

## Religious conversion and self transformation: An experiential study among born again Christians

Anna Stout, Simon Dein

**Abstract.** *Current work on conversion in Evangelical Christianity is rare. This study examined the experience of being 'Born Again' among a sample of eleven British Evangelical Christians. Ethnographic interviews were conducted to examine the antecedents of conversion and its impact upon their meaning system. The data was analysed through thematic analysis. Although significant life crises preceded conversion in a few instances, more frequently it occurred on the background of constant searching and striving motivated by a sense of internal disharmony. Informants reported that their meaning systems changed in a number of ways: God centred rather than self centred, serving God's purpose, giving control to God, dying to self, lesser self preoccupation and self forgiveness. For the majority of participants there was an intensification of pre existent, latent, Christian beliefs. These processes of intellectual conversion were facilitated by the central teachings of the church, Alpha courses and home groups. This study supports the theoretical framework proposed by Paloutzian, 2005.*

**Keywords:** Conversion, Evangelical, Christian, self, meaning

**WCPRR March 2013: 29-44. © 2013 WACP  
ISSN: 1932-6270**

## INTRODUCTION

**Analytic frameworks on religious conversion** Although psychologists of religion have had a longstanding interest in conversion, there has been a lack of theoretical integration in this discipline and a number of diverse frameworks have been deployed (**Note 1**). One analytic framework has attempted to differentiate sudden from gradual conversion. Conversion was a prominent theme for the early American psychologists of religion and was influenced by the revivalist expression of conversion – sudden, emotionally charged, spontaneous, individual. Using Paul's Damascus experience as described in Acts 9 as a paradigm, earlier research was dominated by psychologists who largely focused upon adolescence, sudden conversion and intra individual processes generally within Protestant Christianity (the 'classic paradigm'). Although gradual conversion was recognised, it was generally contrasted with sudden conversion rather than being a subject of study in its own right.

Another framework has focused upon the active versus passive convert. From the early 1960s sociologically oriented social psychologists deploying participant observation and qualitative interviews focused upon gradual conversions. Their perspective was interpersonal (the 'contemporary paradigm') and was linked to the emerging interest in 'new religious movements' and of communal

---

Correspondence to: Dr Anna Stout

Oxleas NHS Foundation Trust, Oxleas House, Queen Elizabeth Hospital, London, SE18 4QH  
[anna.stout@oxleas.nhs.uk](mailto:anna.stout@oxleas.nhs.uk)

Dr Simon Dein,

Mental Health Science, University College London, Charles Bell House, 67-73 Riding House Street, London, W1W 7EJ  
[s.dein@ucl.ac.uk](mailto:s.dein@ucl.ac.uk)

Received January 11, 2012. Accepted March 19, 2012.

Christian groups (Richardson, 1985; Kilbourne & Richardson, 1989). This research paradigm reflected the impact of individualisation, pluralisation and secularisation from the 1960s onwards (Zock, 2006). This was in line with changes in mainstream Christianity whereby those converting were active seekers of meaning in their lives. Conversion was a volitional process which was no longer seen as predominantly emotional. Rather it was seen as a rational process where the potential convert was an intentional and evaluating being. The characteristics of the active paradigm can be easily traced: the search for meaning in the aspect of 'quest', the social factor in the aspects of 'encounter' (the first contacts with a religious group or one of its members) and 'interaction' between 'advocates' and potential converts. A further aspect concerns the way 'commitment' takes place. A third focus has been on semantic differential approaches examining conversion stories and the ways that these derive from and accord with official religious teachings. Since 1980 a new paradigm is emerging: the biographical-narrative approach, focussing on the role of conversion in identity construction by way of narratives (Popp Baier, 2001). Here the influence of the active paradigm is much stronger and self-transformation is the major construct. This corresponds with the prevailing trend in identity theory, which postulates that identity formation is a socio-cultural process in which the 'self' is constructed by an active individual using available cultural traditions to mould his or her own identity. Beit-Hallahmi (1989) states that the study of conversion yields relevant insights for the psychology of religion because it reveals the basic processes of developing a religious identity. He defines conversion as 'a perceptible change in one's religious identity – a conscious self-transformation'.

**The antecedents of conversion** Though many conversion approaches emphasise the importance of crisis and tensions in the conversion process (James, 1902; Lofland & Stark, 1965; Rambo, 1995; Snow & Machalek, 1984), numerous critics have questioned whether conversions are always preceded by 'objective' or 'measurable' life crises (Anderson & Bondi, 1998; Beit Hallahmi & Argyle, 1997; Greil & Rudy, 1983). Snow and Phillips (1980) point out that there is a tendency among converts to re-examine their biographies post-conversion to find evidence of discontent or crisis, a phenomenon which is encouraged by the religious movement that they have joined. Maruna, Wilson, and Curran, (2006) posit that a more important catalyst for conversion may not be a life crisis but rather an identity crisis, questioning who one really is. This dissatisfaction with the self is echoed by other authors. For instance, James (1902) speaks of 'the sense of dividedness' that dominates the pre-conversion phase. Gillespie (1973), states: 'Wishing you were one thing and knowing you were another is severe, and produces tension that may find release in the religious conversion experience'. Similarly Beit Hallahmi and Argyle (1997) discuss the importance of psychological conflict as being 'the *sine qua non* for the transformation of self through conversion'.

**What aspects of personality change in conversion?** One of the most interesting theoretical questions surrounding conversion is what actually changes at a personal level when a person converts (**Note 2**). Following their overview of two bodies of literature, the research on personality change and the research on conversion, Paloutzian, Richardson and Rambo (1999) conclude that several consistent patterns have emerged in the data. It is the person's purposes, goals, values, attitudes and beliefs, identity and focus of ultimate concern that change, not his or her core traits. It is the mid-level or more global aspects of personality that are affected by conversion.

Paloutzian (2005) proposes a model based upon research on spiritual transformation, itself a superset of religious conversion, and recent work on religion as a meaning system and suggests that this model may integrate findings from conversion research over the past 100 years. There is a correspondence between the aspects of a person which show change from pre to post spiritual transformation and religious conversion and the elements of a person's socio-cognitive system that reflects whatever he/she is committed to. The implications of his argument are:

1. There must be pressures upon the system prompted by discrepancies between implicit or intended expectancies about how an aspect of meaning would be expressed or a need associated with it would be met. These include strains or doubts and some discrepancy

between the *ought* and the *is* of a person's life (Hill, 2002). These doubts may be a consequence of crises of purpose, value, efficacy, or self worth.

2. The traditional type of spiritual transformation discussed in the psychology of religion is religious conversion.
3. Spiritual transformation is broader than religious conversion in that people can be spiritual in ways that they do not regard as religious.

He lists a number of components of the religious meaning system: goals, attitudes, beliefs, overall purpose, values, self definition and ultimate concern. This framework is supported by previous research. Research has demonstrated that a general sense of valuing can be more prominent in religious believers (Paloutzian, 1981). Religious belief is associated with specific goals and purposes to which people aspire such as deepening the relationship with God (Emmons, 1999). Religious conversion is often associated with a change in self or core identity construct (James, 1902; Pargament, 1997). Finally transformation results in a change in focus of ultimate concern. As Paloutzian (2005) points out, research on religious conversion suggests that most changes do not involve a major overhaul of the whole system of meaning but rather changes in strength or type of one of more specific elements of the system. Religion as a meaning system is unique in that it centers on what is perceived to be the sacred (Pargament, 1997). The sacred refers to concepts of higher powers, such as the divine, God, or the transcendent, which are considered holy and set apart from the ordinary, and are therefore perceived as worthy of veneration and respect, and can become a unique source of significance in people's lives.

Spiritual transformation occurs after some element of doubt, feeling of unease, pressure or motivation to change. Doubts occur when life circumstances occur that are inconsistent with deeply held beliefs or expectations. The outcome of this process may be transition from one faith to another, change from no religion to a religion, changing from one orientation to an alternative interpretation within a religious tradition, or intensification or diminution of religious beliefs within a faith tradition. Radical dramatic types of conversion are probably the least common type. Hill (2002) underscores the fact that radical dramatic conversions remain our stereotype precisely because of their vividness due to their low base rate combined with their status as exemplars.

While there are many studies of evangelical, fundamentalist, or born-again (**Note 3**) Christians (most dealing with how their religious and social values differ from others), there have been surprisingly few studies of the born-again experience as individual religious change (Dixon *et al*, 1992; Jensen, 2001). In this paper we concentrate upon spiritual conversion among a group of 'Born Again' Christians in the UK. This study aimed to examine: a) The antecedents of religious conversion; b) The type of conversion in terms of sudden/gradual, active/ passive; c) The aspects of personality which change following conversion; d) The relationship between the official church doctrine and conversion stories.

**THIS STUDY** An ethnographic study of a population of eleven born again Christians was undertaken over a period of six months in 2009. The researcher attended the church in question as a member of the congregation for two years prior to the study as a participant observer and informants were recruited from members of the researcher's home group. Further informants were recruited by a snowballing technique. Semi structured interviews were conducted individually in the informant's home or in the church. Informants were asked to provide a detailed description of their conversion experience and its impact upon their lives and self.

Interviews were transcribed and rigorously analysed through Miles and Huberman's (1994) data reduction, display and conclusion drawing method. The data are first codified, sorted and sifted in a manner that facilitated the identification of similar phrases, themes and patterns. The transcripts were read independently by the two researchers to assess reliability of themes (AS, SD) and the various themes elicited were compared and consensus was reached on grand themes. Like other qualitative research methods the narratives do not generate statistically representative samples that can be generalised.

**The church** The church in question is a broad Evangelical/Liberal Church of England congregation in a relatively affluent London borough. The majority of the approximately 300 members are White British, although a substantial minority are Black. A variety of services are held throughout the week, some of which follow the Book of Common Prayer and include Holy Communion, Common Worship and Evening Prayer – there are also more informal contemporary services held. The majority of congregation members are middle class and in employment, and range in age from teenagers to elderly, with the majority being in their thirties- fifties. A large number of congregants have children and there is a well attended children’s group on a Sunday morning. Several informants revealed personal experiences of witnessing speaking in tongues, and one had participated in the practice, although not in this specific church. Personal testimonies are rare although visiting speakers may talk about their experiences of coming to faith and, in so doing, recreate their own experiences of conversion (Stromberg, 1993).

The nurture/guidance/discipleship of the congregation is a major force in cultivating, shaping, and guiding these interviewees in their journey of faith. Newcomers asked to complete a card with their contact details on which are deposited in a box at the front of the church – they are later contacted by a member of the congregation to welcome them and invite them to another service. New attendees are also met by a member of the clergy at the door on the way out after a service, he endeavours to greet them and discuss their faith in Christ. Informants spoke about how the ministers approached them early in their attendance, and how this made them feel rapidly welcomed and included. After the parish communion service on Sunday morning – the most frequently attended service - the congregation is encouraged to stay for coffee and cake, where new people are met by the church wardens and clergy. There is a drive, on a regular basis, to involve new congregation members in a range of activities within the church, such as Sunday stewarding, church administration, the Sunday welcome team, the Sunday Children’s groups, becoming a member of the Church PCC or the youth club. Personal anniversaries are publicly celebrated, for example, people who have had a birthday in the last week are asked to come up to the front so that they can be prayed for and happy birthday sung. The main Sunday service includes an announcements section, where invitations are made to groups such as the alpha group or the confirmation group. There is also a weekly pamphlet given out which details meetings and occasions in the coming week, and advertises home groups. Thus newcomers are typically made to feel ‘at home’ in the church and to reflect upon the role of Jesus in their lives, both of which facilitate their conversion experiences. The church also tries to be very active in the community and encourages reaching out and into the community – there are lots of weekly activities that go on, that people are encouraged to participate in, which may encourage an emphasis within one’s personal life of putting faith at the centre of all you do.

There is no direct teaching about conversion; no public demonstrations of a Damascian type conversion experience or public declarations of experiences such as this, as might be found in a charismatic church. Within this church, the process of conversion seems more subtle. Teaching in services occurs in the form of a sermon, based on a bible text, which tends to be reflective and encourages further personal thought. There is however a focus on how to live life with Jesus as an example and faith at the centre of one’s life, of giving one’s life and self to God. There is a strong emphasis on exploring one’s faith and connecting with like-minded people through home groups and the Alpha Course.

It is a “vision” of the church that every member of its congregation belongs to a ‘home group’, one of the aims of which is set out as “growing in our relationship with God”. New members are encouraged to join a home group – there are designated members of the church who organise this. Personal testimonials are more common in these smaller home groups which are held on a regular basis and which consist of groups of on average six to ten people who meet in each others’ homes weekly or fortnightly to discuss their faith and the Bible, share a meal and pray together. These provide an informal forum where individuals can share matters of faith.

Those visiting for the first time are told about the Alpha course and encouraged to attend. This is a short course of about six to eight weeks held once a week, as an introduction to the Christian faith and is run several times a year and advertised in the service and on banners on the side of the church.

Sessions are held in “neutral” settings, like the local pub, or in the church itself. Sessions begin with a short talk on a topics such as ‘What is the meaning of my life?’, ‘Who is Jesus and How do I pray?’, the group then splits into smaller groups to discuss these topics, with an emphasis on people feeling free to ask whatever questions come to mind, and to answer each other’s questions, from personal experiences and musings, guided by the leader and “helpers”. Through reflection on their current circumstances individuals explore the potential role of faith in their lives. After the Alpha course is completed, there is usually the choice to continue, for example, by joining a home group or attending confirmation class. Of the eleven informants who participated in this study, four in total had completed the Alpha course and come to conversion via it. The Alpha course is also regularly hosted by the church, as is a Confirmation course for adults who were baptised as children and wish to confirm their faith, or who are coming to faith for the first time in adult life (For more information: [www.alphacourse.org](http://www.alphacourse.org)).

**Being Born Again** All the informants in this group self-identified as having been born again. Being born again had a variety of meanings for the individuals (**Note 4**). A few described a discrete religious experience – feeling the spirit entering into them in some way, being filled with the Holy Spirit, having the Holy Spirit living inside them. These informants had the experience of a precise moment which they identified as being the exact point when they became ‘born again’. For each of these informants, however, this defining moment came after a period of searching and discovery. A female informant in her thirties described the following intense and sudden experience:

*‘It was actually here in a service... my heart opened and I was overcome and life was wonderful for about two weeks... there was a definite moment for me’.*

Another female informant spoke of a similar distinct moment when she underwent what she felt was a significant religious experience:

*‘A gradual thing... although there was this one incident, I went on a day course, we’d been studying this course called The Way of The Spirit, some bible studying course, and we went to this day Christian centre, and the author of the book was there preaching about it along with lots of other Christians, and you know some people have these different gifts and this guy had, well, he went around touching people and they would fall over. Now, I think the power of the Spirit was working through this person and I don’t know how it happens but I’ve seen it on TV and I’ve heard about it, how people can be just prayed over, a hand over, and people can get a real sense of heat, something moving, so much so, so powerful it will blast them down to the ground – now in the past I would have been sceptical about that but it happened to me, and I can’t explain what it was that day, people were singing and there was some prayer and this person came up to me and just, I don’t think he even touched me, and I fell to the ground...the term I use is being slain in the spirit, and I had no chance to react other than that I just found myself laughing, I was so surprised and shocked...but to me that was testimony that the Holy Spirit can move...’.*

In contrast many individuals spoke of making a decision to actively live through God, as opposed to a passive belief in his existence – making this active decision was seen as a central aspect of becoming born again. It was a gradual process rather than a discrete experience. Their stories indicated initiative and decision making often after a period of reflection. Most of the informants did not describe a sudden coming to faith, a ‘road to Damascus’ experience, but rather spoke of gradually coming to a decision to commit to a belief that was already present in them, in a passive, background way. A theme emerged of a gradual, ever developing, journey - of coming from a vague Christian-influenced background where Christian beliefs were present but not necessarily prominent. Informants described making an active decision to commit to Christianity and God after a period of seeking information and consideration.

Glenn, a twenty-five year old male informant who had an active role in the church and had been attending for several years described this importance of committing one's life to God:

*'I think it relates to – certainly to Jesus when he's talking to Nicodemus and saying a person needs to be born again to inherit the Kingdom of Heaven... this idea that the point at which we commit our lives to Jesus, when we choose to die to an old way of life and be born again, the new life which is not for ourselves but living for God...yes I do consider myself born again but it's an ongoing thing, to be born again'.*

David, a man in his forties who had been attending the church for the last seven years described the following experience:

*'There was no extrinsic need that made me feel that there was some huge gap that needed to be filled by church or by anything – as I said before its more the sort of organic thing – I think its always been there and that's why I wouldn't say its been born again, its always been dormant in the back ground but its changed from being some value set to you know there being a sense of faith and there's actually more meaning to it that just being good to people...?'*

Catherine, a female informant in her thirties, described a gradual process of developing faith but could also point a precise moment when she made a decision to become born again:

*'I could probably put a date on it if I looked through. I don't have a date in my head now, but approximately I could work out around February time, 2002, it was halfway through my second year at university so I can actually put quite a clear date on it when I, the time in my life when I became a Christian... Em, yes I suppose there is actually a moment, a day, which is a culmination of several months, if not a year or two of searching, which was actually the point where I decided to become a Christian. It was when I was, I'd been doing the alpha course and there was a point when, from what I'd learnt and where my thinking had got to, I suppose there was all different parts of the jigsaw fitting together but I got to the point where I felt that I needed to make a decision, where I believed there was such a thing as a yes or no situation. I felt that if I didn't make that decision then, at that moment, I could shy away from it, I could choose not to make that decision, sort of not really being sure, sort of reject Christianity but I did feel that I had got to a point where things made sense to me and things added up in a certain way but the most honest thing I could do for myself is commit to starting a journey of faith'.*

**External and internal factors** Informants reported both internal (internal disharmony) and external (life event) factors as impacting upon their conversions. One woman in her mid thirties had been attending the church for six years, and who had an active role in the children's groups held there, had experienced the death of her sister fourteen years previously, and had found that Christianity provided a means of making sense of her bereavement and of gaining comfort. For her, her religious framework allowed her to reinterpret a negative life event in a positive light as a form of spiritual growth:

*'The other thing... my sister died in '95 – it initially started for me was my sister's death, and before she died she wrote these words: God blesses those who have faith in Him – He has blessed me with a new life... for us as a family it was like she had not been healed physically but spiritually – she knew where she was going, she was talking about a new life in Christ... The death of my sister, as much as it's sad, I also believe you know that God does things for a reason and through this tragic event... maybe if it hadn't happened that way we'd still be nominal Christians, believing but not really practising and God uses*

*situations you know to glorify himself which I can see happening through this particular thing, the death of my sister’.*

In this instance external factors led to disharmony which resulted in intensification of belief. For most informants however there was no clearly defined external event. Rather, a recurrent theme was one of internal disharmony, or a sense of seeking for something more. This was the input pressure that prompts change. There was a sense of dissatisfaction and unease with the self and life as it was. This occurred often in response to reaching adulthood and independence, leaving home both literally and metaphorically. For many informants leaving home for the first time occurred when they started university. They spoke of the comfort in knowing that there was someone else looking after them and providing them with guidance in making decisions in adult life.

Conversion has consistently been found to be most likely during adolescence where individuals challenge and test normative systems and identity formation is cemented (Beit Hallahmi & Argyle, 1997). One informant described the point, at aged sixteen, when he began to realise his parents were human and fallible. For many, this realisation, dawning as one reaches adulthood and begins to see their parents as humans in their own right, can be unsettling:

*‘I also remember a time when I first started to realise that what my parents said wasn’t necessarily true, and so I think, I can’t even remember when but I do remember that shaking me a bit, you know, thinking, well, actually I disagree with my mum and if I disagree with my mum on this thing, then that calls into question everything...’.*

For this informant it seems that this then led to a deeper questioning of his parents’ faith in which he had been raised— and reaching the conclusion that he did hold those beliefs. Having arrived at this decision himself, through a process of searching and questioning, reinforced his faith and injected it with conviction and commitment. This was recurrent theme: the early influence of a Christian household and upbringing, but then a process of questioning and searching and committing actively, in adulthood. So even though there was an early influence, for some stronger than others, it seems that is not enough to make one a Christian. People described actively choosing.

Graduating from university and being faced with adult life can also be a time of unease and lack of direction. Mary, in her thirties, had moved to London after graduating from university. She spoke about the difficulties this posed and the questions it raised for her:

*‘I was very lost and confused and I’d gone through a bit of a rough...yeah, I was a bit lost and confused in life really...I was quite lost and lonely when I first came to London and I had been before for, I don’t know, a couple of years and I suppose that’s almost what led me to ask questions and to think what’s wrong with me, why, you know, don’t I have any friends, why is life so full of this...and I suppose that was what brought me to, you know, seek meaning in life’.*

Another female informant, in her thirties, described becoming born again in response to internal difficulties and emotional distress:

*‘Well, partly I came to it (becoming born again) because I had a couple of bad personal experiences, really traumatic, and it was interesting going to the church, it was like, I was walking on the common and I was so unforgiving to certain individuals, somewhere very remote circumstances, I don’t mind saying what it was but it was to do with the World Trade Centre and nine eleven, and I had actually gone over there to help where I could and I was affected directly in many ways, so there was that anger and there was also my ex partner, there was all that at the same time and I was getting really kind of caught up in this bitterness, and it was interesting, it was on this Sunday and I just got to the point where I just was ready to scream out, out of the anger and bitterness I felt, and what really got me was, here I was, an atheist, at the point I was acknowledging I was agnostic, and I*

*was crying out to God, and I was like, well why am I crying out to God when I don't know if He really exists? you know, I'm still sort of hedging my bets as an agnostic, and it was while I was walking on the common there was this, sort of this voice that said "Go into the church" and I was trying to convince myself that I was going in to look at the architecture, and it was interesting because I even said, in a testing way, I bet they don't even treat women with respect! and of course I go and not only do I see the vicar there but I see, the reverend who's a woman, and the fact that D was so respectful and said, Now C will be giving the sermon today, and I couldn't believe that.*

The same informant went on to talk about how this initial contact with the church affected her:

*'And I was going regularly (to the church) which was a real shock because when I did it I did it because I thought well I'll just keep going and it wasn't until about six months later when all of a sudden it really just hit me I was like I've got to learn to forgive and I went through a major sort of emotional, sometimes draining, sometimes really cathartic, thing of really focusing on forgiveness - took me two years to get through that it was a slow process, it didn't happen overnight, but what did happen overnight was that all of a sudden I was like I believe in Jesus which was really shocking because... I didn't want to call myself a Christian until I really felt I was a Christian...'*

Hannah, a female informant in her late thirties described how dissatisfaction with how she was living her life led to her decision to commit to faith:

*'I would say probably in my early twenties, that was when I knew what it was to be a Christian, but I wasn't really practising that, you know I was saying things, doing things that I knew I shouldn't be doing, so that was the time when I feel that I was not in that close relationship with God...I think it's been a gradual progression, you know, things have happened in my life, you know, good and bad, that have made me think about God, you know, and what I believe in and my relationship with Jesus and that has slowly...shaped my words and actions and obviously, I'm still on a spiritual journey...'*

**Focus on God rather than the self: Part of a Broader Picture** Changes occurred in their meaning systems to the extent that their lives became centred round God and their goals reflected their quest to have a close relationship with him. Conversion was characterised by novel ways of conceptualising the self, agency, purpose and identity. For most, being born again required a sense of placing God at the centre of their life, and committing to a personal relationship with him. This relationship became their ultimate concern. This led to a greater sense of meaning and the feeling that God was in control. To varying degrees personal agency was diminished. Religion provided informants with a sense of meaning and purpose in life, in a variety of ways. Meaning in life was described as deriving from a sense of seeing a bigger picture, having an understanding of one's place in the universe. Emmons (2000) has described this aspect of personality as spiritual transcendence.

A female informant in her twenties had been attending the church for approximately five years. She described making God the focus of her life – giving her life to God:

*'What I do mean (by being born again) is the sense in which I think of myself as having given my life to God and living for something other than myself, I'm trying to work out what I mean by that, it can be quite difficult, but I mean in a sense that my life being for a higher purpose or part of a broader narrative so born again is quite a good description for that belief that I made a decision that there was a greater narrative for why we are here on this earth and I believe that there is a God and God calls us to live for him and all that that means. So born again, it suggests a decision, a commitment so in that sense I think it's a*

*good and useful label and its biblical I guess as it's something that Jesus talks about so that's what I mean when I say born again'.*

Nadine, a forty year old female described the following experience:

*'In some ways it felt like putting something right that always should have been there, because it made so much sense of my experience of the world and what I understood and my beliefs and all these things sort of came together and it sort of seemed like a home coming to true self...but then in another sense it was a complete change as it was upheaval of my whole world view... my whole world view had shifted, my whole understanding of life, purpose and meaning had all fallen in line with a Christian outlook'.*

Another woman in her late thirties explained her experience of faith providing a bigger picture:

*'I try to focus – I try to get out of my tiny world really, I try and focus on God as the creator and em, I always find if I acknowledge who he is and his majesty that that would bring me out of my trouble, my tiny world and try to focus on his majesty...'*

Another female informant also spoke about how faith provided meaning:

*'I'm at that stage where everything is from God, you know, He's got a reason.....we don't always get the answers to the questions that we have or why things have happen and that's probably where faith comes into practice, that you have to trust Him, that He's got plans for you....it's got to that stage where I have peace about things, yes, I feel sad, I question God like anyone would – why? But at the end of it all, I also know He's in control, He knows what He's doing, He's got the bigger picture'.*

Frieda, a female in her late twenties, described how faith provided her with meaning in life:

*'I believe that it's the best explanation for the world, it's sort of the best narrative, if I really question that.....there aren't any negative things because ultimately it's what I find to be the most satisfying explanation of what makes sense of my life...'*

**God as a locus of control** Informants mentioned that deepening religious faith was associated with God taking over control of their lives and letting go of personal responsibility. There was a loss of autonomy to varying degrees. For instance Lynn spoke about how becoming born again had changed the locus of control in her life:

*'Oh yes, I know the big difference – the big difference is I would have had to have been in control, I would have had to rectify the situation and I would have out of fear, would have been probably with the best intentions but by being so fearful, not really working within the situation, almost trying to get the situation to work...'*

She went on to develop this idea:

*'I think it's a good coping mechanism because at least you don't retreat into your own little world – you face it, and I would confront and face, and that's still a good thing but what I would do because I was coming from a place of fear and blackness or unknown....so I guess what's different now is again, it's that letting go, letting God think for me, I still confront it, that's where I was doing the right thing but I need to be open and I need to be compassionate and I need to not be ruled by fear, and where it is fearful, knowing that I've got that faith to say, ok, I don't understand this but I'm going to leave it with you and I'm going to see, I know I have to leave this with you, and I've found that in all the traumatic*

*incidents where I've found that feeling of being Christ centred, things have actually worked out really well...?'*

Susan, a woman in her forties spoke of how faith helped provide meaning and coping in time of difficulty:

*'It is those times when I get close to God, absolutely, because its that handing over again, that acknowledgement that I've tried my best and I'm still in this mess, or this happened to me I've got no idea why so yes, difficult times in life I do get closer to God...and I suppose I've done that for a while now and so I'm more confident that something is going to come out of it, it's going to enrich my life or somebody else's life, I do believe that there's a purpose in it...'*

**God's purpose: Overall purpose** Many informants spoke about how religion provided them with a sense of a higher purpose in life – God's purpose. This was about making decisions and choices determined by what God would want one to do, and what Christ would have chosen to do, as opposed to one's personal instinct. Sometimes, this means having to overcome one's personal desires.

*'Slowly but surely you're being moulded and transformed to be a better person and if you can keep your eyes fixed on that you're doing it for God as opposed to your own personal goals...?'*

Mary described the following experiences:

*'It has changed how I approach life, I suppose I look for a higher purpose, instead of just seeking something that makes me happy...its about putting things into perspective, putting things into the bigger picture...so for example I might think "Oh, it'd be really nice to have a boyfriend but actually, not if it doesn't fit with God's purpose, which is why it can feel like a bit of a constraint sometimes because sometimes, actually, I just want a boyfriend, but actually if you do that it feels so wrong and the only thing that can feel right is following God's purpose, which can sometimes be difficult because obviously it's not all plain sailing, but it actually feels right when it does, you know, go right – so in that sense it does change how I approach life'.*

David stated:

*'And I know that my faith is still awakening and that more of God's purpose will be revealed over time...I would definitely attribute my faith to giving me a great sense of purpose and I'd like to think that sense of purpose leads me to serve God better...?'*

Thomas, an informant in his early thirties, stated:

*'When I came to London I had the job, I'm a kind of management consultant... but its the kind of purpose of life is now really different, to previously it was big house, Ferrari, you know, that was kind of what I wanted was nice things and luxury and now, I'm not really bothered by those things... the purpose now is to do what God wants me to do really...?'*

**Dying to self: Changes in self definition** Informants described how religion had changed their focus in life from self to God. They experienced a lessened preoccupation with themselves rather than an actual loss of self. Self-centredness was replaced by God – Centeredness. Several referred to this as 'Dying to self'. A male informant spoke about the idea of 'dying to self'. What is actually lost is not the self but self absorption:

*'... it's motivated by faith wanting erm firstly believing that it's so important that people not for the sake of getting to heaven when you die but actually for the sake of what it really means to be alive is to be less – there's this sort of weird paradox, where the more we die to ourselves the more we find that's we're actually alive, and this is the whole born again thing, the idea that God's image in us, we actually model that image in us, so the more we die to ourselves the more we find ourselves actually alive... and then there's a sense that to serve God and to experience God and to be with God actually we don't do that by sitting around and putting our hands in the air, although that is a good thing, to worship, but actually if I want to be with Jesus, I need to be where Jesus is, and if I want to be with the poor and needy then I need to sort of get out of church building and actually start being around the poor and needy'.*

Glenn, a male informant, stated:

*'I think dying to self is about saying I'm now living for Jesus, which means I'm living for others, because I think that's what it means to serve Jesus, looking out for all the people who are lost and poor and needy, and that's actually what our goals should be - in order to serve the King we need to do the work of the King and the Kingdom which is serving the poor and the needy and to actually have that kind of love requires God in us rather than us kind of working it up...'*

*'I suppose it's this idea of dying to self and not, being aware that everything I have, be that my talents, my resources, that it's a gift from god and that I shouldn't hold onto things tightly but be open to sharing and doing what God wants me to do'.*

A female informant in her forties recounted:

*'After I became born again, I actually placed, well tried to place Jesus at the centre of my life and strive towards a relationship with Him, em, in everything really...'*

**Conversion as sense of acceptance: Self forgiveness** Typically, becoming born again brought with it a sense of acceptance for whom one was, regardless of fault, and therefore self-acceptance. Informants described how their religious beliefs provided a sense of being loved for who they were, and of being forgiven for their limitations.

David asserted:

*'Yeah, well, I've been thinking about this recently – conviction of sin, actually, keeps bringing me back, if it's one thing that stands out from all sorts of other things... the one predominant feature of Christianity is redemption- for me, is redemption – if it didn't have that it would be like so many other things in life that can connect me spiritually, but yeah, I think that's the aspect of our humanity that for me Christianity addresses... its an acknowledgement that with the best will in the world I'm not going to be able to obtain – I'm not going to be able to be the person that I want to be, would like to be in a moral and spiritual sense, and just to acknowledge that is very liberating, in a lot of other aspects in life you strive, it's all about striving and the big thing for me about my faith is it's the end of that its ok, conviction of sin, and acknowledgement of sin, it's ok, I've done it and it's a letting go of that...'*

Susan stated:

*‘Acceptance... because I think it’s so hard for all of us to accept who we are in every aspect of life, you know, you don’t want to accept you’re a person of limited intelligence or limited ability or limited faith...’.*

A woman in her early twenties, who had been brought up as a Christian and described having been ‘born again’ about seven years old, a much earlier age than other informants, spoke about being born again as starting afresh in a new life, with emphasis on the forgiveness of sins:

*‘Well I guess the church that I was brought up in, if you weren’t born again you weren’t really a Christian, so I guess there is that in me... dying to old things...its about forgiveness, a big bit, and the sort of letting go of things, obviously your past doesn’t disappear and that still makes you who you are so in a way, that’s still a part of you but for me, those things just don’t, are no longer an issue – I live my life in a different way, I have a different...its quite hard to explain... I think its about your perspective on life, so I live life with a different perspective, but I guess I was born again but as a child so it’s quite hard to remember before that... obviously since then there have been lots of things I’ve done, sin you would say, but because I’ve been born again, I believe that I ask for forgiveness and its gone’.*

Mary gave the following accounts:

*‘Well, the experience itself, it completely changed my life, it changed me and it was like, it was like as though everything was wonderful...’.*

*‘It changed my every day life, em, I wasn’t scared, I wasn’t scared of anybody...’.*

Lynn reported:

*‘And I’d been seeking God, I suppose, or He’d been seeking me, rather, and at that moment, that was when I was “Ah!”, I don’t know, yeah, nothing really mattered, all the little things that mattered before, all the hurt and pain and the, all this sort of went away, er, I forgave everybody and everything bad that had ever happened to me, in a, in a sort of general way, so yeah, everything was great, sort of healed me inside I suppose’.*

Mary said of her conversion experience:

*‘I remember things sort of settled down, I was still changed inside, I remember certain things seeming different, well the whole world seeming different actually in a sense... I felt great love and compassion for everyone and everything, em, and I wanted to sort of reach out to them...’.*

**DISCUSSION** This study was set up to examine the conversion processes of a group of Evangelical Christians, and more specifically explored the types of conversion (sudden/gradual/active/passive), antecedents of conversion, personality changes and the relation between conversion stories and the teachings of the church.

As Rambo (2003) points out in relation to conversion, ‘Evangelical Christians have tended to “own” the concept for several hundred years, and most conversations about conversion – whether on a popular or scholarly level – are confined to the Pauline Paradigm of sudden, dramatic change’. This model, as he asserts, combines notions of an unexpected flash of revelation associated with a radical reversal of previous beliefs and the assumption that converts are passive respondents to outside forces.

For most of the people in the current study being 'born again' did not fit in well with the Damascus stereotype, inherited from James (1902) and portrayed by both academics and the general public. Watts (2006) questions the distinction between sudden and gradual conversion that derives from the early days of the psychology of religion. However, despite the appearance of suddenness in many conversion experiences, there is always the possibility that a gradual period of gestation leads up to and precedes the decisive moment. He argues that conversion needs to be understood psychologically in terms of a preparatory period preceding conversion and of a subsequent period in which the implications of the conversion are assimilated. Thus conversion may be less unusual in its suddenness.

In our study only two informants reported that conversion was sudden, and proceeded by a significant life event. However, much more commonly reported was a gradual conversion associated with an active process of intellectual searching based on a sense of dissatisfaction with the self as it was and the life being lived. Informants took initiative and were involved in decision making. To some extent these findings might be accounted for by the fact the eleven people in this one church reflected its affluence, thus higher level of education, thus a greater probability of having intellectually mediated conversions, than other populations might have. However, to date, there are no other studies examining the influence of educational background and social class on typology of conversion. Furthermore the stories of slow intellectual conversion reflect the teachings of the church with their focus on how to live life with Jesus as an example, faith at the centre of one's life and on giving one's life to Christ. These themes were regularly discussed in the sermons, Alpha courses and home groups all of which provided a context in which potential converts could reflect upon their lives. The semantics of the informants reflected the teaching in these activities.

The findings in this study fit well with the theoretical perspective described by Paloutzian (2005) who posits that a key element to any conversion must be some element of doubt, pressure or motivation to change. For many of our informants there was a chronic sense of dissatisfaction with the self and life lived which was assuaged by being 'born again' which often led to a feeling of being accepted both by God and by other members of their communities. In the current Evangelical group subjects recognise that their self is limited; conversion involves a dramatic change in the self, one in which the self becomes incorporated into the sacred. They undergo a transformation as a result of grasping that there is something fundamentally wrong with their lives. Old values became seen as no longer viable and old goals as no longer significant. The findings accord with previous studies which posit that a more important catalyst for conversion may not be a life crisis, but rather an identity crisis and questioning who one really is (Maruna et al., 2006; Pargament, 1997; Heirich, 1977; Proudfoot & Shaver, 1975).

The interviews revealed that the major changes expressed by informants were in attitudes, values, goals, overall purpose, self definition and ultimate concern. There was a change in the meaning system. In terms of values their priorities changed to greater valuation of a religious lifestyle. For many of these evangelicals there was a change in the goals to which they aspired – as opposed to material satisfaction they devoted their lives to serving God which rendered their lives more purposeful. Religious belief is associated with specific goals and purposes to which people aspire such as deepening the relationship with God (Emmons, 1999). A close relationship with Jesus became their ultimate concern. Their self definition changed in a number of ways: God centred rather than self centred, serving God's purpose, giving control to God, dying to self, lesser self preoccupation and self forgiveness. The self can be seen to undergo transcendence, with new values and goals developed with God at the centre.

In his overview of religious and spiritual conversion, Paloutzian (2005) points out that the research on religious conversion suggests that most changes do not involve a total overhaul of the whole system of meaning but instead are identified as changes in strength or type of one or more elements in the system. Transformation may involve an increase or a decrease in adherence to the same religion or worldview. Individuals in this study typically underwent a strengthening of their already present nascent faith, an increase in commitment and activity. Some of the informants spoke of having long

term 'mild' Christian beliefs. This is an area which is often neglected in the literature where the worldviews of the converts prior to their conversion is often ignored and relatively little research has been conducted on intra-religious shifts in allegiance or identity. Informants described in the majority an upbringing within a loosely Christian environment, and becoming born again brought a resolution to strengthen these pre-existing yet passively held beliefs, bringing the beliefs to the foreground and making an active decision to live through God.

This study has two main limitations. The sample is small, but even so saturation was obtained for the themes. Second, as in all studies of religious conversion the reports may have been subject to bias with informants retrospectively justifying their membership of the group. They therefore tell researchers more about the individual's present construction of personal identity than they tell us about the past (Snow & Machalek, 1983).

**CONCLUSION** This study has attempted to gain an understanding of the experience of being a British Christian – how people come to accept and commit to Christianity, and the effects this then has on their actual lived and their mental lives. As such it contributes to the literature on conversion in the psychology of religion where current studies of conversion in Evangelical Christianity are rare. The data support Paloutzian's (2005) theory of religious conversion which emphasises changes in the meaning system at the core of religious change. Future work in this area should deploy longitudinal methodology to examine the complex links between religious change and personality.

## NOTES

1. The emerging academic field of conversion contains useful perspectives from anthropology (see Harding, 1987; Hefner, 1993; Busker & Glazier, 2003), sociology (see Montgomery, 2001; Richardson, 1978), history (see Cusack, 1998).
2. See also Travisano, 1970; Spilka, Hood, Hunsberger, and Gorsuch, 2003; Snow & Machelek, 1983; Paloutzian, Richardson and Rambo, 1999, for cogent discussions of changes in selfhood and identity.
3. The term 'born again' in Protestant Christianity is complex. It is deployed in various ways and has a variety of meanings. For some it refers to a direct religious experience or a form of religious conversion. The phenomenon of conversion within certain segments of the Christian faith is frequently labelled as 'being born again'. This derives from John 3: 1-21 'I tell you the truth. Unless a man is born again, he cannot see the Kingdom of God'. The phenomenon is understood by different Christian traditions in different ways.
4. The details of subjects have been changed to maintain anonymity. The names are pseudonyms.

## REFERENCES

- Anderson T & Bondi L. Exiting the drug addict role: Variations by race and gender. *Symbolic Interaction*, 21: 155-74, 1998
- Beit-Hallahmi B. *Prolegomena to the Psychological Study of Religion*. Lewisburg, Bucknell University Press, 1989
- Beit-Hallahmi B & Argyle M. *The Psychology of Religious Behaviour*. New York, Routledge, 1997
- Buckser A & Glazier S. *The anthropology of religious conversion*. New York, Rowman and Littlefield, 2003
- Cusack C. *Conversion among the Germanic peoples*. London–New York, Cassell, 1998
- Dixon RD, Lowery RC, Jones LP. The fact and form of born-again religious conversions and sociopolitical conservatism. *Review of Religious Research*, 34: 117-131, 1992
- Emmons RA. *The psychology of ultimate concerns: Motivation and spirituality in personality*. New York, Guilford, 1999
- Emmons R. Spirituality and intelligence: Problems and prospects. *International Journal for the Psychology of Religion*, 10: 57-64, 2000
- Gillespie V. Religious conversion and personal identity: How and why people change. *Unpublished doctoral dissertation*. University of Alabama, Birmingham, 1973

## RELIGIOUS CONVERSION AND SELF TRANSFORMATION AMONG BORN AGAIN CHRISTIANS

- Greil A & Rudy D. Conversion to the world view of alcoholics anonymous: A refinement of conversion theory. *Qualitative Sociology*, 6: 5-28, 1983
- Harding SF. Convicted by the holy spirit: The rhetoric of fundamental Baptist conversion. *American Ethnologist*, 14: 167-181, 1987
- Hefner R. *Conversion to Christianity: Historical and anthropological perspectives on a great transformation*. Berkeley, University of California, 1993
- Heirich M. Change of the heart: A test of some widely held theories about religious conversion. *American Journal of Sociology*, 83: 653-680, 1977
- Hill PC. Spiritual transformation: Forming the habitual center of personal energy. *Research in the Social Scientific Study of Religion*, 13: 87-108, 2002
- James W. *The Varieties of religious experience*. New York, Simon & Schuster, 1902
- Jensen LJ. (Re)discovering fundamentalism in the cultural margins: Calvary chapel congregations as sites of cultural resistance and religious transformation. *Unpublished PhD. dissertation*, University of Southern California, 2001
- Kilbourne B & Richardson JT. Paradigm conflict, types of conversion, and conversion theories. *Sociological Analysis*, 50: 1-21, 1989
- Lofland J & Stark R. Becoming a world-saver. *American Sociological Review*, 30: 863-874, 1965
- Maruna S, Wilson L, Curran K. Why God is often found behind bars: Prison conversion and the crisis of self-narrative. *Research in Human Development*, 3: 161-184., 2006
- Miles M & Huberman A. *Qualitative Data Analysis*. Sage, London, 1994
- Montgomery R. *The Lopsided Spread of Christianity: Toward an understanding of the diffusion of religions*. Westport (CT), Praeger, 2001
- Paloutzian RF. Purpose-in-life and value changes following religious conversion. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 41: 1153-1168, 1981
- Paloutzian RF. *Religious conversion and spiritual transformation: A meaning- system analysis*. In: Paloutzian RF & Park CL (Eds). *Handbook of the psychology of religion and spirituality*. New York, Guilford, 2005
- Paloutzian RF, Richardson JT, Rambo LR. Religious conversion and personality change. *Journal of Personality*, 67: 1047-1079, 1999
- Pargament K. *The Psychology of Religious Coping: theory, research and practice*. The Guildford Press, 1997
- Popp-Baier U. Narrating embodied aims. Self-transformation in conversion narratives—a psychological analysis [41 paragraphs]. **Forum** Qualitative Sozialforschung / **Forum** Qualitative Social Research, 2(3), Art. 16, 2001  
Available on the Internet at <http://nbn-resolving.de/urn:nbn:de:0114-fqs0103165>
- Proudfoot W & Shaver P. Attribution theory and the psychology of religion. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 14: 317-30, 1975
- Rambo LR. *Understanding Religious Conversion*. Yale University Press, 1995
- Rambo LR. *Anthropology and the study of conversion*. In: Buckser A & Glazier SD (Eds). *The Anthropology of Religious Conversion*. Lanham, Rowman and Littlefield Publisher, 2003
- Richardson JT. *Conversion careers: In and out of the new religions*. Thousand Oaks, Sage Publications, 1978
- Richardson JT. The active vs passive convert: Paradigm conflict in conversion/recruitment research. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 24: 163-179, 1985
- Snow D & Machalek R. The sociology of conversion. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 10: 167-90, 1984
- Snow DA & Machalek R. *The convert as a social type*. In: Collins R (Ed). *Sociological theory*. San Francisco, Jossey-Bass, 1983
- Snow D & Phillips C. The Lofland Stark conversion model. *Social Problems*, 56: 598-603, 1980
- Spilka B, Hood RW Jr, Hunsberger B, Gorsuch R. *The psychology of religion: An empirical approach*. New York, Guildford Press, 2003
- Stromberg P. *Language and self-transformation. A study of the Christian conversion narrative*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1993
- Travisano R. *Alternation and conversion as qualitatively different transformations*. In: Stone GP & Faberman HA (Eds). *Social psychology through symbolic interaction*. Waltham, Hinn-Blaisdell, 1970

Watts F. *Personal transformation: Perspectives from psychology and Christianity*. In: Koss-Chioino J & Heffner P (Eds). *Spiritual transformation and healing: Anthropological, theological, neuroscientific and clinical perspectives*. Lanham, Altamira Press, 2006

Zock H. *Paradigms in psychological conversion research. Between social science and literary analysis*. In: Bremmer JN, Bekkum WJ van, Molendijk AL (Eds). *Paradigms, Poetics, and Politics of Conversion*. Leuven, Peeters Publishers, 2006  
Available on the Internet at <http://irs.ub.rug.nl/dbi/49d9b53343768>