



# Issues in the Sociology and Psychology of Religious Conversion

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## Abstract

Religious conversion is the process by which a person commits to the beliefs of a new religious tradition and shifts away from their previously held religious beliefs (Stark and Finke 2000). Religious conversion and its mechanisms have been studied for millennia (Zinnbauer and Pargament in *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 37(1), 161–180, 1998) and were among the first phenomena to be studied by psychology (Paloutzian et al. in *Journal of Personality*, 67(6), 1047–1079, 1999). This review of conversion begins with a discussion of diverse conceptualizations, and hence multiple definitions, of conversion. Next, recurring components of major psychological and sociological conversion theories are explored—those consistently recognized as important for understanding and explaining the large amount of variance across conversions. Such components include the convert’s agency, the convert’s social integration, the temporal span of conversion, the nature of conversion’s consequences, and the roles that crisis, emotion, religion, and identity play in conversion. Identifying which components of conversion, and the issues that surround them, are consistently of significance to scholars provides future researchers practical starting points for accurately measuring the conversion process.

**Keywords** Conversion · Religious conversion · Sociology of conversion · Psychology of conversion · Psychology of religion

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Humans share a fundamental fear of the temporary nature of our existence and of the uncertainty of what, if anything, lies beyond (see Burke et al. 2010; Freud 1928; Solomon et al. 1991). In confronting this fear, we have developed epistemologies through which we seek to understand our world, ourselves, our mortality, and what the future beyond death may hold. Religious epistemologies hold the belief that there are sacred, transcendent elements responsible for our existence and that experiencing and structuring life through a relationship with the sacred allows our consciousness to endure past physical death (Hood et al. 2003; Rambo 1993; Zinnbauer and Pargament 2005).

Most major religious belief systems propose that their outlook on reality and meaning are uniquely correct (Nock 1933/1988; Plantinga 1995; Trinitapoli 2007). This mutual exclusivity has resulted in competition among religions throughout human history, particularly following the rise of monotheism (Nock 1933/1988). Belief systems, including religious ones, are dead without believers. Subsequently, many religious groups seek actively to incorporate as many new individuals as possible through religious conversion (Rambo 1993). For other groups, conversion is simply the process of transformation a person undergoes as they come to believe.

## Definitions of religious conversion

Religious conversion is the process by which a person commits to the beliefs of a new religious tradition and shifts away from previously held religious beliefs (Stark and Finke 2000). However, and not surprisingly, there are multiple conceptualizations and definitions of religious conversion. Taken together, contemporary scholars define religious conversion as a process involving a series of events rather than a stand-alone experience (Hood et al. 2003; Zinnbauer and Pargament 1998). Theories of conversion in this contemporary paradigm are flexible regarding the order of the conversion processes, and they espouse more multicausal views of why conversion takes place than the traditional “power of God” cause (Richardson 1985). Theories that form the traditional paradigm of conversion research view the causes of conversion as external, irresistible, and supernatural and the consequences of conversion as irrevocable (Coe 1916; Hall 1904; James 1902/1985; Starbuck 1897). In contrast, contemporary theories of conversion from both sociology and psychology stress that converts seek to develop meaning, personhood, and self-identity within their social and societal contexts (Kilbourne and Richardson 1989; Paloutzian et al. 1999; Travisano 1970). The contemporary conversion paradigm further defines converts as active participants in their own conversion. In this view, there is constant interaction between converts, as active agents, and external forces, such as recruiters, religious group members, and the spiritual forces that converts perceive (Rambo 1993, 1999; Zinnbauer and Pargament 1998). The person’s decision to convert is both voluntary and conscious (Rambo 1993; Richardson 1985). Another theme in the contemporary paradigm is that converts are conceptualized as seekers of meaning and purpose in both their natural lives (i.e., finding meaning and satisfaction in their careers, relationships, and psychology) and spiritual lives (i.e., finding meaning and satisfaction in their connection to the sacred).

Colloquial definitions of conversion assert that conversion is simply the adoption of a new set of religious beliefs that differ from one’s previous beliefs. Other definitions assert that religious conversion is a reaction to persistent emotional stress that produces a change in the self that aligns converts with sacred beliefs (Paloutzian et al. 1999; Pargament 1997; Sargent 1957; Zinnbauer and Pargament 1998). Rambo (1993, p. 5) defines conversion as “a process of change that takes place in a dynamic force field of people, events, ideologies, institutions,

expectations, and orientations,” whereas others characterize it as a radical change (Snow and Machalek 1984) in one’s “identity, meaning, and life” (Travisano 1970, p. 594) or in one’s “root reality” (Heirich 1977, p. 674).

From early on, scholars have resisted attempts to standardize the definition of conversion (Jackson 1908). Historically, research on religious conversion has been interdisciplinary, producing myriad perspectives, and conversion has been studied using numerous, often competing, methods, theories, and explanations (Zinnbauer and Pargament 1998). As a result, definitions of religious conversion are diverse, and no consensus has been reached regarding its operationalization. However, there is some consensus on what religious conversion is *not*, and certain issues in conversion are consistently recorded across research.

Researchers have established differences between spiritual changes and religious conversion, despite the fact that religion and spirituality are often conceptualized together. Although there are multiple ways to consider these differences (see Zinnbauer and Pargament 2005), there is some general agreement on how these constructs differ. Religion is considered an objective (i.e., canonized), structured system of beliefs and practices rooted in a particular tradition that allows individuals to collectively experience and connect to the sacred (Hill and Pargament 2003). Spirituality, on the other hand, is a personal, subjective, and flexible means for an individual to experience and connect to a transcendent spiritual force (Hill and Pargament 2003; Peteet 1994; Zinnbauer and Pargament 2005). Religion is often characterized by a focus on institutional involvement, organization, and social gatherings, whereas spirituality is often characterized by a focus on personal relevance, transcendent beliefs, and feelings of human relatedness and/or universal connectedness (sometimes called the “oceanic feeling”; Freud 1928; Miller and Thoresen 2003; Zinnbauer and Pargament 2005). Some scholars conceptualize spiritual change as a component of religious conversion, defining it as a subjective, personal alignment of the self with a spiritual power (Pargament 1997; Zinnbauer and Pargament 1998, 2005). As such, spirituality plays a necessary, but not sufficient, role in religiousness in general and religious conversion in particular.

Not all religious changes are religious conversions, and there is some debate regarding which religious changes should be considered conversion (Rambo 1993; Travisano 1970). Travisano (1970) posits that alternation is not the same as religious conversion. Alternation, which stems from Berger’s (1963) concept of social mobility, suggests that people in the modern era are influenced by a great number of competing belief systems and that they adjust their identity to fit different roles based on the relevance of that belief system (Zehnder 2011). Assuming a religious persona to go to church with one’s family and later adopting a nonreligious persona with secular friends (i.e., alternation), is not to be confused with a pervasive shift in one’s identity that remains constant across social roles (i.e., conversion; Travisano 1970). Religious changes, such as institution transition and intensification (Rambo 1993), might be considered religious conversion in some instances but not others, depending on the degree of breakdown of old identity and reformulation of new identity (Travisano 1970; Zehnder 2011). It is not always necessary that the religious system to which one is converting is of a totally new tradition but rather that its sacred beliefs might move from the periphery of one’s life to its center (Snow and Machalek 1983). In this way, one converts by transforming one’s consciousness—transitioning from “nominal belief to True Belief” (Snow and Machalek 1983, p. 279).

Religious conversion does contain several components that are generally agreed upon by which we might gain clearer definitional understanding. What is perhaps most consistent across conversion research is that conversion involves a radical change to the individual’s consciousness by way of the self and identity (Machalek and Snow 1993). This radical,

quantum change (Miller and C'deBaca 1994) is akin to a Kuhnian paradigm shift, in which converts' entire universe of discourse (Mead 1962), or the way they orient themselves in and understand the world changes (Heirich 1977; Snow and Machalek 1984; Travisano 1970). This results in changes both to the way converts view and tell their life stories (i.e., biographical reconstruction) and—therefore—to the way they make attributions regarding life events (Kirkpatrick and Shaver 1990; Proudfoot and Shaver 1975; Snow and Machalek 1984). Another consistently agreed upon element of religious conversion is that it has perceptible effects on the outcomes of converts' lives (Zinnbauer and Pargament 1998). Such outcomes include changes in their mental health and well-being (which, typically, are positive), changes in converts' behavior, and changes in converts' social contexts and social group memberships (Paloutzian 1981; Zinnbauer and Pargament 1998). An additional common thread in conversion research is that a period of stress or crisis often (in an estimated 80% of cases) precipitates conversion (Heirich 1977; Rambo 1993; Ullman 1989). Although definitions of religious conversion are multifaceted and lack full academic consensus, researchers across disciplines, paradigms, religious perspectives, and theoretical orientations tend to agree that the aforementioned components are part of religious conversion.

## Recurring components of conversion theories and associated debate

In this paper, we extract recurring components of conversion from the relevant literature that have been sources of explanation, interest, and debate in the study of religious conversion. The following components, then, are consistently used to explain variance in the wide array of conversion experiences and to characterize the study of conversion. Namely, (a) the level of analysis at which conversion is studied (macro, micro, and meso level); (b) converts' level of agency (active vs. passive) and the social character of their conversion (intra-individual vs. inter-individual; Kilbourne and Richardson 1989); (c) the temporal framework of conversion (sudden event vs. process), the role of crisis, the longevity of conversion's consequences and outcomes (temporary vs. permanent), (d) the role of emotion and rationality; (e) the role of religion (e.g., whether religious explanations of conversion hold unique explanatory value); and (f) the role of the self and identity. The following sections describe these components and related issues in the context of extant theory.

## Ecological level of analysis

Conversion can be studied within multiple contextual levels of analysis (Kleinmann 2018). Accounting for conversion across ecological levels engenders a more accurate conceptualization of conversion paths—across individual, community, and societal contexts—than could be had via a single level of analysis (Bronfenbrenner 1977). Rambo refers to these ecological layers as “contours of context” (1993, p. 22). Theories can be oriented at the micro, macro, and meso levels of systems of process and analysis.

Theories at the micro level of analysis focus on factors that influence converts at the personal level. This includes personality traits, thinking styles, and subjective experiences that affect whether an individual might convert (Gooren 2007). Micro-level theories—the best known being Lofland and Stark's world-saver model (1965)—discuss the immediate settings in which converts experience their daily lives, such as their homes, families, places of worship,

schools, peer groups, and work environments (Bronfenbrenner 1977). Micro-level theories also tend to stress that the individual psychology of converts drives their conversion process. Converts' innate personality traits, such as level of neuroticism, openness, or need for cognitive closure, and their psychological development, such as their childhood, relationships with their parents or other socialization processes, may all influence their conversion path (Williamson and Hood 2012). Other micro-level theories conceive of converts in a more active role, discussing the influence of personal psychological processes such as identity negotiation, meaning-seeking, and self-change in the conversion process.

In micro-level theories of identity change, religious conversion is considered a radical change in the fundamental identity of an individual that results in a new construal of the self (Pargament 1997; Travisano 1970; Zinnbauer and Pargament 1998). The locus of change is within the self. As such, converts' old selves are transformed to those rooted in new religious beliefs (Travisano 1970). Converts orient themselves to the world and to others using this new focal point in their compass. Conversion satisfies the need for a positive and concrete identity through which one can understand life and build a consistent worldview (Rambo 1999). Macro-level factors, such as the "urbanization, modernization, secularization, and the resulting pluralization" (Rambo 1999, p. 265) of our society, produce the micro-level effect of leaving individuals feeling as though they have no true identity, and as a result they may seek one in religion.

Another group of theories that address conversion at the micro level have to do with the direct experiences of the individual and their interpretations of those experiences—the phenomenological and narrative approaches. As James describes in great detail in his book *The Varieties of Religious Experiences* (1902/1985) using the conversion experiences of Tolstoy, Bunyan, Edwards, and others as examples, a person's subjective, sensory experiences of religious change provide valuable data. In several well-documented cases of conversion, Wynn (2012) explains, conversion is marked by major changes in subjective sensory and hedonic perceptions. That is, converts describe phenomena such as feeling lighter, seeing more clearly (in a literal visual sense), and sensing that the world has gone from "flat" to "full of life" (Wynn 2012). Other scholars have contended that it is important to take into account the phenomenology of the interpersonal communication that facilitates conversion (Kellett 1993). That is, converts experience religious communications subjectively, and the meaning conveyed depends on the personal characteristics and spiritual development of the convert at that time. Similarly, narrative approaches to conversion suggest that converts' new identities will directly influence their narratives of their conversion experiences (Jindra 2014). Narrative reconstructions of conversion, and the events that both precede and follow the conversion, are constructed in light of the convert's subjective psychosocial experiences as a new believer.

Although individual-level theories are useful to the study of religious conversion, they only offer insight into person-specific processes and variance in intra-individual psychology. This is helpful but not comprehensive. Consequently, micro-level theories can be overly simplistic and overly deterministic in their reliance on traits as drivers of conversion rather than focusing on the process of conversion.

Macro-level theories focus on the local and global cultures in which a person lives (Bronfenbrenner 1977). This includes the temporal or cohort effects individuals may experience and the patterns of one's life course (what Bronfenbrenner refers to as the *chronosystem*). The macro level includes institutions, such as the overall influence that systems of government, economy, education, and religion may impress upon an individual. Factors such as socioeconomic status, ethnicity, poverty, and level of development in one's nation or region are also accounted for at this level (Bronfenbrenner 1977). Macro-level theories of conversion

address how “entire cultures and societies” (Kleinmann 2018, p. 8) impact the identities and belief systems of potential converts.

Examples of theories at the macro level of analysis include relative deprivation theory, globalization theory, colonization theory, and intellectualist theory (Rambo 1999). Relative deprivation theory was a popular explanation among early conversion scholars for why individuals might adopt new religious beliefs. This theory suggests that people who are deprived of economic and social resources relative to their societal peers seek meaning and advancement through religious conversion (Dawson 2009; Glock 1973). Relative deprivation is not necessarily a state of *actually* having less than one’s peers. Instead, it occurs when people *perceive* that they are receiving less than what they ought to relative to their peers (Dawson 2009; Glock 1973). As a result, relatively deprived individuals seek to change their circumstances by either joining or creating a group (sometimes a religious one) that offers the benefits they believe they deserve, such as social belonging or a sense of purpose.

Globalization theory is the idea that religious changes are facilitated by the speed and ease with which people can globally communicate and travel (Rambo 1999). The expansion of communication and mobilization to its current global scale allows religious groups to gain audience with potential followers anywhere in the world. The Internet, in particular, has revolutionized the manner in which information is transmitted and received. Such technology makes it possible, like never before, for people to access and learn about a religious group’s beliefs, contact group members, and (if protocol permits) join religious groups. Mass communication has also magnified the worldwide religious market, making it possible for thousands or more of individuals to receive the same message at one time (Rambo 1999).

En route to establishing a global community, centuries of colonization introduced many cultures to each other that would not have otherwise had contact. Colonization theory, which Rambo calls post-colonial theory, discusses how colonization in Africa, Asia, and the Americas resulted in the conversions of thousands of indigenous peoples to major world religions, particularly Christianity (Rambo 1999). The dominating and oppressive presence of a new cultural, military, and economic power among indigenous societies resulted in mass conversions as well as the generation of hybridized, “syncretic” religions (Rambo 1999). These religions, such as Haitian voodoo or Mexican Catholicism, combine aspects of indigenous religions with Christianity to produce innovative belief systems.

Intellectualist theory helps to explain the rationale behind the conversions of many colonized indigenous groups. Robin Horton (1971) maintains that human beings seek to understand and control their social, cultural, and physical environments. In Africa, many indigenous groups lived in tribal societies with relatively small spheres of interest and low control of daily life, which Horton (1971) calls microcosms. As such, the religious beliefs of these groups addressed understanding and control of their microcosms, which differed little from their overall view of reality, which Horton calls macrocosms (Rambo 1999). When previously unknown people from the wider world (Europeans and Arabs) entered indigenous microcosms by means of colonization, “Africans sought to expand their myths, rituals, and symbols. ... to make sense of the new situation and wider social, cultural world” (Rambo 1999: 265). Thus, indigenous Africans expanded their macrocosms through their religious system, usually converting either to Christianity or Islam (Kleinmann 2018; Rambo 1999). Although intellectualist theory is scaled specifically for colonial conversion in Africa, its tenets apply to the wider macro-level study of conversion.

The following three macro-level perspectives challenge the manner in which conversion studies are conducted: religious theories, feminist theories, and cross-cultural theories. The first of these



critical perspectives comes from religious and spiritual theories of conversion. Historically, social scientists have “almost without exception, neglect[ed], trivialized[d], or totally reject[ed] the role of religion or spirituality in their theories of conversion” (Rambo 1999, p. 264; see also Scroggs and Douglas 1967). Although the role of religion in conversion is not easy to study empirically, ignoring religion in *religious* conversion is both ironic and scientifically imprudent. The effects of religion are, of course, pervasive throughout the conversion process, and Rambo (1993) maintains that religion makes unique contributions to conversion that cannot otherwise be understood. One piece of evidence in support of that notion is that religious conversions differ between religious groups just as conversions differ between individuals. That is not to say that fundamental principles of conversion that are shared across religions do not exist but—rather—that religion is also a variable worthy of study. Each religion has theological explanations of conversion unique to its traditions and beliefs. For instance, religious traditions have various criteria for what is and what is not a valid or good conversion (Rambo 1993). Consequently, the nature of a person’s conversion is at least somewhat shaped by the religion to which they are converting (Rambo 1993).

Feminist theories argue that female perspectives on religious conversion have been historically overlooked throughout centuries of patriarchal norms in social science and broader culture (Rambo 1999). Gender differences are likely to exist for some aspects of conversion and not others, but little research has been done in this area (Rambo 1999). For instance, women may be differently motivated than men to convert, may convert under different circumstances than men, or may convert more frequently than men in certain types of conversion. Some studies suggest that affectional (i.e., emotional and relational) conversions are more common among women than men (Köse and Loewenthal 2000; Mehmedoğlu and Kim 2002), although these findings may be specific to Islam. In general, the feminist theoretical perspective on the psychology of conversion should, and likely will, be further developed in coming years.

Conversion can be approached from a number of cultural standpoints, and like gender, the culture in which a conversion develops is likely to impact its nature substantially. Religious conversion studies have largely been developed within the academic disciplines of Western Europe and the United States; few studies or theories have been developed outside of this context (Rambo 1999). Some notable exceptions include the work of Alan Roland (1991, 1996), which explored how religious conversion takes place in cultures outside of European and American heritages. His work emphasized that self-change in conversion takes place in the individual self in Western cultures, such as the United States, and in the family self in Eastern cultures, such as India and Japan (Roland 1991). This builds on the work of other cross-cultural psychologists who argue that Western processes of growth and change tend to be relatively linear, rational, and analytical in their approach such that the self is construed as an independent individual (Markus and Kitayama 1991). In contrast, East Asian growth and change processes tend to be conceptualized as holistic and balanced and construe the self as interdependent with family and cultural ties. For example, group and family conversion is more common in East Asian cultures, whereas—in the West—individual conversion is the norm (Rambo 1999; Roland 1991, 1996).

Although both micro- and macro-level theories bring important elements to understanding conversion, both are unfit to analyze and explain conversion alone. As Kleinmann explains, “If structural forces, such as social and economic deprivation, globalisation and colonisation cause religious conversion, we should expect that everyone exposed to those experiences would convert. Yet, it is obvious that some people and groups do not convert when faced with

poverty, imperialism, missionaries, or globalism” (Kleinmann 2018, p. 10). The same notion, of course, applies to the micro-level theories. Not everyone who experiences difficulties in establishing a concrete and consistent self-identity will be a religious convert.

Meso-level theories help to span the gap between individual psychological factors and sociocultural norms by examining the patterns of interactions between micro- and macro-level conversion factors. Meso-level theories focus on how the individual convert interacts with their environment and how each affects the other (Lewin 1936). One useful example of a meso-level factor from developmental psychology is the effect a parent’s work may have on a child’s well-being (Bronfenbrenner 1977). Although a parent’s work is outside the child’s own psychology or immediate context, it may come to affect the child’s psychology; likewise, the child’s psychological health may affect the parent’s work. Importantly, meso-level theories are able to give deeper and more complex understandings of how and why individuals convert by accounting for the process of conversion. As such, meso-level theories of conversion tend to be based on models of process and/or stages (see Rambo 1993).

## Role of converts: Agency and social integration

Kilbourne and Richardson (1989) developed a system for categorizing theories and types of conversion based on two dimensions: *agency assigned to converts* and what they call “levels of analysis,” which we shall hereafter refer to as *social integration*. The first dimension, agency, refers to the role converts takes in their own conversion. Whether converts’ roles in conversion tend to be relatively more active versus passive has been debated since the rise of the contemporary paradigm (Richardson 1985). In the contemporary paradigm of conversion theories, converts are conceptualized as self-directed participants in their conversion, actively seeking meaning in religious beliefs, experimenting with new belief systems, interacting with group members, and exercising personal choice in religious decisions. Conversely, for many years the traditional paradigm conceptualized converts as passive recipients involuntarily acted upon by social and/or supernatural forces (Richardson 1985; Scroggs and Douglas 1967).

The second dimension in this system is the level of social integration, which describes whether the primary drivers of conversion are internal psychological factors or external social factors. Conversion can take place at an intra-individual level, where factors leading to and through the conversion process are within the individual, such as their beliefs, personality traits, and cognitive styles (Kilbourne and Richardson 1989). Conversion can also take place at an inter-individual level, where converts’ interactions with other individuals in their social environment, including group pressures, peer relationships, social networks, and perceived social roles fuel the conversion process (Kilbourne and Richardson 1989). Although both intra-individual and inter-individual factors are present in conversion, as mentioned, there is considerable debate as to which is the more powerful driver of conversion.

Using convert agency and social integration as organizing criteria, Kilbourne and Richardson (1989) categorize theories of religious conversion within a quadrant along those dimensions. The first quadrant describes conversion theories whereby converts have relatively active agency and where conversion is intra-individual (low social integration). Kilbourne and Richardson (1989) refer to such theories as belonging to a *humanistic* metatheoretical family. For example, Lofland and Skonovd’s (1981) intellectual conversion motif, theories of “self-conversion,” and Straus’s (1976) construct of “seekerhood” (i.e., a conversion process characterized by experimentation and intellectual curiosity) are part of this group. Humanistic



theories focus on the uniqueness of the individual, the validity of their personal, subjective experiences, and the volitional nature of conversion. Converts are conceived of as seeking information on new religious options and deciding to convert to a new faith, without external motivation or intensive social interaction (Kilbourne and Richardson 1989). Intellectual conversion is often called self-conversion for that reason (Lofland and Skonovd 1981). In Straus's (1976, 1979) "seekerhood" model, individuals create their own transformations as they search for meaning (Kilbourne and Richardson 1989; Richardson 1985). Within these conceptions, changes tend to occur relatively independent of interference or influence from other individuals, groups, or sociocultural factors.

A second metatheoretical family of conversion that Kilbourne and Richardson (1989) describe is *psychological determinism*. In this group of theories, converts are conceived of as passive, and conversion factors tend to be intra-individual (Kilbourne and Richardson 1989). The classic example of Saint Paul's conversion exemplifies psychological determinism; Paul was a passive recipient of conversion, and changes take place within Paul's own mind without the input of social forces. From this viewpoint, individuals are driven to convert to a new religion by "an internal state or condition" (Kilbourne and Richardson 1989, p. 9) that requires psychological resolution. Human drives—including needs for cognitive structure, spiritual and mental balance, emotional satisfaction, and resolution of unsettled psychological conflict and stress—are at the core of most models of psychological determinism. For this reason, Freudian conceptualizations of conversion, and of religious belief more generally, would fall into this category since Freud and his followers held religious seeking as a means to mitigate psychological trauma from one's parental relationships (Freud 1928; Ullman 1989). Such theories explain how powerful, internal psychological forces can thrust an individual into a new faith (Kilbourne and Richardson 1989).

The *interactionist* theoretical family incorporates active convert agency with inter-individual social interaction. These theories account for the social contexts individuals experience as they search for meaning and progress through conversion (Kilbourne and Richardson 1989). A number of theories fall into the interactionist perspective of conversion, including role theory, social drift theory, and Lofland and Skonovd's (1981) experimental conversion motif. Each of these theories deals with the potential convert navigating, negotiating, and constructing their identity across social roles and environments. In this process, substantial interaction takes place between the individual's traits and the social milieu of the religious group of interest (Kilbourne and Richardson 1989). The experimental conversion motif asserts that individuals actively seek meaning in new religions but begin their journey not with faith but by trying on the roles, practices, and rituals that take place within a given religious group setting before they commit to the group's beliefs (Kilbourne and Richardson 1989; Lofland and Skonovd 1981; Rambo 1993). Similarly, role theories of conversion hold that individuals radically change their identities, first by interacting heavily with group members in social settings and learning about their new roles, then by establishing a commitment to the faith (Balch and Taylor 1977; Bromley and Shupe 1979; Kilbourne and Richardson 1989).

For example, Balch and Taylor (1977) conducted studies examining the structure of a UFO cult, including its appeal to outsiders and the incorporation of new members. They found that potential converts inevitably thought of themselves as "seekers" who wanted to learn the truths of the universe from the group's charismatic leaders and did so through social interaction with the group (Balch and Taylor 1977). Other forms of experimental conversion that fall into the active, intra-individual family are described by Richardson's (1978) conversion "careers" and Straus's (1976) similar concept of seekerhood (Kilbourne and Richardson 1989). These

become inter-individual when converts seeks group contact and group experiences as a means to experimentation and subsequent involvement.

Long and Hadden's (1983) social drift theory of conversion focuses on how individuals gradually "drift" into new beliefs based on their recurring choices in social settings and situational contexts. In this theory, individuals respond to life pressures and stress by constructing a social identity rooted in their role as a potential convert. Social relationships acquired in conversion help to mitigate strain, resulting in a gradual conversion brought about by converts' desire to return repeatedly to social bonds in the new religious group (Long and Hadden 1983).

Theories of *social-environmental determinism* lie at the intersection of a passive convert and intra-individual factors of conversion. These theories align with the traditional paradigm in that they maintain that converts' search for meaning is not a primary driver of their conversion and that converts are not actively choosing to convert. Instead, conversion is attributed to powerful forces in converts' social environments and social psychological processes (Kilbourne and Richardson 1989). Lofland and Stark's (1965) world-saver model serves as an archetype for this theoretical family. Lofland and Stark's (1965) world-saver model is among the most influential, empirically tested (though not always successfully), and widely cited models of conversion (Kox et al. 1991; Snow and Phillips 1980), although it has been criticized for its linearity and overemphasis on social bonds (Gooren 2007; Rambo 1993). Lofland and Stark's additive, funneling model posits that converts first experience *tension*, which causes those who have a *problem-solving perspective* to seek solutions. Some seek solutions in religion and thereby become *religious seekers*. If these religious seekers are at a *turning point* in their lives, then they are open to new religious opportunities. If such individuals create *cult affective bonds* (the original context of this model is cult conversion) in a potential new religion that outweigh their *extra-cult affective bonds* then they are likely to make initial conversion. *Intensive interactions* with the group will produce total conversion, solidifying the convert's commitment to the group and its beliefs. Although it is beyond the scope of this paper to give a more full review of the world-saver model, the linchpin of whether or not a person converts is whether or not their social bonds within the new faith group outweigh their social bonds outside of the new faith group. That is, assuming the previous conditions of the model have been met (i.e., tension, problem-solving perspective, etc.), if a person is more socially invested in their new faith than outside it, then they will convert. Thus, this model is socially and environmentally deterministic.

Lofland and Skonovd's (1981) revivalist and coercive conversion motifs are also a part of this metatheoretical family, as are conversion theories of relative deprivation and socialization. In the revivalist conversion motif, conversion takes place when highly arousing and emotional social environments overwhelm converts emotionally and psychologically (Lofland and Skonovd 1981). The individual loses their sense of identity amid intense group-level identity, emotions, and actions (Kilbourne and Richardson 1989). Coercive conversions, such as "brainwashing," take place under circumstances in which converts are exposed to extreme social pressure to convert, with fear as a primary affective motivator for conversion (Campbell 1972; Lofland and Skonovd 1981). The individual's social and emotional identity is broken down, which allows for submission to group beliefs and the adoption of a new identity (Kilbourne and Richardson 1989). Theories of relative deprivation (Glock 1973) hold that when individuals experience or perceive a lack of social resources, such as a lack of financial capital, power, status, or existential meaning, they will join a social group—which can include religious groups—to attain them (Kilbourne and Richardson 1989).

Theories of socialization hold that converts are not wholly active in their degree of agency because they did not choose to become a part of the group social system. Socialization (Toch 1965) describes the process by which individuals are indoctrinated at a young age to accept and believe the structure and beliefs of a religious group. From this perspective, as individuals age, they may grow away or separate from their childhood faith, but the desire for a similar belief structure will remain in their social psychological preferences. This desire is activated if the individual encounters other adults who are part of a religious group that shares the same religious beliefs learned as a child. In this case, the individual will likely convert to that religious group via intensification or re-affiliation (Kilbourne and Richardson 1989; Toch 1965). If the individual does not find social support for their childhood beliefs, they may “oversocialize” and convert to a group that shares some similarity with their childhood religious system but deviates in significant ways (Kilbourne and Richardson 1989; Toch 1965). In sum, the active versus passive role of converts and the level of social integration of their conversion experience are helpful in understanding the multitude of theories concerning why and how individuals convert.

## Additional components of conversion

In explaining level of analysis, agency of the convert, and social integration, this paper has already discussed many theories of religious conversion. Yet there are still other important components of conversion that merit discussion: the temporal framework of conversion, role of crisis, permanence of consequences, level of emotionality, role of religion, and role of the self and identity.

### Temporal framework

As discussed, theories in the traditional paradigm of conversion tend to characterize conversion as a sudden event, whereas most contemporary theories consider conversion to be a multifaceted process that can take place over a long temporal scale (Gooren 2007; Lofland and Stark 1965; Richardson 1985). Some conversions appear to have a very short temporal duration, but generally researchers tend to view conversion as a gradual process (Lofland and Stark 1965; Rambo 1993, 1999; Richardson 1985). Part of the logic behind a process-oriented perspective is that—even when the act of psychological commitment is very sudden or when it is very quickly followed by official commitment (e.g., baptism or the shahada)—ongoing processes facilitating conversion have been at work for much longer than the event per se (Rambo 1993, 1999).

For instance, converts may not attribute their conversion to their years of searching for meaning that took place prior to conversion. Nevertheless, converts’ relationships, upbringing, work environment, and ideologies often inform their decisions to convert, and other such contextual factors have, of course, been present throughout the converts’ lifespan (Rambo 1993, 1999). Although current models do not deny that parts of the conversion process, namely, the “aha” moments of clarity and psychological or official commitment, can take place in only minutes, they maintain that such singular events do not encompass the entirety of a conversion experience.

## Role of crisis

The idea that personal and social strain can result in the breakdown of an individual's identity and meaning system and that such breakdowns leads some to seek out a new faith is at the core of many theories of conversion (Halama 2015; Rambo 1993). Data from Ullman (1989) suggests that, in 80% of conversions, crisis is one of the major factors that pushes people toward conversion. Early researchers, like James, identified the "sick soul. .. steeped in existential angst" (Scroggs and Douglas 1967, p. 209) as more likely to convert, and some researchers have uncovered what may be physiological evidence that periods of extreme stress precede conversion (Sargant 1951). Heirich (1977, p. 674), concludes that when a person's "root reality" becomes inadequate in coping with life's questions and stressors, a crisis will ensue that leads people to seek new beliefs and identities (though not necessarily religious ones). Crisis also is an essential component in Rambo's (1993, 1999) model of conversion, which asserts that crises force people to assess the limitations of their current beliefs, which leads them on a quest for new beliefs. In applied research, crisis has played a critical role in conversion. Williamson and Hood (2012, 2016) remark that in their sample of people with substance addiction, most came "to a point of desperation" or to "the 'end of the rope'" (2012, p. 615) and that this left them open to Pentecostal conversion. In their study, the spiritual void that participants once filled with substance use is filled instead with Pentecostal beliefs and practices, which have more sustainable, positive, and functional outcomes than substance use.

Other scholars have focused on tension as the precursor to crisis, whereby frustration with one's identity or beliefs builds toward a breaking point (i.e., a crisis). Subsequently, the person must make a life change to reduce or eliminate the tension; in the case of converts, this change is a religious one. James (1902/1985) emphasized that religious changes often come as a result of periods of significant tension, which can involve spiritual, emotional, and intellectual discomfort (Gooren 2007). The experience of enduring and acute tension is the critical first step in Lofland and Stark's world-saver (1965) model of conversion. According to Pargament (1997), individuals cope with the dissonance and uneasiness that crisis produces by converting and incorporating "sacred" beliefs into their identity (Halama 2015). Similar to crisis, Iyadurai (2011, p. 509) uses the term "crunch," which "refers to a difficult situation. .. within one's self that no explanation could be found to address" that takes place prior to conversion.

Theories that rely heavily on crisis to explain conversion have been criticized as being overly deterministic (Gooren 2007). Nevertheless, research has supported that crisis, stress, and tension are strong predictors of conversion. However, not all who undergo crises become religious converts (Heirich 1977), and thus crisis does not necessarily lead to religious conversion.

## Permanence of consequences

Religious conversion can have a wide variety of consequences for converts (see Rambo 1993). These include changes in mental health, social and cultural networks, and other behavioral outcomes as consequences (Pargament 1997; Rambo 1993; Ullman (1989), Williamson and Hood 2012; Zinnbauer and Pargament 1998), but how permanent are these changes? Views regarding how long the consequences of religious conversion last differ among theoretical orientations. Some theories postulate that conversion and its consequences for the individual are permanent, and others suggest that they are short-term and that beliefs must be continually refreshed or renewed in order to maintain changes resulting from initial affiliation (Rambo 1993).

In early understandings of conversion, consequences are viewed as static (James 1902/1985; Richardson 1985; Paloutzian et al. 1999). That is, once conversion has taken place, the individual tends to be changed irrevocably, such that consequences of conversion will not, indeed cannot, abate (Hall 1904). Some contemporary theories also maintain that consequences of conversion are relatively permanent. For example, theories that hold conversion to be a radical change to one's identity through a new "universe of discourse" (Mead 1962) state that one's life perspective is totally shifted, implying that change, at such a fundamental level, is not likely to fade quickly (Heirich 1977; Travisano 1970). Researchers have produced some empirical evidence that the consequences of conversion and spiritual transformations are relatively permanent, persisting in meaningful ways long after religious change (Williamson and Hood 2012; 2016). In their exploration of a Pentecostal faith-based substance abuse treatment program, Williamson and Hood (2012) found that changes in religiousness, personality, and substance use remained largely the same a year after participants had undergone spiritual transformation. The study also provided evidence that the permanence and valence of conversion's consequences are dependent on whether one is intrinsically or extrinsically oriented (Allport and Ross 1967) toward one's religion, such that intrinsically oriented participants had longer-lasting and more positive outcomes (Williamson and Hood 2012).

In contrast, other theories, such as theories of seekerhood (Straus 1976) and conversion careers, place a greater emphasis on experimentation and intellectual curiosity in the process of conversion (Richardson 1978). From such perspectives, converts' subjective search for truth may lead them back out of a religious group just as easily it led them in. Social views of conversion, too, such as Lofland and Skonovd's affectional motif, have implications for the permanence of conversion and its consequences (Downton Jr 1980; Lofland and Skonovd 1981; Lofland and Stark 1965). Specifically, if an individual converted to meet social pressure or gain social support, and later the social pressure or social support is removed, it is unlikely the consequences of their conversion will persist. Similarly, for some converts, the individual's new religious beliefs will only be sustained, or grow, if they have repeated experiences of commitment (Rambo 1993). Such conversions are not once-and-for-all events but are part of a chain of continual spiritual renewals or rebirths. Such a perspective implies that a conversion is never truly "complete."

Although there are multiple perspectives on the permanence of conversion and its consequences, what is clear is that not all conversions are the same in these dimensions. In many cases, conversion and its effects are permanent, but in others, the individual and/or their religious group must continually renew the commitment or the conversion's effects may be lost over time.

## Emotionality

Intense emotions are frequently associated with lay perceptions of religious conversion, but research in this area tends to point to a spectrum of affective involvement. Some theories claim that shifts in converts' emotional states are heavily involved in the conversion process, whereas others claim that conversion is a rational process during which potential converts carefully weigh costs and benefits of conversion before making a decision (Gartrell and Shannon 1985; Gooren 2007). Most theories of rational choice do not ignore emotion altogether but view emotional benefits as part of the expected rewards of conversion, rejecting the idea that conversion is primarily a result of overwhelming emotional experiences.

Conversion often provides the expectation or actual experience of emotional benefits, which is one of the primary reasons people seek conversion (Rambo 1993). Many converts report that they feel relief from guilt, gratification from acquiring a congruent worldview, a sense of peace and well-being, or elation and excitement (Rambo 1993). Although few psychologists who study religion would argue that there are no emotional elements at play in most cases of conversion, some researchers have placed emotional arousal at the center of the conversion process. Early conversion scholars framed conversion as a dramatic and highly emotional surrender to higher forces that overwhelm rationality (Hall 1904; Hastings 2010; James 1902/1985; Richardson 1985; Starbuck 1897). This perspective has permeated some contemporary theories of conversion. Lofland and Skonovd's (1981) revivalist conception of conversion is reliant on the high-energy and high-emotion settings of religious revivals, during which the potential convert is so swept up in the irresistible group emotion that they seek membership themselves. Converts also seek fulfilment of emotional needs for love and approval through emotional bonds to spiritual figures like God or social networks within religious groups (Lofland and Stark 1965).

Other theories suggest that emotional release, inspiration, or validation are not mechanisms in the process of conversion, but—as mentioned—are actually part of a larger system of cost-benefit analysis that converts use to seek cognitive balance (Gartrell and Shannon 1985; Pitt 1991). In this case, the mechanism of conversion is a rational choice based on whether a potential convert believes they will gain greater social and cognitive outcomes from converting than from not converting (Gartrell and Shannon 1985). Such outcomes can include emotional benefits, but they are not the basis of the conversion decision per se.

### Role of religion

The role of religion in conversion is another topic of debate. Put simply, most social scientific research in religion has, ironically, dismissed religion (Hill and Pargament 2003; Rambo 1993; Scroggs and Douglas 1967). In an effort to be empirical and unbiased, and to assert testable theories and hypotheses, many scholars hold that any supposed influence of religion as a unique and valid contributor to phenomena of conversion can be accounted for by psychological and sociological factors (Rambo 1993). The sacred and supernatural elements of religion are not readily observable, which makes them difficult to incorporate into scientific study. Additionally, the scientific consideration of religion may challenge scholars' own worldviews, which could be a source of discomfort that some academics would prefer to avoid (Rambo 1993). However, ignoring the role of religion altogether is as scientifically irresponsible as ignoring social, political, or cultural influences on human thought, emotion, and behavior.

Although such influences are difficult to quantify and measure, they are essential to the context of conversion insofar as religion contributes its own unique variance to conversion that cannot be explained by other factors (James 1902/1985; Rambo 1993). The religion in which a potential convert is interested helps shape the path of the conversion process, and from a phenomenological perspective, religion itself should not be overlooked (Rambo 1993). Religious belief systems, rituals, practices, and social networks vary greatly between religious traditions, and such variations interact with the potential convert's personality, goals, and involvement behaviors. For example, potential converts who seek an intellectual basis for their religious meaning system are more likely to be drawn to a religious tradition that places strong emphasis on the rationality or logic in its beliefs. To reiterate, if religious conversion is the



process by which individuals align themselves with purpose, meaning, and identity by connection with the sacred (Pargament 1997; Zinnbauer and Pargament 1998), it seems unwise to overlook the factor of religion. Scholars of conversion will be more accurate in their assessments if they take account of religion, which requires only their respect, not their belief (Garrett 1974; Rambo 1993).

### Role of self and identity

Finally, some theories rely heavily on the role of the self, or of personal identity, including how identities are constructed in one's own conversion story (Snow and Machalek 1984). From such perspectives, an individual's conversion is considered a major shift in their self-identity. Many researchers have suggested that such changes in self-identity are most likely to occur during the "storm and stress" of adolescence (Hall 1904), although others have contended that conversion requires a level of personal awareness and maturity that comes only in adulthood (see Scroggs and Douglas 1967). A fundamental change occurs in the way converts orient themselves in, and understand, the world (Travisano 1970), sometimes called a "root reality" (Heirich 1977) or "universe of discourse" (Mead 1962). Conversion is seen as a means to transform how individuals think and feel about themselves, perhaps to reveal their "real" or "true" self that did not come into being until they made their conversion transformation (Gooren 2007; Staples and Mauss 1987). Snow and Machalek (1983, 1984) discuss the prevalence of converts' descriptions of their preconversion identities as mistaken, saying that these old identities and behaviors are now invalid in the light of their new identities in their adopted religion. Concomitantly, converts tend to change their view of their biographical life story and their attribution schemes to match their new identity (Snow and Machalek 1983, 1984). According to such theories, the cause of conversion is a "spoiled identity" (Greil 1977), which can occur when social or intellectual tension or crisis breaks down a convert's previous identity and associated meaning system such that it is no longer satisfying, or viable, for them. Consequently, conversion remedies this state of broken or spoiled identity by allowing the individual to reformulate their identity in terms of the sacred (Pargament 1997; Travisano 1970; Zinnbauer and Pargament 2005). This destruction of one's former self and identity and reconstruction of a self and identity that is centered upon sacred elements of a new religion are essential to this conceptualization of conversion.

### Conclusion

With so many social and psychological dimensions as influencers, it is clear that conversion is a complex phenomenon, not explainable through a single perspective. To use one factor of conversion (the temporal framework) as an example, some religious conversions occur "overnight" whereas others take decades to come to fruition. Nevertheless, both are instances of conversion, and theories must be able to explain why and how the individual converted in both situations.

As a complex human phenomenon, the psychological and sociological processes of religious conversion encompass a host of descriptions, perspectives, and theories. What we know about conversion is that it is a *process of change* that incorporates the *sacred* into the very core of individuals' *identities, worldviews, and orientation* both to their own existence and to that of the world outside themselves. The process of conversion varies widely based on

personal qualities, family environment, and social, societal, religious, cultural, and historical contexts and the interactions among these factors. Although there remains virtually limitless opportunities for further research on the psychology of religious conversion, as this review has highlighted, scholars have made significant strides in understanding why, how, and to what ends individuals choose to transition to new faiths. We hope that our enumeration of some of the components that are commonly discussed in the study of conversion will better equip researchers to accurately measure and understand the rich variation in conversion.

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