicity with structures of exploitation in the region and declared that in future they would side with the poor. Liberation theology developed from this declaration and extended its influence to Africa in the 1970's. Following the de-colonisation of African countries the old colonial powers left or were forced out of their former colonies. The writing of Paulo Freire, especially in his influential work *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*¹³⁴ provided an analysis of the oppressive mechanisms of colonialism and offered a means of overcoming it. Though not a theologian, he was a Christian and influenced by the Gospel message of liberation. Perhaps the most influential Liberation Theology theologian is the Peruvian Gustavo Gutiérrez¹³⁵ whose work provided a solid theological foundation for this movement and for other related theologies such as Black Theology and Feminist Theology. These all bring a similar analysis to bear on the nature of sin and evil as a structural or systemic malaise in society, especially in the economic, political and educational institutions of society. The corresponding approach to what constitutes redemption or salvation is a structural and systemic transformation according to Gospel values.

In all these aspects of sin the principal result is alienation from God. A consequence of alienation from God is that this alienation spreads to other relationships, including alienation from others in the form of family and society, thus the social ills of crime, warfare and injustice. Further, in the analysis of the Social Gospel movement and Liberation theologians there is alienation from creation, thus the ecological crises; and an inner alienation from self thus psychological and spiritual problems.

The purpose of this discussion is not to exhaustively explore the rich and complex theological understandings of sin but to touch on the main concepts to highlight that in theology sin is understood to be the principal predicament from which human beings require salvation, deliverance from sin and its consequences thus being the principal benefit that conversion offers.¹³⁶

¹³⁴ Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed: 30th Anniversary Edition*, translated by Myra Bergman Ramos, (New York /London: Continuum 1970, 2005.)

¹³⁵ McGrath, Alister. *Christian Theology: an introduction*. [3rd ed.] (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2001), 115. - "In his *Theology of Liberation* (1971), ... Gustavo Gutiérrez introduced the characteristic themes that would become definitive of the movement."

¹³⁶ For further exploration see related articles in *A New Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Alan Richardson and John Bowden. (London: SCM Press, 1983.), S. v. "Sin", "Depravity, Total", "Imputation", "Moral Theology". Also

What is the means of salvation?

Christian theology sees the means of salvation to be in the mercy and grace of Jesus Christ. But again how this is to be understood has produced a rich and complex literature and catalogue of ideas. This salvation in Christ is prefigured and foreshadowed in a number of ways by earlier covenants in the Old Testament. Besides the covenant with Israel inaugurated through Moses,¹³⁷ the Old Testament also refers to a covenant with Abraham (Abram),¹³⁸ and to a covenant establishing the dynasty of Davidic Kingship.¹³⁹ This is just an indication of the richness of Covenant theology in the Old Testament much of which is understood by Christians to be fulfilled in the salvation available through Christ. The study of how Christ is able to fulfil these longings for salvation has its own richness and complexity, and is generally considered under the terms ‘Christology’ or ‘soteriology’. Another important term is ‘*Heilsgeschichte*’ a German term made prominent in theological sense by J. C. van Hofmann, which translates as ‘salvation history’ and refers to the way that the saving initiative of God in Jesus Christ is appropriated into history, both in the general sense and in the personal sense.¹⁴⁰

The concepts of mercy and grace are important in considering how salvation in and through Christ is made available. Grace is God’s undeserved favour while mercy carries the idea of the withholding of deserved punishment or retribution. There were early disputes over the nature of salvation as a free gift of God’s grace between Pelagius and Augustine in the fourth Century. Augustine in his *de natura et gratia* (“on nature and grace”) summarises the heart of the matter: “...this grace of Christ, without which neither infants nor grown persons can be saved, is not bestowed as a reward for merits, but is given freely (*gratis*), which is why it is called grace (*gratia*).”¹⁴¹ (McGrath’s emphasis) Other important concepts are ‘justification by faith’, which became an important and foundational concept

there is a helpful survey of these concepts in Alister McGrath, *Christian Theology: an introduction*. [3rd ed.] (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2001.), 445ff.

¹³⁷ “Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession.” (Exodus 19:5-6, NIV)

¹³⁸ “On that day the Lord made a covenant with Abram and said, “To your descendants I give this land....”” (Genesis 15:18, NIV)

¹³⁹ “Is not my house right with God? Has he not made with me an everlasting covenant, arranged and secured in every part?” (2 Samuel 23:5, NIV)

¹⁴⁰ *A New Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Alan Richardson and John Bowden. (London: SCM Press, 1983.), S. v.

¹⁴¹ Alister McGrath, *Christian Theology: an introduction*. [3rd ed.] (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2001.), 447.

in the reformation of the Church initiated by Martin Luther and carried forward by many theologians of the Reformed tradition.

What is the nature of the new state?

In theology it is recognised that there are three ways in which a person can be understood to be 'saved'. Firstly a person is saved (past tense) by the work of Christ in his life, death and resurrection, announced in the *kerygma*¹⁴² or totality of the Christ Event and the Apostolic teaching which is the vehicle for salvation. Secondly the person is being saved in the present and continuing tense. This refers to the process of 'regeneration'¹⁴³ or 'sanctification'¹⁴⁴ by which a person is progressively set free from sin and transformed into the likeness of Christ. The third sense is that a person will be saved (future tense). This is the ultimate completion of the process which is understood theologically to be initiated, enabled, empowered and completed by God and for God's own loving and compassionate purposes. The role of the person as a willing contributor and partner with God in this process is important and essential considering that humans have free will, yet it is also understood as a process completely dependent on God as active and present throughout.

The new state of salvation for the person is thus in one sense wholly and eternally achieved already 'in Christ' yet in the temporal reality of daily life of each person it is in the process of becoming; while it is also understood as the promised reality whose eventual arrival is associated with the 'Parousia,'¹⁴⁵ the reuniting of Christ with the Church as bride,¹⁴⁶ or the end of the age or the ultimate end of all human questing. The apprehending of these spiritual and theological realities is perhaps the ideal of a Christian conversion experience. This apprehending is a complex event bringing the eternal, ultimate and perfect purposes of God into conjunction with the temporal, proximate and imperfect realities of any human person and their historical, societal and cultural context. The new state of a saved person so

¹⁴² C. F. Evans, "Kerygma" *A New Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Alan Richardson and John Bowden. (London: SCM Press, 1983.), 316 especially in the second sense listed "emphasising that the Christian gospel is essentially not general truths of religious truth but the announcement of salvation(*) in and through particular events interpreted as decisive acts of God."

¹⁴³ Peace, *Conversion in the New Testament*, 353.

¹⁴⁴ Geoffrey Wainwright, "Sanctification," *A New Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Alan Richardson and John Bowden. (London: SCM Press, 1983.), 521.

¹⁴⁵ Anthony Tyrell Hanson, "Parousia" *A New Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Alan Richardson and John Bowden. (London: SCM Press, 1983.), 427.

¹⁴⁶ Revelations 21:2, "I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband."

converted is a state of willing and active partnership by the person with God. Gordon T. Smith, the dean at Regent College in Vancouver, Canada in his 'extended reflection on conversion' describes the features of the person who has been saved in the sense of Christian conversion:

“...these women and men were transformed by grace. They received strength in the midst of trial and persecution and were an example to believers in other parts of the world, witnessing in word and deed to the power of the gospel. This is what we mean by conversion: through the Spirit women and men are transformed by the Word; experience pervasive joy and peace in the midst of a broken world; courageously walk in the way of the cross; and live by faith, hope and love, signs of the triumph of God's grace.”¹⁴⁷

Smith contributes an evangelical emphasis to our understanding of conversion. He is careful, as an evangelical, to impress on his readers that conversion is a complex process and not the result of a single decision. Smith identifies seven elements of a 'good conversion' including intellectual belief, repentance, trust and assurance of forgiveness, commitment, water baptism, reception of the Holy Spirit, and incorporation into the church. In addition to these factors Smith points out there is a complex interaction of them all and yet he affirms: “Belief and repentance stand as a pair at the center of the Christian experience of conversion.”¹⁴⁸ Smith includes a discussion on the role of baptism as an essential sacramental and liturgical element to an understanding of conversion. He affirms baptism “is a necessary sacramental dimension of a Christian conversion, not merely a sign of conversion,” he continues “Baptism without faith and repentance is nothing more than water on the body. But faith and repentance without baptism are also inadequate, for we are embodied souls.”¹⁴⁹

Richard V. Peace, Professor of Evangelism and Spiritual Formation at Fuller Theological Seminary California, an evangelical theologian with a maths and engineering background defines conversion as modelled on the experience of Saint Paul. Peace's understanding is that Christian conversion involves:

¹⁴⁷ Gordon T. Smith, *Beginning Well: Christian Conversion and Authentic Transformation*, (Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP Books 2001.), 220.

¹⁴⁸ Smith, *Beginning Well*, 142.

¹⁴⁹ Smith, *Beginning Well*, 183-184.

“new insight into God, new turning to God, and a new life lived in response to God. It involves seeing oneself in the light of God’s truth, embracing a new relationship with God, and living this out within the community of God’s people as a servant and witness to all people.”¹⁵⁰

All definitions give expression to some form of change taking place in the person or peoples under study. For the sake of this study conversion will be defined as *a reorientation of life focus towards a centring on Christ and the Christian Gospel*.

‘Reorientation’ is used to indicate that the ‘turning’ or ‘*metanoia*’¹⁵¹ which is essential to conversion may be from a variety of prior positions, not just a position of unbelief, nor of conscious moral failure. It implies no moral or spiritual judgement on the person’s prior position, even if in hindsight the person who has experienced conversion may make such moral judgements. ‘Life focus’ is used as it takes into account the whole of life of the person converting, their past as well as their future orientation, and includes not only the person’s inner life but also their life context. The term also seeks to recognise that conversion includes an act of will, an intentional decision and not merely a matter of being swept up into a course beyond the person’s control, or that the person is driven by past pathological failures or inadequacies, even if these are present to some degree. ‘Centering’ is used to indicate that the conversion is purposeful and directed towards a particular focus, and that focus is ‘Christ and the Christian Gospel’. This phrase is used because Christian conversion is often experienced as a person to person encounter in which, for the convert, the other person in the encounter is experienced as the presence of God or Christ. And further, this personal encounter serves as an introduction to or profoundly renewed understanding of the ‘Christian Gospel,’ the message or kerygma of Christ; the person and the message being inextricably linked.

When we consider any definition or model of salvation or of conversion we need to bear in mind the post-modern critique of what are described as ‘meta-narratives’ or ‘grand

¹⁵⁰ Richard V. Peace, *Conversion in the New Testament: Paul and the Twelve*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan/ Cambridge, U.K.: William B. Eerdmans 1999.), 101.

¹⁵¹ ‘*metanoia*’ -to turn, to turn again or to return. S.v. ‘Conversion’ in *A New Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Alan Richardson and John Bowden. London: SCM Press, 1983.

narratives.’¹⁵² Jean-François Lyotard¹⁵³ a twentieth century professor of philosophy at the University of Paris VII, Vincennes, and at the University of California, used this term to critique “any theory claiming to provide universal explanations and to be universally valid”¹⁵⁴ or as McGrath described them: “generalizing narratives which claimed to provide universal frameworks for the discernment of meaning.”¹⁵⁵ Metanarratives have been very effective in propagating ideas, concepts and systems of meaning not just in religion but in secular ideologies and science. Marxist ideology is often used as an example of an effective metanarrative: “which processes all human history and social behaviour through its theory of dialectical materialism ... all history has been the history of class struggle, and it denies the validity of all other explanations, laying sole claim to the truth.”¹⁵⁶ Lyotard’s contention was that such metanarratives were to be rejected on the basis that they were authoritarian and that there was no basis for this authority as there was no absolute truth. He argued that all truth is relative and local. What was needed was a collection of *les petit récits*, or little narratives which offer local and relative truth which are pragmatically useful in achieving short-term social objectives.¹⁵⁷ This is a useful insight even if it is somewhat self-consuming, as post-modernism and the concept of metanarratives is in itself a metanarrative. The usefulness of the concept lies in the way that it draws our attention to the reality that all accounts of salvation or conversion are contained in a narrative, and that these join together to form a Grand Narrative by which Christians offer a world-view, a Gospel or a *kerygma*, which seeks to offer a comprehensive and meaningful explanation for the ultimate meaning and purpose of existence. When soberly considered against what we now know of the vastness of the universe and the seemingly impenetrable mystery of life this is a breathtaking claim.

Stark and Finke, citing other commentators such as Nock, have defined conversion as a “shift from one of the monotheistic religions to another.”¹⁵⁸ The argument being that a

¹⁵² The two terms are considered interchangeable. “Metanarrative,” *The Icon Critical Dictionary of Postmodern Thought*, ed. Stuart Sim, (Cambridge: Icon Books, 1998.), 315.

¹⁵³ Lyotard used the French term *les grand récits* ‘grand narratives’ describing the repressiveness of communism, as distinct from *les petit récits* ‘little narratives’ as part of his critique of Marxist totalitarianism.

¹⁵⁴ “Metanarrative,” *The Icon Critical Dictionary*, 315.

¹⁵⁵ Alister McGrath, *Christian Theology: an introduction*. [3rd ed.] (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2001.), 141.

¹⁵⁶ “Grand Narrative,” *The Icon Critical Dictionary*, 261.

¹⁵⁷ “Little Narrative,” *The Icon Critical Dictionary*, 306.

¹⁵⁸ Rodney Stark, *Cities of God: The real story of how Christianity became an urban movement and conquered Rome*. (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 2006.) 4, citing A.D. Nock, *Conversion: The Old and the New in Religion from Alexander the Great to Augustine of Hippo*. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1933.), 12.

conversion type experience that does not result in the change of religion is really only an intensification or reaffiliation experience within a particular faith tradition. One of their propositions was that doctrine does not play a major part in attracting converts to a new faith, at least initially. Yet doctrine can make a major difference later. It is to some extent doctrinally driven change that is most characteristic of Christian conversion as it continues to shape character beyond a single conversion event. Therefore I have chosen to use the term 'conversion' for the experiences described above even though from a sociological perspective it is a change within a religious tradition. I concede that for sociologists it is important to have some clear definition within their discipline for distinguishing conversion from other types of intense mystical experience. However the profound shift from a life lived for utilitarian purposes through conversion to a life lived in the service of God modelled on Christ is such a profound change it dishonours it to call it less than conversion. For many long centuries this kind of change has been named 'conversion' drawing on the strong biblical and patristic heritage. Stark and Finke do not, I believe, give sufficient weight to the significance of this shift from a nominal acceptance of a culturally pervasive form of Christian religion to a profound re-centring of life focus away from personal ambition, selfish pursuits, tribal or familial loyalties, to the kind of universalising faith described by Fowler. For our purposes this can and must be described as conversion. In his later work, Stark acknowledges the profound difference that doctrinal monotheism makes to providing "an adequate religious basis for moral order,"¹⁵⁹ -and missionising activity,¹⁶⁰ including conversion, so perhaps his position on this has softened a little.

¹⁵⁹ Stark, *Cities of God*, 116.

¹⁶⁰ Stark, *Cities of God*, 116, citing Isaiah 49:6, "It is too small a thing for you to be my servant to restore the tribes of Jacob and bring back those of Israel I have kept. I will also make you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring my salvation to the ends of the earth." And other similar supporting verses from Isaiah.

Conversion in the Bible

Conversion is part of the experience of those whose stories are recorded in the Hebrew and Christian scriptures and through history to the present. The word ‘conversion’ in the sense of ‘to turn’ or ‘to return’ is used extensively in the Bible. Lewis Rambo¹⁶¹ identifies the words translated as ‘conversion’ from the Hebrew: ‘*shub*’ (sic. -rendered as *shubh* in other literature); and from the Greek: *epistrephein*, *strephein*, and *metanoia*. Gillespie provides a detailed explanation of these words and the nuances of their meanings, noting that the Hebrew ‘*shub*’ is used some 1,146 times in the Old Testament.¹⁶² These words mean ‘to turn,’ ‘to turn again’ or ‘to return.’¹⁶³ Rambo notes that in the Hebrew Scriptures the concept of turning was used in reference to those who turned from the worship of idols to the worship of the living God. He notes that present day meanings could include changing allegiance from one major religious tradition to another; changing allegiance from one denomination to another within the Christian spectrum; conversion from non-involvement to affiliation; and intensification of faith through a deepening of feeling or involvement in a faith tradition to which the person nominally belongs.¹⁶⁴ J. L. Houlden¹⁶⁵ in his article on conversion expands the explanation of the Old Testament understanding giving the examples of Abraham leaving his homeland for a promise from God;¹⁶⁶ the experience of Jacob encountering and wrestling with God;¹⁶⁷ and the experience of Moses turning aside to view the burning bush and encountering God.¹⁶⁸ A number of other examples exist of figures in the Old Testament whose experience of ‘turning’ are examples of changes of allegiance or calls to refreshed allegiance such as Joshua’s challenge to the people of Israel; or Isaiah’s intensification of his pre-existing loyalty.¹⁶⁹ In general however the calls to repentance issued by the prophets were addressed to the whole nation as very clearly articulated by Joshua.¹⁷⁰

¹⁶¹ In his article ‘Conversion,’ *A New Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Alan Richardson and John Bowden. (London: SCM Press, 1983.) S.v.

¹⁶² V. Bailey Gillespie *Religious Conversion and Personal Identity*, (Birmingham, Alabama: Religious Education Press, 1979) 12-17.

¹⁶³ Lewis R. Rambo “Conversion,” *A New Dictionary of Theology*, (SCM Press 1983), s.v.

¹⁶⁴ Rambo “Conversion,” *A New Dictionary of Theology*, 123, 124.

¹⁶⁵ J. L. Houlden “Conversion,” *The Oxford Companion to the Bible*, (New York / Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993.) 132-134

¹⁶⁶ Gen. 12:4-5

¹⁶⁷ Gen. 28:10-17

¹⁶⁸ Exod. 3:1-4

¹⁶⁹ Isa. 6:1-8

¹⁷⁰ “Now fear the Lord and serve him with all faithfulness. Throw away the gods your forefathers worshiped beyond the River and in Egypt, and serve the Lord. But if serving the Lord seems undesirable to you, then

Richard V. Peace whose focus is on the New Testament provides a helpful ‘Lexical Summary of Conversion’ in an appendix to his work.¹⁷¹ In this summary the words ‘*epistrophē*’, ‘*metanoēō*’ and ‘*metamelomai*’ are explained in more detail. He notes that *epistrophē* is borrowed from Greek classical philosophical literature referring to the ‘turning of the soul to piety or the divine.’¹⁷² This concept then passed into Christian usage via the Septuagint (LXX) and that the term *epistrophē* is similar to the way *shubh* is used in the Old Testament to indicate a turning away from wickedness (Acts 3:26), from darkness to light and from the power of Satan (Acts 26:18), or from worthless things to the living God (1 Thess. 1:9).¹⁷³ It is noted that although what one turns from is indicated in these and other examples, it is what one turns to that is emphasized, so it is the turning to God which has the stronger impact in the use of this term. Peace notes that there is another word linked with *epistrophē*. It is *pisteuō* which relates to belief and the connection between the two is to be seen in Acts 11:21: “... a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord” (NIV)... ..Thus the New Testament equation seems to be repentance plus faith equals conversion.’¹⁷⁴

Metanoēō and *metamelomai* are related words in that they both capture ‘the sense of regret over the life that was once led but from which there has been turning.’¹⁷⁵ Peace concludes this section by identifying six points in relation to the scriptural language and treatment of conversion. Firstly, that the theological use of the terms is derived from the secular or utilitarian meaning and original use. Secondly that when used in the religious sense, there is both a turning away from something, whether evil, or idols or darkness; and a turning to God or righteousness, and it is what is turned to which is more important. Thirdly in the Old Testament it is more often the nation of Israel, or the people of God who are called to turn, while in the New Testament it is individuals to whom the call is directed. Fourthly, although the more comprehensive word used in the Old Testament is *epistrophē*, with

choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your forefathers served beyond the River, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you are living. But as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord.” (Joshua 24:14-15, NIV)

¹⁷¹ Richard V. Peace *Conversion in the New Testament: Paul and the Twelve*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan / Cambridge UK: William B Eerdmans, 1999) 346-353.

¹⁷² Peace, *Conversion in the New Testament*, 346, citing F. Laubach, “*Epistrophō*” in *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, ed. Colin Brown (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1975), vol. p.354.

¹⁷³ Peace, *Conversion in the New Testament*, 348.

¹⁷⁴ Peace, *Conversion in the New Testament*, 349

¹⁷⁵ Peace, *Conversion in the New Testament*, 348

metanoēō used as an equivalent, when the two words are used together *metanoēō* is the word that has the sense of looking backward with regret. The fifth point he makes is that there is a clear sense that *metanoēō* is a decision of the mind. It is a conscious choice that is made. And the sixth point is that repentance is not complete without faith (*pistis / pisteuō*). Looking back with regret must be accompanied by looking forward with trust and a renewed focus on God and Jesus Christ. A final point to note from Peace's analysis of repentance:

“Thus far the focus has been on the person: the person who repents, reaches out in faith, and experiences conversion. Yet it is quite clear from the New Testament that God the Holy Spirit is an active agent in this whole process. (Here he cites John 1:12-13)¹⁷⁶ ... The theological term for this work of God in the hearts and lives of those who turn to God is regeneration. Without regeneration conversion is mere human effort at self-improvement; without the work of the Holy Spirit evangelism becomes manipulation.”¹⁷⁷

¹⁷⁶ “But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God.” John 1:12-13.

¹⁷⁷ Richard V. Peace *Conversion in the New Testament: Paul and the Twelve*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan / Cambridge UK: William B Eerdmans, 1999) 353.

CASE STUDIES OF CONVERSION

Case Study 1: The Conversion of Paul: A Transformed Life

Perhaps the most dramatic and definitive description of Christian conversion is the account of what happened to Saul/ Paul as recorded in the Acts of the Apostles. Paul first appears as an approving witness to the stoning of Stephen, the first Christian martyr (7:58 / 8:1).

Following this decisive event, Paul takes up the cause of zealous persecution of this new and heretical 'sect'¹⁷⁸ within Judaism (8:3-4). This persecution has the effect of dispersing followers of the Way throughout the Mediterranean world. Paul reappears 'breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord' (9:1) and obtaining letters of authority in Jerusalem from the High Priest to extend his persecution to Damascus. While travelling on the Damascus Road, Paul has a dramatic encounter. Paul's conversion experience is set out in three passages each with some slight variation.¹⁷⁹ Paloutzian et al. note that "Some Christians regard Paul's experience as the prototype of the true conversion."¹⁸⁰ His encounter experience involved seeing a bright light; falling to the ground and hearing a voice speak to him (9:3-6). The identity of the voice is given as "Jesus, whom you are persecuting" (9:5). He is instructed to go into Damascus to receive further instructions and he finds that he has been physically blinded. In Damascus he encounters Ananias who has also received divine instructions to minister healing to Paul, to receive him into the Christian community by baptism and to commission him for a new task as a "chosen instrument ... to carry my name before the Gentiles..." (9:15). After a period of rest Paul quickly takes up this new commission. He begins to visit local synagogues to proclaim Jesus as the Son of God (9:20), to the astonishment of those who knew of his former reputation. This brief outline of Paul's conversion reveals a pattern, or template, which became the grand narrative by which later Christian conversions were measured and compared for many centuries and continues to exercise power as a model today. In fact any significant change of allegiance or life direction even in the secular world will sometimes be called a 'Damascus Road experience.'

¹⁷⁸ Stark and Finke define a sect as a religious body in relatively higher tension with its socio-cultural environment: Stark, Rodney and Roger Finke. *Acts of Faith: Explaining the human side of religion*. (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 2000.), 144.

¹⁷⁹ The three passages in Acts are: 9:1-19; 22:3-21 and 26:1-23.

¹⁸⁰ Raymond F. Paloutzian, James T. Richardson and Lewis R. Rambo. "Religious Conversion and Personality Change." *Journal of Personality* 67:6, (December 1999.): 1049.

Ronald D. Witherup in his treatment of conversion in the New Testament¹⁸¹ notes that in Luke-Acts the author ‘nuances’ the concept of conversion in three ways that stand out as different to the other Synoptic gospels. Firstly, by shifting the emphasis in conversion from the more communal accounts in Matthew and Mark to more personalised and individualised accounts. Secondly rather than treating conversion as a message for those within the community to be purified and renewed; the author directs conversion outwardly showing that it is a means for outsiders to be joined with the new community. Thirdly, and related to this second point, the Book of Acts portrays conversion as an ‘overt change of religion.’¹⁸²

Peace gives a detailed analysis of Paul’s conversion, describing his experience in three movements or phases, 1) insight, 2) turning, and 3) transformation. Firstly, Paul gains insight into who he really is especially in relation to God. Secondly, in his ‘numinous’¹⁸³ encounter with Jesus he turns and submits to him as Lord. And thirdly this commitment brings about a transformation of both his inner orientation towards God and his behaviour and lifestyle in relation to others.¹⁸⁴ On another level Peace sees within each of these phases the same three movements and he explores them in some detail.

We can note some relevant points from this detailed exploration. Firstly Paul’s insight into the nature of Jesus as divine, although Horsley and Silberman note that Paul’s background would have included a rich grounding in the divine encounter experiences of the Old Testament prophets, and that his conversion can thus be understood to have taken “a form appropriate to his educated background: a sudden, divine commission to preach the *true* path to Israel’s redemption, in the tradition of generations of righteous Israelite prophets, scribes, and seers.”¹⁸⁵ (Author’s emphasis) They contend also that it is pure speculation that Paul’s conversion came as the result of “a personal crisis or painful realization that his

¹⁸¹ Ronald D. Witherup, *Conversion in the New Testament*. (Collegeville, Minnesota : The Liturgical Press, 1994.) 58.

¹⁸² Witherup, *Conversion in the New Testament*, 58.

¹⁸³ The term ‘numinous’ was coined by Rudolf Otto in his insightful work *The Idea of the Holy*. It refers to the unique feelings experienced on encountering the divine presence. See Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy: An inquiry into the non-rational factor in the idea of the divine and its relation to the rational*. Translated by John W. Harvey. (London/ Oxford/ New York: Oxford University Press, 1958.) (First published 1923), 7-11.

¹⁸⁴ This is a summary of Peace’s conclusion to his section on Paul, see: Richard V. Peace, *Conversion in the New Testament: Paul and the Twelve*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan/ Cambridge, U.K.: William B. Eerdmans 1999.), 99-101.

¹⁸⁵ Richard A. Horsely and Neil Asher Silberman, *The Message and the Kingdom: how Jesus and Paul ignited a revolution and transformed the ancient world*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997.) 122.

relentless persecution of a few poor peasants and townspeople of Damascus did nothing to advance the salvation of Israel.”¹⁸⁶

In the second phase, according to Peace, that of turning to Jesus, there is also insight in encountering the risen Christ and realising his true identity. This realisation induces in Paul a need to be transformed. It is one thing to have a mystical or numinous experience, but it is another for the experience to bring about conversion. Peace cites research that indicates that many Americans report having a mystical experience but few result in a conversion or transformation of life.¹⁸⁷ Paul’s conversion begins with his words reported in Acts 22:10 “What am I to do Lord?” At the immediate point he asks he is told to enter the city of Damascus and wait (Acts 9:6, 8-9). As the experience unfolds he is met by Ananias, who has a collaborating mystical experience and is sent by God to heal and bestow a commissioning upon Paul and mediate the gift of the Holy Spirit (Acts 9:17-19a). Paul’s sight is restored, he is baptised, he regains his strength and after a period of getting to know his former enemies as friends he begins to preach about Jesus as the Son of God, the Messiah (Acts 9:19b-22). Longer term his transformation involves being recognised and more widely received into the Christian community, understanding the continuity between Judaism and Christianity, and coming to terms with the full implications of his call as Apostle to the Gentiles.

This leads to the third phase of transformation which involves Paul gaining insight into the nature of the new life he must lead which involves a new commission to bring people into willing captivity to Christ.¹⁸⁸ This radical turn-around has become archetypical for conversion ever since. Horsley and Silberman further contend that Paul’s conversion should not be considered as being from one religion (Judaism) to another (Christianity). His dramatic, light-filled encounter with the risen Christ “would not have changed his basic scriptural outlook but would have merely shown him previously unknown *details* of God’s unfolding plan for Israel’s salvation.”¹⁸⁹ A point affirmed by Peace who suggests that the standing of Ananias as a: “devout man according to the law and well spoken of by all the Jews...” (22:12) was significant. Paul’s extended reflections on the continuity of the two faith communities especially as set out in the Letter to the Romans (5:1ff) and Letter to the

¹⁸⁶ Horsely and Silberman, *The Message and the Kingdom*, 123 (author’s emphasis)

¹⁸⁷ Peace, *Conversion*, 88.

¹⁸⁸ “...we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ.” (2 Corinthians 10:5, NIV)

¹⁸⁹ Horsely and Silberman, *The Message...*, 122 (author’s emphasis)

Galatians (2:16ff) led to a major theme in his theology of ‘Justification by Faith’¹⁹⁰ which has been so influential in renewal movements of the church including of course the Reformation, particularly in the thinking of Martin Luther.

Wetherup places Paul’s experience alongside the other conversion accounts in Acts. These are the accounts of the conversions of the Ethiopian Eunuch (8:26-40); Cornelius (10:1-11:18; 15:7-11); Lydia (16:14-15) and the Philippian jailer (16:25-34). Four of these conversions are also of gentiles and are indicative of the significant new direction this movement now takes. It can no longer be regarded as a Jewish sect, and of course it is in Acts that it is recorded that Antioch is where those who followed Jesus were first called ‘Christians’ (11:26), thus identifying them as a new movement.

In considering Paul’s conversion with reference to our definition of conversion as a *reorientation of life focus towards a centring on Christ and the Christian Gospel*, perhaps the most striking things about Paul’s conversion are firstly that it was so sudden, and secondly that it resulted in such a radical transformation and reorientation of his life, his behaviour, his belief and his belonging even though the centring of his life on Christ and the Gospel would probably have not been understood by Paul at the time, nor by his contemporaries as a change of ‘religion.’

As we consider the following case studies, this definition enables us to include experiences of the deepening of faith in which a person, already nominally Christian by upbringing or by passive acceptance of Christian cultural norms has an experience of centring and deepening of their faith through an experience of reorientation. The following three case studies come from of a period of history in which Christianity was more likely to be the ‘default’ cultural setting.

Case Study 2: The Conversion of Constantine

It is impossible to know at this distance in time and culture the full story of what may have motivated Constantine to support the Christian faith. Yet his ‘conversion’ was truly a seminal event which profoundly reshaped the church and the world. The story of his

¹⁹⁰ B. A. Gerrish, “Justification,” *A New Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Alan Richardson and John Bowden, (London: SCM Press, 1983.) S.v.

conversion became emblematic of conversion as a phenomenon for centuries. So despite the obscuring effects of time and cultural distance a study of Constantine's conversion is important. The story of his conversion as it is classically known draws from Eusebius's *The Conversion of Constantine*.¹⁹¹ Fletcher notes that: "Eusebius was a notable scholar and a prominent member of the little circle of court clerics who helped to school Constantine in Christian ways and to shape an image of him for contemporaries and for posterity."¹⁹² (My emphasis) According to Eusebius, Constantine, having been declared Emperor in Britain in 306 CE and also, six years later, having conquered Gaul and Spain travelled south with his army to confront the army of Maxentius, his rival for supremacy in the Empire. While on this journey Constantine saw a sign in the sky. This is how it is described by Eusebius:

He said that about noon, when the day was already beginning to decline, he saw with his own eyes the trophy of a cross of light in the heavens, above the sun, and bearing the inscription, CONQUER BY THIS. At this sight he himself was struck with amazement, and his whole army also, which followed him on this expedition, and witnessed the miracle.¹⁹³

Following this experience and as preparation for battle he ordered his troops to mark their shields with a cross. The battle was engaged at the Milvian Bridge just outside Rome and the army of Constantine, despite the huge odds against them, were victorious.

A few months later, in March 313, Constantine issued the 'Edict of Milan' which put an end to the persecution of Christians.¹⁹⁴ Fletcher comments however that after his conversion Constantine demonstrated a lack of understanding of how this new faith he had adopted should affect his behaviour. He notes we need to go to other sources to learn that Constantine later arranged the murder of his father-in-law, his wife and his son.¹⁹⁵

¹⁹¹ "Eusebius: The Conversion of Constantine", *The Medieval Sourcebook*,
<http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/source/conv-const.html> Paul Halsall (15 July 2009).

¹⁹² Richard Fletcher. *The Conversion of Europe: from Paganism to Christianity 371-1386 AD*, (London: HarperCollins Publishers, 1997.) 22.

¹⁹³ Eusebius, *Conversion* CHAPTER XXVIII.

¹⁹⁴ Richard Fletcher *The Conversion of Europe: from Paganism to Christianity 371-1386AD*, (Hammersmith London: HarperCollins 1997) 19.

¹⁹⁵ Fletcher *The Conversion of Europe*, 22.

These factors must be taken into account as we consider why this new faith sufficiently attractive to Constantine, when clearly his understanding of it and his adoption of its teachings about changed behaviour was at best only partial? Stark is very helpful here. Stark's main concern is to develop a mathematical model to demonstrate that the growth of the early church through social factors such as natural affinity, the superiority of Christian pastoral care, and support of women and children, brought about an incremental conversion of the Roman Empire through natural growth to the point that the Emperors had to take notice. Citing Shirley Jackson Case, he notes that "attempts by the emperor Diocletian in 303, and continued by his successor Galerius in 305, to use persecution to force Christians to support the state had failed because "by the year 300 Christianity had become too widely accepted in Roman society to make possible a successful persecution on the part of government."¹⁹⁶ On discovering this, the emperors changed tactics, making it permissible for the Christians to pray to their own God for the security of the state. Thus Constantine's 'Edict of Toleration,'¹⁹⁷ issued two years after this concession could be understood as a continuation of this policy. With reference to this Edict, Case, cited by Stark concludes:

In this document one perceives very easily the real basis of Constantine's favour of Christianity. First, there is the characteristic attitude of an emperor who is seeking supernatural support for his government, and secondly, there is a recognition of the fact that the Christian element in the population is now so large, and its support for Constantine and Licinius ...is so highly esteemed, that the emperors are ready to credit the Christian God with the exercise of a measure of supernatural power on a par with the other gods of the State.¹⁹⁸

Therefore Constantine's conversion could be understood, at least in part, as an astute realignment of his personal and political loyalties with the growing social influence of the Christians in the empire.

¹⁹⁶ Stark, *The Rise of Christianity*, 10-11, citing Shirley Jackson Case, "The Acceptance of Christianity by the Roman Emperors," *Papers of the American Society of Church History*, pp. 45-64. (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons 1928.), 62.

¹⁹⁷ Also known as the 'Edict of Milan'.

¹⁹⁸ Shirley Jackson Case, "The Acceptance of Christianity by the Roman Emperors," *Papers of the American Society of Church History*, pp. 45-64. (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons 1928.), cited in Stark, *The Rise of Christianity*, 11.

Alan Kreider also notes the inconsistency of Constantine's behaviour with his new faith.¹⁹⁹ Kreider, as noted earlier, has stated that Christian conversion carries with it the expectation of change in 'belief, belonging and behaviour.'²⁰⁰ For Constantine each of these presented formidable challenges. As Emperor, and largely self-taught, he found it difficult if not impossible to submit to the instruction of someone of lesser rank in the orthodox beliefs of Christianity. By contrast with this he did much to encourage theological debate amongst Christian scholars. "Constantine wished to have a united church throughout his empire; and was thus concerned that doctrinal differences should be debated and settled as a matter of priority."²⁰¹ In addition to this political motivation he seemed genuine in his interest in Christian matters as reflected in that he not only summoned church councils he also attended them and participated in the debates²⁰². McGrath attributes Constantine's encouragement of theological discussion for the great period of doctrinal formulation in the later patristic period as a "high-water mark in the history of Christian theology."²⁰³

Yet Constantine's sense of belonging to the church was ambivalent. At times he addressed himself to the bishops as "beloved brethren"²⁰⁴ while at the same time he was not permitted to partake of communion.²⁰⁵ Behaviour was a challenge as noted above, not only in the major matters of using murder as an instrument for achieving political goals, but also in relatively minor matters such as avoiding 'ostentatious clothing.'²⁰⁶ This was a time also when it was unclear how to deal with the issue of the forgiveness of sin after baptism. Therefore Constantine delayed his reception into the church through baptism until 337 AD when he fell seriously ill. Taking these factors into consideration we see that Constantine's life offered the world a model of conversion as an "unbaptised, unchatechised person"²⁰⁷ who fully participated in the worldly life as Emperor, exercising power, engaging in battles and intrigues, commerce and exploitation, and yet also a patron of the church and somehow a Christian. The extent to which Constantine ever truly converted will continue to be debated. Nevertheless there was a significant reorientation of his life towards Christ and the

¹⁹⁹ Alan Kreider, *The Change of Conversion and the Origin of Christendom*, (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf & Stock, 1999.) 35.

²⁰⁰ Kreider, *The Change of Conversion*, xv.

²⁰¹ McGrath, *Christian Theology*, 9.

²⁰² Fletcher, *The Conversion of Europe*, 22.

²⁰³ McGrath, *Christian Theology*, 9.

²⁰⁴ Kreider, *The Change of Conversion*, 34.

²⁰⁵ Kreider, *The Change of Conversion*, 35.

²⁰⁶ Kreider, *The Change of Conversion*, 36.

²⁰⁷ Kreider, *The Change of Conversion*, 36.

Gospel demonstrated in his support for the church through the Edict of Milan, his decree in 321 AD for the recognition of Sunday as a day of rest,²⁰⁸ and his encouragement of theological debate.

Case Study 3: The Conversion of Augustine

Augustine was “born in 354 AD at Thagaste in Numidia ... of a devoutly Christian mother, Monica and a father, Patricius, baptized only late in life...”²⁰⁹ Augustine has left us one of the finest memoirs of conversion in his *Confessions*,²¹⁰ which was written near the end of his life. In this work he records his spiritual enthusiasms and doubts. It is set out in a series of ‘books.’ Our exploration will be confined to those covering the period of his childhood (Book I), adolescence and early adult life (Book II), and his conversion which is recounted in Book VIII. We will discuss his conversion with reference to Erikson’s model of human development.

What is clear from reading the chapter about his conversion is that Augustine was in a highly unresolved state of mind, unable to reconcile certain inner tensions. These tensions are described variously in *Confessions* as having “drifted from error to error,”²¹¹ He describes his condition as being bound by ‘fetters of lust.’²¹² In many vivid passages Augustine reveals the anguish of his soul. Yet at the same time he had a growing admiration for inspiring Christians whom he knew such as Simplicianus, Victorinus²¹³ and Antony of Egypt²¹⁴ and he recounts their stories in some detail.

During a period of extreme anguish over his inability to overcome his lustful feelings and resolve his inner uncertainties he retreats, with his friend Alypius, to a garden to struggle with his dilemma. There he receives a vision of ‘Continenence’ as a vision of pure beauty free from his impurity.²¹⁵ Struggling with his emotions he casts himself on the ground somewhere in the garden and while sobbing there he hears a child’s voice repeating the

²⁰⁸ Alister McGrath, *Christian Theology: an introduction*. [3rd ed.] (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2001.), 9.

²⁰⁹ A. J. Krailsheimer, *Conversion* (London: SCM Press 1980), 16.

²¹⁰ Saint Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. by R. S. Pine-Coffin (Harmondsworth, Middlesex, England: Penguin Books, 1961).

²¹¹ Augustine, *Confessions*, Book VIII Chapter 2, 159.

²¹² Augustine, *Confessions*, Book VIII Chapter 6, 166.

²¹³ Augustine, *Confessions*, Book VIII Chapter 5, 164.

²¹⁴ Augustine, *Confessions*, Book VIII Chapter 6, 167.

²¹⁵ Augustine, *Confessions*, Book VIII Chapter 11, 176.

phrase: “Take it and read.”²¹⁶ Taking this to be a divine command he takes up the book of Paul’s letters and reads from Romans.²¹⁷ Augustine describes what he then felt: “For in an instant, as I came to the end of the sentence, it was as though the light of confidence flooded into my heart and all the darkness of doubt was dispelled.”²¹⁸ From this dramatic conversion point, which took place probably in August 386 in Milan when he was aged about thirty two²¹⁹ Augustine’s life and relationships were transformed and his ongoing story as one of the greatest thinkers and leaders of the Church is well known.

Reflecting on the elements of Augustine’s story in the light of Erikson’s insights into identity formation, it seems that some of the developmental tasks were not adequately resolved in Augustine even by the age of thirty two. This is indicated by the anguished inner conflict and inability to act on his will, his indecision and doubt. Ullman comments in her study of conversion that an absent, withdrawn or ineffective father is a common feature of those who experience conversion.²²⁰ Augustine harboured resentment towards his father, whom he considered to have failed to provide moral guidance during his formative years; and had also failed to provide materially for his family.²²¹

During his school years, recounted in Book I Chapter 9, Augustine reveals that he was confused as to what was expected of him in terms of preparation for his future: “grown up games are known as ‘business’, and even though boy’s games are much the same, they are punished for them by their elders.”²²² In Erikson’s schema of development the period of school life from the age of six to twelve is a time of choice between industry and inferiority and the failure to resolve this issue results in a failure of confidence.

Augustine was sensitive to peer pressure “I used to pretend that I had done things I had not done at all because I was afraid that innocence would be taken for cowardice and chastity

²¹⁶ Augustine, *Confessions*, Book VIII Chapter 12, 177.

²¹⁷ “...not in reveling and drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in quarreling and jealousy. Instead, put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires.” (Romans 13:13-14)

²¹⁸ Augustine, *Confessions*, Book VIII Chapter 12, 178.

²¹⁹ A. J. Krailsheimer, *Conversion* (London: SCM Press 1980), 20.

²²⁰ Chana Ullman, *The Transformed Self: the Psychology of Religious Conversion*. (New York & London: Plenum Press 1989.) 36

²²¹ Augustine, *Confessions*, Book II Chapter 3, 45.

²²² Augustine, *Confessions*. Book I Chapter 9, 30.

for weakness.”²²³ Failure to resolve issues around peer pressure according to Erikson arise due to confusion about identity and result in an inability to make commitments, one of the traits Augustine clearly demonstrated.

Augustine’s *Confessions* make a fascinating psychological study of conversion. His work was the first detailed autobiographical account of a conversion and nothing of a similar nature was to be written for many centuries. He modeled a form of anguished emotional conversion that was not to emerge again until the reformation and the emergence of pietism, revivalism and later Pentecostalism.

Case Study 4: The Conversion of Clovis I

The Story of Clovis I²²⁴ presents us with a significant new model of conversion. Clovis succeeded his pagan father Childeric as King of the Salian Franks in 481-2 AD. His conversion makes an interesting contrast to the conversion of Paul and Constantine. The story is recorded by Gregory, Bishop of Tours in his *Ten Books of Histories*²²⁵ also known as the *History of the Franks* written a century after the events and clearly did not have all of the facts as his sources were meagre.²²⁶ Nevertheless Clovis’s conversion is important because it marks a change in the nature of conversion over one hundred years after Constantine. Just as the conversions of Paul and Constantine provided models for subsequent conversions, so also Clovis’s conversion became a grand narrative for subsequent conversions, especially of the nobility.

Clovis was a great warlord who expanded the Salian domination of territory in the area of modern-day Netherlands and northern Germany. His Queen, Clotilde was a Catholic Christian. As Gregory tells the story in Book II of his ‘*History of the Franks*,’²²⁷ Clotilde gave birth to their first son and argued with her husband that not only should the child be baptised but that Clovis should turn away from pagan gods. Despite lack of support from

²²³ Augustine, *Confessions*. Book II Chapter 3, 46.

²²⁴ Fletcher, *The Conversion of Europe*, 102-103.

²²⁵ Accessed from the Internet Medieval Source Book. The Sourcebook is a collection of public domain and copy-permitted texts related to medieval and Byzantine history.

<http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/source/gregory-clovisconv.html> Accessed 15 July 2009.

²²⁶ Fletcher *The Conversion of Europe*, 103.

²²⁷ Gregory of Tours, “History of the Franks.” *Medieval Source Book*

<<http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/source/gregory-clovisconv.html>> © Paul Halsall, December 1997 (15th July 2009.) Book II:29.

Clovis, Clotilde arranged the baptism and shortly afterwards the child died. Clovis blamed the Christian God for this death and accused this God of impotence. A second child was born and again was baptised without Clovis's support. The child's health failed shortly after. Again Clovis blamed this on the failure of the Christian God, but the child did not die. All the while Clotilde pressured Clovis to convert. Eventually Clovis made a promise to convert when he prayed to the Christian God when his troops were in desperate danger of losing a battle against the Alamanni. Following his prayer the Alamanni were defeated, and true to his word Clovis began instruction in the Christian faith under Bishop Remigius of Rheims. He was reluctant, however, to be baptised as he feared that his army and other followers would desert him. Upon learning that they would remain loyal he was baptised, and three thousand of his army were also baptised, as well as his two sisters, one of whom had been an Arian.²²⁸

Fletcher makes some interesting points about this conversion; firstly, the role of a Christian Queen in converting her pagan husband. It gave powerful encouragement to Christian women to exercise their influence, on behalf of the Gospel, with their men folk. This development is attributed to two main factors by Rodney Stark. "First, by prohibiting all forms of infanticide and abortion, Christians removed major causes of the gender imbalance that existed among pagans."²²⁹ This gender imbalance, brought about by the practice of abandoning female babies to die at birth, as well as abortion, had led to a situation where males exceeded females in the population by a ratio estimated at 140 males to 100 females in Italy, Asia Minor and North Africa in about 200 AD.²³⁰ The second major factor was the greater likelihood of woman to convert to Christianity. Here Stark makes a distinction between *primary conversion* and *secondary conversion*. In primary conversion the convert takes an active part in their own conversion "becoming a committed adherent based on positive evaluations of the particular faith."²³¹ Secondary conversion is more passive and involves a somewhat reluctant acceptance of a new faith on the basis of strong personal attachments to the primary convert. This was a feature of household conversions as early as

²²⁸ This is a summary of the account recorded in some detail in Gregory, "History of the Franks," Book II:29, 30, 31.

²²⁹ Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity: How the obscure, marginal Jesus Movement became the dominant religious force in the Western World in a few centuries*. (Princeton N.J.: HarperSanFrancisco, 1997.), 99.

²³⁰ Stark, *The Rise of Christianity*, 97, citing a study conducted by J.C. Russell (1958).

²³¹ Stark, *The Rise of Christianity*, 100.

those recorded in Acts,²³² but occurred in later times also as noted by Stark.²³³ Stark also cites research which confirms that primary conversion was much more prevalent amongst females than among males. These factors taken together help us to understand that the influence of women became much greater as society 'Christianised'. The gender ratios in favour of woman increased and women became more influential generally and specifically with their men so that as women became Christian through primary conversion their men and families became Christian by secondary conversion. We see this pattern in the conversion of Clovis and it is repeated in other conversions subsequently.

For Clovis a second important distinguishing feature of his conversion was the power of the Christian God to give victory in battle. Clovis's answered prayer as he engaged with battle against the Alamanni encouraged him to think that there was nothing inherently wrong with going to war. In addition, at his baptism, and with reference to his baptismal gown, Clovis received these words of encouragement from Bishop Avitus: "Do not doubt... that this soft clothing will give *more force to your arms*.." ²³⁴ (My emphasis) In other words, it was clear that his conversion and baptism were not expected to change his warlord behaviour except to make him even more successful in battle. In this sense Clovis's conversion resonates with that of Constantine.

Thirdly, the king was reluctant to convert out of concern for alienation from his people, especially his army. Upon seeking advice about the feelings of the people, and being assured that they would continue to support him, Clovis gave permission for his baptism to be arranged. Stark and Finke's insight, that in converting, people seek to conserve their social capital,²³⁵ helps us to understand this factor. Clovis and his troops were reliant upon each other. Clovis relied upon his popularity with his army to maintain his position as a King and ruler. The troops relied on Clovis as a tried and trusted warlord who they knew could win battles and assure them of income through conquest and plunder. Without their support conversion was not an option for Clovis, and his troops demonstrated their support

²³² Such as the baptism of Lydia and her household: "One of those listening was a woman named Lydia, a dealer in purple cloth from the city of Thyatira, who was a worshiper of God. The Lord opened her heart to respond to Paul's message. When she and the members of her household were baptized, she invited us to her home." (Acts 16:14-15, NIV)

²³³ Stark, *The Rise of Christianity*, 100.

²³⁴ Kreider, *The Change of Conversion*, 87, citing the letter of Avitus in Rudolf Peiper, *Alcimi Ecdicii Aviti Viennensis Episcopi Opera*, MGH AA VI. 2. (Berlin: Weidmann, 1883.)

²³⁵ Stark and Finke. *Acts of Faith*, 118.

by receiving baptism themselves. This mass baptism of his family and followers and army is the fourth distinguishing feature of Clovis's baptism. Krieder in his section dealing with the conversion of Clovis notes that this event foreshadowed "the collective tribal baptisms that occurred as Christianity conquered Western Europe."²³⁶ The combination of Clovis's personal concern to be able to continue to exercise customary power, the influence of his wife and the social and cultural concerns and implications surrounding this baptism demonstrate that conversion as a phenomenon had undergone considerable change. No longer was conversion about relinquishment of worldly power and even family, change of moral behaviour or belonging to a radically new community, rather it was about aligning with the power of Rome, maintaining lifestyle and local relationships and authority. This confirms what Stark and Finke point out in their Propositions 29 & 33 that in converting people will tend to conserve their social and religious capital.²³⁷

Constantine and Clovis in choosing to convert were recognising the changing social influences of their times, and for Clovis, the shifting of the centres of power towards Christian influence. Conversion meant aligning themselves with these shifts even if it meant discontinuity with their pagan heritage. This was a price they were willing to pay to guarantee to themselves and their dynasties continuation of power and a hopeful future. In choosing to renounce paganism to become Christian they were making a choice between competing visions of the future.

Conversion as a Social Phenomenon

The case studies give us evidence for the changing understanding of conversion within social contexts, and how this change of understanding is mediated and given focus by particularly dramatic conversion stories. These stories often define equally dramatic shifts in the wider social context. We have already noted above from the work of Peace the changes in the language about conversion in the Old Testament as a call to the nation, while in the New Testament it is a call to the individual. The experience of Paul and the three accounts of his conversion served as a normative model for conversion in the early centuries of the Christian church and to a large extent continue to exercise a hold on the popular imagination as a 'metanarrative' of conversion. Paul's conversion offered the

²³⁶ Kreider, *The Change of Conversion*, 88.

²³⁷ Stark and Finke. *Acts of Faith*.

church a narrative which merged his story with the story of Jesus and with the story of the origins of the church. As a metanarrative it also enabled everyone who subsequently had a similar experience to feel that they had become part of this story. It could also be understood to act not only as a metanarrative but as a meme or a protean fragment picked up and appropriated by people who wished to identify with the Christian community. Thus when the term “a Damascus Road experience” is used there would be few, even to day, who would not understand it to mean a radical change of viewpoint i.e. a conversion experience.

Other experiences have also shaped the understanding of conversion. With the experience of Constantine, a new conversion model or narrative emerged for consideration. The critical difference the conversion of Constantine made is that from his time onwards Christianity became, more and more normative as a base for personhood or at least for citizenship, whereas previously it was a risky and sometimes fatally dangerous choice, counter-cultural to mainstream society. Alan Kreider’s helpful exploration of the phenomena of conversion which takes in the first five centuries of Christian experience, is focussed around conversion as a change of belief, belonging and behaviour.²³⁸ He observes that “As the centuries went by and as Christians gained influence and the capacity to induce and compel adherence, the content and configurations of conversion altered.”²³⁹ Kreider begins by noting the work of some earlier writers each with their particular focus.²⁴⁰ He takes up three aspects of these different foci for his work which examines closely the effect of conversion in the changes in belief, belonging and behaviour. It is this conjunction of factors which made early Christianity attractive to new converts and continue as factors through history but with varying emphasis.

Despite offering a crucified God to worship, despite persecution and the scorn of the powerful, the Christian movement grew. Kreider asked: what was the attractiveness of Christianity, firstly according to its beliefs? Christians firmly believed that because Christ had conquered death they need not fear death. At a time when death by execution or in

²³⁸ Alan Kreider, *The Change of Conversion and the Origin of Christendom*, (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf & Stock, 1999.)

²³⁹ Kreider, *The Change of Conversion*, Introduction xv.

²⁴⁰ Kreider, *The Change of Conversion*, Introduction xiv. Kreider particularly refers to Kenneth Scott Latourette’s work *History of the expansion of Christianity*, but also the work of Kurt Aland, A. D. Nock, Ramsay MacMullan, William Harmless and others. To some extent Kreider offers something of a synthesis of the work of these authors.

gladiatorial combat was often a public spectacle and life was cheap, the power that Christ's resurrection gave Christians to face death fearlessly was hugely attractive. This fearless behaviour in the face of persecution, torture and execution generated a strong belief that divine power was at work amongst Christians. This in turn led to using that power particularly in the exorcising of demons, thus Christianity became powerfully attractive to the non-Christian pagan population; because as Kreider explains: "Many people felt themselves to be oppressed by predatory spiritual forces from which they longed for liberation...liberation from demonic power was one of the chief benefits that the churches could offer to potential converts."²⁴¹

The second point of attractiveness was Christian behaviour. Citing Tertullian in his letter *To His Wife* 2.7, "conversion changed the convert "into a better person."²⁴² The early Christian community put a great deal of effort and time into pre-baptismal preparation. They sought to transform the behaviour of candidates for baptism by applying the teachings of Christ to the lives of those who came to them as candidates. They did this through adopting the mindset of being "resident aliens" or *paroikoi*²⁴³ a familiar legal term which Christians appropriated to describe their relationship with the communities in which they lived. It expressed their sense of belonging to the Kingdom of Heaven while also being committed to the welfare and benefit of their home communities. They also appropriated other well known symbols of pagan piety and reinterpreted them in Christian terms, such as the symbol of the shepherd Orpheus reinterpreted as Christ the Good Shepherd.²⁴⁴

This leads to the third point of attractiveness about Christianity, the new sense of belonging that was developed in this new community. The social reality of these early Christians transcended the Roman Empire; they believed that the whole world was their home. They expressed this through corresponding with churches around the known world, they were great travellers and offered warm hospitality to guests. They took up collections for communities that were in distress.²⁴⁵ The early Christian communities were marked by economic sharing and sincere compassion for the poor. The Christians were expected to

²⁴¹ Kreider, *The Change of Conversion*, 17.

²⁴² Kreider, *The Change of Conversion*, 17.

²⁴³ Kreider, *The Change of Conversion*, 15. See also 1 Peter 1:1. "Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ, To those who reside as aliens..." (New American Standard Version)

²⁴⁴ Kreider, *The Change of Conversion*, 16.

²⁴⁵ "Now about the collection for God's people: Do what I told the Galatian churches to do." (1 Corinthians 16:1, NIV)

demonstrate this practical compassion in their daily lives and it made them hugely attractive. The example of Pachomius is given by Kreider as someone who benefitted as a prisoner in transit from the kindness of Christians. He made a promise to himself and God that once freed he would serve this Christian God. Shortly afterwards he was released and went to a church and sought instruction. He later became an early leader in the development of monastic Christianity.²⁴⁶

Kreider's work thus identifies the attractiveness of Christianity, which meant that in spite of the obstacles new converts were regularly admitted to the ranks of the church. These insights are supported by and systematised by Rodney Stark as we have seen, especially in his concept of the preservation of social capital. Kreider's main concern is to explore changes in the experience and the recording of conversion during these first centuries of the Christian influence on civilisation in what has come to be called 'Christendom.' He traces these changes through the experiences of particular people as exemplars of certain understandings of conversion. We will look at two of these significant turning points in the experience of conversion and consider how they relate to the contextual social circumstances.

Discussion and Summary

We have seen that conversion has meant different things at different times in response to social changes and individual experience and response. From the Biblical perspective through to the medieval period we have noted significant changes in the understanding of conversion. Stark in particular has been able to apply a theoretical model and offer some important principles in the form of propositions and definitions which describe the dynamics involved as people choose to convert. Choice is an important element in conversion as pointed out by Peace and others. But what Stark does most helpfully is to identify the factors behind this choice such as social attachments, religious capital, marriage, and the influence of women on their spouses and children. Stark also identified certain inherent advantages in Christianity itself in terms of its prohibition against the waste of life from infanticide, abortion, and gladiatorial combat as well as its superior response to people in need through the care of orphans and widows. Thus Christianity offered to people

²⁴⁶ Kreider, *The Change of Conversion*, 19-20.

a new paradigm of what community could be like. And for many people it looked a lot better than the old pagan paradigm. These factors all helped to make Christianity attractive in itself and gave to the Christian community a higher birth-rate. Expectations about Christian conversion have continued to be shaped by the complex nexus of societal and personal context down through the Christian centuries.

The section on the development of identity has helped us to understand the different characteristics of this process and how they relate to conversion. Fowler in particular has been helpful in his research showing that there can be a complex interplay between normative human development in relation to faith and conversion. The various developmental stages described by Freud, Erikson and Fowler leave open the possibility of forms of developmental incompleteness should these tasks not be satisfactorily completed and the challenges resolved. Freud identified conversion as a form of dysfunctional response to developmental failure. Marcia identified two forms of personality irresolution: that of moratorium and diffusion, both of which would appear to be stages particularly open to conversion. While Lifton very helpfully alerted us to the phenomenon of personality and social fragmentation he describes as 'proteanism' while Riddell and others expanded our understanding of this to the postmodern and even post-Christian context in which conversion and faith formation take place today.

Stark and Finke introduced the concept of a religious economy by which they suggest a form of market forces approach which sets the level at which conversion occurs. These are interesting concepts but tend to diminish the intensely personal aspect of conversion and the resulting transformation of personality, as evidenced by changed attitudes to life, belief and behaviour. Something that is hard to understand or explain without recourse to the theological and spiritual language of divine encounter, repentance and regeneration. The theological understanding of conversion includes and respects the contribution of sociology, psychology, and pedagogy but is primarily concerned with the divine encounter aspect and the personal transformation that must be present for a genuine conversion to be accepted and ratified through the sacramental rite of baptism, and subsequent incorporation into the life of the church and engagement in the transformation of society according to the Gospel. Although this transformation is the unfailing heart of conversion, the integration of it into the particularities of a person's life, within the context of an ever-changing society means that conversion will inevitably mean different things to different people at different

times. Every age brings changes and shifts in society and in personal circumstance. Every age can lay claim to uniqueness, nevertheless this post-modern, post-Christendom age brings together forces and currents of society that have never existed before and with a rapidity of change that has never existed before. We can only guess at how this will impact on the phenomena of conversion. Some of what follows may give some indication of the trends that will affect the shape of conversions to come.

Part B) THE FIELD STUDY

THE QUESTIONNAIRE

Questionnaire Design

Gathering information about an experience that may have happened years in the past inevitably means there will be some distortion and refinement of memory. Nevertheless, conversion, by its very nature is a profound and vivid experience. The questions I have developed to assist respondents to access these memories are around several key aspects of life that are central to the development of a sense of identity according to Erikson and others, and around which Fowler developed his stages of faith development. This study measures changes in life attitudes before and after conversion so has a longitudinal aspect to it. Ullman has suggested that there has been little done to measure conversional changes in longitudinal studies.²⁴⁷

Sections A and C of the questionnaire are related in that they ask for an assessment of how respondents felt before and after conversion. Section A asks about life issues before a decision to become a Christian, and Section C about the same life issues after having made the decision. By setting the responses beside each other it should be possible to determine what if any significant difference the decision made in their lives. In the questionnaire I decided not to put these two sections in direct sequence following each other, partly so that in addressing the post-conversion questions they would approach them somewhat afresh, having dealt with section B, and partly because section B deals with key factors influencing the actual decision and seems a more natural chronological sequence. Thus, between sections A and C, section B asks about significant factors which influenced their choice to become a Christian. Again these questions cover many of what have emerged from the literature as possible factors in conversion. The final section D asks about means of communication most likely to be used to stay in contact with family and friends. An assumption behind this section is that significant attachments to family and friends are an important factor in making a decision to become Christian. In fact Stark and Finke would

²⁴⁷ Ullman, *The Transformed Self*, 195.

suggest that it is the most important factor²⁴⁸, a view shared by Ullman and others cited by her.²⁴⁹ Therefore how relationships are maintained becomes very important, and if there are differences in the two differing cohort groups this could be a factor in the incidence of conversion.

The questionnaire was administered to two different cohorts. The older group consists of those born from 1965 and older, and the younger group being those born between 1980 and 1989. Thus most of the older group falls in the range commonly described as ‘Baby-boomers’ – the post World War II generation born between 1945 to 1965 with just a few older than that; and the younger group span the range between those often described as ‘Generation X’ (1965-80) and ‘Generation Y’ (1980-1990). The limit of a 1980 birthday for this age group was selected in order to include young people raised during a time when they are likely to have always had access to internet and cell phone use.

As this project is seeking qualitative information, apart from questions seeking direct information, the questionnaire seeks responses using a modified form of Likert scaling. This form of enquiry devised by R. Likert in 1932,²⁵⁰ is especially suited for gathering information on attitudes and values. The questionnaire is set out in such a way that the questions seek a response along the standard range of options: Strongly Agree; Agree; Neutral; Disagree; to Strongly Disagree which were numbered 5 to 1 and were assigned values between +2 to -2 for the purposes of tabulating the results. The table below shows how these values were assigned:

²⁴⁸ Stark and Finke. *Acts of Faith*, 119, see propositions 31 and 32.

²⁴⁹ Chana Ullman, *The Transformed self: the psychology of religious conversion*. (New York & London: Plenum Press, 1989.), 82.

²⁵⁰ Lorraine Blaxter, Christina Hughes and Malcolm Tight. *How to Research*. (Berkshire England: Open University Press, 2007.), 142.

Table 3: Application of the Likert Scale Values for purposes of Tabulating the Responses

Terms used in the Questionnaire Qs A 1-8 & C 1-8.	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree
Value in Questionnaire	5	4	3	2	1
Value in Data Tables	2	1	0	-1	-2

The reason for assigning different values on tabulation was to enable the assessment of the relative positivity or negativity of the person’s attitude to major life issues and areas where it could be expected conversion would have some effect.

The Sample Groups

Stark and Finke suggest that “fewer than 1 percent of Americans convert.”²⁵¹ However their definition of conversion means a change of religion i.e. from Islam to Christianity. They define a conversion experience that occurs within a broad faith tradition such as Christianity as a ‘reaffiliation’ and they state that this is a more frequent occurrence.²⁵² Gillespie however refers to a survey of thirty two studies of conversion done in 1949 which concluded that “between ten and thirty percent of Americans experienced such crisis religious conversion and that the dominant age was about fifteen years.”²⁵³ The expectation was that the sample group would be a relatively small group especially as the New Zealand community has significantly less people who identify as Christian church attenders than in the United States.²⁵⁴

²⁵¹ Stark and Finke. *Acts of Faith*, 115.

²⁵² Stark and Finke. *Acts of Faith*, 114

²⁵³ V. Bailey Gillespie, *Religious Conversion and Personal Identity*. (Birmingham, Alabama: Religious Education Press, 1979.), 10.

²⁵⁴ Kevin Ward, “Christendom, clericalism, church and context: finding categories of connexion in a culture without a Christian memory,” *Stimulus: The New Zealand Journal of Christian Thought and Practice*, Vol. 10, No. 1 (Feb. 2002.), 395.

Ethical Approval and Distribution

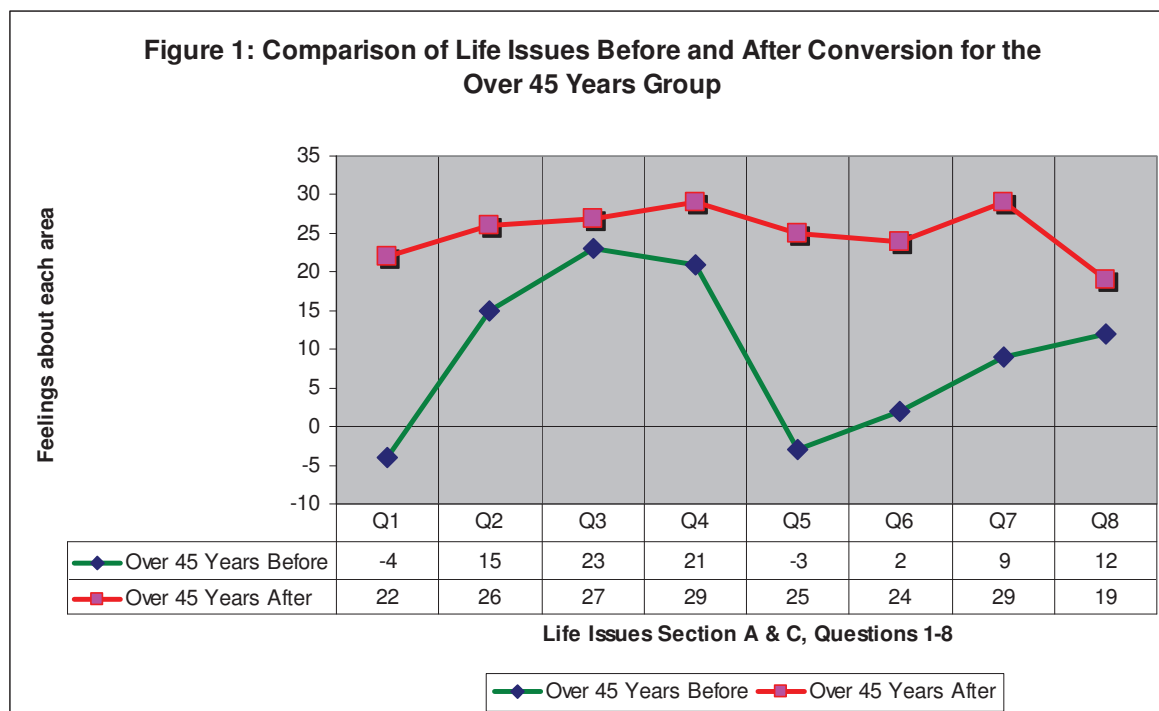
Ethical approval was sought and obtained from the University of Otago by means of Departmental approval. Full approval of the Ethics Committee was not required due to the nature of the research and the specific exclusions as described in the accompanying Information Sheet (Appendix 1). In addition approval was sought and obtained from the Bishop of the Anglican Diocese of Waiapu, the Right Rev'd David Rice (See letters in Appendices 3 & 4). This approval enabled distribution of the questionnaire to respondents at a Regional Church Conference held in Rotorua on the 25th July 2009, and at the Diocesan Synod held on 19-20th September in Taradale, Napier, and on some other occasions. Information was also posted on the Diocesan emailed newsletter. A total of forty questionnaires were distributed through these outlets. Approval was also sought verbally from ministers of churches within the Rotorua District through a request and discussion of the project given verbally at a Minister's Association meeting. A further twenty questionnaires were distributed as a result. Through personal informal contacts with colleagues in ministry twelve more questionnaires were requested and distributed. Thus a total of seventy two questionnaires were distributed amongst the sample group who were largely church attending people, and twenty seven were returned, a response rate of 37.5%. Fifteen were from the older age group ranging from age 44 to 70 years; and ten were from the younger age group ranging from 19 to 29 years of age; two were from the age range between these two groups so I could not use the data they provided.

Questionnaire Findings

Comparison of Feelings about Life issues for the Older and Younger Groups (With data from Sections A 1-8 and C 1-8 responses.)

Sections A 1-8 and C 1-8 of the questionnaire ask substantially the same questions of the respondents about their feelings about major life issues. The life issues identified are those areas central to the early construction of identity according to Erikson such as hope, will, purpose, confidence, fidelity and love; and conversion such as direction and purpose in life, sense of belonging, morality and ethics, spirituality and prayer, service to others; to changes in 'belief, belonging and behaviour' as identified by Kreider; or the 'social and religious

capital' identified by Stark and Finke. Figure 1 below shows the results for the older group in this section.



Figures 1 & 2 interpretation of horizontal axis:

- Q1: Happiness with the purpose and direction of my life.
- Q2: Belonging a group such as a sports club, band, service club or church.
- Q3: The importance of my family.
- Q4: The importance of living a morally and ethically good life.
- Q5: Personal prayer as a regular part of my life.
- Q6: Doing voluntary work for a charitable group or church.
- Q7: Regularly attending worship services and belonging to a church or faith community.
- Q8: The importance of staying in regular contact with my circle of friends.

Figure 1: Comparison of Life Issues before and after Conversion for the Over 45 Years Group

Note: See Table 3) above for an explanation of how the totals were calculated.

Comments on the older group results in Figure 1:

In all sections there has been a general lift or improvement of feeling after conversion. Taking the point of decision to be Christian as a turning point, whether as a process or an event, clearly there has been a re-orientation of life focus in the form of an elevation in the feelings about the groups attitudes to life overall. The largest areas of positive movement

have been around issues relating to personal prayer (Q5: 28 point lift), purpose and direction of life (Q1: 26 point lift); and doing voluntary work, or service to others (Q6: 22 point lift).

The areas where there has been the least change have been in the importance of family (Q3: 5 point lift); friends (Q8: 7 point lift); and leading a morally and ethically good life (Q4: 8 point lift). This suggests that relationships with family and friends were already good and that conversion has improved these relationships somewhat but not dramatically. Also that morality and ethics were not a critical issue as there has been only small attitudinal improvement in this area of life. The big changes have been in personal spirituality such as prayer (Q5: 28 point lift); and worship (Q7: 20 Point lift); service to others through voluntary work (Q6: 22 point lift); and the overall direction and purpose in life (Q1: 24 point lift from a negative 4 base). This overall pattern is very similar the younger group, as we see in Figure 2 below, but with some subtle but significant differences.

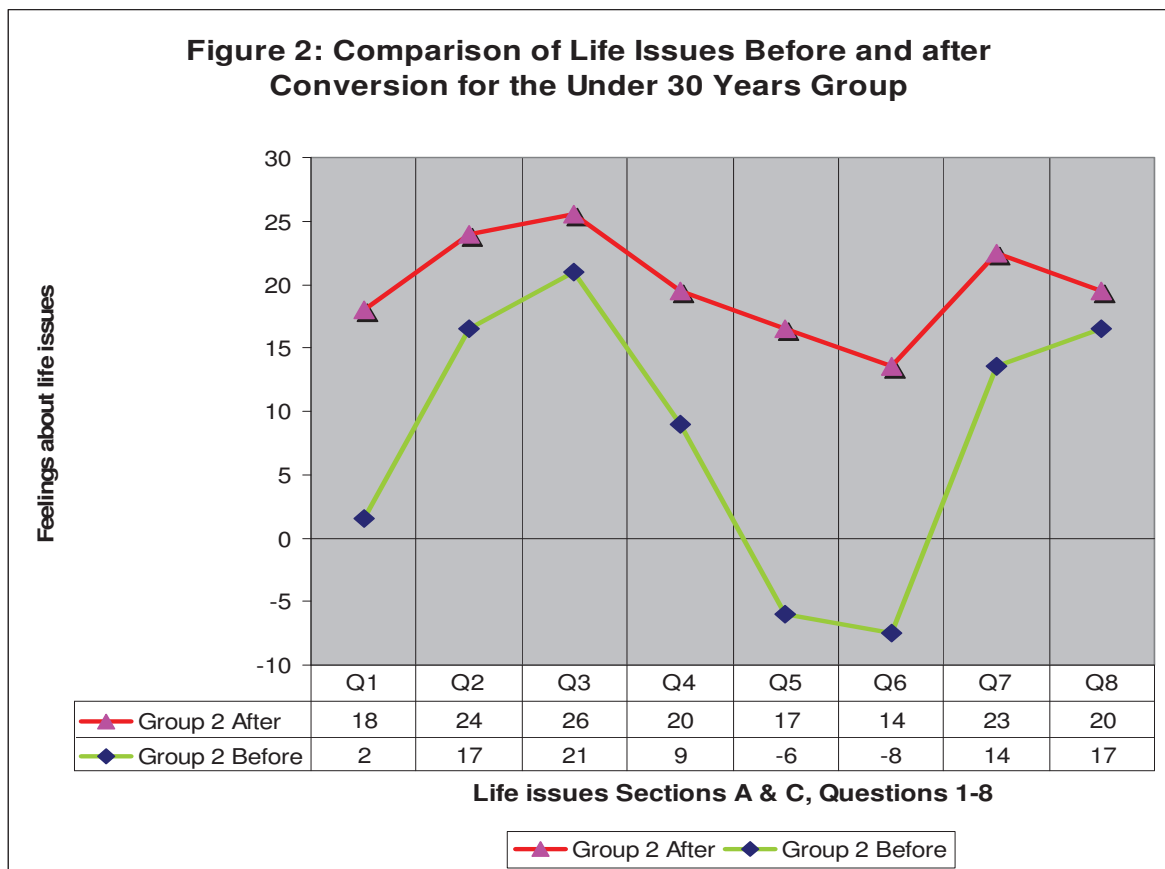


Figure 2: Comparison of Life Issues Before and after Conversion for the Under 30 Years Group

Comments on the younger group results in Figure 2:

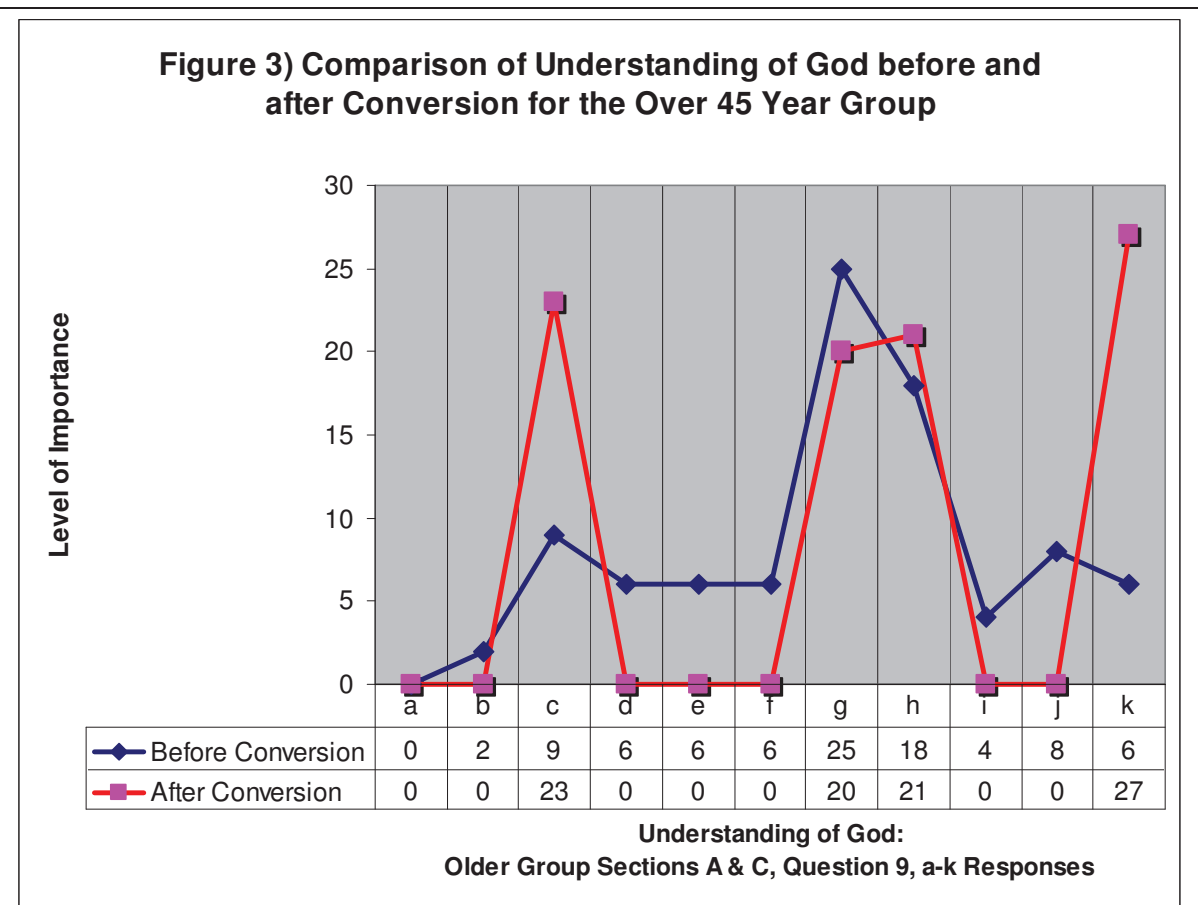
The pattern for the younger group is very similar to that for the older group and the differences are subtle. The younger sample group of ten is smaller than the older group which numbered fifteen; therefore the values for the younger group have been adjusted by applying a calculation of 15/10 to the figures to obtain equivalent point comparison between the two groups. The differences are firstly that the younger group start from a more positive base level in terms of their feelings about the general purpose and direction of their lives (Q1: younger group 2 / older group -4). In relation to how they felt before their conversion they felt more negatively about personal prayer (Q 5: younger group -6/ older group -3) and doing voluntary work (Q 6: younger group -8 / older group 2) than the older group. The corresponding lift in the area of doing voluntary work was relatively less than for the older group, but for prayer it was very close. The other difference was in the importance of closeness to friends. There was a seven point lift in this for the older group while for the younger group it was only three points. This suggests that the younger group made fewer changes in their circle of friends as the result of conversion than the older group. This would also be consistent with the younger group being 'second generation Christians',²⁵⁵ whom Smith asserts have a different character, rather than converts from a non-church or non-Christian background where major changes in the network of friends would be more likely.

Conversion has clearly made a major difference to the lives of both these groups in significant areas of personal spirituality and service to the community and in their general sense of purpose and direction in life. The motivation for and focus of this change becomes more evident as we consider the results from Question 9 of Sections A & C, and then Section B.

²⁵⁵ Gordon T. Smith, *Beginning Well: Christian Conversion and Authentic Transformation*, (Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP Books 2001.), 208.

Comparison of Understanding of God for the Older and Younger Groups

(With data from Sections A 9 a- k and C 9 a- k Responses.)



Interpretation:

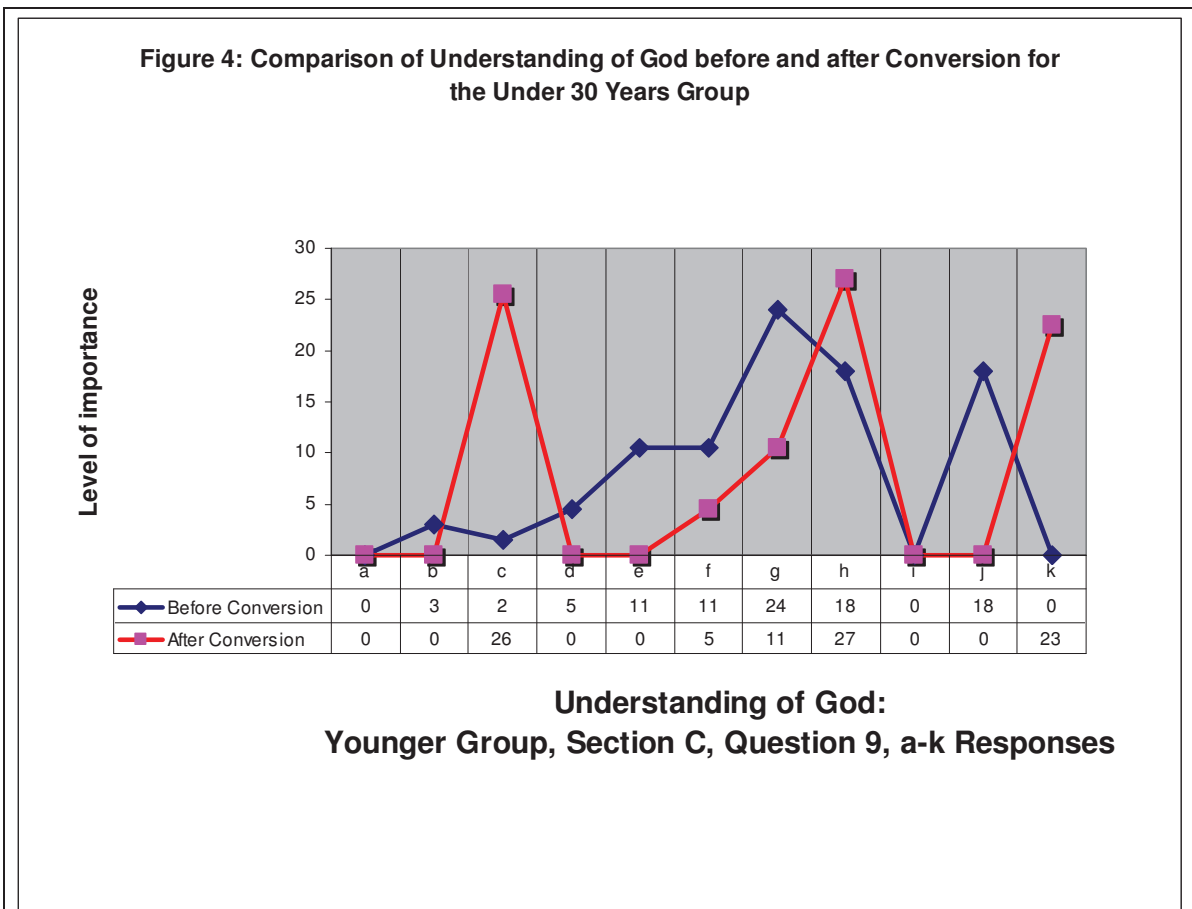
Sections A & C, Questions 9, a to k:

- a) I did not believe in God.
- b) I considered God to be uncaring and distant.
- c) I experienced God as loving and close.
- d) I considered God to be an impersonal force or energy.
- e) I had no strong beliefs about God at all.
- f) I thought God was a stern judge.
- g) I accepted Christian belief and teaching about God.
- h) I believed the Bible's view of God.
- i) I had an understanding of God from another faith tradition.
- j) I was unsure one way or the other about the reality of God.
- k) I didn't believe God was real or cared for me personally.

Figure 3) Comparison of Understanding of God before and after Conversion for the Over 45 Year Group

Comments on the older group and their shift in understanding of God before and after conversion:

There has been a shift in this group away from a tendency to see God as an impersonal force or energy (d), a stern judge (f), on the one hand and from a general state of uncertainty (j) or distrust (k). Interestingly no one identified with an atheist position (a) or with God as being totally uncaring or disinterested (b). After conversion there was a general abandonment of previously held positions and a refocusing of belief in God as loving and close (c), and caring personally. Curiously there was a small drop after conversion for this group in Christian belief (g), and a small increase in affirming the Bible's view of God (h). This suggests that conversion was a very personal experience for this group in which confirming orthodox belief played little part but did result in a small improvement in their view of the Bible. It is also interesting that before conversion members of this group could hold to views of God inconsistent with Christianity, i.e. as an impersonal force or energy while at the same time being able to affirm Christian belief and the Bible's view. This suggests that their affirmation was more to do with accepting the cultural norms of their social group rather than due to any personally developed understanding of the content of orthodox belief. There are significant changes however following conversion when their concept of God becomes more personal and affective as demonstrated in the spikes in responses to (c) experiencing God as loving and close; and (k) experiencing the reality of a God who cares personally.



Interpretation:

Sections A & C, Questions 9, a to k:

- a) I did not believe in God.
- b) I considered God to be uncaring and distant.
- c) I experienced God as loving and close.
- d) I considered God to be an impersonal force or energy.
- e) I had no strong beliefs about God at all.
- f) I thought God was a stern judge.
- g) I accepted Christian belief and teaching about God.
- h) I believed the Bible's view of God.
- i) I had an understanding of God from another faith tradition.
- j) I was unsure one way or the other about the reality of God.
- k) I didn't believe God was real or cared for me personally.

Figure 4: Comparison of Understanding of God before and after Conversion for the Under 30 Years Group

Please note that the figures in the tables and the calibration of the graph have been altered by the 15/10 proportion in order to compare the differences between the older and younger group on the same points basis.

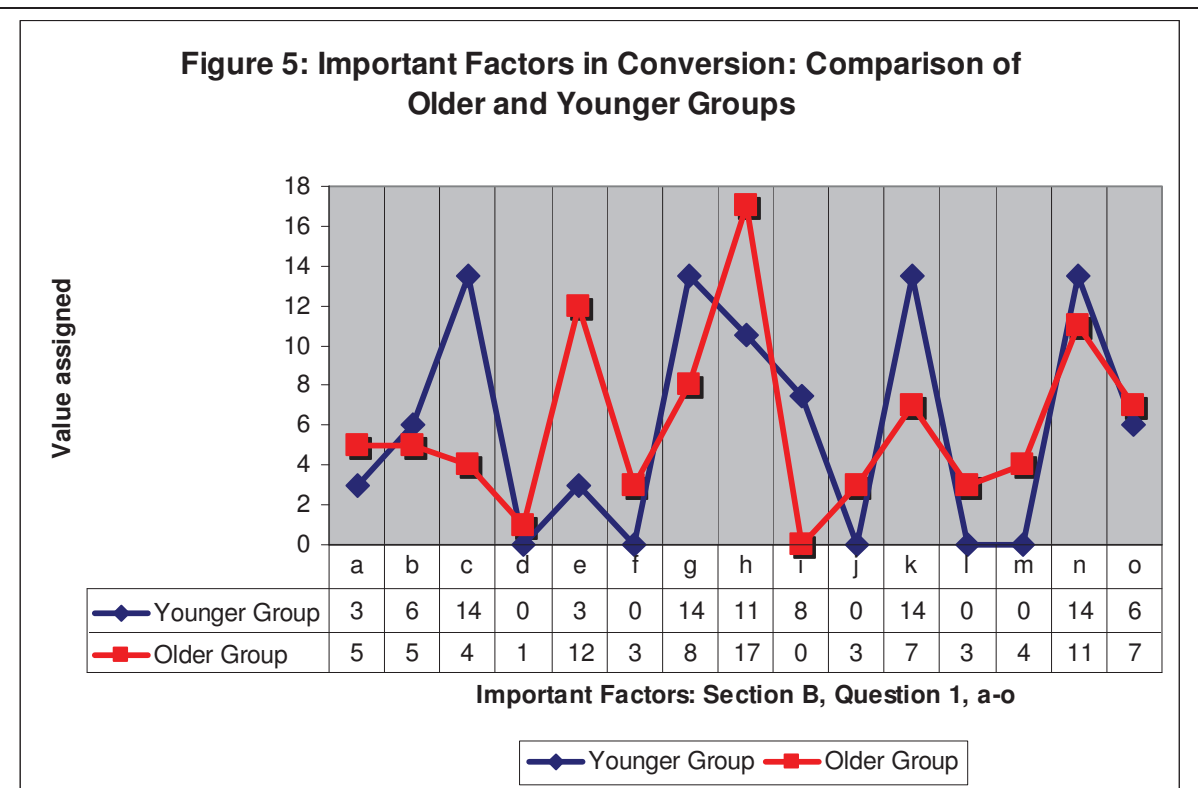
Comments on the younger group and their shift in understanding of God before and after conversion:

This younger group had a similar pattern of changed understanding about God as the older group with a some subtle but significant differences. Firstly, their pre-conversion position had a lot more uncertainty and doubt about God reflected in the higher levels of responses to these questions (j: younger group = 18/ older group = 8); and (e: younger group = 11 / older group = 6). Their post-conversion profile shows a stronger shift to acceptance of the Bible's view of God (h: younger group = 27/ older group = 21); and an experience of God as loving and close (c: younger group = 26/ older group = 23). In the area of understanding God as caring personally for them the younger group found this important but not to the same level as the older group: (k: younger group = 23/ older group = 27).

There is the interesting transposition, which also occurs in the older group but less markedly, of confidence in Christian belief and teaching dropping after conversion, while confidence in the Bible's view of God increases. Perhaps this reflects a shift for both groups away from reliance upon the received understanding of their faith coming from their cultural context; and a shift towards reliance on personal study and interest in the scriptures. This would then confirm what Fowler, Smith and others have said about the need for the genuinely converted person to critically explore their faith in order to come to a personal appropriation of the faith, what Smith calls "their own faith"²⁵⁶ and Fowler describes occurring in Stage 4 of his model.

²⁵⁶ Smith, *Beginning Well*, 208.

Comparison of Important Factors influencing Conversion for the Older and Younger Groups (With data from Section B Question 1, a-o Responses)



Interpretation:

Section B, Question 1: Of the following factors identify the three most important to you at the time (of) your choice to make a Christian commitment:

- a) Having Christian friends who I could communicate with.
- b) A desire to belong to a Church or Christian group.
- c) A sudden flash of insight that gave you a different view of God.
- d) A sense of personal incompleteness around unresolved issues.
- e) A challenging presentation of the Gospel by a speaker or preacher.
- f) A shock, trauma or injury which made you reconsider your life's direction.
- g) A desire to find greater direction and purpose in life.
- h) A spiritual encounter with a strong sense of God's presence.
- i) Having time to think carefully through the issues and questions.
- j) Facing a moral or ethical issue that challenged my beliefs.
- k) The personal influence of an important person in my life.
- l) Facing a major decision about the direction of my life.
- m) A sense of dislocation or lack of direction.
- n) A need for forgiveness from sin and release from the past.
- o) An overwhelming sense of love and acceptance.

Figure 5: Important Factors in Conversion: Comparison of Older and Younger Groups

The factors that influence conversion can be many and varied. From the psychological perspective conversion's chief benefit is evident in a reintegration of the fragmented self and the resolution of inner conflicts. If such irresolution was a major factor we would expect to see a much higher response therefore in the following areas: a sense of personal incompleteness around unresolved issues (d: younger group = 0/ older group = 1); a sense of dislocation or lack of direction (m: younger group = 0/ older group = 4); or facing moral or ethical issues (j: younger group = 0/ older group = 3). Such irresolution is not there for the younger group and shows as only a weak response for the older group. However, more positively (g) a desire to find greater direction and purpose in life has produced a high response rate (g: older group =8/ younger group =15). For both the groups surveyed then it appears that identity confusion in the form of incompleteness, unresolved issues or lack of direction were not factors, however finding purpose and direction was important. We can conclude though that personal fragmentation in Lifton's protean sense or diffusion in Marcia's sense was not a major issue in influencing their conversion.

The theological perspective looks for a change of life in the areas of belief, belonging and behaviour. It also looks for evidence of encounter which profoundly changes outlook and direction, a genuine *metanoia* followed by signs of regeneration, or sanctification, specifically new and better behaviour focused on Christ-likeness. There is a stronger theological, personal and spiritual dimension to conversion for both these groups as evident in the responses to (g), (h), (n) and (o). For the older group, a spiritual encounter with a strong sense of God's presence was the peak consideration (h =17). They were also most likely to be influenced in this change of direction by the challenging presentation of the Gospel (e =12) rather than through the personal influence of someone important to them (k =7) although this is still a factor. This could indicate that the older group came under the influence of crusade evangelism of the late 1950's to the 1980's when Billy Graham (1959 & 1969), Luis Palau (1987) and others brought their crusades to this country. Both the older and younger group were fairly strongly influenced by a sense of personal sin and the need for forgiveness (n: older =11/ younger =12).

The main factors for the younger group in conversion were a desire to find a greater purpose and direction in life (g =15); a need for forgiveness from sin and release from the past (n= 14); personal influence by someone important to them (k =14); a spiritual encounter with a strong sense of God (h =11). They were much less likely to be influenced

by a challenging speaker (e: older =12/ younger =3), than the older group. Both groups were significantly influenced by an overwhelming sense of love and acceptance (0: older =7 /younger =7). However the younger group had lower response to (a) having Christian friends they could communicate with (a: older =5 /younger =2).

There are two areas that do not feature very strongly for either group. Firstly, (j) facing a moral or ethical issue that challenged my beliefs, and secondly, (f) a shock, trauma or injury which made you reconsider your life's direction. Perhaps this indicates that both groups have led relatively sheltered lives or else they have been very confident in their beliefs, more likely the former.

From a sociological perspective we would expect to see some evidence of seeking to conserve social or religious capital evident most likely in (a) having Christian friends who I could communicate with, and (b) a desire to belong to a Church or Christian group. There is some evidence for this in both groups (b: older =5 / younger =7) but it is less clear in (a: older =5 / younger =2). However both groups indicate a moderately strong response to (o) an overwhelming sense of love and acceptance (o: older =7 / younger =7). It does not appear that conserving social or religious capital was much of a consideration for either group. This perhaps indicates that within New Zealand in the periods under consideration the social consequences of conversion or non-conversion are not great. The younger group preferred to take more time over their decision (i = younger 8/ older 0).

The differences between the two groups are significant. Whether they represent a true generational shift is a moot point as the sample groups are small. The trend seems to be that the younger group prefer to take more time to make their decision and they were more conscious that it would shape the direction and purpose of their lives (g: younger =15 / older =8). Yet this group is also more likely to convert earlier overall than the older group, even when those who converted over the age of 30 in that older group are screened out as shown in Figure 6 below. The younger group were also more likely to study their Bibles for growing in understanding of the content of their faith, rather than relying on culturally received understandings of being Christian, perhaps from early experiences of Sunday Schools, Bible in Schools programmes or from teachers or preachers.

Comparison of Conversion as an event or a process.

(With data from responses to Question B 2.)

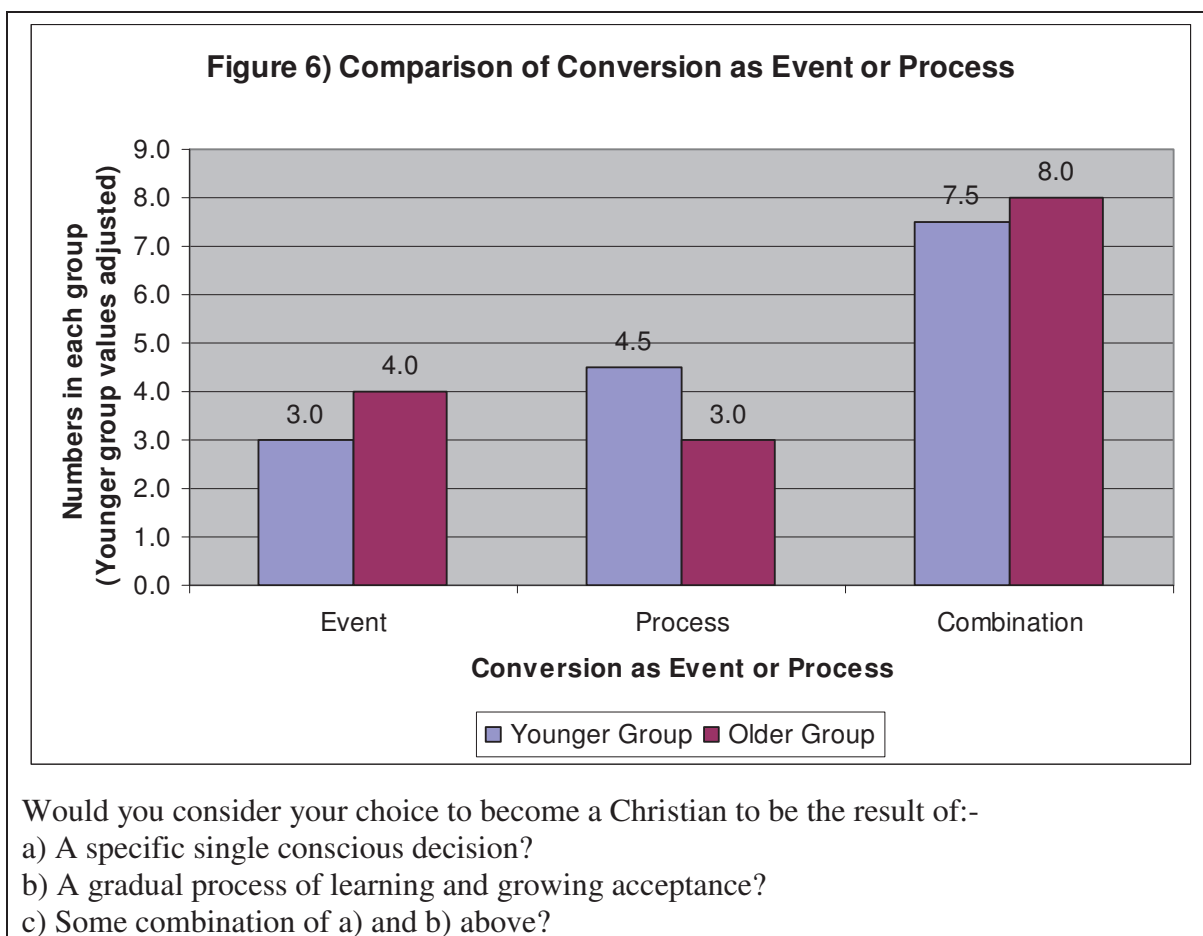


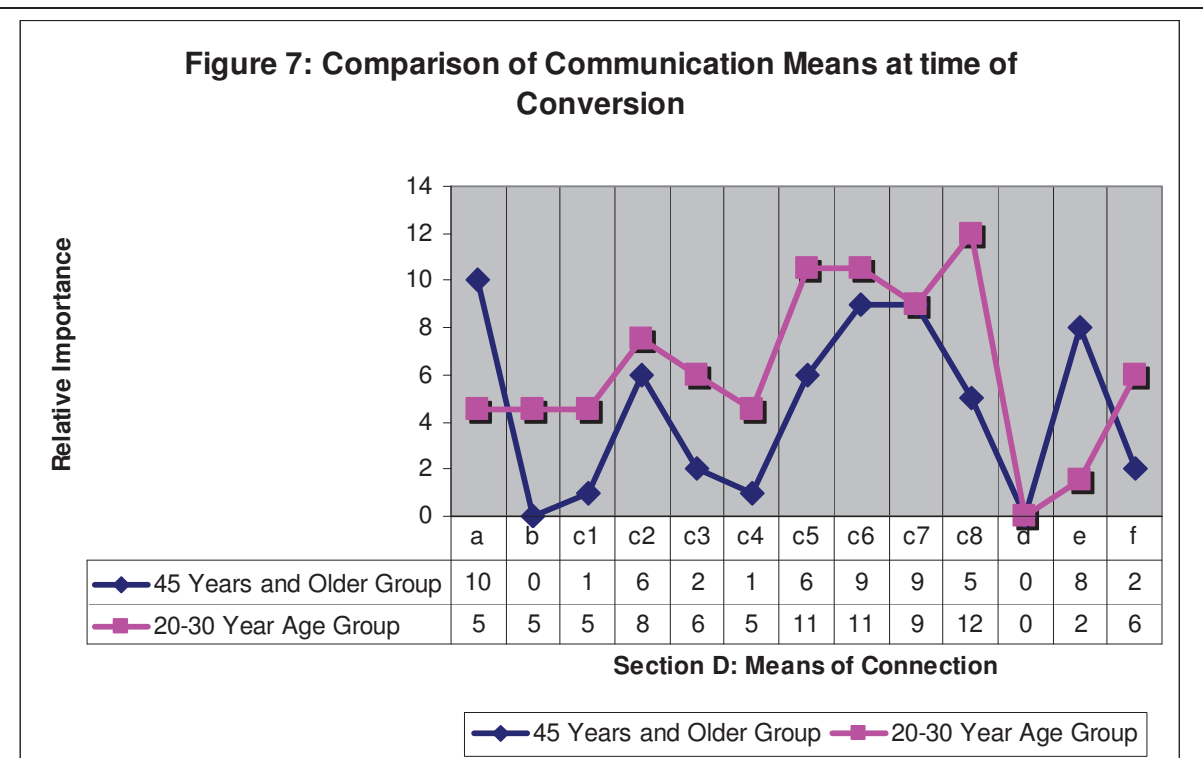
Figure 6: Comparison of Conversion as Event or Process

Please note that in Figure 6 the figures for the older group are the actual number of persons identified for each category, while for the younger group the figures have been adjusted by the application of the 15/10 formula in order to compare the two groups proportionately.

We can see that for some people their conversion experience was a single identifiable event but for the majority the sense of it being a process occurring over time, but with significant events along the way is the strongest impression. Overall the older group had a slightly greater tendency to experience conversion as a single event, or as events within the process. The younger group tended towards experiencing conversion as a process and less so as a single event. The differences are small but consistent with other findings.

Comparison of Communication Means at Time of Conversion

(With data from Section D)



Relating to others. At the time you made the decision to become a Christian what were the principle means by which you connected with friends and family?

- a) Landline telephone.
- b) Cell phone texting
- c) Meeting or gathering at:
 - 1. Dances, discos, or concerts
 - 2. Church youth groups
 - 3. Camping or tramping
 - 4. Sports events
 - 5. Informal gatherings
 - 6. Family events or holidays
 - 7. Church worship services
 - 8. School or other educational institute
- d) Internet websites such as Bebo, Facebook etc.
- e) Letter writing.
- f) Emailing.

Figure 7: Comparison of Communication Means at time of Conversion

Points to note in relation to findings from responses to Section D:

Firstly, there is a general elevation in most forms of communication for the younger group. Surprisingly, neither group indicate that they make use of the social networking websites which have developed in recent years and of which the younger group could have been expected to make some use. The older group make greater use of the landline telephones and of letter-writing. The younger group make greater use of cell-phones (b: younger group = 5/ older group = 0); emailing (f: younger group = 6/ older group = 2); and all forms of face to face social interaction (Questions c 1-8). For the older group the major face to face interaction was through family events (c 6), worship services (c 7), Church Youth Groups (c 2) and informal settings (c 5). The younger group followed a similar pattern but at a higher level for all face to face social interaction. This may simply reflect fading memory for the older group, or else reflect more social opportunities available to contemporary young people.

Comparison of Average Age at Conversion

(With data from biographical details page of the Questionnaire)

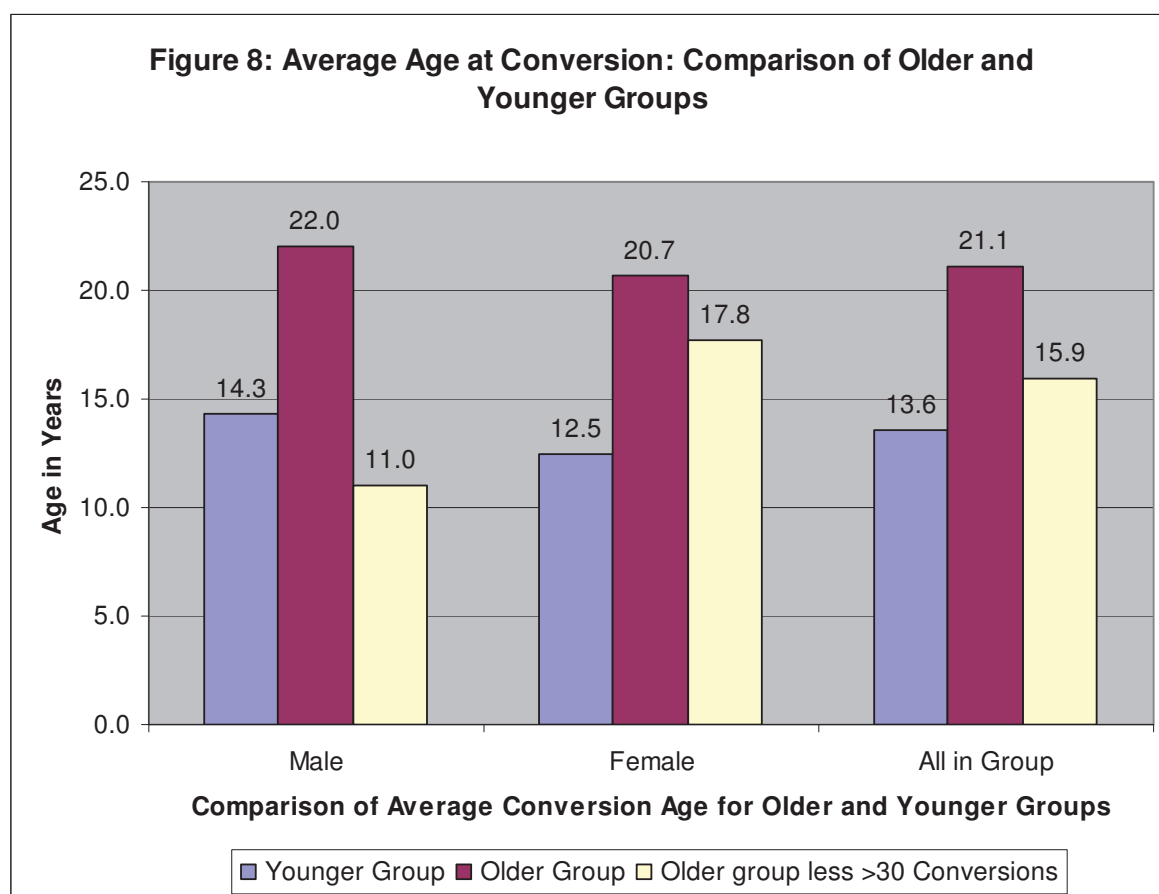


Figure 8: Average Age at Conversion: Comparison of Older and Younger Groups

A direct comparison of the older group and younger group in terms of their age at time of conversion leads to a distortion in the figures since the older group includes several whose age at conversion was well beyond the ages of the oldest of the younger group. Therefore the yellow column represents those in the older group who at the time of their conversion were under the age of thirty. In the younger group there was no-one over the age of twenty at the time of their conversion. Therefore the finding is that the younger group tended to be converted 2.3 years earlier than the older group overall after screening out those over thirty at the time of their conversion. There is a strong trend with the younger group to make their conversion relatively earlier in life than the older group with a slightly younger age for females than for males. The males are relatively small in number so this could just be a feature of the small sample group, however it is consistent with other findings, including

that of the older group who displayed the same pattern of males converting later than females but at a later stage with a 7.5 year difference overall between the two groups.

Thus there is a significant trend overall for a younger age for conversion amongst younger people. This is consistent with medical data indicating that the age of onset for adolescence is falling, notably for girls with obesity, as found by a study done by Wang in 2002 who concluded that “Early SM (sexual maturity) was positively associated with overweight and obesity in girls, but the associations were reverse for boys.”²⁵⁷ A study by Gluckman and Hanson made a similar finding but discovered that early maturity may also be happening for reasons other than obesity. Their finding was that “early onset of puberty is reported in children who have migrated from developing to developed countries.”²⁵⁸ As a finding it tends to confirm the work of Starbuck, Erikson and Hall referred to earlier that conversion is a phenomena linked to adolescence, even if it may occur at other stages of life.

The earlier onset of adolescence could be one factor encouraging this feature of younger conversion. Another factor could be the growing complexity of society with the bewildering array of role models, protean personality fragments, or memes that are so readily available to young people through movies, television the internet. This proliferation of cultural role models could be pressuring young people to face ultimate choices earlier than previous generations and so to move towards individuation at an earlier age. My expectation had been that this pressure would have tended to make young people delay making such choices. But perhaps this is also happening in parallel with this other trend. It was interesting to note that of the younger group whose age ranged up to thirty, all had made their choice of Christian commitment well before they turned twenty, the average being 13.6 years. I was unable to elicit stories of conversion from twenty to thirty year olds. Although I did receive responses from two people whose birthdates were between my target

²⁵⁷ Youfa Wang, “Is Obesity Associated With Early Sexual Maturation? A Comparison of the Association in American Boys Versus Girls,” *Pediatrics: Official Journal of the American Academy of Pediatrics*, Vol. 110 No. 5 November 2002, pp. 903-910. < <http://pediatrics.aappublications.org/cgi/content/abstract/110/5/903> > (24 10 2009). In this article (Citing from abstract only), Wang’s finding was for early maturation in females with obesity but the reverse for males. Obesity was not a factor considered in the respondents to this study.

²⁵⁸ Peter D.Gluckman and Mark A. Hanson. “Evolution, development and timing of puberty,” *Trends in Endocrinology & Metabolism*, Volume 17, Issue 1, January 2006, Pages 7-12. (Citing from abstract only) < http://www.sciencedirect.com/science?_ob=ArticleURL&_udi=B6T3K-4HNSB4S-1&_user=10&_rdoc=1&_fmt=&_orig=search&_sort=d&_docanchor=&view=c&_searchStrId=1061706589&_rerunOrigin=scholar.google&_acct=C000050221&_version=1&_urlVersion=0&_userid=10&md5=b6dc495ed148aa59d34040b47aa2c796 > (24 10 2009).

groups and one of them gave thirty as his age of conversion. The other gave his age as nine. I was not otherwise able to use their data in this study.

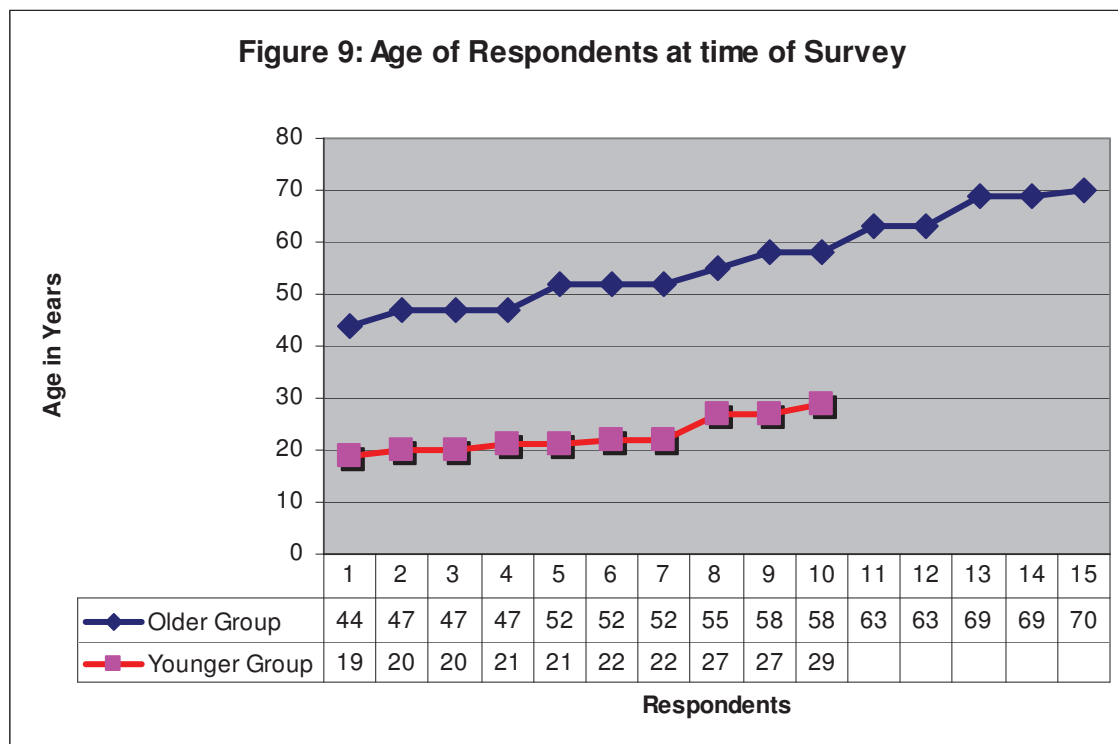


Figure 9: Age of Respondents at Time of Survey

Notes: There is a fifteen year gap between the oldest of the younger group and the youngest of the older group. The youngest in both groups of respondents were born within the year of the beginning of each decadal cohort but the date of their birthdays meant that at the time of responding to the survey their ages were 19 and 44 respectively.

THE INTERVIEWS

Scope of the interviews

Not all of the respondents were interviewed, however three from the younger group and four from the older group were interviewed, and the conversations recorded, to clarify and give some depth to three areas of the questionnaire responses which left intriguing questions. Firstly there was the area of the importance of role models. The work on the case studies made it clear that the stories of conversion were preserved by the church for specific reasons: they were exemplars for others to learn from; draw inspiration from and to emulate in their own lives. The responses by the younger group in Figure 5, (k) the personal influence of someone important to them, indicated that this was an important factor for them. Who, if anyone, do contemporary Christians look to as exemplars today? The second factor for exploration in the interviews was the intriguing lack of evidence for sophisticated use of the internet or of cellphones in establishing and maintaining relationships. This was evident in both groups and seems an unlikely result that can only be clarified by interview. The final point for clarification was in the area of the changes in the faith content in attitudes to Christian Belief and the Bible. Figures 3 and 4 in relation to questions (g) and (h) showed that in both groups, after conversion, there had been a drop in Christian belief about God but a rise in Biblical belief. What does this paradoxical result mean?

Interview Findings in the area of Role Models and Character Formation

Both the older group and the younger group found their roles models close to hand. They were either parents, leaders in local churches or youth groups which they belonged to or work colleagues who shared their faith with them. However only one of four of the older group mentioned parents while two of the three of the younger group mentioned parents. Extended family referred to were cousins, an uncle and wider family. Among the non family people mentioned were: a Scout leader; Boys Brigade leader; Church Youth Group leaders; an employer and work colleagues. These are all people with whom the respondent had direct personal contact. Even when asked specifically none of the older or younger groups referred to a historical or Biblical figure influencing them except long after their conversions. A typical response regarding role models comes from Respondent Y 04: "My father was the most important role model and I was always impressed by his selflessness

and confidence in life.”²⁵⁹ One respondent from the older group was not typical, stating that she had no role models and knew nothing about Christianity. Someone had taught her the Lord’s Prayer as a child but her family background had been filled with parental abuse. It was an employer who took her to church and gave her a booklet, which she read month’s later while on her own. Her experience was notably like that of St Paul. She recounted: “...one night I was feeling very lonely I went through the booklet again. This awesome light came into the room and I experienced an overwhelming sense of peace. I didn’t understand it much at the time. That happened when I was 18.”²⁶⁰

Most respondents were conscious of the benefits of conversion in terms of how it had shaped their character. A common theme was recognising these changes in hindsight rather than as they occur. Common references are to conversion giving real focus to life, for example from Respondent O 09: “Without God in my life I don’t have a purpose”²⁶¹; and from O 05: “I stopped swearing. I was more at peace with myself.”²⁶² This recognition of real change in behaviour and lifestyle was more common and specific amongst the older group. One of the younger respondents, Y 04 stated: “...the older I get the more aware I am of how bad I once was.”²⁶³

In general there seemed to be little learning about what being a Christian means coming from sources other than people with whom the respondents were in direct personal contact. This was true for both groups. The rich resource of historical conversions and the stories of the saints or even of contemporary Christians beyond the circle of immediate contact had little impact and were little known.

Interview Findings in the area of Internet and Cellphone Use

Those interviewed were asked about their internet use more generally in order to clarify the puzzling zero response to the internet question in the questionnaire from both groups. Perhaps the reference in the original question to specific websites such as ‘Bebo, Facebook etc’ made it possible for people to answer “no” or to skip this response; when they may be

²⁵⁹ Respondent Y 04, Interview by author, Telephone, Christchurch, New Zealand. 27 October 2009.

²⁶⁰ Respondent O 09, Interview by author, Telephone, Rotorua, New Zealand, 24 10 2009.

²⁶¹ Respondent O 09, Interview by author, Telephone, Rotorua, New Zealand, 24 10 2009.

²⁶² Respondent O 05, Interview by author, Telephone, Rotorua, New Zealand, 24 10 2009.

²⁶³ Respondent Y 04, Interview by author, Telephone, Christchurch, New Zealand. 27 October 2009.

regular and frequent users of the internet for other purposes but don't use these specific sites? Or perhaps their use of the internet was more utilitarian than personal.

All of those interviewed, when questioned about internet and cell phone use, said that they made use of them. Some from both groups used the internet quite extensively.

Respondent O 09 said:

“Yes I use the internet for banking and paying all my bills / for staying in contact with friends all over the world – one being a missionary girl from our church who went overseas. We share prayer concerns between us and with others in our church. I have also used the internet for searching for a job, and for research for study.”²⁶⁴

Amongst the younger group the internet was used extensively for utilitarian purposes:

“I have cut down to only using one social networking site which I only check about once per month – I used to have three. Other than that I just use it for emails – not a lot for personal connections just work.”²⁶⁵

Cellphones were much the same. They are used to arrange face to face gatherings rather than for direct relating. Respondent Y 07 said:

“I use texting to stay in contact with more distant people, like family or friends in another city or town; or to arrange to meet for coffee, because I have a high emphasis on face to face stuff. I like to be with people rather than relating through a screen or text.”²⁶⁶

Both the older and younger group seem to have a similar utilitarian approach to the internet and to cellphone use. They both were proficient users of the internet. However both groups seem to overlook just how ubiquitous this technology is in the sense that they are very reliant on it for “maintaining contact” or “staying in touch” –both being phrases frequently used. They use it unreflectively. The extent of their dependence on it for many normal

²⁶⁴ Respondent O 09, Interview by author, Telephone, Rotorua, New Zealand, 24 10 2009.

²⁶⁵ Respondent Y 07, Interview by author, Telephone, Christchurch, New Zealand, 27 10 2009.

²⁶⁶ Respondent Y 07, Interview by author, Telephone, Christchurch, New Zealand, 27 10 2009.

aspects of life such as communication, banking, paying bills and looking up information has disguised it for many people. It has become so common that it is almost invisible.

Interview Findings in the Area of Christian Belief and the Bible

All respondents were asked to articulate core Christian beliefs in their own words as they understood it personally. Both age groups looked to the traditional Creeds and doctrines of the Trinity, the human / divine nature of Christ and teachings of the Bible, the Ten Commandments, the New Testament or the parables and commandments of Jesus. Only one from each group was able to express this faith in more personal terms. Firstly a member of the older group O 01 who said: “That I am saved through Jesus Christ who died for me. - That I have hope for the future. Also looking out for others, showing love and care for others.”²⁶⁷ And from the younger group, Y 07: “To bring glory to God in the way I live my life. To serve God and to practice Christ-likeness. To be loved by God and to show that love towards others.”²⁶⁸

All respondents showed an appreciation of the need to interpret Biblical truth and its relevance for today by seeking to understand Scripture within the context of its original and current cultural settings. One of the younger respondents Y 09, showed a particular affinity to the postmodern viewpoint: “– I believe there is room for different interpretations. It is not possible to have completely objective truth about anything. All philosophies or ideas must relate back to something that really exists.”²⁶⁹ One of the older group, O 02 said: “I listen and look first to the Bible and God’s revelation to me personally before science. After all scientific truth changes but the truth in the Bible stays the same.”²⁷⁰

The differences between the two groups are not marked. The younger group accepted quite readily the need for interpretation of the Biblical message while some of the older group seemed to have moved to this position from backgrounds of quite conservative belief. This was true especially in relation to the ongoing debates around science and faith. Both groups seemed well aware of this issue, sometimes expressed as the evolution versus creation

²⁶⁷ Respondent O 01, Interview by author, Telephone, Rotorua, New Zealand, 27 10 2009.

²⁶⁸ Respondent Y 07, Interview by author, Telephone, Christchurch, New Zealand, 27 10 2009.

²⁶⁹ Respondent Y 09, Interview by author, Telephone, Auckland, New Zealand, 27 10 2009.

²⁷⁰ Respondent O 02, Interview by author, Telephone, Rotorua, New Zealand, 27 10 2009.

debate, as background to their new lives of faith. They both had made reasonably comfortable accommodations with it in their own minds.

“..creation versus evolution. I was well aware of these debates. The thing is the Bible is written in stories, oral stories recorded into writing. It was all pre-scientific. Science is about doing tests, selecting sample groups and how big they are. Data from test results can be manipulated but it is all subject to critical reviews. It is a different kind of knowledge from the Bible.”²⁷¹

More troubling for a couple of respondents was the issue of unmerited suffering or the issue of theodicy. Its impact was very personal rather than academic. For one respondent it was in relation to a desire for healing for her autistic son and struggling to understand why bad things happen to some people.

“I had a child who is 12 now who has autism so I have thought a lot about the issues of healing and suffering. I understand other people’s pain a lot more. I have a lot more empathy for where others are at. I wonder sometimes about how can God do this to people? Why do bad things happen to people? But I accept that we see only a little bit of the picture and God sees a bigger perspective. Maybe my son will be healed in heaven.”²⁷²

Conclusions and Implications for Evangelism and Faith Formation

The findings of this project do indicate that there have been changes in the ways that people appropriate their faith over time. Young people today are aware of the implications of the choice made in conversion and they are attracted to Christianity as a comprehensive meta-narrative which gives them confidence about major life issues, reassures them of the forgiveness of sins and gives them a sense of purpose and direction. They are more relational than older people and surprisingly less dependent on technology than expected, preferring face to face encounter and the face to face influence and support of friends. In terms of our definition of conversion: a *reorientation of life focus towards a centring on Christ and the Christian Gospel*, we can affirm, from those studied, that they have

²⁷¹ Respondent O 01, Interview by author, Telephone, Rotorua, New Zealand, 27 10 2009.

²⁷² Respondent O 01, Interview by author, Telephone, Rotorua, New Zealand, 27 10 2009.

significantly reoriented their life focus. The younger group have done so against a more negative base level than the older group, especially in the areas of greater scepticism about God, and negative attitudes towards personal spirituality and community service. The second part of the definition has also been confirmed by inference from the questionnaire responses, with conversion generating an increase in church attendance; voluntary work; in acceptance of biblical belief; a removal of negative attitudes and stereotypes about God; and a sense of personal closeness to a God who is understood to be personal and caring.

In earlier ages models of ideal conversions were identified and promoted quite vigorously by the church. These models, whether Paul, Constantine, or Augustine not only exemplified the issues and concerns of their day, they also exemplified the Christian response to those issues. They provided comprehensive metanarratives, or polished memes or protean fragments that could be readily accessed to provide examples of Christian belonging, behaving and belief.

A challenge for the church today is to identify those from amongst contemporary Christians whose stories do these things equally as well as in times past. Or to identify figures from the past whose stories resonate with today's concerns. Those who become Christian today are drawing inspiration from Christians with whom they have close personal relationships and the rich heritage of the past is not being made available to them. A challenge in our time is that there is a multiplicity of genres and media in which to tell these stories. Some genres will reach some segments of the community but not others. Therefore the targeting of appropriate cohorts and people groups with not only the appropriate model of Christian life, but also using the appropriate media and genre are as important. Telling the galvanising stories that inspire and evoke the aspirations of a generation, and which offer the transforming power of the Gospel is important.

Fragmentation or diffusion of society could be a possible factor influencing a trend to earlier conversion in the younger group. As we have seen pluralism is a feature of the post-modern environment and this extends to religious pluralism. Stark identified competing monotheism as a strong factor in missional activity directed towards conversion. The post-modern environment is much more tolerant of competing world-views or metanarratives. Taken together these factors encourage young people to make their choice early in life, and any delay at this point seems to extend into middle age. As protean fragmentation is likely

to continue as a feature of society in general, this feature of conversion at a younger age is likely to remain, although whether it continues to trend downwards seems unlikely. It remains important that the Church is able to offer role models of identity coherence and integrity which emerge from powerful stories of real people involved in real action. In a world where highly sophisticated role models and personality fragments are offered through the media, guiding young people to genuine encounter with real people of depth and genuine spirituality, and to worship that provides meaningful encounter with God, are key tasks of the church in evangelism and faith formation. The church could also explore factors that encourage conversion for those who have delayed consideration of conversion into mid-life.

That young people are experiencing conversion earlier was a surprising finding as I had expected that the increased complexity of society would lead to a tendency to delay making the kind of commitment that conversion involves. However it could also mean that in the face of the multiplexity of society the experience of conversion gives to young people a welcome shelter from the confusion and chaos of protean images and role models on offer. This being the case there could be a concern that this could lead to a kind of foreclosure of personality which identifies with a too narrow understanding of Christian faith, whereby the development to maturity is arrested by the too early imprinting of a fundamentalist world view and corresponding rigidity of personality. This in turn can lead to what Lifton calls totalism, a kind of fundamentalist blindness to other viewpoints.

Despite this tendency to rush to early conversion, young people need to be encouraged to take time in order to process faith content information and to integrate this with personal experience and growing knowledge. It would be a mistake for the Church to overly promote a rush to early Christian conversion without accompanying encouragement of and respect for process being built in to how we pass on the faith. The interest of the younger generation in spiritual matters needs to be respected as a starting point for encouraging further exploration and not as an opportunistic readiness to 'close the deal.'

A further challenge is that for those who attain individuation, or in Marcia's terms, personality achievement (or foreclosure), or developmental maturity in Erikson's understanding, without the experience of conversion, it will be more difficult to be open to the Christian metanarrative simply because it will be lost amongst all the other competing

memes and fragments that proliferate in the post modern world. The unreflective use of internet and other technology could multiply superficial relationships built on texting, tweeting and blog posts, rather than genuine encounter. A hopeful sign is that the younger generation seem to be developing an appetite for such face to face encounters and are becoming discriminating about communication technology and media.

Further Research

Further research could usefully be done in the area of role modelling. What constitutes an effective role model and how is knowledge about role models communicated? If we do live in a protean age as Lifton suggests how do we overcome the problem of the fragmentation of life and role models? Are there models of integration that would be helpful?

More depth in the current project in the specific ways that persons converting came to a knowledge of Jesus Christ and the Gospel would have helped with clarifying some of the findings. Research into what Fowler would call the 'contents' of personal faith before and after conversion would be interesting as it would help us to understand what people consider important to them both in terms of the attractiveness of Christ and of Christianity as an ongoing life-focus.

Alex Czerwonka

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Interview Respondents

Respondent O 01. Interview by author. Telephone. Rotorua, New Zealand. 27 10 2009.

Respondent O 02. Interview by author. Telephone, Rotorua, New Zealand. 24 10 2009.

Respondent O 05. Interview by author. Telephone, Rotorua, New Zealand. 24 10 2009.

Respondent O 09. Interview by author. Telephone, Rotorua, New Zealand. 24 10 2009.

Respondent Y 04. Interview by author. Telephone. Christchurch. New Zealand. 27 10 2009.

Respondent Y 07. Interview by author. Telephone. Christchurch. New Zealand. 27 10 2009.

Respondent Y 09. Interview by author. Telephone. Auckland. New Zealand. 27 10 2009.

(All interviews were recorded electronically with the prior permission of the respondents)

Appendix 1) Information Sheet



July 2009

BELIEVING LIKE NEVER BEFORE:
Christian Conversion and Faith Formation in a Networked World
INFORMATION SHEET FOR PARTICIPANTS

Thank you for showing an interest in this project. Please read this information sheet carefully before deciding whether or not to participate. If you decide to participate we thank you. If you decide not to take part there will be no disadvantage to you of any kind and we thank you for considering our request.

What is the Aim of the Project?

The purpose of the project is to identify what differences there may be in the experience of identity and faith formation since the 1990s. Of particular interest is comparing the differences in the experience of Christian conversion and faith formation in those born before 1965 as against those born between 1980 and 1990. The aim is to explore what may account for these differences, and what the implications these differences may have for evangelism and the design of faith formation processes in the church.

This project is being undertaken as part of the requirements for the Master of Ministry Degree for the University of Otago Department of Theology and Religious Studies.

What Type of Participants are being sought?

The participants sought for this study are males or females from two different age groups:

- a) those born before 1965 and,
- b) those born between 1980 and 1990

Excluded from the study are:

- Those who have not consciously chosen to become professing Christians.
- Anyone who identifies as having a mental health condition or personality disorder.
- Anyone who identifies as a minor, a prisoner, a hospital patient, or anyone whose capacity to give informed consent is compromised in any way.

What will Participants be asked to do?

Should you agree to take part in this project, you will be asked to complete a questionnaire asking for some personal details to identify you to the researcher, and also to give other information about how you came to become a Christian and the factors that may have influenced you in your decision. Completion of the questionnaire should take less than an hour.

You will also be asked if you would be willing to participate in a follow up interview with the researcher, either in person or by telephone.

Can Participants Change their Mind and Withdraw from the Project?

If at any stage you decide not to take part in the project or wish to withdraw from completing the questionnaire or a follow up interview you may do so without any disadvantage to yourself of any kind.

What Data or Information will be Collected and What Use will be Made of it?

In the questionnaire you will be asked to assign a value to certain optional responses. The questions will cover your values and relationships before and after your choice to become a Christian, and how this choice has affected your understanding of God and other relationships. You will also be asked about your preferred means of communication for relationships at the time you chose to be a Christian.

Some participants in the questionnaire will be invited to participate in an interview which will involve an open-questioning technique where the precise nature of the questions which will be asked have not been determined in advance, but will depend on the way in which the interview develops. Consequently, although the Ethics Committee is aware of the general areas to be explored in the interview, the Committee has not been able to review the precise questions to be used.

In the event that the line of questioning does develop in such a way that you feel hesitant or uncomfortable you are reminded of your right to decline to answer any particular question(s) and also that you may withdraw from the project at any stage without any disadvantage to yourself of any kind.

The purpose of the project is to identify what differences there may be in the experience of identity and faith formation since the 1990s. Of particular interest is comparing the differences in the experience of Christian conversion and faith formation in those born before 1965 as against those born between 1980 and 1990. The aim is to explore what may account for these differences, and what the implications these differences may have for evangelism and the design of faith formation processes in the church.

This project is being undertaken as part of the requirements for the Master of Ministry Degree for the University of Otago Department of Theology and Religious Studies. The information collected from the questionnaire will be merged into statistical tables and graphs and used to analyse broad trends in conversion experiences and faith formation in differing cohort groups.

Information gathered from participation in interviews will be used to compile case studies for comparison with the more general information from the questionnaires and literature surveys.

Results of this project may be published but any data included will in no way be linked to any specific participant. You are most welcome to request a copy of the results of the project should you wish.

The data collected will be securely stored in such a way that only those mentioned above will be able to gain access to it. At the end of the project any personal information will be destroyed immediately except that, as required by the University's research policy, any raw data on which the results of the project depend will be retained in secure storage for five years, after which it will be destroyed.

People who meet one or more of the exclusion criteria set out above may not participate in this project, because in the opinion of the researchers and the Ethics Committee, it involves unacceptable risk to them.

What if Participants have any Questions?

If you have any questions about our project, either now or in the future, please feel free to contact either:-

Hugh Alexander Czerwonka
Department of Theology & Religious Studies

or

Kevin Ward
Department of Theology & Religious
Studies

University Telephone Number: 03 479 8901 University Telephone Number: 03 479 8901

Appendix 2) Consent Form



July 2009

BELIEVING LIKE NEVER BEFORE:
Christian Conversion and Faith Formation in a Networked World
CONSENT FORM FOR PARTICIPANTS

I have read the Information Sheet concerning this project and understand what it is about. All my questions have been answered to my satisfaction. I understand that I am free to request further information at any stage.

I know that:-

1. My participation in the project is entirely voluntary;
2. I am free to withdraw from the project at any time without any disadvantage;
3. The data [completed questionnaires and audio tapes and transcripts] will be destroyed at the conclusion of the project but any raw data on which the results of the project depend will be retained in secure storage for five years, after which it will be destroyed;
4. Some participants in the questionnaire will be invited to participate in an interview which will involve an open-questioning technique where the precise nature of the questions which will be asked have not been determined in advance, but will depend on the way in which the interview develops. Consequently, although the Ethics Committee is aware of the general areas to be explored in the interview, the Committee has not been able to review the precise questions to be used.
5. It is not expected that there will be any discomfort or risk for participants however, in the event that the line of questioning does develop in such a way that you feel hesitant or uncomfortable you are reminded of your right to decline to answer any particular question(s) and also that you may withdraw from the project at any stage without any disadvantage to yourself of any kind.
6. There is no expectation of any remuneration or compensation for participants in this project.
7. The results of the project may be published but my anonymity will be preserved.

I agree to take part in this project.

.....
(Signature of Participant)

(Date)

Appendix 3) The Questionnaire

MINX 590: Research Project

**Believing Like Never Before:
Christian Conversion and Faith Formation in a Networked World**

THE QUESTIONNAIRE

Alex Czerwonka

MINX 590: Research Project
Supervisor: Rev Dr Kevin Ward

**Believing Like Never Before:
Christian Conversion and Faith Formation in a Networked World**

The Survey Questions:

The following information requested from you will enable only the researcher and his supervisor to identify you and your responses in this questionnaire. The information you provide will only be used in the final form of this study in such a way that any connection to you personally will remain anonymous.

Your Name: _____

Your contact details: _____

phone *postal address* *email*

Your year of birth _____

Your age in whole years when you decided to become a Christian: _____

Your gender: M / F

Please note that if you come into one of the following categories you should withdraw from participation in this project. You need not do anything further, just destroy the questionnaire. There will be no follow up from the researcher and no disadvantage to yourself in doing so.

Please destroy this questionnaire if you have:

- Never made a conscious choice to profess to be a Christian
- Ever been diagnosed as having a mental health condition or personality disorder.
- Are currently a prisoner or a hospital patient or someone who cannot give consent on your own behalf.

Are you willing to participate in a follow up interview with the researcher, either in person or by telephone? Yes / No

Notes: 1) the researcher will only be able to follow up for interviews with a limited number of those who participate in the questionnaire.

2) Please read the questions overleaf through in full before starting to respond. Use a black or blue pen to circle or make the appropriate responses.

Thank you in anticipation for your time and thought in responding to this questionnaire.
Alex Czerwonka

Section A) Respond to the following statements in relation to your life **before your decision to become a Christian.**

Using the scale 5 to 1 where: 5 = strongly agree; 4 = agree; 3 = neutral; 2 = disagree and 1 = strongly disagree.

1. I was happy with the purpose and direction of my life.
5 4 3 2 1
2. I belonged to one or more groups that were important to me such as a sports club, band, service club or church.
5 4 3 2 1
3. My family were important to me.
5 4 3 2 1
4. Living a morally and ethically good life was important to me.
5 4 3 2 1
5. Personal prayer was a regular part of my life.
5 4 3 2 1
6. Doing voluntary work for a charitable group or church was important to me.
5 4 3 2 1
7. I regularly attended worship services and belonged to a church or faith community.
5 4 3 2 1
8. Staying in regular contact with my circle of friends was important to me.
5 4 3 2 1
9. What would best describe your understanding of God?
(Select three options closest to your position at the time and rank them from 3 to 1 in order of importance, with 3 being most important and 1 being of lesser importance.)
 - a) I did not believe in God.
 - b) I considered God to be uncaring and distant.
 - c) I experienced God as loving and close.
 - d) I considered God to be an impersonal force or energy.
 - e) I had no strong beliefs about God at all.
 - f) I thought God was a stern judge.
 - g) I accepted Christian belief and teaching about God.
 - h) I believed the Bible's view of God.
 - i) I had an understanding of God from another faith tradition.
 - j) I was unsure one way or the other about the reality of God.
 - k) I didn't believe God was real or cared for me personally.

Section B) Respond to the following statements in relation to your choice **to make a Christian commitment:**

Of the following factors identify the three most important to you at the time and rank them from 3 to 1 in order of importance, with 3 being most important and 1 being of lesser importance.

- 1
 - a) Having Christian friends who I could communicate with.
 - b) A desire to belong to a Church or Christian group.
 - c) A sudden flash of insight that gave you a different view of God.
 - d) A sense of personal incompleteness around unresolved issues.
 - e) A challenging presentation of the Gospel by a speaker or preacher.
 - f) A shock, trauma or injury which made you reconsider your life's direction.
 - g) A desire to find greater direction and purpose in life.

- h) A spiritual encounter with a strong sense of God's presence.
 - i) Having time to think carefully through the issues and questions.
 - j) Facing a moral or ethical issue that challenged my beliefs.
 - k) The personal influence of an important person in my life.
 - l) Facing a major decision about the direction of my life.
 - m) A sense of dislocation or lack of direction.
 - n) A need for forgiveness from sin and release from the past.
 - o) An overwhelming sense of love and acceptance.
- 2 Would you consider your choice to become a Christian to be the result of:-
- a) A specific single conscious decision?
 - b) A gradual process of learning and growing acceptance?
 - c) Some combination of a) and b) above?

Section C) Respond to the following statements in relation to your life after your decision to become a Christian.

Using the scale 5 to 1 where: 5 = strongly agree; 4 = agree; 3 = neutral; 2 = disagree and 1 = strongly disagree.

1. I am happy with the purpose and direction of my life.
5 4 3 2 1
2. I belong to one or more groups that are important to me such as a sports club or service club or church.
5 4 3 2 1
3. My family are important to me.
5 4 3 2 1
4. Living a morally and ethically good life is important to me.
5 4 3 2 1
5. Personal prayer is a regular part of my life.
5 4 3 2 1
6. Doing voluntary work for a charitable group or church is important to me.
5 4 3 2 1
7. I regularly attend worship services and belong to a church or faith community.
5 4 3 2 1
8. Staying in regular contact with my circle of friends is important to me.
5 4 3 2 1
9. What would best describe your understanding of God since becoming Christian?
(Select three options closest to your position now and rank them from 3 to 1 in order of importance, with 3 being most important and 1 being of lesser importance.)
 - a) I do not believe in God.
 - b) I consider God to be uncaring and distant.
 - c) I experience God as loving and close.
 - d) I consider God to be an impersonal force or energy.
 - e) I have no strong beliefs about God at all.
 - f) I think of God as a stern judge.
 - g) I accept Christian belief and teaching about God
 - h) I believed the Bible's view of God.
 - i) I have an understanding of God from another faith tradition.
 - j) I am unsure one way or the other about the reality of God.
 - k) I believe God is real and cares for me personally.

Section D) Relating to others. At the time you made the decision to become a Christian what were the principle means by which you connected with friends and family?

- a) Landline telephone.
- b) Cell phone texting
- c) Meeting or gathering at:
 - 1. dances, discos, or concerts
 - 2. church youth groups
 - 3. camping or tramping
 - 4. sports events
 - 5. informal gatherings
 - 6. family events or holidays
 - 7. church worship services
 - 8. School or other educational institute
- d) Internet websites such as Bebo, Facebook etc.
- e) Letter writing.
- f) Emailing.

Affirmation

I affirm that the information supplied in this questionnaire is true and accurate to the best of my knowledge and recollection.

Signed _____

Date _____

Participant

Once completed, please return the questionnaire to 'Believing Researcher, C/o P O Box 351 ROTORUA.' In the envelope provided.

Appendix 4) Interview Questions Guide

Interview Questions

Respondent:

A) Role Models & Character Formation

- 1) Were there any people who were important models for you of what being a Christian means?
- 2) What particularly about these people was distinctive and impressive?
- 3) How was that communicated to you?
- 4) Are you conscious of growing more Christian in terms of your character?
- 5) What examples can you give of growing to be more Christian in character?
- 6) Did you have any initial concerns or hesitations about making a Christian commitment?
- 7) What do you find most difficult to cope with about continuing as a Christian?
- 8) What inspires you or motivates you to continue as a Christian?
- 9) Is your Christian faith a help to you in your daily life?
- 10) Can you give some examples?

B) Communication & Relationships

- 1) Do you use the internet much and in what ways?
- 2) Do you use your cellphone mainly for texting or talking?
- 3) How important is belonging to a local church to you?
- 4) How important is your family to you?
- 5) How do you handle any conflict between church and family?

C) Christian Belief and the Bible

- 1) What would you say are core Christian beliefs?
- 2) Where do you look for authoritative teaching about Christian belief?
- 3) How important is right belief to you?
- 4) Is the Bible important to you?
- 5) Have you thought about possible conflicts between the Bible and modern understandings?

Appendix 5) Letter to the Bishop of Waiapu

13 July 2009

The Right Rev David Rice
C/o P O Box 227
NAPIER 4140

Dear Bishop David,

As you may be aware I am currently a distance student with Otago University aiming to complete a Master of Ministry degree with a final research project. I have recently obtained the ethical approval required to go ahead with this project from the Head of the Theology and Religious Studies Department Professor Paul Trebilco.

I am writing to you to obtain your approval to seek participants for the questionnaire and, for some respondents, possibly an interview to enable me to complete the field research part of this project.

It will involve advertising through the Diocesan eNews and possibly requesting access to some other selected parishes and their internal newsletters and networks. I anticipate that all participants will be entirely voluntary in response to my request, and they can withdraw from the project at any time without any disadvantage to themselves.

For your information I enclose a copy of the material, including the information sheet, consent form and the questionnaire. If you have any additional questions please contact me

I look forward to hearing from you.

With best regards,

Alex Czerwonka

Appendix 6) Response Letter from the Bishop of Waiapu

The Right Reverend David Rice
Anglican Bishop of Waiapu

21 July 2009

Rev A Czerwonka
38 Rutland Street
Utuhina
ROTORUA 3015

Dear Alex

Thank you for your letter dated 13 July 2009.

I am more than happy for you to seek the participants you require to complete your project, through the various means you suggest. Also to use E-News as a channel of communication as needed.

Alex, I wish you every success as you work towards your final goal.

Blessings



David Rice
Bishop of Waiapu