

THE PSYCHOLOGY OF CONVERSION*

I HAVE just been reading—rather late in the day —*A Spiritual Æneid*, a fascinating book in which Father Ronald Knox tells the story of his conversion from Anglicanism to the Catholic faith. To me these accounts of conversion are always interesting, whether they relate the process that led the convert from unbelief to belief or whether they describe that other style of conversion, I mean that awakening from a dead faith and no works to a keen and enthusiastic practice of the virtue of religion.

But although conversions do not fascinate everyone, few who notice them can remain indifferent. The strongest emotions are aroused, anger and repulsion, wonder and scepticism. It sometimes happens that the witness of a conversion is moved to “go and do likewise.” That is to say conversion can become a motive of credibility, a reason for believing. Yet it is curious to notice that, if we except some very recent books, conversion has never before been reckoned among those *facta divina* of secondary value which, like prophecy and miracles, are the external motives for our accepting revelation as from God.

The science of Apologetics is progressive, and there seems every room for progress on this point. The phenomenon called conversion may very well take its place among the proofs for revealed truth, if, all psychological and merely human motives being tried and found wanting, the sole and ultimate cause of conversion has to be identified with God who leads the soul on to Truth. Naturally, those only are to be accepted as conversions which prove to be complete and permanent, and those only can be of any use of which reliable record has been left. Thus the human

* *La Psychologie de la Conversion*, par Père T. Mainage, O.P. (Paris: Beauchesme & Gabalda.)

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fact of conversion may be submitted to a psychological analysis in order to see if any human factors suffice to explain it. In the absence of any natural explanation, we must appeal to some other and higher cause which can only be the first Cause—God.

A convert is usually asked, "What *reasons* led you to take the step?" The replies are generally as bewildering to the inquirer as is the question to the convert. There is always something more than reasons and something other than reason itself. One may try to imagine the mass of research to be made, problems to be solved, objections to be answered, arguments to be stated, if conversion were but the final step in a merely intellectual process. Quite frequently one is astonished when reading the autobiographies of converts to see the extraordinary discrepancy between the intellectual *data* and the actual result. Moreover, arguments, if they had any intrinsic and objective value, should carry conviction to all men; but as a matter of fact we find this is not so. What is even more strange is that we find such writers as Pierre Loti and Maurice Barrès expounding ideas—the former on the God of Pity, the latter on the Church's wonderful influence for good—which are sufficient to convert others, yet do not bring their author's any nearer the truth. More astounding still are those souls to whom truth has come through channels of error. Darwinism, Theosophy and Spiritualism are at different times alleged as elements of a soul's first turning to God. And lastly, we have those who seem to be intellectually convinced, who have a thorough grasp of the truth and yet cannot take the obvious step. From all this it would seem that the mind is not the sole factor in the matter of conversion.

Indeed when we read the accounts of the conversions of such persons as Herman Cohen, the brilliant pupil of Liszt and friend of Georges Sand, or of

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Nathaniel Thayer (1783), or of Miss Baker or Paul Claudel, or if we read the interesting experiences of missionaries with their Chinese converts, we see some element—call it illumination, sentiment or emotion—in no way reducible to mental processes. Sometimes we hear it said of one who hovers thus on the brink of conversion that he cannot make up his mind ; but he might better be described as one who cannot make up his will. For surely it is the will that decides the final step. Although the will does not constitute one's personality, it is the all-important power in man. In a sense it is the centre round which the self is built : it rules all the other powers of the soul and it is, or ought to be, ruled by great ideals and noble motives. A convert is one who reconstructs his moral life round a new principle, and fashions his life according to some religious ideal hitherto unknown or neglected. Great demands will be made upon this sovereign faculty, his will. Yet all converts acknowledge something other and higher than the will in the work of conversion, namely the grace of God. In a remarkable book published some years ago, entitled *Du diable à Dieu*, Adolphe Retté, a militant socialist, anarchist and anti-clerical, describes the circumstances and influences that first impelled him to turn to God. It is an extraordinary instance of how all the good will in the world is impotent by itself and needs to be helped by some higher power.

It is frequently said that conversions are more often than not wrought by sentiment and emotion. The heart sways men more than the mind and will. Love will sometimes lead a person to embrace the religion of his friend. "Thy people shall be my people, and thy God shall be my God," were Ruth's words to Nœmi. But how far does the mere friendship act in these cases ? Often enough the friend simply acts as a guide. Sometimes, as in the case of Count de

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Stolberg (1800), friendship makes known through the friend a religious ideal—"What a grand religion yours is!" "What fine souls it produces!" And in the end it is not the friend but the friend's religion that works the conversion.

Yet on the other hand we find sometimes that a stronger love than friendship is quite powerless in bringing about any change of soul. The anonymous author of *Souvenirs d'un Père* and Count Schouvalof (both during the last century) had married women who were models of virtue and piety. Both loved their wives deeply, yet neither was in the least influenced by his wife's example. The former began to come back to God during a serious illness by thinking of his dead mother; the latter at the death-bed of his wife was irresistibly impelled to kneel down and offer to God a prayer mingled with tears of sorrow. Thus once more we are led to conclude that, whatever part the mind, the will and the heart may play in a serious conversion, there is always something behind and beyond.

Another influence to be considered in conversion is that social magnetism which psychologists refer to when they speak of the "Group mind," I mean that undoubted influence caused by environment, by the interplay of mind upon mind which we see when a whole group of men are swept along into some concerted action that we usually call a "movement." We do not need in any way to minimize the very real effect of the collective soul upon the individual soul, for instance in "revivals" and missions, yet we must admit that ultimately, conversion is something that takes place in the individual. A real conversion (i.e. total and lasting) is due to personal effort, conviction and decision. Thus, when the Caldey monks came over they did it together. If you chose to speak in metaphors, you may call it a corporate act, but bear

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in mind that it was an act that each separate person had first to perform in the inner sanctuary of his own soul. Similarly in the Oxford movement, we see no feverish haste, no hysterical revival, no suggestion of men being carried away in an emotional current; it was a thing that each one after long, serious, and prayerful consideration calmly decided for himself. When we read of the wholesale conversions following upon the preaching of St. Francis de Sales in the province of Chablais, we are apt to think of it as a sort of prairie fire that spread rapidly and probably burnt itself out as quickly. Yet the fact is that the people were only received after several years of lengthy and often individual instruction. True, sometimes great numbers were received together, but it was only after each had been dealt with individually. The wisdom of this method has been justified, for the conversions have been of lasting effect—so much so that Savoy is to this day one of the most solidly Catholic parts of France.

Upon their own admission converts experience in their own minds a conflict between two powers, the one interior, the other that comes from without and eventually prevails. The convert is not one: he is *two*. This seems to be the one almost essential feature in all conversions. The case cannot be better illustrated than by the conversion of St. Paul on the road to Damascus. In a lesser degree the influence from outside is described in St. Augustine's conversion, when he heard the voice singing *Tolle lege, tolle lege*. Obediently he took the Epistles of St. Paul and read a few words, and "as if by a light infused into my heart every shadow of doubt melted away."

These are exceptional cases. In the ordinary convert there is no external, palpable influence: all takes place within the soul. Yet deep within the recesses of

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the soul this dualism is felt. It is experienced as a sort of possession. Some hidden inexplicable power grips the inner man and seems to control his religious and moral life. This was the experience of Isaac Hecker, the founder of the Paulist Fathers. He was bidden by some irresistible force to leave his family and go forth till he found peace and joy in the Catholic Church. So too Johannes Jøergensen, the Danish writer, while visiting a church in Lucerne, found himself on his knees and he felt an indescribable Presence beside him while the priest blessed the faithful with the Host at Benediction—and as he took holy water it was as if a mysterious power thrilled within him. Elizabeth Seton, the founder of the Sisters of Charity in America, Albert de Ruville, the German professor, the Venerable Father Liberman, the poet Francis Jammes, all bear witness to some powerful but unmistakable impression received before or during their conversion.

But we have to deal with modern psychology which pretends to solve our problem with its recent discoveries and hypotheses. Those who do not take the supernatural into their calculations will never admit that conversion can be the effect of Divine grace. For them it is a purely human phenomenon, a disease of the nerves. What Dr. Pierre Janet calls psychasthenia is a term that covers all morbid nervous afflictions, mental deficiency, inability to fix the attention, suspension of consciousness, and at the same time weakness or total inactivity of the will. Persons in this morbid state are said to act unconsciously, and then realizing that they have followed a certain course of action, they feel that some power not under their control has worked within them. Hysteria and auto-suggestion are other explanations offered.

The fault of all who adopt these systematic and a priori explanations is that they are saying, "You are

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ill" to persons in perfect health. Converts are ordinarily perfectly normal people—healthy-minded and alert and in full control of their own thoughts and acts. Those who have had experience with converts know that they have nothing in common with those poor nervous wrecks whom the nerve pathologists have to deal with—such for instance as was Nietzsche who began to write *Zarathustra* in 1881 under the dictation of a mysterious inspirer by whom he was led to an asylum eight years later. The power that inspires the convert seems to lead to light, moral health and greater spiritual activity.

William James's theory, set forth in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, is familiar enough. According to him a man's conversion is brought about by the surging up from the unconscious self of certain religious ideas and impulses which henceforth become his habitual source of personal energy. The motives first grow, in darkness, and when powerful enough, come to the light, explode, as it were, and carry all before them. Thus does the convert feel himself being irresistibly overruled by some force other than himself (which in reality is only his higher self). In this explanation the transcending God is reduced to the level of a finite, material plane. But there are conversions that bear no trace of a subconscious preparation, and they are precisely those in which the feeling of being overruled is strongest, as for instance in the conversion of St. Paul or that of the Venerable Alphonse Ratisbonne (1842). William James explains away such sudden instances by introducing what he calls "a nervous storm" not unlike an epileptic fit. Now the subconscious mind is a very real thing. It contains that vast accumulation of impressions and experiences tucked away in those mysterious recesses of the mind; but the subconscious cannot explain ideas that have never been ours—ideas that come to

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us as entirely new and as the working of an intelligence plainly not our own.

Modern psychology cannot explain away the Presence whose action converts feel and describe. A higher philosophy must be invoked if we would find out the nature of this power. Causality implies intelligence and final causality in the world is a proof of a creative Mind. In the souls of converts the Power at work is not blind, but very clear-sighted, aiming and driving towards an end that is clearly foreseen and planned. How, for instance, explain by the sub-conscious mind theory such a conversion as that of the young physician who, recently, lounging dreamily on the Seine Embankment, found on a second-hand book-stall a New Testament which he mechanically opened for the first time in his life. He read the Parables of the Prodigal Son and of the Good Shepherd. He chanced on the words, *Ask and it shall be given to you. . . . Knock and it shall be opened unto you.* He bought the book and straightway sought a priest and asked to be received into the Church.

Sudden or gradual conversions always show the same Power acting in the same direction, adapting its action marvellously to all manner of souls, in all countries and ages, as widely different as temperament, race, culture, and sentiment can make them, leading them all in one way or another to the same haven of light and peace.

It would seem then that the Catholic Church is the goal aimed at by the invisible Worker of conversions. The Catholic Church He would seem to say is true and authentic: that Church is the work of God, My work. And He says it by the lips of innumerable converts, each and all of them echoing Him who put into their mouths this song of thanksgiving and praise.

Conversion to the Catholic Church is truly a divine fact. It demands a cause more than human—tran-

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scendent, divine. It points to the God of the Gospels, to Jesus Christ our Lord. It is due to an influence to which converts spontaneously give its Catholic name : *supernatural grace*.

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THE CHALICE

SPEAK low, kneel softly, for lo . . . He is here
Close, in a sweet and a mystical guise,
Visible only to innocent eyes,
A Love without speech and a Power without fear.

Far over the sunlit peaks and the hills
Of Heaven He speeds . . . through the arch of the sky,
Yet Love, ere a heart-beat has fluttered, is nigh,
And Love, like a harp, all Infinity fills.

O, blessed is He who cometh unshod
From Infinity's gates, from a city of light,
To the hearts of His loved ones, a sanctuary white,
To a Chalice made rose with the blood of a God !

VIVIENNE DAYRELL.