

# REFLECTIONS ON SOME SPIRITUAL CONVERSIONS

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## *Semantic fences*

WE ACKNOWLEDGE ONLY ONE CONVERSION in my extended family. My paternal grandfather ‘turned’, as we used to say, to marry my Dublin born grandmother. Was this conversion from Orange to Emerald Isle Green a spiritual conversion? Beyond the case of my grandfather, how does spiritual conversion figure in individual lives? What has the spiritual conversion of individuals to do with evangelization in the life of the Church? As I have pondered on questions like these, I have taken a few turnings myself. Obviously, when I agreed to write on spiritual conversion I thought I had something to say on the topic. That something was to be, though, if reflective, still rather social-sciency, remote from my own sympathies and concerns. But in the writing I have been turned by my cases towards an appreciation of the centrality of spiritual conversion to evangelization, that is, to all that is most important to me as a Christian of the Catholic Church.

Since my having to turn at all will soon seem rather odd to any reader (as in many stories of turnings, great or small like this one, the turn was long since there but for the taking), I should note some further personal details which explain the semantic fences that stood between my topic and me. I am the sort of Catholic who has mentally conceded the notion of spiritual conversion to a sort of commercialized revivalism. It was something that happens to Americans to make them born again, not to solid, undemonstrative, once-born Australian Catholics. Then, to a Catholic formed in what we called the intellectual apostolate of the University of Melbourne in the early 1960s, the qualifier ‘spiritual’ tolled the dichotomies our incarnational theology rejected.

This Melbourne graduate went off to become an academic sociologist – and perhaps to acquire a certain trained incapacity to think again about spiritual conversion. As a sociologist of religion I became used to thinking of conversion as a precise turning to a clearly defined set of beliefs and/or practices and/or commitments to a new group of fellow devotees. A religious conversion, to most members of the tribes of social science (when operating on automatic, at any rate), is a happening, a

problematic discontinuity that demands explanation in terms of some psychological disposition or set of social circumstances. Again, it is an experience of some other, with little to do with evangelization.

My first post-doctoral job took me to Brazil, and since 1970 I have been studying religion and politics in that country on and off. My own Catholicism has been shaped by enthusiasm for and peripheral involvement in the Church of the base communities of the urban poor. And that too has shaped notions of and sentiments toward both evangelization and conversion. Evangelization became for me what the living Church in the communities is all about – making real to members and their neighbours, in their daily lives, the life and unfolding message of Jesus Christ. But conversion? I recall my dismay when I read summaries of the preparatory schema for the Puebla Conference of the Latin American Bishops. Medellín and the communities seemed betrayed by a strategy for justice and peace centred on conversion of the rich and powerful. If spiritual conversion meant élites internalizing Catholic social teaching and that was taken to be sufficient for fulfilment of the Church's evangelizing mission to the world, then it was not for me nor in any way central to evangelization as understood in the Church with which I identify.

Family, university formation, profession, the Brazilian connection, all maintained a sort of semantic fence between evangelization and conversion, leaving me on the side of evangelization. And yet there are some cases of conversion that I know about, and some cherished ideas from my eclectic theological reading, that ought long since to have challenged me to dismantle the fence. In the rest of this paper I will outline the belated joining of the challenge. I start with brief sketches and reflections on those cases of conversion.

Here are four of these converts. They have in common their claims to have experienced Christian conversion. They are, though, remarkably different in status, personality, and even spirituality. But I set out to reflect on them because of an intuition that, across their differences, they might be my guides in revising both my notions of spiritual conversion and my understanding of its place in the evangelizing life of the Church. I do not claim that they are representative of the spiritually converted. At most they exemplify a form of spiritual conversion that I have come to see is central to the life of my Church.

#### *Four conversion stories*

Dom Helder Câmara, now retired Archbishop of Recife-Olinda in Brazil, is well known as a fearless critic of Brazil's military regime

(1964–1985) and its savage capitalism. He has been one of the great prophetic voices in the Latin American Church, and is rightly regarded as one of the architects of the Church of the poor. He is probably not so much thought of in the context of spiritual conversion or evangelization. Quite to the contrary, his political and church critics have presented him as a political man, a wily, wilful operator driven by the *esprit* of the game.

Now I have never accepted the political operator interpretation of Dom Helder's remarkable public life. But neither had I thought of spiritual conversion as its well-spring. Then I started thinking about him as a case for my topic because of the title of his biography – autobiography really – by José de Brouker, *Conversions of a bishop*. As I read de Brouker's edited versions of his long taped interviews, I began to appreciate the aptness of the title. His own gloss on Dom Helder's stories of turnings gets it just right:

From one error to another, he confesses, Dom Helder's itinerary is made up of a succession of conversions, and it is not yet ended. Conversion under the guidance of the Holy Spirit is, for the Archbishop of Recife, the only way of being faithful. A marked contrast to those 'faithful' that cling to tradition, or prostitute themselves to fashion.<sup>1</sup>

In Dom Helder's own telling, the nearest thing to a precise conversion event in a life of conversion occurred in 1955 after the Eucharistic Congress in Rio de Janeiro which he, as auxiliary bishop, had very successfully organized. One of the delegates at the conference, Cardinal Gerlier of France, moved by what he saw of the shanty-towns in Rio, put it to Dom Helder that he should use his organizing talent in the service of the poor. Dom Helder describes his response as a conversion:

And so the grace of the Lord came to me through the presence of Cardinal Gerlier. Not just through the words he spoke: behind his words was the presence of a whole life, a whole conviction. And I was moved by the grace of the Lord. I was thrown to the ground like Saul on the road to Damascus.<sup>2</sup>

In this, and in several other accounts he gives of his own or others' conversions to service, the Holy Spirit intervenes and conversion follows.<sup>3</sup> But for the most part, Dom Helder tells the whole story of his life, from boyhood to seminary, to young priest-educationalist in Rio, to initiator of the Brazilian Conference of Bishops, to Archbishop in Recife – political involvements, social welfare experiments, close friendships, and all – as one long conversion story.

Here already is a nudge away from my erstwhile stereotype of conversion. Conversion, in Dom Helder's story, is life process rather than dramatic moment: a particular way of leading a life rather than this or that turning in life. His turnings have been enormous in scope, particularly with regard to politics, ecclesiology and relationships with the poor. But these turns, usually away from routes mapped out for him by the dominant cultures of Church and society, amount in the telling to a way of life. That way is marked by a habit of listening and responding to a God who calls us, in love, out of ourselves and our settled routes and into the world of unfolding creation.

Some conversion stories which I had thought to fit the stereotype seem, on review, closer to Dom Helder's conversion as a way of life. When John Henry Newman referred, even in old age, to his conversion, he usually meant what some authors have called his first conversion as a young teenager. In my mind (though I had clearly not taken in either Louis Bouyer's analysis of it, nor the account in the *Apologia* when I read them over twenty-five years ago) this was a case of stereotype-confirming evangelical conversion. Indeed the conversion of young Mr Newman may be described in from-to terms: from broad Anglican biblical humanism to what his anxious father identified as evangelical enthusiasm.

But the story really will not fit into any simple frame of that sort. The movement that can be discerned is a linking of childhood past to a future of continuing conversion. The dramatic time-bound conversion seems to have involved a deep conviction of God's love and an acceptance of central Christian credal doctrines, including the incarnation and the redemption, as vital truths. And it involved commitment – in Bouyer's words, to Christianity 'in all its gradually unfolding plenitude'.<sup>4</sup> The conversion moment, in other words, issued in a commitment to a lifelong process of conversion. As understanding of the unfolding plenitude was sought, interestingly enough, the commitment to specific doctrinal formulations that characterize the surface of the conversion moment was discarded. Fidelity to the conversion and consistency were seen by Newman to lie in a commitment to permanent conversion: to turning, albeit towards greater real apprehension of those basic credal doctrines, as a characteristic. Commitment to specific doctrinal formulations, like the Calvinist doctrine of final perseverance, was secondary and soon discarded on the conversion journey. The conversion turns out to have been not a once-for-all change of doctrinal convictions, but an opening out to receive God's love, guidance and energy for a journey of conversion. On that journey, as we know, he was to present constant

challenge to the liberal inclusiveness of the established Church of England and the defensive exclusiveness of the Church of Rome.

Two further cases suggest that conversion journeys are to be found not just among those whom Max Weber called religious virtuosi but also among ordinary believers. Such a traveller is my friend Severino, a Pentecostal of the Assembly of God in North-East Brazil. Severino, I hope, speaks more for himself in my book *Kingdoms come*.<sup>5</sup> He is a municipal labourer and he and his wife have had to struggle to raise a large family against illness, inadequate housing and an economic system that offers no just return for hard work. Now in his later fifties, Severino has been a Pentecostal *crente* (believer) since his conversion as a young man. In my conversations with him over a period of fifteen years, he has sometimes referred to his conversion as consisting of two events: his public declaration of conversion and then baptism in the Spirit which sealed the first.

More often, though, Severino presents these conversion events as important episodes in a life of conversion. The episodes call him out to a lifelong search for God's will for him in constant reading and reflection on the Bible. The conversion episodes themselves were preceded by 'reading, reading, reading and thinking, thinking, thinking'. Literacy and continuing conversion are thereafter bound up with one another as he pushes beyond the limits imposed first by his father's rural folk Catholic culture and then (to my surprise) by his *crente* culture.

Severino's continuing conversion into and then beyond cultural limits cannot be adequately described as the development of an independent, focused individual self. It includes his life of engagement for a more just neighbourhood. Severino feels called to discern the good and the bad, the just and unjust, and then, within the territory defined by faith and experience for effective exercise of personal responsibility, to help his neighbours right wrongs. Over the years, following that calling has led him to actions that he has not predicted and that might surprise some observers of Pentecostal Protestants in Latin America. Severino maintains, like most of his co-religionists, that *crentes* should keep out of politics. But his reflections on the Bible and circumstance have led him into public involvement quite regularly.

Some years ago, on behalf of a neighbour who had been greatly harmed by a corrupt local police officer, Severino took up the delicate and dangerous politics necessary to redress the wrong. More recently, he successfully organized the campaign of a Catholic friend and neighbour who was a candidate of the radical Party of the Workers in local council elections. When I asked him about this foray into politics he explained

that he had decided to take part because a good man had asked him to take part in a good cause on behalf of exploited workers, his people. As I see it, this little turning into the politics of the left, from apolitical or quite conservative positions, is an expression of that greater turning of Severino's whole life towards action that constant reflection on the Bible's salvation stories shows him to be right and required of him.

From the same town, Joana, a member of a Catholic base community, tells a conversion story very different from Severino's at first sight, but, I will argue, with some common features. In her story, Joana does not use the word *convertir* but two verbs that mean to turn, to become. She is clear what she has turned from – the life of a poor fisherwoman locked into competitive struggle for survival for herself and her children – a life without hope, except in the passing euphoria of alcohol. There is no decisive episode in her story of turning or becoming, but over the years her participation in the base community, she reports, has given her self-confidence and purpose based in the conviction that 'Jesus calls us to work together for justice'.

Joana has defeated her incipient alcoholism, and when I last spoke with her in January 1993, had just been re-elected to the presidency of the local fishing colony. In that position, she leads not only her women colleagues but also the fishermen in a number of struggles. It is most unusual for a poor woman, in this area of Brazil, to lead men into battle on such matters as industrial pollution of fishing waters, unjust pricing arrangements and health and age benefits for the fishing folk. When I ask her what sustains her in her unusual role she refers to her base community. She does not regard herself as 'very Catholic', despite her long, close association with the Catholic nun who brought the community together, and her participation in the liturgical celebrations and Bible discussions of the community. But she is insistent that her persistence in struggle on so many fronts has come from an understanding, gained and sustained in her community, that her life has meaning in the history of salvation and liberation: 'Jesus calls us . . . ?'.

### *Reflections on the stories*

There are a number of common features in the conversions of these very diverse people. First, these are stories of conversion as a developmental process which, in turn, characterizes a way of life. Second, that way of life consists in constant challenge to the limits – whether from political constraints, received dogmatic formulations, cultural determination or personal obsessions and fears – inhibiting the conversations through which knowledge of a calling and the responsibilities of love are

discovered. Third, the transcendence of limits in these stories is made possible and sustainable through a growing realization of God's love and calling out beyond the limits. Fourth, conversion or challenge to limits as a way of life in these stories is of a kind compatible with coherence of personality and fidelity in relationships: the challenges seem not to stop and start and de-focus these lives but rather to be cumulative and developmental. In each case, conversion appears to involve habitual re-reading of a life such that it is integrated into the history of salvation: morality, the engagements of everyday life and spirituality, formerly compartmentalized, are experienced as complementary aspects of one individual life. Fifth, and finally, these life-conversions are deeply personal but in no sense individualistic: these lives-in-conversion are distinguished, in their different worlds, by their openness to others and by deep, critical engagement in social life.

But are these *spiritual* conversions? Is the qualifier necessary and apt? Despite my initial semantic prejudices, I have come to think so. We need a qualifier, certainly, to distinguish conversion as it figures in these lives from that sort of conversion which, Jim Wallis tells us, figures in contemporary evangelistic campaigns in the US where:

The gospel message has been molded to suit an increasingly narcissistic culture. Conversion is proclaimed as the road to self-realisation. Whether through evangelical piety or liberal therapy, the role of religion is presented as a way to help us uncover our human potential – our potential for personal, social, and business success, that is.<sup>6</sup>

That sort of conversion, as Wallis points out, locks converts into a hallowed, middle-American present rather than drawing them out beyond received limits.

So we need a qualifier, and *spiritual* seems just the word. Other ways of expressing that fourth characteristic of the lives in conversion might include words like integration, wholeness – or holiness in its basic sense. In my social science argot, these lives are at once differentiated and de-centred, as required of the citizens of modernity, and distinctively, though not statically, integrated or re-centred. In other (and better) words again, these are lives in which an integrating, developing self or *spirit* moves.

The process through which the spirit has developed in these cases seems to have involved what Archbishop Bathersby of Brisbane has called an 'asceticism of self-appropriation'<sup>7</sup> – nothing less than what is commonly called a spirituality. In these life-conversions, not just the head or the heart or some aspect of personality or some single attitude is

changed, but the whole – the spirit. And the spirit moves not primarily according to a logic of belief or of the psyche but unexpectedly, according to the movement of the Other, the Beyond-the-self which these believers identify as the Holy Spirit. So these are not cases of political or psychological or even religious conversion: they are properly described as cases of spiritual conversion, a turning of the spirit in openness to the moving and energizing Spirit of God in the world.

*Spiritual conversion in the evangelizing life of the Church*

My cases have persuaded me not to concede the notion of spiritual conversion to pietists and narcissists. But more than that, they have led me to appreciate how important spiritual conversion might be in the the evangelizing life of the Church. That life, as I understand it, requires that in particular time and space the message of Jesus Christ be made flesh so that the kingdom he proclaimed may be enacted. In these cases we can see how spiritual conversion among the faithful is a necessary condition for the message to be made flesh and the kingdom to be enacted.

Karl Rahner has written of the heresy of indifference, in which ‘dead orthodoxy is only the expression and the result of a secret indifference to the truth’, as the subversion of the Church’s living faith.<sup>8</sup> Dead orthodoxy is a result of a failure of effort and will on the the part of the faithful in any age to ‘assimilate it (the truth) existentially and express it in new terms’.<sup>9</sup> Rahner sketches what should obtain if the faith is to live, and in doing so, he seems to me to be calling for spiritual converts (men and women, despite the sexist language of the translation) akin to my cases:

. . . this truth of God in human words . . . is meant to come into living contact with the individual Christian, to take on flesh and blood, penetrate his heart and mind and bring him to the truth. Each man anew has to make it his own. Each man, with his own experiences, his own vocation and his whole spiritual situation, which is not only that of Catholic Christianity but the general spiritual situation of his time, must individually hear God’s message anew.<sup>10</sup>

Newman contested indifference throughout his life, and in the *Apologia* the well-spring of this attitude in his own spiritual conversion is plain to see. In vastly different circumstances, Joana and her colleagues in the base community lead one another in hearing the message anew. There they sustain one another in the quest for personal wholeness. There they work a sort of sacramental rhetoric of memory and vision so that the Word is made flesh in their time and place. That, I am suggesting, is the



fruit of spiritual conversion. The first and necessary moment in the development of a living faith – ultimately an achievement of the whole Church – is when a spiritually converting person exchanges reflections on the meaning of the Christ-event in particular personal, social and political circumstances.

That is also the first and necessary moment in that aspect of evangelization which is the enactment of the kingdom in real social relations. Jim Wallis, previously cited, considers that: ‘The goal of biblical conversion is not to save souls apart from history but to bring the kingdom of God into the world with explosive force; it begins with individuals but is for the sake of the world’.<sup>11</sup> It is often forgotten that for many of the theologians of liberation a spirituality of liberation is the source of energy and the inspiration for the praxis of liberation. For Gustavo Gutiérrez that spirituality will centre on conversion: ‘Evangelical conversion is indeed the touchstone of all spirituality. Conversion means a radical transformation of ourselves; it means thinking, feeling and living as Christ – present in exploited and alienated man.’<sup>12</sup> Both Wallis and Gutiérrez stress that conversion of individuals is the necessary, first moment in that collective movement for the justice and peace which is the kingdom of God.

How individual conversion links with the collective movement is suggested in Bernard Lonergan’s writings on conversion.<sup>13</sup> It is easy to see how Lonergan’s fully converted subjects, with all the characteristics of the spiritual converts discussed here, are, by virtue of their conversion, disposed in their different worlds to strive for liberation, peace and justice. Archbishop Bathersby expresses nicely the characteristics of Lonergan’s convert: ‘The fully converted subject is a fully self-transcendent being whose life is regulated by the transcendental precepts: be attentive, be intelligent, be responsible, and be in love’.<sup>14</sup>

Lonergan distinguishes religious, moral, intellectual and affective conversion. But all are integrated in the religious conversion of the fully converted subject. Religious conversion does not lead towards a particular political programme, but it does educe a distinctive sort of citizen. The converted subject, through the healing power of God’s love, has had released what Lonergan identifies as the creative vector in human consciousness. Whole persons, engaged by the Word of God, are freed of the biases of psychological injury or hegemonic ideology or cultural conditioning, so that they have the capacity and will to question the given social, political and economic order. Their horizons lifted by virtue of conversion, they will critically assess their society, and be able to imagine how the social arrangements they know might be other, and

closer to God's will for human fullness, than they are. And they will act (though I suspect not so uniformly as the converts prefigured by Wallis and Gutiérrez) as active subjects in the construction of the kingdom-in-becoming. The spiritual or religious convert has not only had horizons lifted but has also received the energy of love to persist in the slow boring through thick boards which is active citizenship in modern, complex societies.

Spiritual conversion, then, as a process of transcendence of the psychologically and socially given self in openness to the love of God, is a condition of the life of the Church, that is, of evangelization. Through the spiritual conversion of individuals, the Church's faith assumes flesh and blood. In the conscientious actions of the spiritually converted, the notional kingdom of God of the Bible and the Church's message becomes the emerging kingdom in particular, historical reality. I am grateful to my cases and to the theologians who have helped me lift my own semantic horizons so that I can see and express the point.<sup>15</sup>

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> José de Brouker, *Dom Helder Câmara: the conversions of a bishop: an interview with José de Brouker* (London: Collins, 1979), p 13.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p 152.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, pp 22, 122, 182, 221.

<sup>4</sup> L. Bouyer, *Newman: his life and spirituality* (London: Burns & Oates, 1958), p 25.

<sup>5</sup> R. Ireland, *Kingdoms come: religion and politics in Brazil* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1991), ch 3. In this book I tell the story of Maria Pretinha who, if a label must be applied, is an Afro-Brazilian Spiritist Catholic. I believe that she also exemplifies the sort of spiritual conversion reflected upon here. But telling her story and including her in my argument would have greatly increased the length and widened the scope of the paper.

<sup>6</sup> J. Wallis, *The call to conversion* (Tring: Lion Publishing, 1981), p 28.

<sup>7</sup> J. Bathersby, 'Bernard Lonergan and spirituality' in W. J. Danaher (ed), *Australian Lonergan workshop* (Boston: University Press of America, 1993), p 94.

<sup>8</sup> K. Rahner, *Nature and grace* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1963), p 129.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p 129.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p 128.

<sup>11</sup> Wallis, *op. cit.*, p 8.

<sup>12</sup> G. Gutiérrez, *A theology of liberation* (Maryknoll NY: Orbis Books, 1973), p 205.

<sup>13</sup> I am very much a novice in Lonergan studies, having read only some of the collected papers and several chapters of the seminal work *Insight*. My reflections here are largely drawn from secondary sources, particularly Robert M. Doran, *Theology and the dialectics of history* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1990) and William J. Danaher (ed), *op. cit.*

<sup>14</sup> J. Bathersby, in W. J. Danaher, *op. cit.*, p 93.

<sup>15</sup> I wish to thank also my friends and colleagues of the Melbourne Archdiocesan Tertiary Advisory Committee, Fr Paul Garland, Fr Peter L'Estrange, and Dr Gabrielle McMullan, for their help and suggestions as I started to write this paper.