DISCERNING CONVERSION

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I. Introduction: What is conversion?

ARNOLD, estranged from the Church since adolescence, at age forty applies to the seminary after an experience he describes as 'Jesus calling me to the priesthood'. Sixty-year-old Beth seeks spiritual direction following the emotional impact of praying in tongues during her first charismatic retreat. Charles, an agnostic graduate student in philosophy, asks to make the Spiritual Exercises after the change of mind that resulted when he 'accidentally bumped into Aquinas'. Claims of conversion are a pervasive characteristic of contemporary spirituality. But not all 'conversions' are authentically Christian. Therefore, pastoral ministers need criteria for discerning authentic from inauthentic conversions.[1] This essay will integrate theology and developmental psychology by using developmental criteria for maturity to delineate the biblical meaning of conversion as a call to fullness of life.

In the Judeo-Christian tradition, conversion has first and foremost meant a turning, a redirection, change of heart, renewal. It was no accident that John the Baptist preached repentance for sin. He was, after all, in that long line of Hebrew prophets who called their people to turn from sin to God. And after John's arrest, Jesus continued the call to conversion as he proclaimed the good news of God in Galilee: 'This is the time of fulfillment. The reign of God is at hand! Reform your lives and believe in the gospel!' (Mk 1,15).

From the beginning, then, conversion has meant return—return to God from sinful ways. And so it has been throughout Christian history as the community of God's people has been blessed with special moments of renewal, with individual and corporate transformations of life, some particularly striking—one thinks of Augustine and Monica, Francis and Clare, and Ignatius and Teresa—most rather ordinary, but all of them important steps on the return to God's ways. The phrase, 'return to God's ways', suggests a

journey, and that is how many Christians today experience conversion: a long, day after day, year after year struggle through rough desert terrain, but inspired by the joyful goal of a 'promised land' of love and justice, and supported by the caring hand of God's presence.

Turning from sin to God suggests a heavy emphasis on morality in conversion. And, certainly, the moral dimension has been given special attention in Christian life. Jesus's preaching clearly called for moral conversion: 'Reform your lives and believe in the gospel!' But this is more than a call to moral obligation. Jesus's call to repentance must be understood in terms of his proclamation which precedes it: 'This is the time of fulfillment. The reign of God is at hand!' First there is the good news of salvation: God's offer of love. In this context, our response to Jesus's call to repentance is a joyous change of heart, a grateful acceptance of God's reign of love. This dynamic principle of conversion is poignantly depicted in the parable of the prodigal son. Here the good news is the possibility of returning home to God's unconditional love. But homecoming is for the homesick. We must have a sense of our sin, of the misery of being cut off from God, and of the need for redemption.

So conversion is experienced as a journey, indeed a lifelong journey. And while a moral dimension is fundamental to this journey, the movement away from sin is always experienced in the context of God's love. For the journey of conversion is initiated as a response to God's gracious invitation, and it takes the direction of a return to God's very life of love. The plan of this essay, therefore, is to trace this journey through the course of life, highlighting four points in the life span which present special opportunities for distinctive conversions, for giving birth to new virtues or habits of the heart. 1) We will first consider adolescence as an opportunity for *moral* conversion, a new way of living rooted in the virtues of fidelity and justice. 2) In young adulthood we will see the special occasion for the transformation of desire that is *affective* conversion, a new way of loving grounded in generosity and forgiveness. 3) Then adulthood will bring us to the possibility of *cognitive* conversion, a new way of knowing anchored in empathy and humility. And we will see how this cognitive conversion can renew our moral life again by deepening our sense of justice in the virtue of care, just as the affective transformation of desire gives a vital dynamism to our moral life when we fall in love. 4) Finally, we will consider how, in the second half of life, questioning life's ultimate meaning can be the occasion for a radical *religious* conversion, a new way of being, secured in the realities of gift and surrender.[2]

The point of this framework is not to put conversion in a straight-jacket by claiming that there are only certain kinds of conversions and that they can only occur at certain moments. Indeed, the deviations from the pattern of our two principal examples in this essay, Thérèse of Lisieux and Thomas Merton, should leave no doubt about this. The point, rather, is to highlight optimal times in a person's life when some basic conversion possibilities are at their height, thus allowing us to discern them more easily and to support them more effectively. Such a framework will also make it eminently clear that Christian conversion is a lifelong enterprise. Renewal is never complete; each season of life, rather, is the opportunity for a conversion with a particular shape and meaning of its own.

In speaking of Christian conversion here, of course, we are not referring only or primarily to the initial process of becoming a Christian, of joining a Christian Church, which is certainly a conversion when it marks a significant interior turning in one's adult life. For conversion also and especially means the interior transformation that may be experienced by a person who is already a Christian, either from birth or through an earlier conversion. So Christian conversion is not just a matter of believing something new, of affirming a new faith, of adopting a new story. Conversion is not just a change of content, a switching over from one faith story to another. But, much more importantly, Christian conversion is the introduction of a new *kind* of story into one's life, a story with its own intrinsic requirements for moral, affective, cognitive and religious transformation.

Christian conversion demands that one live, love, understand and even be in a new way. Christians must be morally converted, but moral conversion is not first of all a matter of choosing new values (content), but of choosing value as the criterion of one's choices. Christians must be affectively converted, but affective conversion is not primarily a question of loving someone new (content), but of allowing love to become the central reality, the dynamic principle of one's life. Christians must be cognitively converted, but cognitive conversion is not first of all knowing something new (content), but understanding one's knowing, and thus oneself, in a new way. And Christians must be religiously converted, but religious conversion is not primarily a matter of new forms of prayer and worship (content), but of allowing God to move from the edges to the centre of one's life, transforming one's very way of being. But we must see what all this means in the lives of real Christians. So we turn now to consider how Christian conversion unfolded in the lives of Thérèse of Lisieux (1873–1897) and Thomas Merton (1915–1968).

II. Moral conversion: a new way of living

Adolescence has probably been studied more than any other phase of life. This is not surprising. As the transition from childhood to adulthood, it is endlessly interesting both in its vulnerabilities and in its possibilities. Erik Erikson, the psychologist renowned for his view of the life-cycle as a series of personal challenges, interprets adolescence as a crisis of identity.[3] By crisis he means both a danger and an opportunity. Adolescence is the time when our need to find a place in our community and have our community recognize us comes to a head. All the tentative self-meanings developed during childhood, all the personal successes as well as the failures, must be renegotiated and focused on the future.

An essential part of the resolution of this identity crisis is a new commitment to value, especially in the form of fidelity to persons and causes. This is the affective side of a personal moral transformation that, from the cognitive side, developmental psychologist Lawrence Kohlberg has described as a transition from moral reasoning that is self-centred to an orientation that is interpersonal and social (conventional).[4] For the first time, adolescents have the cognitive ability to distinguish value, what is really good, from self-satisfaction, what is good-for-me; and when the crisis of identity is successfully resolved, the desire to be good and to do good is effectively empowered in the virtue of fidelity. These cognitive and affective transformations, possible for the first time in adolescence, constitute moral conversion: opting for value over satisfaction as the criterion for life's decisions.

The first fruit of moral conversion is a new sense of justice. The orientation to persons and society established by moral conversion gives fairness a new meaning. No longer does fairness mean 'getting what I want' (adults know how to translate the ten-year-old's cry: 'it's not fair!'—even if they use it occasionally themselves). Fairness has developed into a sense of justice: recognizing one's obligation to respect the rights of everyone.

Thérèse of Lisieux

One of the most popular saints of this century, Thérèse's life is well-known. But viewing it from the perspective of conversion will not only help us to understand the nature of conversion more realistically, but also allow us to appreciate the extraordinary strength of the 'Little Flower'.[5]

Thérèse Martin was born in Alençon, France, the youngest of five daughters. Thérèse's mother died when Thérèse was four years old, so her father moved the family to Lisieux in order to be near his wife's relatives. At age nine, Thérèse lost her 'second mother',

her sister Pauline, who entered the cloistered Carmelite monastery in Lisieux. Four years later, her oldest sister, Marie, entered the same Carmel, and two years after (1888), Thérèse also entered Carmel.

The one event in her life which Thérèse explicitly called a conversion meets the requirements we have just designated for moral conversion. Several years after the event, Thérèse recalled that on returning from Midnight Mass at Christmas, 1886, she overheard her father express annoyance that Thérèse, at age thirteen, was still planning to be the centre of Christmas customs designed for small children. Thérèse's older sister, Céline, aware of how extremely sensitive Thérèse's feelings were, and realizing that Thérèse had heard their father's comments, understood her grief and was amazed to see Thérèse carry on as joyfully as though nothing had ever been said.

Thérèse calls this 'my complete conversion' because a dramatic change happened, she writes, 'in an instant'. The permanent change in direction is from being a girl who 'was really unbearable because of [her] extreme touchiness' to a 'strong and courageous' young woman whose 'source of tears was dried up and has since reopened rarely and with great difficulty'. She who 'wasn't accustomed to doing things for [herself]' now experienced 'the need to forget [herself] and to please others'. She now had a great desire to work for 'the conversion of sinners'.

Thérèse gives this conversion a religious interpretation—'Jesus had changed her heart', but it is essentially a moral conversion. This is not to deny genuine religious aspects to the event, but to affirm that the basic change of direction Thérèse describes corresponds, in three ways, to what we have called a moral conversion. First, Thérèse speaks of a change in her criterion of decision from self-pity and an excessive desire to receive attention and thanks to self-forgetfulness, a desire to please others, a concern to convert sinners and, thus, to do good. This change—from concern for self-satisfaction to desire for a life lived according to value—is the primary characteristic of moral conversion. Second, moral conversion is an experience of more mature, adult decision-making. Whereas children are persuaded or compelled to do what is right, moral adults act out of responsible freedom. A movement out of childhood is precisely the process Thérèse identifies as most characteristic of her conversion; it marked her 'growing up'. Moral conversion can be more or less independent of parental, peer or social influences, that is, more or less critical. Because the occasion for Thérèse's conversion was her father's annoyance at her prolonging a childhood ritual, Thérèse seems to have been acting out of a

desire to please him, which would suggest that her conversion was uncritical and, thus, typically adolescent. Third, Thérèse later singled out in this conversion experience the qualities of strength and freedom of decision, characteristics of moral conversion. Whereas in 1884 she had felt so feeble and fragile at her First Communion that she asked Jesus to take away her liberty because it frightened her, in the 1886 conversion she felt strong and courageous.

In summary, then, Thérèse's description of her conversion as a change from selfishness to self-forgetfulness, as 'growing up', as a shift from self-satisfaction to value, manifests the essential characteristics of a moral conversion. Not surprisingly, she uses religious language to describe the experience: God effected the change in her; the child Jesus enabled Thérèse to renounce childishness. If Thérèse's conversion fits into our chronological framework perfectly, we will see the need for flexible interpretation as we consider Thomas Merton's conversion.

Thomas Merton

Everyone is at least somewhat familiar with Thomas Merton, the young convert to Roman Catholicism who lived his adult life as a Trappist monk and died in Bangkok pursuing contemplative dialogue with Buddhist monks.[7] Both Thérèse and Merton were called to the monastery, but in so many other respects their exterior lives could not have been more different. Amidst all the dissimilarities, we shall focus on the conversion experiences they shared in common. But one coincidental similarity should not be passed over: both Thérèse and Merton lost their mothers while still young children, and their fathers while teenagers.

Merton's years as a student at Columbia University were a period of sustained development in his moral judgement and decision-making powers. For much of that time he was engaged in an almost single-minded effort to reach a decision—a decision constitutive of his very life, of the kind of person he would be. On his return to the United States in 1934 from Cambridge, England to begin his studies at Columbia, Merton was in an extended period of self-centred licentiousness he had thrown himself into after his father's death three years earlier. Although he had made some commitment to Communism, Merton would look back on this time and judge that 'my inspiration to do something good for mankind had been pretty feeble and abstract from the start. I was still interested in doing good for only one person in the world—myself'. By 1937 a physical breakdown reflected the inner life of the 'big man on campus'. 'I had done what I intended,

and now I found that it was I who was emptied and robbed and gutted. What a strange thing! In filling myself, I had emptied myself'.[8]

This spiritual breakdown—an identity crisis in the deepest sense—marked the beginning of Merton's long struggle toward conversion (1938) and, ultimately, decision for the monastic priesthood (1941), commitments marking his growing sense of fidelity. This conversion was clearly a shift from a pre-moral to a moral orientation, that is, from a radically self-centred orientation in which the criterion for decision is self-interested satisfaction (Merton the party-boy at Cambridge and in his early years at Columbia) to an interpersonal and social orientation in which the standard for choice is value (Merton in his call to Catholicism and the monastery).

Merton's conversion was not simply the resolution of an identity crisis clothed in pious Christian language, as so many classic adolescent conversion accounts seem to be. By 1941 Merton had not only 'developed a conscience' as he put it, he had also committed himself to Christian values in a solidly conventional way through a fundamental moral conversion. Merton's self-discovery did not occur quickly or easily—he had set the identity stakes high, but when it did come forth, his private mirror of self-satisfied narcissism was shattered and transformed into the powerful telescope of a moral conversion reaching out to the universe of value. Still, as personally authentic and life-transforming as Merton's 1938–41 conversion was, we are suggesting that it was essentially a conventional, uncritical conversion to the unquestioned values and beliefs of the Catholic Church. In the Church and monastery he found the home he had sought ever since his mother's death when he was six years old.

III. Affective conversion: a new way of loving

Moral conversion, unfortunately, is not moral perfection. It is more a beginning than an end, more a challenge than an achievement. Moral conversion to value calls us to move beyond the self; it discloses the gap between the self we are and the self we should be. The challenge to close that gap is the challenge to move beyond ourselves not only in our judgements of conscience but also in our decisions and actions—the challenge to make our actions and lives consistent with our judgement of what we should do and what we should be. To opt for value as the criterion for decision is one thing; to choose consistently according to it is quite another. The choice of a life of value will be effective in the long term, and not be just a short bloomer, only if supported by affective conversion.

We move beyond ourselves with any regularity, in other words, only if we fall in love. Through affective conversion we become beings-in-love. Love takes over our lives, becomes the source of all our desires and fears, our joys and sorrows, our decisions and deeds. Just as we can live for the good of a beloved, or of our children, when we count no sacrifice too great, so our love can also extend to the entire human family. Jesus's example of a life in which no one is a stranger can become a reality in us. Affective conversion, in short, turns our self, shifts our orientation, from absorption in our own interests to concern for the good of others.

Love, of course, is for every season of life. But we may ask if any one point in the life cycle is especially favourable for affective conversion. Erik Erikson's answer is that the young adult's crisis of intimacy is a particularly apt occasion for such falling-in-love. For this is the time when, more or less secure in our own identity, we can—even must—risk that identity by falling in love. We are personally strong in reaching out, in sharing ourselves, not in defensively protecting ourselves in isolation. Affective conversion is a transformation of desire: a turning from desire for possession to desire for generosity. It is a reorientation from the possessiveness rooted in obsessive concern for one's own needs to a self-giving in intimate love of others. Along with the other conversions we are discussing, this transformation of desire lies at the living centre of Christian experience. In the shared identity of concern it nourishes in love lies the only possibility of genuine forgiveness.

Thérèse

Thérèse's life is marked by an ever-deepening and expanding love. This depth and expansion are evident in two aspects of her spirituality: the widening embrace of her generous love and the depth of her indentification with God's forgiving love of sinners. Evidence of the latter is the way Thérèse's adolescent desire to convert sinners deepened into a relationship of sisterhood with sinners, a love for them that resembled Jesus's own willingness to be identified as a 'lover of tax collectors and those outside the law' (Mt 11,18-19). At her adolescent moral conversion Thérèse said, 'I felt charity enter my soul', a love she wanted to express through work for the conversion of sinners. This youthful love was characterized by a certain condescending attitude toward sinners—she would reach down to 'snatch them from the eternal flames' of purgatory. Nine years later she was plunged into the 'night of the spirit' described by John of the Cross, and in this darkness she loved sinners not from some place above them but, instead, from a place of companionship which she imaged as eating 'at their

table'. Thérèse who, as a young nun, was afraid of soiling her baptismal robe, later wanted to be identified as a sister and companion of sinners. Her love became like that of the heart of Jesus who went 'to a sinner's house as a guest' (Lk 19,7).[9]

Thérèse's affective conversion was also manifest in the widening embrace of her love. It expanded to the point where it became a first principle which took over her life. Although living a secluded life in a cloistered convent, Thérèse desired to have her generous love be effective for the good of the world. Dying of tuberculosis, she longed to overcome her own diminishment through identification with the symbolism of the life-giving heart of the mystical body of Christ. This identity involved a dilemma which had become a vocational crisis. She recalls it vividly in her autobiography:

> considering the mystical body of the Church, I had not recognized myself in any of the members . . . , or rather I desired to see myself in them *all*. *Charity* gave me the key to my *vocation* . . . I understood that LOVE COMPRISED ALL VOCATIONS, THAT LOVE WAS EVERYTHING, THAT IT EMBRACED ALL TIMES AND PLACES . . . THAT IT WAS ETERNAL! Then in the excess of my delirious joy, I cried out: O Jesus, my Love . . . my *vocation*, at last I have found it . . . MY VOCATION IS LOVE![10]

Thérèse's wide embrace included not only the vague and general 'all times and places' but also the specific and difficult persons she lived with. In the last year of her life she explained her most mature insight regarding love: 'This year . . . God has given me the grace to understand what charity is . . . I understand now that . . . charity must enlighten and rejoice not only those who are dearest to us but "ALL who are in the house" without distinction'.[11] Thérèse grew to love and honour all, not favouring her own three sisters who were in Carmel with her, but caring especially for the women who were very difficult, neurotic or compulsive.[12] Friendship for all was her deepest desire and final experience.

Merton

Despite all the difficulties and uncertainties of the confusing years leading up to Merton's conversion to Catholicism, one constant that stands out clearly is the importance of his friends. Merton's deep friendships with students and teachers at Columbia were certainly a fundamental element in his conversion and decision for the monastery. Significantly, these friendships continued throughout Merton's life, and had many, many more added to them.

In 1958, a full twenty years after his youthful moral conversion, Merton's affective development, nourished by years of monastic

prayer, came to a significant turning point during a visit to Louisville: 'At the corner of Fourth and Walnut, in the center of the shopping district, I was suddenly overwhelmed with the realization that I loved all these people, that they were mine and I theirs, that we could not be alien to one another even though we were total strangers'. This experience was like waking from a 'dream of separateness, of spurious self isolation in a special world, the world of renunciation and supposed holiness'. With a sudden clarity, as he watched people go by about their daily life, Merton saw that although monks are 'out of this world' they continue 'in the same world as everybody else, the world of the bomb, the world of race hatred, the world of technology, the world of mass media, big business, revolution, and all the rest'. Merton ends his published reflections on this discovery with a prayer of gratitude: 'Thank God, thank God that I am like other men, that I am only a man among others'.[13] Perhaps this experience, as Merton was beginning to appreciate compassion for the world, best represents affective conversion in his life journey.

Eight years later this realization was personally concretized for Merton in a brief emotional relationship with a young woman who nursed him during a hospital stay. Despite its brevity, this experience was overwhelming, and secured Merton's ability to love and be loved.[14] There are personal developmental requirements for conversions—they do not just happen out of the blue, but to say that intimacy is usually a crisis of the young adult is not to claim that affective conversions will necessarily arrive on Eriksonian Standard Time.

IV. Cognitive (critical moral) conversion: a new way of knowing

As important as it is, none of the moral and affective development discussed thus far would even be possible if we were not also developing cognitively. The Swiss psychologist Jean Piaget has traced the awesome development of our powers of intelligence from the elementary eye-hand coordination of the infant to the sophisticated technical understanding of the adult who can create a robot that has eye-hand coordination. Given the right stimulation, an important turning point occurs in this development of intelligence in early adolescence with the emergence of abstract thinking: the powerful ability to reflect intelligence back on itself, to think about thinking.[15]

This development is fundamental not only to our understanding of the physical and social world, but also to our self-understanding. For insofar as we have developed through concrete and abstract thinking to adult realistic judgement, and can reflect this cognitive

power back on ourselves as knowers, we have the possibility, beyond cognitive development, of cognitive conversion. In the broadest sense, cognitive conversion consists of an insight into our knowing which allows us to take clearer possession of it and thereby transform our lives. In the deepest sense, it is the discovery that the criterion of the real and the valuable lies, not somewhere 'out there' beyond ourselves, but in the dynamic, self-transcending structure of our own knowing.

Cognitive conversion is nowhere more important than in our moral lives. When we examined moral conversion in Thérèse and Merton, we suggested a distinction between uncritical and critical versions of moral conversion, between conversions that are dependant on the values and authority of others and those that are autonomous. Lawrence Kohlberg makes this distinction developmentally by recognizing, beyond conventional morality, the possibility of a postconventional moral orientation rooted in self-chosen, universal ethical principles. The difference between uncritical and critical moral conversions, and between conventional and postconventional moral orientations, lies precisely in the absence or presence of cognitive conversion. Basic moral conversion to conventional morality is essentially uncritical, locating authority in absolutely given, unquestioned values of others and society in general. To become postconventional we must not only relativize conventional values, but also discover the final criterion of value in our own critical judgment, thereby becoming the authors of our own moral lives.

From the perspective of the life cycle, Erik Erikson has proposed that a genuinely ethical orientation of care emerges from a successful resolution of the adult crisis of generativity, that is, the creative sharing of ourselves with our community and especially with the next generation. Critical moral conversions are adult not just because they require advanced cognitive development, but because they are also dependent on distinctively adult experiences of responsible caring, of making life-determining decisions not only for ourselves but for others as well (in most, but not all, cases for our children). Such responsible caring itself requires realistic insight into the realities of ourselves and others.

Caring is the active expression of empathy, the ability to understand and feel with the needs of others, to share and experience their perspectives as vividly as our own. But if empathy is a realistic understanding of others, its 'flip side' is humility, a realistic view of ourselves. The ability to become more 'subjective' regarding others and more 'objective' regarding ourselves is the fruit of cognitive conversion, of taking possession of our critical,

realistic understanding. Humility is not pious self-abasement any more than empathy is sentimental pity; both consist of truthful insight into ourselves and others. Both are required for adult, fully human moral lives.

Thérèse

How could Thérèse have a cognitive conversion in her nineteenth-century French Carmelite milieu which reinforced social conformity and adherence to external religious authority? She did so by gradually coming to judge that her own understanding of her religious experience was true and a valid basis for life's decisions. Her locus of cognitive authority progressively shifted from others to herself. She took personal possession of her own interpretation of scripture and spiritual masters and acted decisively out of that interpretation, despite the fact that these convictions were misunderstood or rejected by her companions.

A very complex process of cognitive conversion in Thérèse's life can be summarized by noting the remarkable difference in the criterion of what is 'real' at three points in her life. In her autobiography, Thérèse recalled how she judged the truth about herself when she was eleven years old (four years before entering Carmel): 'All my teachers looked upon me as a very intelligent student, but . . . at Uncle's house . . . they never said a word [about my intelligence], and so I concluded I didn't have any and was resigned to see myself deprived of it'.[16] At this point, what Thérèse judges to be the truth is only what her immediate family says or implies is true.

At the age of eighteen, after three years in Carmel, Thérèse demonstrated trust in insights she had developed on her own. In contrast to her Jansenistic milieu which viewed God as demanding retribution in justice for every human sin or fault, Thérèse suspected that God could completely accept a person who was full of faults. During her yearly retreat, she risked sharing this insight and told her retreat confessor about her attraction toward this image of God. He not only understood her but also explicitly confirmed her attraction to a God of total mercy and loving acceptance of her as weak and full of faults. Her Carmelite prioress, on the other hand, was shocked to hear of Thérèse's uncommon view of God and forbade Thérèse to speak any further with that confessor. Obediently, Thérèse never spoke to him again, yet she firmly retained this image of God and based her spirituality upon it.[17]

During the final three years of her life, at age twenty-two to twenty-four, Thérèse demonstrated a pattern of consistently trusting her own understanding and experience. 'I am an explorer into

scripture', she says, where 'I am constantly discovering . . . new lights, hidden and mysterious meanings. I understand . . . from experience that: '*The kingdom of God is within you.*'[18] When she shared her insights with her Carmelite sisters, they consistently misunderstood. Thérèse made a basic effort to clarify her views; but when misunderstanding continued, she peacefully persevered in her own vision of spiritual development, of God, of heaven and of the Sacred Heart, for example.

Fruit of her cognitive conversion is evident in her empathy for the novices entrusted to her care and in her humble, that is, realistic, view of herself. She grasped and responded to the differences among the novices, so much so that some thought she had 'the gift of reading souls'. Describing herself, Thérèse acknowledges the range and depth of her spiritual gifts while, at the same time, peacefully admitting her faults. 'I am not disturbed at seeing myself *weakness* itself. On the contrary, . . . I expect each day to discover new imperfections in myself'. Remembering that '*charity covers a multitude of sins*', Thérèse desired simply to be herself and do everything out of love.[19]

Merton

Merton had always had a brilliant mind, but it was not until conflict with his abbot gradually destroyed his simplistic, romanticized view of monastic life, and until the position of novice master gave him the serious responsibility of caring for others, that he took full possession of his moral life in a critical conversion that embraced the whole world. And once appropriated, Merton's critical moral voice addressed the basic social and political problems of that world, especially those of peace and justice.

The critical and principled qualities of Merton's mature moral orientation is clearly illustrated in his stance on the issue of nuclear warfare. In 1941, just before he entered the monastery, Merton was personally inclined to view killing in war as insupportable on gospel grounds. But the new Catholic convert made his decision to register for the draft as a noncombatant objector on the conventional, external authority basis of the Church's officially approved just war theory. In contrast, twenty years later, with the United States and Russia engaged in a nuclear arms race which he judged to be immoral, Merton took a public, independent stand which directly challenged Church as well as government authority. Even his superiors' attempt to silence him on the topic had only temporary success; on this issue Merton's autonomous, principled moral voice could not be still. He had discovered the authority of his own conscience.

V. Religious conversion: a new way of being

We have noted Erik Erikson's crises of identity, intimacy and generativity, recognizing them as opportunities for fundamental moral, affective and cognitive/critical moral conversions. The final crisis Erikson identifies in the life cycle is integrity vs. despair in the older adult. The basic issue in this crisis is the very meaning of our lives, and suggests that the years after mid-life might be the occasion for a transformation of life radical enough to be truly called religious. Lawrence Kohlberg has suggested something similar in his speculations about a seventh, religious stage of development following the six stages of moral reasoning.[20] Kohlberg's point is that anyone who attempts to live a life of principled justice for a number of years will inevitably ask the most fundamental question of all: 'Why be just in an unjust world?' He sees the beginnings of this radical religious experience in the despair of perceiving human life as finite from the perspective of the infinite—the meaninglessness of life in the face of death, for example. Continuation in non-egoistic contemplative experience leads to an identification with the infinite perspective in which despair is overcome. This experience, which Kohlberg says cannot be realized on purely rational grounds, is what Christian theologians mean when they refer to a religious conversion that is not just the joining of a new religious group, but is the radical reorientation of one's entire life that occurs when God is allowed to move from the periphery to the centre of one's being.

When this radical religious conversion is considered from the traditional Christian perspective of total self-surrender, the relativization of human autonomy is stressed. Properly understood, one surrenders not oneself or one's personal moral autonomy, but one's deepest (though unadmitted) pretence to absolute autonomy. Such total surrender is rare, and possible only for the person who has totally fallen in love with a mysterious, uncomprehended God, for the person who has been grasped by an otherworldly love and completely transformed into a being-in-love. Now one's very being—indeed, all of reality—is seen as a gift.

Thérèse

In the same year in which Thérèse recalled 'the mercies of God' in her past by starting to write her autobiography, she committed herself to an action that epitomizes the definition of religious conversion: total, permanent, unconditional self-surrender in love. On Trinity Sunday, 1895, she was inspired to make a total offering of herself to God's merciful love in the form of an act of oblation.

Her surrender's totality is conveyed through the image of martyrdom, and permanence is implied in the image of love's fire which she hopes will consume her incessantly. The oblation-prayer is framed precisely in terms of love, a framework radically different from most offerings made by nuns in Thérèse's day. Usually, these oblations were expressed as desire to be a victim of reparation to God's justice for sins of atheism and secularism.

Thérèse's surrender in love exemplifies qualities of the type of religious conversion that is Christian. For Christian conversion is experienced as God's own love flooding our hearts, and this gift of God's love is the focal point of Thérèse's experience. Christian conversion is rooted in confidence and requires no heroism. Rather, a model is the 'little child' who takes for granted that it will receive. The hallmark of Thérèse's spirituality, her 'little way', is the confidence and trust born of her profound experience of being loved and gifted. Her last writings, composed while she was in spiritual darkness, are permeated with missionary concern to draw everyone in the world with her into the immensity of God's love as, at age twenty-four, she was dying of tuberculosis in 1897.

Merton

Did Merton experience a radical religious conversion? As personally authentic and life-transforming as Merton's 1938-41 Christian conversion was, we have characterized it as essentially a conventional, uncritical moral conversion to the given, unquestioned values and beliefs of the Catholic Church. We have also suggested that by the end of the 1950s, Merton, through affective and critical moral conversions, had developed an autonomous, principled moral consciousness rooted in caring compassion. Significantly, however, Merton understood this moral autonomy as in no way absolute. He emphasized that what we really seek and need—'love, an authentic identity, a life that has meaning—cannot be had by merely *willing* and by taking steps to procure them'; they come to us, rather, 'only as gifts'.[21]

At Polonnaruwa in Ceylon, during his 1968 Asian journey which was to end in his death, Merton appears to have received this *gift*. As he looked at the giant Buddhas, with 'the silence of their extraordinary faces. The great smiles. Huge yet subtle. Filled with every possibility, questioning nothing, knowing everything, rejecting nothing', he was 'suddenly, almost forcibly, jerked clean out of the habitual, half-tied vision of things, and an inner clearness, clarity, as if exploding from the rocks themselves, became evident and obvious'. In this clarity, Merton realized, 'everything is emptiness, and everything is compassion'.[22]

Despite the intrinsic power of such spiritual experience, Merton saw its special significance as a 'stepping-stone to an awareness of God'. He could not be more explicit: 'If we enter into ourselves, find our true self, and then pass "beyond" the inner "I", we sail forth into the immense darkness in which we confront the "I AM" of the Almighty'.[23] This is the Christian version of religious conversion, the culmination of our drive for self-transcendence in an orientation toward transcendent mystery. Still, though other-worldly, such radically religious experience is in no way isolated or individualistic. Merton was clear on the this-worldly conditions for passage through the deepest recesses of interiority into the world of the sacred: '*a man cannot enter into the deepest centre of himself and pass through that centre into God, unless he is able to pass entirely out of himself and empty himself and give himself to other people in the purity of a selfless love*'.[24]

Conclusion

This, in developmental outline, is Christian conversion, the specific lines our fundamental reorientation to value, love, truth and God takes when it is shaped by the Christian story. We have distinguished moral, affective, critical and religious dimensions of Christian conversion at key points of transition in the developmental pattern, and traced them through the lifelong journeys of Thérèse Martin and Thomas Merton. Only as we are thus multiply converted will we be fully and concretely sensitive to the loving life of Jesus. These developmental guidelines can furnish pastoral ministers with criteria for discerning authentic from inauthentic conversions.[25]

NOTES

[1] For clear explanations of discernment and added bibliography on this topic see Harvey D. Egan, S. J., *Ignatius Loyola the mystic* (Wilmington, DE: Michael Glazier, 1987) and Ernest Larkin, *Silent presence: discernment as process and problem* (Denville, NJ: Dimension Books, 1981).

[2] For a fuller consideration of these four conversions, see Walter Conn, *Christian conversion: a developmental interpretation of autonomy and surrender* (New York: Paulist, 1986), on which this study is based. The basic source on conversion is Bernard Lonergan, *Method in theology* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1972), pp 237–43, and 'Natural right and historical mindedness', *Proceedings of the American Catholic Philosophical Association* 51 (1977): pp 132–43, at 140.

[3] See Erik H. Erikson, *Childhood and society* (2nd ed.; New York: Norton, 1963 [1950]), pp 247–74, for an outline of the eight stages of the life cycle, the last four of which we discuss here: identity, intimacy, generativity and integrity.

[4] See Lawrence Kohlberg, *The psychology of moral development* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1984) for a presentation of the six stages in the development of moral reasoning, which are

grouped in pairs on three general levels: preconventional, conventional and postconventional.

[5] The basic source for Thérèse, of course, is *Story of a soul: the autobiography of St. Thérèse of Lisieux*, trans. J. Clarke (Washington, DC: Institute of Carmelite Studies, 1975). Two fine recent studies are Monica Furlong, *Thérèse of Lisieux* (New York: Pantheon, 1987) and Guy Gaucher, *The story of a life: Thérèse of Lisieux*, trans. A. M. Brennan (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987). Also see Joann Wolski Conn, 'Conversion in Thérèse of Lisieux', *Spiritual Life* 24/3 (Fall 1978): pp 154–63, and Joann Wolski Conn and Walter E. Conn, 'Self-transcendence in the spiritual life: Thérèse of Lisieux' in Robert Masson, ed., *The pedagogy of God's image*, The Annual Publication of the College Theology Society 1981 (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1982), pp 137–52, on which this study is based.

[6] On this event, see *Story of a soul*, pp 97–99.

[7] In addition to Merton's autobiography, *The seven storey mountain* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday Image, 1970 [1948]), also see his journals covering the later years: *The sign of Jonas* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday Image, 1956 [1953]), *Conjectures of a guilty bystander* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday Image, 1968 [1966]), and *The Asian journal*, ed. N. Burton, P. Hart, and J. Laughlin (New York: New Directions, 1973). For excellent biographical and interpretive studies, see Monica Furlong, *Merton: a biography* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1980), Elena Malits, *The solitary explorer: Thomas Merton's transforming journey* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1980), Anthony T. Padovano, *The human journey: Thomas Merton, symbol of a century* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1982), Michael Mott, *The seven mountains of Thomas Merton* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1984), and Anne E. Carr, *A search for wisdom and spirit: Thomas Merton's theology of the self* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988). Also see Conn, *Christian conversion*, chs. 5–6.

[8] *Seven storey mountain*, pp 184, 203.

[9] *Story of a soul*, pp 99, 150, 212.

[10] *Ibid.*, pp 193–94.

[11] *Ibid.*, pp 219–20.

[12] See *ibid.*, pp 221–29.

[13] *Conjectures of a guilty bystander*, pp 156, 157.

[14] See Mott, *Seven mountains*, pp 435–58.

[15] See Jean Piaget, *Six psychological studies*, trans. A. Tensor and ed. D. Elkind (New York: Random House Vintage, 1968).

[16] *Story of a soul*, p 82.

[17] *Ibid.*, pp 173–74.

[18] *Ibid.*, p 179.

[19] *Ibid.*, pp 243, 224.

[20] See Kohlberg, pp 249–50, 496–97.

[21] *Conjectures of a guilty bystander*, p 224.

[22] *Asian journal*, pp 233–36.

[23] Thomas Merton, 'The inner experience: notes on contemplation (I)', *Cistercian Studies* 18/1 (1983): pp 3–15, at 9.

[24] Thomas Merton, *Seeds of contemplation* (New York: Dell, 1960 [1949]), p 41.

[25] This essay appears in a slightly different form in Monika Hellwig and Joseph A. Holt (eds), *Themes of renewal* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, forthcoming 1989).