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The psychology of conversion

"THE PSYCHOLOGY of CONVERSION."

By

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The Psychology of Conversion.

It is not my purpose in this thesis to propound anything startling enough to affect in any great sense the conclusions of noted investigators in the field of Psychology. I do not expect to find the world getting better because of any ponderous assertionsin this paper; and I shall feel highly honored if, in view of the small circle in which it shall move, the world does not grow any worse. Considering my limited experience in this large and important sphere of investigation I have had to depend largely on the data gathered by others. And where I have intruded with my own data and experiences I shall be satisfied if they remain there"per se", and for no wider influence. I have however found it delightful even to dabble in this comparatively new and recent subject, and hope that when more experience comes my way I shallbe able to write more authoritatively.

I wish to considerthis theme not from the psychological standpoint, technically speaking; I wish to say nothing for example, of mental currents or of grooves formed in the brain; but I want to draw a few conclusions which have come

mostly from general observation.

Investigations in this line, as I have above intimated, are of comparatively recent date. We are living in a sceptical age. Men are busy inquiring into the causes and into the real import of things. If ever truth and falsity were at odds, they are so now. This investigating spirit has been carried into the religious world to such an extent that some have questioned the advisability of interfering with things Divine. But we ~~believe~~ argue with Lowell who said in substance that, "God's universe is fireproof, and we need not be afraid to strike a match any place". So far from the scientific investigations carried on in this field being an i mposition on religious matters they should be, and I believe are a great factor in making for the realization of a consummated kingdom of God on earth.

At any rate whether it be right or wrong to apply scientific investigation to religious matters, among others three noted men, Professor, Starbuck in his, "Psychology of Religion", Professor Coe in his "Spiritual Life", and Professor James in his "Varieties of Religious Experience," have given us the results of their observations. Professors Bowne, Beiler, and Rishell of Boston University

School of Theology, in their classes, also give us valuable information on the subject of conversion.

One would naturally think that the New Testament be teeming with information on so i mportant a phase of religious experience, but it is rather exceptional to find anything directly on conversion. Among the Gospels the expression"born again" is found only in John. Some few references are made in Paul's letters; but throughout the New Testement very little is said about the particular event known as conversion. The idea of being saved is quite prominent, but the act of conversion is distinguished by its absent treatment.

Christ himself very seldom used the word"conversion". InMatt. I8:3 andActs, 3:I9 we have the idea of "turn" emphasized. Of course the monumental example in the New Testament of a turning or a converting is that of Paul. Acts9:8," And when his eyes were opened, he saw nothing; and they led him by the hand".

Even though the New Testament has not much to say about conversion, the event of conversion has been recognized since the beginning of the early church. It has taken on different names of designation, but they all have the

samesignificance; a changing, a turning. The principal requisite is that there be really a changing, a turning due to mental and spiritual awakening. Among the Greeks and among the Roman Catholics and Lutheransand Anglicans the "turning" is supposed to come at confirmation. Sam Jones characterized it by the expression, "Quit your meanness"; but there is, no doubt, more to conversion than that. Starbuck in his "Psychology of Religion" page 2I has given us his definition:"Conversion is characterized by more or less sudden changes of character from evil to goodness, from sinfulness to righteousness, and from indifference to spiritual insight and activity".

This changingis much like repenting. InMatt.4:I7 Christ says,"Except ye repent, ye shall all likewise perish". In Luke I5: 7 He says,"There shall be joy in Heaven over one sinner that repenteth."

We are religious beings. I have never yet seen an individual, no matter how wicked, but what he had within his soul the religious spark.On the other hand I have never seen an individual, however good, but what he had moral failings. It is my opinion that any person with a healthy intellect can overcome evil, can experience

a change of life. Prof. James, it seems, cannot take this hopeful view. He says in his "Varieties of Religious Experience" page 204: "Some persons never are and possibly never could be converted. They are either incapable of imagining the invisible or they are lifelong subjects of barrenness." That some persons are never converted I admit , but that they are incapable of "turning" I cannot comprehendunless, as one of the attendants of my church, they are suffering with mental debility.

Children, then are not as has long been supposed, all ungodly creatures that have to be rescued. The requirement is that they be preserved from evil influences and evil thoughts. Taking an optimistic view of the child-nature, we can labor with more success for the betterment of the race in a world of evil. If we suggest sin to the child, intimating that he is a reprobate he is more liable to be sinful than if we work toward the development of his better nature. If a child, then, is brought up in the way he should go he does not need to be what is commonly known as "converted". And if anyone must be converted it is because of an abnormal religious development from childhood. In every individual, no matter how good, there

come waves of religious awakening. This is perfectly normal. But I should not call every religious awakening conversion. For the sake of convenience, however, I shall call the first marked spiritual awakening conversion. This may occur early in life or in old age. It may be marked by demonstration or by quiet reflection. No two persons need necessarily be converted with the same intensity of emotion; no two persons need necessarily be converted at the same place; and the pre-conversion and post-conversion states need not be the same. A great mistake has been made by many honest people in the Methodist Church in supposing that we all have to experience the same sort of conversion as that of John Wesley. As Rev. Downey said recently in Chapel, "The principal necessity is that our conversion have the same effect upon our lives as John Wesley's conversion had upon his life".

In recent years the discovery has been made that the religious and the physical life are vitally connected. There are periods in our physical development when we are especially susceptible to religious influences. The religious and physical are , however, not so vitally related that one is the product of the other. The physical

does not produce the spiritual, but the two are simultaneously affected.

Wise people have taken advantage of this psychological fact and are now placing emphasis where it belongs. They now proceed on the principle that it is better to put a railing on the edge of the cliff to keep the child from falling over than to have the ambulance at the foot of the cliff to take ~~them~~ it to the hospital after ~~they~~ it has fallen. They have further learned that if the railing is placed about the cliff at the proper time there will be less need for one when the child becomes older. This idea has been carried out so extensively that revivals are losing in popularity. It is largely as Dr. Rishell said recently at the Methodist Social Union, "Revivals are a by-product." But as long as we fail to carry out the principle of preservation we will have to resort to rescue. And futher, in view of the proneness of human nature to become lax in spiritual things we may with some profit conductrevivals, if for no other reason, for the mere sake of reviving those who have been previously converted.

Revivals have grown somewhat into disfavor because of the abuses that have accompanied many of them.

Evangelists for the sake of reporting large ingatherings have used all conceivable, and in some cases questionable means to promote their interests. Some have worked upon the emotions of the peo ple till they have seemed to on-lookers as filled with new, and in exceptional cases with old wine. The evangelist has worked the idea of suggestion to thefullest; and in some instanc es he has taken undue advantage of religious hypnosis. Often excitations have been taken for conversion. And after the subject has come to himself and has realized what actually has happened, frequently a reaction has set in and he has become disgusted with the whole matter of religion.

Emotional excitation is not necessarily religious activity. Many have mistaken this fact ; and some very honest and upright people who were more cool headed than others, have been accused of laxity ofreligious interest; while others whocould make a big ado were admired for their religiosity. For example, some believe that when a "Holy Jumper" is converted, the better he can jump and the higher he can kick the more does he show that he has been genuinely converted. But as Dr. Bowne said this morning in Ethics", "What they do show is not religion"..

10 Nearly all evangelists adopt methods which are obnoxious to thinking people. Even the best of them could justly be accused of the ill use of methods. A magnetic evangelist will always report the most converts. The fact is that they are indeed oftimes converts, converts to the evangelist but not to God. Any evangelist who merely arouses emotions does not convert.

Suggestions, if rightly administered may not be harmful in getting persons to come to the altar. But when the methods of hypnotism are used, I cannot see that God's blessing can rest on such procedure. Mr. Hugh Smith, considered to be a very sane evangelist uses every power of suggestion he can summon when making his appeal. He will come running down the steps as if he were fleeing for an exit___ a performance which, if any minister at some Sunday Morning service should execute would lead his congregation to believe that he was suffering with a brainstorm. Then he will look straight at you with eyes well adapted to lift you out of your seat, and then as he makes the appeal to lift your hand for prayer he will throw up both hands , palm upward, as though he would lift you. This he will repeat several times; and if he

happens to catch your eye, he will nod his head at you. Here are hands, eyes, head all saying, "Lift your hand". And all this immediately after he has told you a death story and has come rushing down from the platform. Any excitable person would be quite likely to yield to such a combination of circumstances whether he were prompted to do so by God, or the Devil, or neither.

Another reason why the revival has come into disrepute is the personnel of those converted. It is found that the adults converted at revivals are usually of the more impetuous kind. Though there are many exceptions, the revival converts are quite frequently not from the best stratum of the community. 'Tis true, these should be saved as well as those in the higher stratum, but could they not be reached in some other way, and thus avoid the ill effects which they often produce in religious meetings? Often half silly persons make public demonstrations which are not agreeable to the respectable who are in the meeting. Often those who lead least consistent lives are the most active when it comes to the altar service. Many backsliders at such times take their annual spiritual bath. The revival seems especially to appeal to these

classes because it "makes them feel good".

The other night at People's Temple a man came to the altar who had been through the mill before, I know not how many times. Mr. Smith was so delighted with his reconversion that in the midst of the altar exercises he asked him to give his testimony before the large audience. The fellow probably thought this was the chance of his life to show off. Accordingly he began to yell out sentences at a terrific rate, sawed the air right and left with both fists, stamped the floor, and gave general evidence that he was not responsible for what he was saying. The occurence put a bad flavor in the mouths of many earnest people. I know of several who were disgusted and went out. Many sincere seekers after the truth, no doubt, left the meeting that night with this thought: "If that is the kind of people who go up to that altar, I am not going".

The nature of many revival conversions does not appeal to the high minded. One might give illustrations "ad infinitum" where people went into ecstasies that were repulsive to the onlooker. I remember what sort of revivals we had back in the little old school-house in Kansas. How the people used to shout! Some song with a catchy

swing and with about twenty-five verses, chorus after each verse, would be started; and for several hours the men and women would be huddled together on the hard floor singing and shouting. I remember distinctly a young man who when he was "converted" ran about in the audience shaking hands, hugging people, and crying out, "Halleluiah". I recall one night how two big, fat women of the community contorted their bodies around eachother so as to form a big ball, and thus they rolled around on the floor. I also remember the excitement one evening when Bro. H--- , the bald-headed man in a fit of excitement ran his head through the window pane. The young toughs of the community came to church because it provided a better vaudeville than was going on in the village Hall; and besides, here they got in free. But to me the most detrimental results of these meetings was that here I received the impression that I would have to go through similar performances before I could be converted,-- a foolish notion which later cost me much anguish.

Such facts make for the denunciation of the revival. But there are, of course, two sides to the question. A moment's reflection on the other side willshow that the

revival produces, if properly conducted, a spiritual uplift and it is also the means of sane and genuine conversions. The Methodist Church has been built up largely through the revival. My father being a minister in a Church that emphasizes revivals I have had the opportunity of seeing many souls born again. Father is a pastor of the evangelistic type; and hundreds have been sanely converted through his labors. Every winter through his efforts, the revival has brought out the self-revelation of God. And He has glorified Himself not only at the altar but also outside the church building. I shall mention only one instance: Mr. K-- had been wonderfully under conviction for several days, but he could not find peace, till one day as he was out in the field husking corn he was suddenly filled with the Spirit. And when peace came to his soul he was so happy that he unhitched his mule-team and went about from neighbor to neighbor telling the news of his salvation.

But it was just during these same meetings that I had to pay for what my eyes had seen a few years before in the little old school-house. There were about sixty at the altar. My father did not insist that I go but suggested it.

With several other boys I knelt at the altar; and they were all "saved" thefirst night. Several older persons at this meeting had shouted when they received the light, and again I thought of the little old school-house. I wanted to be converted right. Night after night I went to the altar; I prayed and wept and prayed and wept, but the little old school-house experiences would not come. I had been at the altar six nights when my father announced that on the morrow the meetings would close. So I went to the altar for the last time and again I wept and prayed but I ha d'nt had the desired experiences. And that last night on the way home I surely must have felt as dejected and depressed and downhearted as any boy could possibly feel, for I thought I was going to Hell because I had not been "converted" at the altar in the "school-house" way. Not until several yrars later did I realize that what I was looking for I would never find. And one evening on the shore of Lake Winona, Indiana. I quietly, prayerfully looked up to God and dedicated my life to Him, and then the world had new meanings and I was at peace.

The general standard of revivals in the Methodist Episcopal Church has undergone striking alterations.

16 But in some sections the demonstrative type is still condoned and idealized. In a lecture in Pastoral Theology Professor Beiler said:"The type of conversion in the Methodist Church has changed. Formerly there was darkness, depression, crying, despair; then peace, joy, light , happiness. This was the adult type. Often the young had the same kind of experience. Now conversion especially among the young is more quiet, perhaps more intelligent. The normal way is better than a "spasm in winter". Let us hope that the normal way will be more and more realized in Methodism.

The various denominations differ in their standards of conversion. The Presbyterians and Congregationalists of today believe as they say in"hand picked fruit". The Social method, which also has its defects is emphasized The Baptist Church has inclined toward the Methodistic spirit. In the Episcopalian and Lutheran Churches conversion resolves itself into confirmation. In the Catholic denomination the child belongs to the Church as soon as it is born, and confirmation soon follows. The last three Churches mentioned have been wise in making special effort to make the child feel that he belongs to

the Church rather than to let him grow up and go to the bad and then try to convert him.

Not only do Churches differ, but races have their peculiar tendencies in taking the religious stand. We could hardly expect to find the same decorum in a Georgia camp-meeting composed of Ethopians as in a Bostonian revival meeting composed of Caucasians, the Holy Jumpers notwithstanding. The racial temperament is carried into religion as well as into secular affairs. We would not condemn striking conversions of the emotional type, for much religious and moral good may result from them. If one has an eruptive temperament what else could we expect than an emotional conversion, or at any rate one that tended in that direction. A strong willed person may hesitate a long while and fight against his convictions; but when he does yield we would not be surprised to see him come over to the side of righteousness as an avalanche rushes down the mountain.

Professor Coe has made some investigations concerning the relations of individuality to conversion. In his "Spiritual Life" page 135 he says, "There are three factors favorable to striking religious transformations; temperament

expectation, and tendency to passive suggestability". With the latter factor Professor Coe has made some valuable experiments. In his classesI have seen him get some interesting data in this line. I shall indicate merely one instance given in his "SpiritualLife" page 135: "Response to passes and suggestion of drowsiness is not prompt. Yet when response comes it simply plumps itself. Now very passive. This subject was converted at sixteen with marked manifestations, being thrilled with joy". The conversion here was in perfect accord with the temperament of the subject.

Temperament and conversion, then, are vitally related, and, as indicated in the beginning of this paper, physical development and conversion are close allied. There are certain stages in the physical development when conditions are most favorable for a change of life. Professor Beiler says, "The percent of adult conversions in Methodism has fallen off within the last fifty years". The cause of this falling off is due largely to the discovery of the relation between the physical and the religious. As the revival is losing ground another method of saving souls is taking its place. Individual work among the youth

is now emphasized. The Sunday-School is now a greater factor than ever in the salvation of the world. Professor Starbuck is given special credit for his discoveries in regard to child and youth religion. Professor Beiler in a lecture quoting from Starbuck stated that now the average age of conversion for both males and females is sixteen. There are certainly some reasons for this figure. In getting statistics promiscuously from twenty-four men in BostonUniversity School of Theology I was favorably surprised to find that my statistics agree so closely with those of Starbuck. Here are the figures given by the first fourteen men questioned as to the age of their conversion: I7, I6, I5, 32, 23, I7, I6, I8, I7, I6, I3, 8, I6, 8. Of the twenty-four, nine were not converted at a revival. Comparatively few people are converted after twenty-five years of age. Hence there must be a psychological period when the church should do its most strenuous work in the way of preserving the growing boy and girl; for after that particular period it will be extremely difficult to bring them into vital relations with the church.

Starbuck says that conversions occur almost exclusively between the ages of ten and twenty-five. He has come to

20 this conclusion by means of the compilation of many carefully gathered statistics. In his "Psychology of Conversion" page 29 he has given in graphic form the results of his investigation. From that figure it would seem that among the males conversion usually begins at seven. Then comes a gradual increase till thirteen, then a very rapid increase between thirteen and sixteen, here a culmination, then a ~~gradual~~ rapid. decline between nineteen and twenty, and a gradual decline between twenty and twenty-five.

The religious as well as the physical psychological phenomena of females differ somewhat from those of the males. For example, in this same figure the females begin two years earlier namely, at five. Then there is a gradual increase till ten, then a very marked increase between ten and thirteen, then a marked decrease between thirteen and fifteen, then a rapid increase between fifteen and sixteen, a sharp decline between sixteen and seventeen, then a gradual decline to twenty-five. These results show that among boys the most favorable time in general for conversion is between thirteen and sixteen; among girls between ten and thirteen, and again betweenfifteen and

sixteen, and at eighteen. Girls, then, are more precarious in religious matters. While these statistics are valuable for general information, there are always exceptions which must be taken into account in practical life.

We must come to the conclusion with Starbuck that "conversion is an adolescent phenomenon", that it is during the period of most rapid bodily growthwhen conversion is most likely to occur. At the beginning of adolescence when the voice changes, the head changes in shape, the heart becomes more active, and the child becomes man or woman, and rapid physical growth is in order --during this time of storm and stress the youth is most responsive to religious influences.

Another interesting phenomenon is the relation of conversion to puberty. Among males puberty generally comes two years later than among females. Among females it occurs at about fourteen years of age. Comparing this fact with the table given at the bottom of page forty in Starbuck's book it would seem that conversion is likely to occur just before or after puberty. i.e. one is likely to supplement the other.Yet there are exceptions when the two occur at the same time.

Aside from the physical conditions there are other causes favorable to conversion. Starbuck, page fifty-two mentions, fear of death, fear of Hell, altruistic motives, moral ideals, remorse, conviction of sin, response to teaching, example and imitation, social pressure and urging. He found that among the males the largest number were converted because of moral ideals and conviction of sin., and among the females, social pressure and conviction of sin. The results of these observations lead us to infer that we are apt to rely on instinct rather than on rationality in taking the religious step, and that among females outside influences have more bearing on their decisions than among males.

I found in gathering statistics among the students of "B.U.S.T." that the immediate influences causing conversion were as follows: "Personal work, pastor's invitation, pastor's preaching, parents and home, friends, sister". In answer to the question, "Phenomena during conversion", the following answers were given: "Not excited, ecstasy, physical lightness, laughter at former doubt, weeping, desire to be with God's people, clearness of vision". The varities of experience during conversion are of course determined by the temperament of

23 the subject. Henry Ward Beecher says: "I sprang to my feet and began to cry and laugh".

The outcome of conversion also varies with the individual. Professor James gives the following list:

Wider life, freedom, harmonious affections, asceticism, strength of soul, purity, charity, Starbuck knew cases where the Bible was more precious, where there was a birth of new powers,;one said, "I was changed from a dishonest to an honest man". In some cases men begin to control their passions, others subdue various evil habits, such as the drinking of intoxicants, an d the use of tobacco. I have in mind a man who was converted at a camp- meeting. Just before his conversion he had a plug of tobaccoin his pocket. But after making the decision he threw the plug as far as he could and not only quit chewing but decided to become a minister.

There are some persons who cannot point to a definite time when they were converted. My room-mate belongs to this class, and in the statistics gathered in our school I found four out of the twenty-four that could point to no definite time when they became Christians. Yet I believe they are genuinely saved and they have been

the means through God to bring manyto a saving knowledge. This class usually consists of those who from childhood have been brought up amid religious surroundings and have gradually grown into the religious life. Yet even these have had tides of religious experience. Those who can point to a definite time of conversion also have had their "ups and downs". And each time they went up they were reallyreconverted; they turned from a lower to a higher standard of life. Conversion then is not wholly unique. It is only the first of a series of steps in the right direction. To me the ideal religious life would be that the child at seven or eight make its first outward profession, simple though it may be; that from ten to fifteen he be catechised; that as he grows into maturity he also grow spiritually, not necessarily as the tree, but as the rising tide, wave after wave, higher, ever higher.
It would be unreasonable to expect the individual continually to be on the mountain-top of experience.
A great deal of foolish talk about sanctification might be avoided if people would once realize that there are not only second blessings but third, fourth fifth, and sixth and dozens of blessings for the spiritually

awakened. Showers of blessing are liable to fall upon men's souls at any time, and then they are reconverted as the growing plant in the dry soil is reconverted into active growth by showers from the clouds.

I remember one Sunday morning at Bolton, Illinois as I went into my pulpit and looked over the congregation there seemed to be an unusual something, I knew not what, that lighted the faces of the people. There seemed to be an earnestness of expression and eagerness of feeling such as had never been manifested before. And as I went to my knees (for that was the custom) to offer the morning prayer, I felt uplifted as never before. I had hardly gotten into the middle of the prayer when the Holy Spirit came down upon the entire audience and one of the Sisters suddenly burst forth into shouting. I was terribly frightened but it was the only sensible shout I have ever heard. Pastor and many of the people were reconverted on that glorious day.

All who are interested in the salvation of the world will profit in the application of the religious principles that have been drawn out of the discovery of the relation of spiritual development to physical growth; they will

do well to seize upon the child or youth at the critical period of his life so that he may normally grow into the religious experience; they will succeed best if they do not mistake emotion for religion, nor expect the spiritual tide always to be at the high water mark.

We who are specially called to look after, and conserve, and increase the membership of God's visible church should realize that "hand picked fruit" is usually very lasting. We should have revivals discreetly conducted to awaken saint and sinner; we should know the psychological tendencies of the child, the youth, the adult that we may act with discretion in the preservation and rescue of humanity.

--FINIS--