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## Sacred Changes: Spiritual Conversion and Transformation

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We use Pargament's (1997) definition of religion—"the search for significance in ways related to the sacred"—as a framework to understand spiritual conversion. Like other life-changing transformations, spiritual conversion alters the destinations that clients perceive to be of greatest importance in life (significance) and the pathways by which clients discover what is most significant in life (search). Unlike other transformative experiences, however, spiritual conversion incorporates the third element of religion, "the sacred," into the content of change. To illustrate these points, we discuss two theological models of spiritual conversion rooted in Christianity: a traditional model based on classic western theology and an alternative model based on feminist theology. We then compare processes of spiritual conversion to nonreligious models of transformation. We also highlight the importance for clinical work of the fit between the context of a client's life and the type of spiritual conversion experienced. © 2004 Wiley Periodicals, Inc. *J Clin Psychol/In Session* 60: 481-492, 2004.

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Only recently have psychologists turned their attention to the possibility of dramatic change in peoples' lives, but religious traditions have long acknowledged the human potential for transformation via the process of conversion. Spiritual conversion represents an important process that has significant implications for clinical practice. However, spiritual conversion is not monolithic. In this article, we discuss important differences in the nature of spiritual conversion depending on the content of the experience. We illustrate this by comparing two models of spiritual conversion that have been well articulated within Christianity, a traditional model and an alternative feminist model. The traditional perspective emphasizes that the cardinal feature of spiritual conversion is turning away from an excessively prideful self as the core source of significance and

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instead placing God at the center of one's life. In contrast, Christian feminist theology highlights a type of spiritual conversion in which excessive reliance on relationships with others to derive a sense of significance (self-negation) is rejected and a sense of self is enhanced via a greater union with God. We discuss the clinical implications of these two types of spiritual conversion and how various processes of spiritual conversion compare to nonreligious models of change.

Before proceeding, it is important to recognize that spiritual conversion falls under the rubric of "religious conversion," a broader topic that encompasses a wide range of cultural, social, theological, and psychological issues (Malony & Southard, 1992; Rambo, 1993). Most scientific studies on religious conversion have been produced by anthropologists and sociologists and focus heavily on changes in religious group membership (Paloutzian, Richardson, & Rambo, 1999). In contrast, we focus here on the interior world of religious conversion, namely spiritual conversion. Our discussion deals primarily with phenomenological issues rather than peoples' exploration or adoption of a particular religious group. Despite the fact that the early founders of religion and psychology were fascinated by spiritual conversion (e.g., James, 1902/1961), this subcategory of religious conversion has received relatively little scrutiny by scientists and mental-health practitioners.

#### Spiritual Conversion: Definitions and Framework

Pargament's definition (1997, p. 32) of religion—"a search for significance in ways related to the sacred"—is deceptively simple. Each element deserves elaboration. The "significance" component refers to whatever people construe as most important in their lives, whether these destinations be psychological, social, physical, or spiritual in nature. The "search" component of religion refers to the means or pathways that individuals use to achieve their chosen ends. However, not every search for a desired destination is religious in nature. Rather, the sphere of religion is unique because it incorporates perceptions of the sacred into either the means and/or the ends of a person's life journey. The "sacred" component of religion refers to concepts of God, the divine, the supernatural, the metaphysical, and the transcendent (Pargament & Mahoney, 2002). Paying attention to the spiritual core of religion is critical to differentiate the study of religion from other phenomenon. Religion nurtures peoples' relationship with whatever they hold sacred. Thus, although some have begun to divorce spirituality from religion, we view spirituality as the most central function of religion—to facilitate the search for the sacred (Pargament & Mahoney, 2002).

Religion can be involved in transformations that occur in either the pathways or destinations that people follow in their life journeys. For example, if a client's primary destination in life is marital intimacy, switching to a partner's faith may be adopted as a pathway to reach this goal. However, according to Pargament (1997), religious conversion takes place only when changes happen in *both* the destinations and pathways of a person's life in connection with the sacred. One type of religious conversion is called "group religious conversion." This occurs when an individual alters his/her fundamental values to reflect a specific religious group and makes significant lifestyle changes to fit into the group. Here the religious group, its leader, and/or its mission are seen as sacred, and the individual adopts new daily habits, routines, and relationships to mesh his/her personal identity with the group. By converting to the group, the individual is able to appropriate its special force into his/her own sense of self (Pargament, 1997). Listen to the way one woman, addicted to drugs, draws on the sacred power of the members and leader of the Divine Light Mission:

Once I got to know them, I realized they loved me. They took me up, and it was as if they were holding me in their arms. I was like a baby whose mother guides its moves and cares for it. When I wanted to take heroin, or even to smoke (marijuana), I knew they were with me to help me stay away from it, even if I was alone. And their strength was there for me, even before I could hardly meditate at all, I could rely on their invisible hand, moved by Maharaj Ji's wisdom, to help me gain control (Galanter, 1989, p. 30).

People who convert to a religious cult provide vivid illustrations of the religious group conversion. Of course, this process also can occur with local mainstream congregation and clergy. A neighborhood church and its leader can become a new organizing force for a client whose personal identity then revolves around congregation involvement.

Another type of religious conversion, and our main focus in this article, is on "spiritual conversion." This involves a two-tiered reorientation in the relationship between the sacred itself and the self. First, spiritual conversion involves a change of the core destination of a person's life. Specifically, the identification of the self with the sacred itself becomes the ultimate source of significance; other strivings, while still potentially very important, cease to be the highest organizing principle of existence. Second, an individual transforms his/her life pathway to reach this destination. This transformation may involve shifts in relationships, habits, patterns of thought, emotional reactions, and, more generally, a new sense of guidance in the journey of life. Taken together, spiritual conversion radically alters a person's understanding of the sacred, the self, relationships, and one's place in the universe.

### Two Types of Spiritual Conversion

Our definition of spiritual conversion provides a coherent framework for understanding the key functions of spiritual conversion both psychologically (i.e., changes in the search for significance) and spiritually (i.e., changes in the sacred's role in one's life). At the same time, our definition allows flexibility in the content of peoples' beliefs about the nature of the sacred and the dynamics between the sacred, self, and the world of the self. In this section, we elaborate two models of spiritual conversion to illustrate the impact of differences in the substance of the spiritual-conversion process. These two models have been articulated most fully by Christian theologies. The first model of spiritual conversion that we will discuss has been developed richly within traditional Christian literature. The second, more recent, model has been elaborated by reformist feminist Christian thinkers. We do not assume that the traditional Christian model of spiritual conversion applies only or to all males, nor that the feminist Christian model applies only and to all females. Instead, we assume that both models could apply to individuals of either gender.

#### *Classic Christian Perspective*

Like many religions, Christianity holds that the central source of significance in a believer's life should be his/her connection with the sacred. Given that Christianity is a monotheistic tradition, God therefore should be the center of a person's life. To examine a classic Christian model of spiritual conversion, we turn to Saiving, Plaskow, and Ruether's discussions of concepts promoted by highly influential 20th century Christian theologians Ander Nygren, Reinhold Niebuhr, and Paul Tillich (Plaskow, 1980; Ruether, 1998; Saiving, 1960). These theologians argued that pride is the primary sin that creates a gulf between the self and God. Rebellion against God reflects arrogant self-assertion whereby the self becomes elevated over God and takes center stage in one's life. In this misorientation

toward God, individuals believe they have the power to usurp God's authority and, unencumbered by God's will, follow their own desires. People also believe they can control their destiny without divine assistance. The underlying motivation to displace God with the self reflects an attempt to conquer anxiety created by human freedom. As Saiving (1960, p. 26) summarizes:

Sin is the self's attempt to overcome anxiety by magnifying its own power, righteousness, or knowledge. Man knows that he is merely a part of the whole, but he tries to convince himself and others that he is the whole. He tries, in fact to convince himself to become the whole. Sin is the unjustified concern of the self for its own power and prestige; it is the imperialistic drive to close the gap between the individual, separate self and others by reducing those others to the status of mere objects which can then be treated as appendages of the self and manipulated accordingly.

Thus, sin from a traditional Christian vantage point involves taking a prideful "one-up" stance toward God and other people. This renders a person vulnerable to denial of his/her limitations and compromises his/her judgment about ethical choices. Without God's guidance, a person falls into thoughts, feelings, and actions that are destructive to self and others. But wrongdoing cannot be acknowledged because this could invalidate the narcissistic self.

Conversion takes place when the individual realizes that God, instead, should be placed at the center of his/her life. As Plaskow (1980, p. 155) summarized, "The sinful self which remains locked and centered in itself, unable to enter into loving relationships with others, must be shattered in the very center of its being through confrontation with the power and holiness of God. Finally aware of its true source and center, the self which trusted only itself must be 'crucified with Christ' and destroyed. One then surrenders a false sense of pride and corresponding disobedience." This classic spiritual-conversion experience of surrendering one's pride transforms one's relationship with God. God becomes the focus of one's life and God's intended destinations for the self displace preconceived notions of how to enhance the individual's own sense of power, control, and accomplishment. Pathways to reach God's goals require careful discernment of God's will.

The trigger of spiritual conversion from the classical Christian view is an experience that challenges false pride. This may take the form of "hitting bottom" with any number of forms of psychopathology or when uncontrollable external events, such as an accident, lethal illness, or chronic unemployment, strip away illusions of personal power or control. Alternatively, a person may be confronted and directly or indirectly punished for engaging in destructive patterns of interpersonal betrayal, exploitation, or dominance (e.g., losing marriage due to an affair, being incarcerated for violence). In such a context, forsaking oneself as the prime authority of one's life can occur. God then shifts to the central authority of the individual's life and the person becomes obedient to God's will, rather than his/her own will.

The story of Asa Candler, Jr. (1951), the second son of the founder of Coca-Cola Company, illustrates the recognition of false pride as the key element of spiritual conversion. Unable to resolve his depression and unable to quit drinking, Candler (with some assistance from a divine voice) identifies his own pride and vanity as the cause of the problem:

I was unusually troubled in my soul. Suddenly I heard a voice, just as clearly as I have ever heard anyone . . . The voice said to me, "You must get rid of your *self*; you must renounce your *self*; you must reject your *self*." These were surprising words. I should not have been surprised if the voice had commanded me to stop drinking. But this was not the message at all. It was my *self* that I was commanded to give up. My *self* was the trouble—my love of myself, my fear of

anything that might frustrate my wishes. My will had always been the central interest in my life. False pride had erected a barrier between my soul God. (Candler, 1951, pp. 55–56).

Paradoxically, a reorientation in which God's will becomes central is liberating because the person also is freed from the impossible burden of trying to maintain a stance of utter invincibility and power when he/she inevitably experiences feelings of weakness, insecurity, or self-doubt (Rambo, 1993). A person also is freed from the need to deny wrongdoing because he/she realizes that acknowledging sin will not result in absolute death of the self. Rather, the person experiences forgiveness of the "old" self and affirmation in a rebirth of the self. This allows a person to select healthier and more fulfilling paths in life. As a consequence of this reorientation of one's relationship to God, one's relationship with other people also shifts from objectification and exploitation in which interpersonal relationships are used as a means for the gratification and glorification of the self. Instead, one recognizes God's central commandment to deny the self and love others (i.e., sacrificial love). The archetypal model for such a conversion is Jesus Christ, who is understood as actual God in flesh but who laid down his life to save others.

### *Reformist Feminist Christian Perspectives*

A feminist Christian model of spiritual conversion originated with a groundbreaking essay written by Valerie Saiving (1960). She argued that Christian formulations of sin as prideful self-assertion, and of grace as self-sacrificial love, are rooted in the experience of privileged white males in western culture. As a consequence, the traditional Christian depiction of spiritual conversion contradicts the predominant spiritual and psychological experiences of many women whose primary struggle in life is self-negation, not self-exaltation. Namely, the cardinal "sin" of women is in their failure to acquire a strong sense of self, and thus assume responsibility for their lives through reasoned and free decisions (Plaskow, 1980). Moreover, the traditional Christian emphasis on self-sacrifice as the prime virtue paradoxically may undermine women's ability to develop any core self at all.

By questioning the validity of traditional Christian stories of sin and redemption for women, feminist Christian theologians have articulated an important model of spiritual conversion. Here, excessive dependence on others for one's identity displaces God from the center of one's life. Sin, in this case, involves placing other people at the center of an individual's life, effectively allowing other people to function as God. This cuts off a person from authentic relationships with God and others. Rebellion against God amounts to God-forgetfulness because of excessive efforts to satisfy other peoples' unjust or simply insatiable demands of self-sacrifice. As Plaskow (p. 155) states, "the refusal to become a self can represent deliberate flight from responsibility before God and is certainly active in the minimal sense that it involves orientation toward what is not God." In short, feminist theologians argue that "women's sin" is precisely *the failure* to turn toward the self. Moreover, traditional western Christianity paradoxically may reinforce the temptation to surrender the responsibility of developing a strong sense of self by elevating self-negation to a supreme virtue.

Without a strong sense of self, a person easily can condone an unjustified "one-up" stance by others toward the self. This can sabotage the development of a person's authentic God-intended identity and reinforce evil. As with the traditional Christian model, the displacement of God as the foundation of one's life is rooted in anxiety. However, this anxiety manifests itself not as dominance over others or usurping God's place in the universe. Instead, misplaced anxiety renders the individual unable to set boundaries, risk

rejection, or fight injustice. This sets the stage for unjustified tolerance of maltreatment, exploitation, and victimization by others.

The feminist model of spiritual conversion echoes major themes found in the co-dependency literature in the mental-health field. Clinicians have highlighted the “enabling” role that victims often play in relationships with perpetrators of domestic violence, substance use, and sexual abuse. Victims often seem reluctant to take action within their control to stop cycles of violence and exploitation. This fear boils down to an unwillingness to take a stand against the abuser for fear of losing the relationship with the abuser and fear of being unable to take care of oneself outside of the relationship. In the process, a person forsakes his/her potential, tolerates mistreatment, and colludes with injustice. This kind of warped relationship between self, others, and God may lead to identical forms of pathology exhibited by people caught up in the trap of pride. However, the root cause is not prideful denial of one’s vulnerability, but slothful abdication of inner dignity.

In this model, defining God as the central destination of one’s life requires the search for, and establishment of, a healthy sense of self and personal autonomy. Here, the experience of conversion to God involves neither “shattering” of self as by an authoritarian father-judge nor a quietistic “acceptance” as by an understanding mother (Carr & Schurman, 1996). Rather, the spiritual-conversion experience involves a profound affirmation of self as capable of living in co-union with God. This is expressed best by words such as co-creating, co-sharing, co-stewardship. The “great surrender” in this context means forsaking the depressed and empty self and discovering self-worth in companionship with God, who is experienced as permeating within and outside the self.

The following story of a woman coping with her children leaving home and an unhappy spouse illustrates the struggle and transformation embedded in spiritual conversion as articulated by feminist theologians:

I had been happily married for some fifteen years, when things started to change. My husband started to get dissatisfied at work and it affected our home, as well as our relations. My children were growing up and I had to find something to do with my time, so I started to attend the adult night school. The second year at school I fell deeply in love with the teacher. Never, had I felt such closeness to a human. This teacher knew of my feelings, and declared his to me, and told me he was coming for me . . . I knew that if I would be unfaithful to my vows I would never be able to live, to me, it would be worse than death. I knew that I had to go back to that class room and face this man . . . Arriving that night, I was so terribly frightened, but I did make it to my seat. I was so weak that I could hardly sit up. He told me to turn to a certain page in the typing book . . . The page contained an excerpt from Ernest Hemingway’s ‘The Old Man and the Sea’.

‘Man was not made for defeat, he can be destroyed but not defeated.’

. . . All weakness left me, and I felt thunder in my veins. At that moment I had the power of the Universe at my finger tips. I looked up at him, he grew terribly white and scared. He was a man of questionable character, and had many affairs in his life. He wanted to add me to his long list of conquests. But it wasn’t to be. As I looked at him, I could feel a power sitting alongside of me, telling me when to look at him. Four years have passed since then . . . God has shown me himself beyond any doubt. It has enriched my life and turned it completely around. I am no longer afraid of anything. (Hardy, 1979, pp. 94–95)

According to feminist theologians, this type of conversion goes beyond an individual journey toward God. It demands recognition that liberation of oneself requires participation in the struggle for the transformation of the larger social structure of injustice (Ruether, 1998). When the boundaries between self and God dissolve, a person encounters a sense of solidarity and obligation to address all forms of unjust dominance and exploitation. An

archetypal Christian story for this spiritual conversion is the Pentecostal epiphany of the apostles. Jesus's death shattered the apostles' reliance on their relationship with the human Jesus as a source of their identity and direction in life and triggered immobilizing fear. Via a transformative union with the Holy Spirit, the apostles came to see themselves as embodying Christ; this affirmation of their own sacredness empowered them to conquer their insecurities and go out into the world to help others.

In summary, these two Christian models of spiritual conversion represent two sides of the coin of estrangement from God. "Self-exaltation" and "self-abnegation" are presented as equal dangers to the human psyche. Conversion from pride involves placing God at the center of one's life rather than the self. The pathway to reach this spiritual destination is learning obedience and self-sacrificial love. Conversion from self-abnegation involves placing God at the center of one's life rather than relying on others as the authority of one's identity. The pathway to reach this goal involves learning self-affirmation in union with God and compassionate love. This reorientation establishes a firm sense of self that prevents oneself from being victimized and obliges one to fight for justice for others.

### Distinctive Content of Spiritual Conversion

What distinguishes spiritual conversion from other types of transformations? In short, we argue that the integration of the sacred into the destinations and pathways the individual adopts is the unique element of spiritual conversion. To help make this clear, we focus on how spiritual conversion differs in substance from quantum change, one of the many human change processes that is not necessarily religious in nature.

Quantum change clearly involves a transformation in the pathways or means used to arrive at a sense of significance. The unexpected experience of quantum change radically alters a person's understanding of how to arrive at highly coveted destinations of peace, serenity, joy, and/or a new lifestyle that departs from an uninspired existence and destructive routines. Contrary to a highly controlled, painstaking journey often necessary to bring about profound changes in living, Miller and C'de Baca (2001; this issue) emphasized a sudden breakthrough of awareness and consciousness that occurs with seeming effortlessness. Second, quantum change brings with it a transformation in what people perceive to be of ultimate significance, importance, and value. Quantum change alters peoples' understanding of what is fundamentally important in life and what they should strive for.

Quantum change involves a transformation along two of three dimensions of spiritual conversion: a shift in the pathways by which a person discovers what is most significant in life (i.e., search) and an alteration in the destination perceived to be of greatest importance in life (i.e., significance). However, unlike spiritual conversion, quantum change does not necessarily involve the belief that the sacred is involved in these changes. For quantum change to be a spiritual conversion, the transformation of pathways and destinations would need to be perceived as connected to the sacred. Overall, spiritual conversion is distinct from quantum change because the latter does not require attributions of the sacred to be embedded in change.

### Process of Spiritual Conversion: Comparison with Quantum Change

Greater insight into spiritual conversion can be gained by comparing its underlying processes with other human-change experiences. Empirical research on the processes associated

with religious conversion suggests several intriguing points of divergence and convergence between spiritual conversion and quantum change.

### *Processes Embedded Within Spiritual Conversion*

Whereas limited scientific attention has been paid to the theological content of religious conversion, notable efforts have identified their psychosocial parameters (Rambo, 1993). This research highlights several processes that spiritual conversion partially shares with nonreligious change. One relevant body of work concerns topographic descriptions of religious conversion. Lofland and Skonovd's (1981) categorical system is cited most widely and includes six motifs:

1. intellectual conversion, which involves the seeking of knowledge without significant social contact;
2. mystical conversion, which is considered by some the prototypical conversion characterized by a sudden and dramatic burst of insight, induced by visions, voices, or other paranormal experiences;
3. experimental conversion, which reflects a "show me" mentality by the religious seeker who actively tries out different religious groups and explores their theology, ritual, and organization for best fit;
4. affectual conversion, which emphasizes a personal experience of being loved, nurtured, and affirmed by religious group and leader;
5. revivalism, which relies on crowd conformity to induce conversion behavior; and
6. coercive conversion, which involves external pressure exerted on the person to convert to an alternative religion.

That fact that our framework of spiritual conversion does not fit neatly into any of these categories highlights our view that any of the above processes could involve a shift in both the sacred pathways and destinations that an individual pursues. On the other hand, quantum change seems to be aligned closely with the motif of a mystical conversion, and to a lesser extent overlaps with intellectual conversion (i.e., insight-oriented quantum change).

A second process embedded within religious conversion deals with the speed of change. Rather than a one-time intense experience, religious conversion most often appears to involve gradual changes that finally culminate in a distinct shift in religious orientation (Paloutzian et al., 1999; Rambo, 1993). However, both "slow" and "fast" conversion experiences are reported. To understand better sudden spiritual-conversion experiences, Zinnbauer and Pargament (1998) examined differences between a gradual versus rapid intense spiritual change. Contrary to expectations, the precursors and outcomes linked to both types of spiritual change were essentially the same. This suggests that the speed of spiritual transformation is not as important as what kinds of substantive changes are embedded in the process. In terms of quantum change, this also suggests that the pace of spiritual conversion can parallel either "insight-oriented" quantum change, marked by a series of "a-ha" realizations that build to a crescendo, or "mystical" quantum change, characterized by a rapid and dramatic initial change experience.

The degree of passivity versus activity that the converter exhibits is a third process embedded in religious conversion. Contemporary concerns of excessive passivity among converts stem from anecdotes of psychologically vulnerable individuals joining counter-cultural or seemingly irrational "new" religious movements. Research, however, indicates



that only a small percentage of people who are exposed to proselytization by any religious group investigate the group seriously (estimated <1%; Rambo, 1993). Even fewer people convert to new religious movements, with most converts later leaving nontraditional groups. In addition, research indicates that almost all people who venture down nontraditional religious pathways do so in a thoughtful, highly intentional manner that is consistent with their chosen destinations in life (Pargament, 1997). Thus, while spiritual conversion may be marked by intense or surprising encounters with a perceived spiritual force or community, people typically experience themselves as actively selecting the path they choose. Likewise, despite powerful psychological sensations of conviction associated with quantum change, Miller and C'de Baca (2001) emphasized that people feel a sense of choice in whether to accept or reject the experience into their lives and to pursue the implications of its subsequent unfolding in their lives.

### *Precursors to Spiritual Conversion*

Most social scientists who study religious conversion theorize that stressful events increase the likelihood of conversion by creating serious discrepancies in some domain. This could include intrapsychic conflict, interpersonal conflict, or conflict between a person's resources and demands invoked by an ever-changing dynamic environment. This dovetails with Christian theory on the precursors to the two types of spiritual conversion elaborated earlier. The experience of conversion depends on how one has defined what is wrong (or sinful) with the human condition (Ruether, 1985). The goal of conversion is to repent from or correct what is wrong and out of alignment in one's life.

Retrospective studies in the past 25 years have documented that acute stress and a sense of personal inadequacy often precede sudden religious conversion. These studies include work with Charismatics (Galanter, 1982), a study of a Yogananda Commune (Rosen & Nordquist, 1980), a study of converts to four different traditions (Ullman, 1989), and college students (Zinnbauer & Pargment, 1998). In addition, long-term chronic stressors and interpersonal conflict have been linked to religious conversions. For example, cross-sectional (Kirkpatrick & Shaver 1990) and longitudinal (Kirkpatrick 1997, 1998) studies have indicated that people who report insecure attachment styles with caregivers or adult partners are more likely to report significant changes in the nature of the divine in adolescence and adulthood. These findings often are interpreted as evidence that religious conversion operates as a compensation mechanism for those who have suffered from unavailable or inconsistent caretakers during childhood. Chronic conflict with family members, especially fathers, also seems to increase the rates of religious conversion (Ullman, 1989). However, higher levels of spiritual growth and commitment over time are found among those who are psychologically well adjusted and report secure attachment styles (Granqvist, 1998, Pargament, 1997). These two points converge with Miller and C'de Baca's (2001) observation that only about half of people who underwent a quantum change previously had been experiencing significant stress; conversely, relatively few people under stress report experiencing quantum changes.

Because stress does not lead invariably to religious conversion, other precursors have been noted in the literature. In particular, access to a religiously based orienting system to fall back upon in times of stress seems to be essential (Pargament, 1997). Such systems are grounded in both personal and social processes. For example, private spiritual practices, such as praying, meditation, and reading religious literature, constitute one pathway likely to facilitate spiritual growth. Through these processes, people attempt to become open to a direct personal encounter with the sacred. Less obvious solitary practices,

such as listening to music, going on nature walks, exercising intensely, or engaging deeply in work or leisure activities, also may be used intentionally as a means of accessing the divine. However, a sense of receptivity and a perception of being acted upon by the divine also are necessary. Typically, such experiences engender a deep sense of humility and gratitude. Thus, spiritual conversions often may be experienced as a mysterious, intimate encounter between the individual and an external "Higher Power." This overlaps heavily with Miller and C'de Baca's (2001) description of quantum change as a surprising, self-contained encounter between the self and an invisible external force that is not mediated by others. Interestingly, prayer is the single most common act preceding quantum change, occurring one third of the time.

However, unlike quantum change, interpersonal processes appear to be important to spiritual conversion and historically have been valued equally with individual processes in religious traditions. Communally based spiritual practices include attending religious services, engaging in intimate dialogues as well as formal discussions with fellow believers, undergoing religious education, and seeking out spiritual guidance when distressed. In addition, broader cultural factors appear to play a role in providing people with access to symbols, myths, and rituals that facilitate spiritual conversion (Rambo, 1993). Some theologies, in fact, would argue that communion with others is tantamount to a connection with the sacred (Malony & Southard, 1992). Thus, while a heavy value is placed on individualism in the secular world, spiritual conversions are not restricted to private transformations disconnected from other people. This differs from quantum change, which is described as not being mediated directly or immediately by others. Thus, the key issue for spiritual conversion is not whether the means to change is strictly a private versus social experience, but whether the transformation involves fundamental shift in one's relationship to the sacred, such that the sacred becomes the center.

Finally, social communication about both spiritual conversion and quantum change seems important to validate and facilitate both experiences. Miller and C'de Baca (2001) articulated this well when they explained that one of the primary reasons for writing their book on quantum change was to uncover these experiences and help people overcome fears that quantum-change experiences are a sign of mental illness. They noted that most participants had kept silent about these experiences until they were interviewed.

### Implications for Clinical Practice

- Although some mental-health professionals look upon religious conversion with suspiciousness, empirical studies on the topic have suggested that such experiences have psychological and social benefits. Fairly consistent findings have indicated that religious conversion typically is associated with greater feelings of personal satisfaction, lower depression and anxiety, and a greater sense of serenity and forgiveness (Paloutzian et al., 1999; Richardson, 1995). In addition, converts report post-conversion levels of adjustment on par or better than people who have not undergone such a change.
- Also contrary to stereotypes, there is little empirical basis to assume that a religious-conversion experience is dysfunctional. Empirical research has suggested that most people experience religious conversions from one religious tradition or group to another do not become more judgmental, hostile, or coercive toward others (Paloutzian et al., 1999; Rambo, 1993).
- Clinical practice is intimately concerned with helping clients sort out their values and providing new pathways and methods to reach their chosen destinations in life.

Because religion is embedded in life journeys of many clients, greater attention to the spiritual conversion can help uncover the strivings people place at the center of their lives and the pathways they pursue to achieve their goals. A careful assessment and exploration of clients' spiritual-conversion experiences can reveal deep wellsprings of vulnerability, fear, hope, and inspiration.

- It is important to realize that spiritual conversion can take more than one form. We have described here only two types of spiritual conversion. Because the effects of spiritual conversion depend greatly on the individual context of clients' lives, uniform views of spiritual conversion should give way to more differentiated perspectives. In other words, blanket statements about the benefits or costs of spiritual conversion are meaningless without knowing the challenges that clients face.
- Our depiction of the two Christian models of spiritual conversion highlights the importance of a good fit between the type of spiritual conversion and the circumstances of a person's maladaptive functioning.
- The traditional Christian spiritual conversion emphasizes a person giving up some measure of autonomy and acknowledging the limits of one's personal power, control, and rights. This type of change can be precisely what is needed for people embroiled in antisocial, narcissistic, violent, or addictive behavior patterns that are perpetuated by denial of responsibility and erroneous attributions about other people's blame for one's own misconduct. On the other hand, traditional Christian spiritual conversion could exacerbate the psychopathology of clients who suffer from debilitating insecurities, low self-worth, and failure to set limits with other people who mistreat and harm them. An undue emphasis on concerns about pride could undermine further a person's ability to form his/her own judgments of wrongdoings by others and take action to care for oneself. This could aggravate psychological dysfunction.
- The feminist model of Christian spiritual conversion would seem especially indicated for some circumstances. A greater sense of personal worthiness and a heightened sense of confidence in one's personal judgment of right and wrong via union with God can help the individual take ownership and control for the direction of his/her life. Such experiences may provide people with a powerful and unique source of strength to fight social injustice and oppression. Of course, taken too far, excessive conviction that the person has special knowledge of God could heighten his/her sense of superiority, intolerance, rigidity, and narcissism. This could aggravate antisocial behavior and interpersonal conflicts.

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