Current Research on Conversion, Models and Critique

Richard Kronk, *Christians of Mahgrebi Background and French Evangelical Protestant Churches: The Role of Social, Cultural and Religious Values in Conversion and Affiliation* (PhD Dissertation, Evangelical Theological Faculty, Leuven 2016, p. 121-130.

4.4 Conversion and Conversion Models

Having provided an overview of prominent cultural values studies as well as a brief introduction to the various comparative instruments, the balance of this chapter will discuss the concept of conversion and extant conversion models that have been developed in an effort to understand the process of conversion and how various models attempt to classify various components of the conversion process. The fundamental question that this research has been engaged to answer relates essentially to the possibility and extent of cultural adaptation which has been deemed essential as a result of religious conversion and all that that implies with regards to identity (re)construction for CMB in relationship to FEPCs (affiliation). At the heart of this question of cultural adaptation however, lies a deeper one concerning the nature of conversion and the role of the potential convert in his conversion. For if conversion is intimately related to affiliation (as this research seeks to affirm), and if affiliation implies some degree of cultural adaptation for the CMB (who affiliates with an FEPC), then an understanding of the conversion process and the role of the potential convert can perhaps shed light on the process of affiliation.

Consistent with efforts to describe sociological processes, the meaning and essence of conversion is fraught with multiple understandings and interpretations of this complex human phenomenon. Though it is well beyond the scope of this research to attempt to resolve the differences between competing schools of thought with regards to conversion, it is essential to survey prominent theories and models and attempt to apply that model which seems to best reflect the results from this research.

The term "conversion", as defined in Chapter 1, can be understood in a variety of ways, not all of which necessarily imply a religious context. For the sake of this research, however, conversion is means the change in religious orientation of the person of Maghreb Background from Islamic faith to an evangelical Christian faith ("tradition-transition", Rambo, 1993:14). Therefore the nature of conversion used herein assumes an evangelical definition which is derived from biblical terms most often used to describe the idea of conversion as change of religious affiliation; *epistrepho* (Greek: to turn) and *metanoia* (Greek: to repent). Conversion, according to Gooren (2010:3), is "a comprehensive personal change of religious worldview and identity, based on both self-report and attribution by others." And so, religious conversion implies a personal reorientation based on religious information and/or experience. And yet, as simple as this definition may seem, conversion, together with the rest of religious vocabulary and experience, takes on the meaning(s) that are provided by the particular group into which the person is converted (Rambo, 1993:7). Furthermore, the term carries both emic and etic connotations which are themselves subject to the personal and social contexts of the person(s) undergoing conversion and the group into which the person(s) is converting. Additionally, religious conversion is affected by the theological context governing the particular case of conversion in question such that the receptor group essentially defines the conversion process and outcomes of the potential convert. Finally, the meaning of

conversion is subject to the interpretation of the concept by researchers who, as "both 'insiders and outsiders' translate the phenomenon of conversion into their own categories and force the experience of conversion into modes of expression that may not be recognized by the other" (Rambo, 2003:215).

In an effort to understand the nature and process of conversion, a number of theories and models have been developed. Prominent in this discussion are competing theories which attempt to ascribe agency to the process of conversion and seek to show that the convert is either an active agent (hence Active Agent Theories of conversion) or a passive agent (and similarly, Passive Agent Theories of conversion). A summary discussion of several prominent theoretical approaches derived from social science and anthropology follows.

4.4.1 Active Agent Theories of Conversion

Certain theories of conversion suggest that a change of religious orientation can be understood as the result of a cognitive choice. Thus the Rational Choice Theory (Stark and Bainbridge, 1987, as well as the economic model (Iannaccone, 1990) imply that the subject is an active and not passive agent in his conversion. Such theories of religious experience suggest that people make religious choices based upon a calculation of risk/benefit that can be perceived (or imagined). Proponents of such theories argue that people, when given the option to make their own choice, will choose that which is most rational – that which provides (or is perceived to provide) the greatest benefit, based on an evaluation of the imagined or proposed "economics" related to the proposed exchange (conversion) – which include so-called "other-worldly rewards" associated with particular religious views of the spiritual dimension of reality. Active agent theory however, hinges on two fundamental issues; 1) the availability of options and 2) the freedom for the potential convert to actually choose. Both of these factors are themselves a function of the prevailing religious economy (monopolized or pluralistic) as described by Stark and Bainbridge (1987:44), Stark and Finke (2000:35,36). With regards to this research project, people of Maghreb Background that migrate from a monopolized religious economy (dominated by Islam) into a pluralistic religious economy (France) would theoretically have more religious options available to them on an individual basis of personal choice despite the historic state-church religious monopoly and more recent secularization of France noted in Chapter 2 (Hervieu-Léger, 1999:121). It could be expected therefore that religious consumption based simply on the enlarged menu of options and the potential (at least theoretically) for choice, and as defined both by Islamic practice as well as conversion-affiliation, would therefore be higher for people of Maghreb Background (van Tubergen, 2006:4).

From this description of conversion, the perceived "costs" associated with such include such things as loss of social capital, influence, and access to opportunities (especially with regards to society at large). Conversion then is influenced by the perception of costs and benefits associated with it. As the perception of the benefits associated with potential conversion increases, conversion becomes theoretically more attractive. Similarly, as the perception of potential costs increase, conversion becomes theoretically less attractive. One historical example provided by Stark and Finke (2000:119) illustrates this dynamic. "For example, the two great plagues that swept the Roman Empire in the second and third centuries left large numbers of people relatively unattached, their families and close friends having died or fled. This made conversion to Christianity not only less expensive in terms of social capital, but profitable for those who replaced their lost social ties to pagans with new ones to Christians".

Additionally, as Stark points out, "the costly demands in question are not simply monetary costs analogous to the purchase of secular goods. They are instead what at first glance would seem to be gratuitous costs, the stigmas and sacrifices common to sects, cults and other "deviant" religious groups" (1996:176). The potential gains can include such things as entrance into a restricted group (and resultant sense of being loved and accepted), religious reward (both current and future), and access to particular knowledge and resources – what Stark and Bainbridge refer to as "compensators" (Stark and Bainbridge, 1980:36, 42-43). Conversion then is an outcome based on a rational analysis of perceived costs vs. benefits.

For some, this single context of conversion, which is constructed from an understanding that conversion is related to a cognitive choice, limits the panorama of conversion realities that are better explained by a matrix of conversion motifs which seek to take into account the evidence that conversion can be understood as much by expectations of what it should involve as by what actually happens (Lofland and Skonovd, 1981:375). For Lofland and Skonovd, conversion is better understood as a reality that derives its explanatory context from a range of motifs that include: intellectual, mystical, experimental, affectional, revivalist and coercive – only some of which would find compatibility with an economic metaphor of rational choice.

4.4.2 Passive Agent Theories of Conversion

The aforementioned theories stand in opposition to those proposed by passive agent proponents such as Kirkpatrick and Shaver (1990) James (1982) and Bourdieu (1994), among others. Passive agent models maintain that the potential convert responds to opportunities and proposals not out of a cognitive evaluation of options but rather out of accrued knowledge which predispose the range of both choice and outcomes. Change then is a matter of an application of instinct or *"un sense du jeu"* (a feel for the game) and the subjects are endowed with a certain *"sens pratique"* (practical sense) which enables them to make the appropriate choices, which are suitable to the rules and boundaries associated with the realm in question (what Bourdieu [1994:45] refers to as *"le champ",* or, the "field of play" or "realm of experience/discussion"). The accumulation of adequate responses to opportunities/choices in any given realm becomes "norms". According to this model, conversion and affiliation to another religious tradition, which involve a radical departure from the personal and social context from which the subject derives his instinctive identity (including knowledge of the schemes of available and appropriate action which orient the perception of the situation and the appropriate response), would not occur under normal circumstances (Ibid.: 45,72).

Additionally, passive agent theories of conversion argue that over time the effects of religious experience accumulate and serve to reinforce one's confidence in, and commitment to, one's faith orientation. As a result, when faced with religious choices, people will tend to respond in such a way so as to preserve as much cultural and religious capital as possible. This is why most children (although not all) adopt the religious faith of their near and extended family – by doing so they preserve social, cultural and religious capital (Stark and Finke, 2000:119). Furthermore, the greater the personal investment in one's religious faith – the greater the degree of religious capital – the less likely the person will convert because of the perceived cost (loss of religious capital) of doing so. With this in mind, the accumulation and reinforcing of religious capital can be equated to the

process of affiliation. And so, "under normal circumstances, most people will neither convert nor reaffiliate" (Stark and Finke, 2000:119).

With regard to the "game" metaphor as it concerns religious choices, converts are not likely to be those who are significantly vested in their current game and for whom the benefits of the game are maximized. Those kinds of people are not looking for another religion. Conversion then, when applying the logic associated with passive-agent models, is reserved for those who are lacking a prior religious commitment, who retain only a nominal connection to a near-context religious group or those who have experienced a crisis of sorts (such as marriage or migration) which results in an alteration of their social network - an alteration which introduces the potential convert to a new religious option (Ibid.,119). And so, for those people who do convert, "it is usually not because their preferences have changed, but because the new church or faith more effectively appeals to preferences they have always had" (Ibid.,86).

4.4.3 Conversion Motifs, Cognition and Affection

In addition to evaluating conversion in terms of active or passive agent models, which attempt to define the relationship of the convert to the agency of the conversion process, conversion processes themselves can be evaluated and classified in terms by the type of process that leads the potential convert to and through the conversion experience. One suggested means of considering the differences in possible conversion processes is reflected in the following conversion motifs chart (Table 4.2) which categorizes conversion experiences and motivations by types which provide six possible frameworks for understanding and classifying the conversion experience. For though conversion can be described as a multi-phase, interactive sequential-stage process involving initial and overarching catalysts (Rambo, 1993:17), conversion experiences can be categorized by type according to motif. According to Lofland and Skonovd, "…subjective conversions actually vary in a number of acute, qualitatively different ways which are best differentiated by their respective "motif experience". "Motif experiences," then, are those aspects of conversion which are most memorable and orienting to the person "doing" or "undergoing" personal transformation – aspects that provide a tone to the event, its pointedness in time, its positive or negative affective content, and the like" (1981:374).

Table 4.2 Conversion Motifs (Lofland and Skonovd, 1981: 375)

	Intellectual	**Mystical**	**Experimental**	**Affectional**	**Revivalist**	**Coercive**
Degree of social pressure	low or none	none or little	low	medium	high	high
Temporal duration	medium	short	long	long	short	long
Level of affective arousal	medium	high	low	medium	high	high
Affective content	illumination	awe, love, fear	curiosity	affection	love (& fear)	fear (& love)
Belief participation sequence	belief - participation	belief- participation	participation - belief	participation -belief	participation - belief	participation - belief

The conversion motifs are briefly described below:

Intellectual: resulting from a predominantly cognitive effort to understand and evaluate two (or more) competing truth claims

Mystical: resulting from non-rational experience (such as a dream or vision) which compels an exchange of religious allegiances

Experimental: resulting from an accumulation of positive outcomes derived from participation in religious ritual

Affectional: resulting from relational ties (cult-affective bonds) which serve as a bridge to a new religious identity

Revivalist: resulting from compelling argument or evidence (via emotive experiences) to demonstrate the superiority of a new religious system

Coercive: resulting from negative or threatening experiences to compel religious adherence (sometimes referred to as brainwashing)

The categories of conversion motifs based on what can be determined as compelling motivators by which potential converts engage the process of conversion do not, however, tell the whole story. For conversion is not only a complex process of choosing one truth system over another, it is also a passage from one social context (complete with relationships, rules and outcomes) to another. And it is clear that the distance between any two points on the (imagined) religious map is not equal. In other words, conversion from one system to another may involve much greater social, religious and personal "distance" for some than for others (from Islam to Christianity, vs. from Catholicism to Protestantism, for example).

Models of Rambo, Sogaard and Strähler

In his description of the nature of conversion, Rambo (1993:13,14), provides five conversion categories which attempt to classify this idea of relative distance between the former religious sphere (or lack thereof) and the new religious sphere that is adopted in a given conversion experience; they include:

1) apostasy or defection – is the repudiation of a religious tradition or its beliefs by previous members. This change does not involve acceptance of a new religious perspective but often indicates adoption of a non-religious system of values.

2) intensification – is the revitalized commitment of faith with which the convert has had previous affiliation, formal or informal. It occurs when nominal members of a religious institution make their commitment a central focus in their lives, or when people deepen their involvement in a community of faith through profound religious experiences and/or life transitions like marriage, childbirth, and approaching death.

3) affiliation – is the movement of an individual or group from no or minimal religious commitment to full involvement with an institution or community of faith.

4) institutional transition – involves the change of an individual or group from one community to another within a major tradition. An example is conversion from the Baptist to the Presbyterian Church in America. This process, which sociologists call 'denominational switching', can involve simple affiliation with a church because of convenience (such as geographical proximity) or significant religious change based upon profound religious experience.

5) tradition transition – refers to the movement of an individual or group from one major religious tradition to another. Moving from one worldview, ritual system, symbolic universe, and life-style to another is a complex process that often takes place in a context of cross-cultural contact and conflict.

With regards the conversion of people of Maghreb Background to an evangelical expression of Christianity, the conversion category that applies most generally is that of tradition-transition.

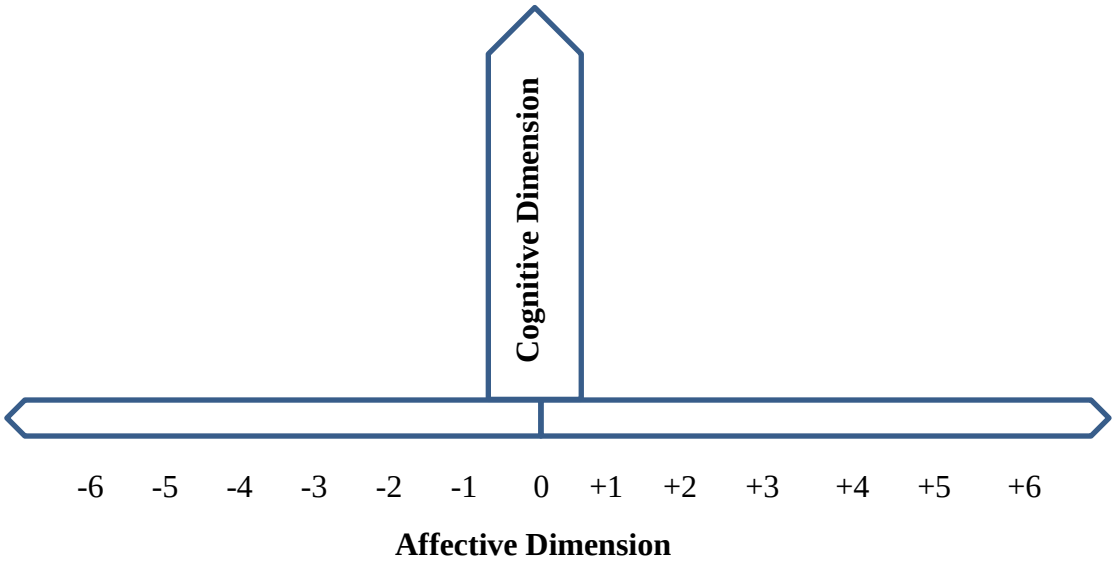
On final element of the conversion process which is implied in the debate between active and passive agency is the role of cognition and affection in determining or influencing the conversion process and outcome. At stake are two questions, one of which concerns content of the new religious option (at least from the perspective of the potential convert) and the role that cognition plays in the conversion process. Here the question is, "What kind of content, and how much, is necessary to produce conversion?" The second question concerns affection. Here the question is, "What kinds of experiences contribute to an increased positive affection towards the new religious option?" And finally, "How do cognition and affection contribute to the end result?"

In his reflection on this apparent relationship between affective and cognitive domains in Muslim-Christian conversion, Strähler (2007) amended a model originally suggested by Søgaard (1993, 1996:57) whose two-dimensional scale provided a relative graphic depiction of the relationship of the affective dimension – understood as the potential convert's feelings with regards to the new religious faith (in this case, the elements of the Christian faith) - and the cognitive dimension – understood as the understanding of and assent to the information concerning the new religious faith. For Søgaard, conversion was understood as the point at which the potential convert crosses over from negative to positive on the affective scale, almost regardless of corresponding progress on the cognitive scale (1996:58). And so, for Søgaard, the affective satisfaction of the potential convert was more important than cognitive agreement – at least with regards to the outcome of conversion. This is affirmed by Stark in his evaluation of the spread of the Christian faith in the first few centuries following its beginning. From his assessment of the historical evidence he concludes,

> "Moreover, the claim that mass conversions to Christianity took place as crowds spontaneously responded to evangelists assumes that doctrinal appeal lies at the heart of the conversion process – that people hear the message, find it attractive, and embrace the faith. But modern social science relegates doctrinal appeal to a very secondary role, claiming that most people do not really become very attached to the doctrines of their new faith until after conversion (1996:14,15)".

Søgaard's two-dimensional model[1] provided below in Figure 4.7, was eventually modified by Gray ("The Gray Matrix", 2005) who placed the vertical axis (cognitive dimension) across the horizontal axis (affective dimension) and made it clear that conversion meant both the crossing over from negative to positive feelings (affective) as well as the acquisition and assent to certain content with regards the Christian faith. However, as Strähler points out (2007:50), neither Søgaard nor Gray actually defined the intermediate points on either scale. As such, the model, though a helpful concept, remained a theoretical visual aid lacking precise indicators of identifiable progress in either domain.

Figure 4.7 Søgaard's Two-Dimensional Model of Conversion w/Cognitive and Affective Dimensions



Strähler's contribution to the model defined the intermediate steps or phases that relate to the cognitive and affective domains. By providing suggested identifiable nodes of progress the two-dimensional model can be used to plot the conversion process as a type of decision-matrix. Figure 4.8, Strähler's Spiritual Decision Matrix for Conversion is provided below. A summary explanation of the index points for each axis is provided in Table 4.3 below.

[1] Sogaard's original model was later modified and published by James Engel (What's Gone Wrong with the Harvest?, Zondervan Publishing Company, 1976) and became known popularly as the "Engel Scale" of conversion.

Figure 4.8 Strähler's Spiritual Decision Matrix for Conversion (Strähler 2007:53)

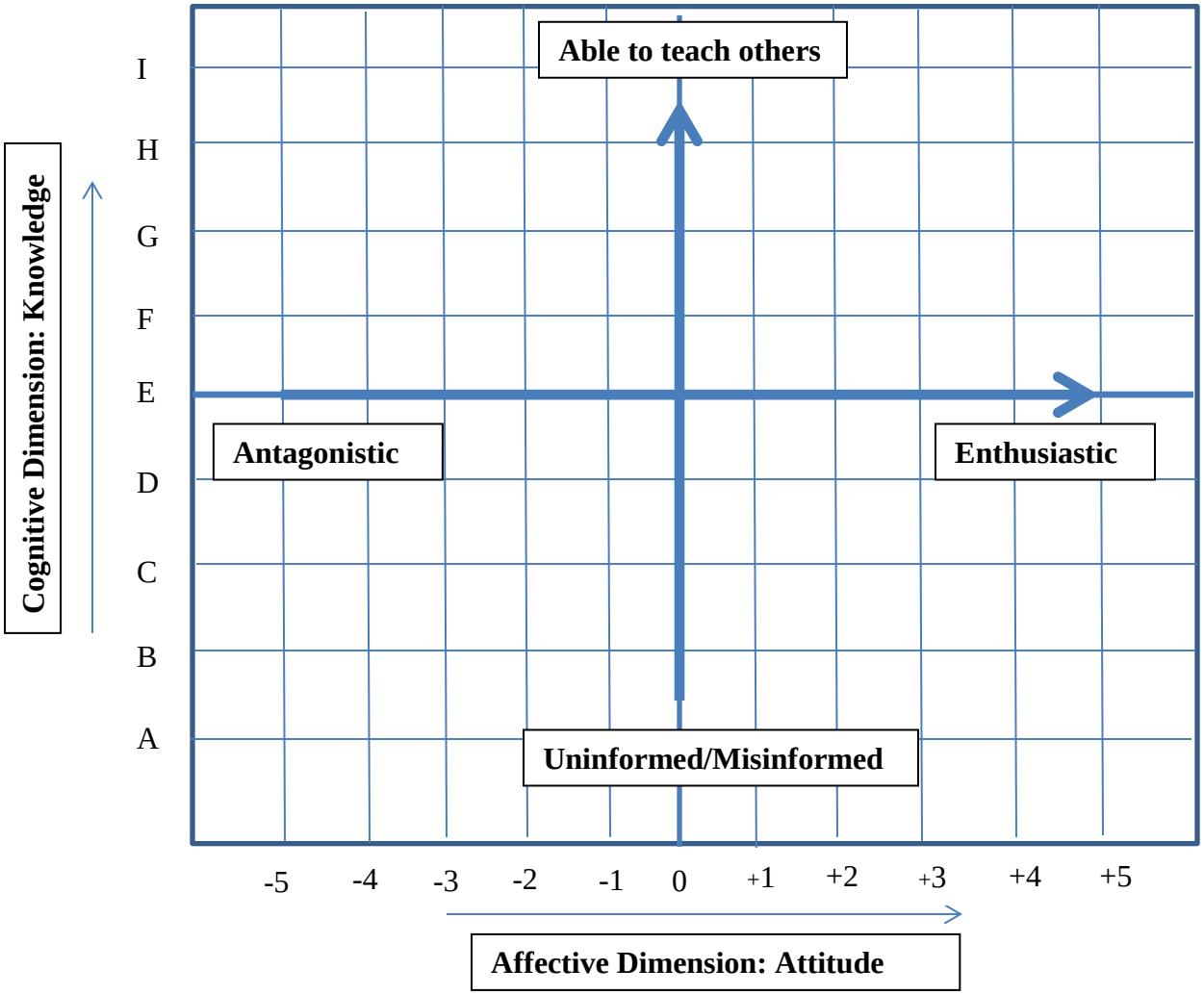


Table 4.9- Affective and Cognitive Stages in the Conversion Process (Strähler 2009: 300).

Cognitive Dimension	Stage	Affective Dimension	Stage
Misconceptions, no knowledge of Gospel	A	Unaware of or hostile to Christianity	-5
Awareness of Christianity	B	Indifferent towards Christianity	-4
Initial grasp of Gospel	C	Positive attitude towards Christianity	-3
Jesus is more than a prophet	D	Positive attitude towards Gospel	-2
Jesus is the focus of submission	E	Jesus is seen as attractive	-1
Realization and confession of sin	F	Conversion	0
Experience of assurance of salvation	G	Experience joy as new believer	+1
Evaluation of decision, doubts	H	Experience fellowship	+2
Growth as disciple of Christ	I	Internal doubts, external pressure	+3
		Overcoming doubts and pressure	+4
		Willingness to serve	+5

Unlike the Lofland and Skonovd conversion motifs (1981:375), the Strähler Conversion Matrix goes beyond a reckoning of the general type of conversion process – defined by the predominant influence on the potential convert – to a means of quantifying the conversion process itself based on progress measured in both cognitive and affective dimensions. Though the two models were not designed in response to one another, it is conceivable to consider that the conversion motifs of Lofland and Skonovd could be understood in terms of contributions that a particular motif makes to the affective or cognitive aspects of a potential convert's conversion process. Seen in this way, the two models can be seen as cooperating to describe the conversion process in complementary terminology. For instance, what Lofland and Skonovd refer to as the Intellectual motif (Table 4. 2, above) clearly aligns with the cognitive dimension of the Conversion Matrix of Strähler. The remaining motifs – Mystical, Experimental, Affectional, Revivalist and Coercive – all contribute in different ways (as noted by Lofland and Skonovd) to the affective dimension of the Conversion Matrix.

The Lofland and Skonovd Conversion motifs (1981:375), though helpful to evaluate certain generalized typologies of conversion experiences, did not emerge from a Muslim-Christian conversion context and so the question arises, to what extent do these categories capture the pattern of experiences that Muslim-Christian conversion reflect? In response to this question a series of studies which were focused on Muslim-Christian conversion (Greenlee 1996; Mogensen 2002; Strähler 2007;Woodbury 2007; Kraft, 2012; Leonard, 2006; Farah 2013; Jansen, 2000) were consulted in an effort to evaluate Muslim-Christian conversion experience in light of the motifs suggested by Lofland and Skonovd (1981:375).

4.4.4 Contributions from Conversion Models

From the review of these studies the following observations can be made:

1. Specific conversion catalysts seem to be influenced by the social-cultural-religious-political climate in which the converts and their conversion narratives were collected and evaluated. So, Greenlee (1996) whose research dealt with male subjects under the age of 39 who lived in Rabat-Casablanca, Morocco, identified that Bible Correspondence Courses (BCC), Radio programming, and Face-to-Face Witness were the key factors in the conversion process (ibid.,71, 84, 89). Both BCC and Radio appeal primarily to the affective motif as they provide information about the Christian faith for the potential convert to assimilate. In contrast, Mogensen (2002:14-17), whose research was focused primarily on Muslim converts to Christianity (5 of 6 interviewees were immigrants from Iran) in Denmark, and Jansen (2000), whose research focused on Moroccan CMB in Amsterdam, both identified contact with local evangelical churches, relationships with other Christians and the Bible as leading catalysts in conversion. Leonard (2006:225-227) whose ethnographic study of a CMB Church in France also cited relationships with Christians, contact with a FEPC and access to the Bible as key factors in conversion. These catalysts relate to the affective motif (as reflected through relationships), the experimental motif (participation with Church activities) and the intellectual motif (reading and studying the Bible).

2. All agree that conversion and affiliation with the new religious community is both multivalent and the result of, what is often, a long process. In the instances of Muslim-Christian conversion in a majority Muslim social, cultural and religious context (such as in

Egypt), Kraft notes that the perceived reaction (negative) to the convert's new identity inhibited full self-disclosure until such time as alternative social compensators could be secured. And so, "knowing that their decision was socially deviant in their communities, (these Muslims) changed beliefs in private and only informed a small and select group of people, sometimes years after they made their decision to change. They see their conversion moment as the moment they changed beliefs, not the moment their change became known in a social context" (2012:8).

3. Finally, these research efforts suggest that the point of conversion at which time the potential convert moves from his former religious and social allegiance to his new one, difficult as that may be to precisely ascertain, nevertheless involves some degree of intellectual assent (cognitive agreement) as well as emotional satisfaction (affective gratification).

As noted above, Strähler (2009:300) attempted to quantify aspects of the cognitive and affective scales in his efforts to define a means to measure conversion progress along a continuum. With regards the application of Strähler's Spiritual Decision Matrix for Conversion (Figure 4. 8) to the CMB conversion narratives from this research, progress along the cognitive dimension was difficult to discern in the course of the interviews. In most cases, the participants spoke almost exclusively of the affective dimension as influenced by the people they met or the experiences they had that brought them into contact, and into a position of increasing interaction, with the Christian faith. Even for those who cited the significance of the Bible as critical to their conversion process, their conversion narratives generally lacked descriptions of anything resembling the idea of an increased knowledge or enhanced confidence in the biblical (Christian) content (as indicated in progressively significant categories in Table 4.3 above) vs. that of the Qur'an (Islamic) content.

The discussion thus far of religion, culture, values and conversion leads, when considered from a religious studies and missiological perspective, to a discussion of contextualization which brings these concepts together into an evaluative framework that enables a relative comparison of the evangelical message of recruitment. This message is embodied in the Gospel which is understood by evangelicals to not only be the basis for conversion but also a foundational component of the corporate, public expression of the faith as a member of the religious community, the Church. Even as the evangelical theological understanding of conversion implies a change in a person's religious behavior and beliefs (Rambo, 1993:2; Richardson, 1985:164,165), so conversion affects the convert's identity by re-defining not only the convert's religious referent, but also the community of faith into which the convert affiliates. "One does not merely join a faith, but one enters into a new set of relationships with members of a religious community. Conversion, therefore, changes not only the individual but also the groups that must assimilate or give up on the convert" (Buckser and Glazier, 2003:69). For the CMB, conversion moves the convert from "Muslim" as an identity marker and Mosque as the religious community referent to that of "Christian" and Church.