

Understanding Religious Conversion

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Résumé de Lewis Ray Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion*. Yale University Press, 1995.
And his article 'Religious Conversion' in Lewis Ray Rambo, Charles E. Farhadian (editors)
The Oxford Handbook of Religious Conversion (Oxford Handbooks in Religion and Theology Series)
Oxford University Press, 2014.

The Oxford Handbook of Religious Conversion offers a comprehensive exploration of the dynamics of religious conversion, which for centuries has profoundly shaped societies, cultures, and individuals throughout the world. Scholars from a wide array of religions and disciplines interpret both the varieties of conversion experiences and the processes that inform this personal and communal phenomenon.

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Conversion

Religious conversion provides converts with an opportunity to embrace a community of faith and a philosophy that nurture and guide and offer a focus for loyalty and a framework for action.

Whether the conversion is

- from one religious tradition to another,
- from one denomination to another,
- from no involvement to participation in a religious community,
- or is an intensification of commitment within one's faith,

the process can be complex but compelling and transformative.

Rambo recognises that there are different forms and backgrounds of conversion, but he does not develop different conversion analyses.

He offers one overall model.

Dynamics of conversion

In this book Lewis Rambo discusses the dynamics of conversion, presenting it as a multifaceted process of change with personal, cultural, social, and religious implications. Drawing on insights from psychology, sociology, anthropology, history, theology, and missiology, as well as on interviews with converts from disparate backgrounds, Rambo explores the forces that shape the conversion experience. He considers various theories of conversion, examines the role of cultural and social factors in the conversion process, and describes how different religions and disciplines view conversion. While acknowledging the individual nature of each conversion experience, Rambo discerns stages that are illuminating. These include

- opening oneself to new options;
- seeking a resolution to the dilemma or deprivation that makes change seem attractive;
- meeting the agent who embodies the religious vision;
- learning new roles, rituals, and rhetoric;
- and committing oneself to a new way of life.

His book will not only encourage empathy for the converting process but will also provide a nuanced strategy of critique and evaluation of religious conversion throughout the world.

STAGE 1 CONTEXT	STAGE 2 CRISIS	STAGE 3 QUEST	STAGE 4 ENCOUNTER
<p>Macrocontext</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Systems of access and control <p>Microcontext</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Degree of integration and conflict <p>Contours of context</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Culture • Social • Personal • Religious <p>Valence of dimension</p> <p>Contextual influences</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Resistance and rejection • Enclaves • Paths of conversion • Congruence • Types of conversion <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Tradition transition Institutional transition Affiliation Intensification Apostasy • Motifs of conversion <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Intellectual Mystical Experimental Affectional Revivalism Coercive <p>Normative: proscriptions and prescriptions</p>	<p>Nature of crisis</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Intensity • Duration • Scope • Source: internal/external <p>Catalysts for conversion</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mystical experiences • Near-death experience • Illness and healing • Is that all there is? • Desire for transcendence • Altered states of consciousness • Protean selfhood • Pathology • Apostasy • Externally stimulated crises 	<p>Response style</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Active • Passive <p>Structural availability</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Emotional • Intellectual • Religious <p>Motivational structures</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Experience pleasure and avoid pain • Conceptual system • Enhance self-esteem • Establish and maintain relationships • Power • Transcendence 	<p>Advocate</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Secular attributes • Theory of conversion • Inducements to conversion <p>Advocate's strategy</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strategic style <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Diffuse Concentrated • Modes of contact <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Public/private Personal/impersonal <p>Benefits of conversion</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • System of meaning • Emotional gratification • Techniques for living • Leadership • Power <p>Advocate and Convert</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Initial response • Resistance • Diffusion of innovation • Differential motivation and experiences <p>Missionary adaptations</p> <p>Convert adaptations</p>

Figure 18 The converting process summarized.

the totality of a person's life. Playing a role that conforms to reciprocal expectations in a social setting enables the potential or new convert to experience and enact a new way of life, frequently with a sense of mission; a new sense of self often emerges through the internalization of a new role as a convert.

Commitment: Consummation and Consolidation of Transformation

Commitment is the consummation of the conversion process. The decision to commit is often expected. A psycho-spiritual experience of surrender

STAGE 5 INTERACTION	STAGE 6 COMMITMENT	STAGE 7 CONSEQUENCES
Encapsulation Sphere of Change <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Physical • Social • Ideological Relationships <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Kinship • Friendship • Leadership • Disciple/teacher Rituals—choreography of the soul <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Deconstruction • Reconstruction Rhetoric—systems of interpretation <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Attribution • Modes of understanding Roles—reciprocal expectations and conduct <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Self and God • Self and others 	Decision making Rituals <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Separation • Transition • Incorporation Surrender <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Desire • Conflict • “Giving In”: relief and liberation • Sustaining surrender Testimony: biographical reconstruction integrating personal and community story Motivational reformulation <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Multiple • Malleable • Interactive • Cumulative 	Personal bias in assessment Nature of consequences <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Affective • Intellectual • Ethical • Religious • Social/political Sociocultural and historical consequences of conversion Religious landscapes Unintended socio-cultural consequences <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Nationalism • Preservation of the vernacular • Secularization Psychological consequences <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Progression • Regression • Stasis Stories of conversion Theological consequences

empowers the convert with a sense of connection with God and the community. Some groups require that a person engage in specific rituals that enable him or her to separate from the past, move to a new “world,” and consolidate that new identity through rituals of incorporation. In the liminal or transitional period, the convert learns more intensively how to think, act, and feel like a new person. Central to the converting process is the convert’s reconstruction of his or her biographical memory and deployment of a new system of attribution in various spheres of life. The convert