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Bias and Conversion: An Evaluation of Spiritual Transformation

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To be formed in a religious tradition is not to merely give intellectual assent to the theological and ethical doctrines; it is to internalise these teachings and precepts, to hold them in one's heart, to fasten them on the centre of one's will. It is precisely in extraordinary circumstances, such as those generated by deadly conflict, that formation in an ethical and spiritual tradition distinguishes the behaviour of genuinely religious actors.¹

The conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus in John 3 opened an important dimension in the former's ministry. That conversation had two elements: intellectual and spiritual, and the result was predictable: change, conversion, transformation. For Nicodemus, a Judaeiser, logical or intellectual discourse was necessary for the under-

standing and meaningfulness of spiritual transformation. Thus, his question: by what power do you do the wonderful miracles, and the answer he got: you must be born again, express the theology and philosophy of spiritual transformation upon which this essay focuses.

Nicodemus was a teacher, and learned in the tradition of the Jews. As a teacher, he obviously expected some intellectual/literal explication of the concept of being 'born again' in his conversation with Christ. It was not practically or literally possible for a grown person or even newly born babies to re-enter their mothers' wombs to be re-born. Jesus' answer introduced the metaphysical/spiritual dimension to a literal probing. Thus, what appears impossible in the literal/natural conceptualisation is apodictically possible in the metaphysical realm. This certainly underscores that transformation is not a psychological, physical, natural or literal transmutation, but one which has spiritual anchorage as expressed in Christian theology.²

1 R. S. Appleby, *The Ambivalence of the Sacred: Religion, Violence and Reconciliation* (Lanham & Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield, 2000), 286.

2 A. Dzugba, *God and Caesar: A Study in the Sociology of Religion* (Ibadan: John Archers, 2002), 51.

The result is significant. Although there is no record that Nicodemus was converted, the actions he carried out inherently portray that he was a disciple at heart, or at least a secret disciple. He made a careful legalistic defence of Jesus against the Pharisees, and played a secondary role with Joseph of Arimathea in the burial of Jesus Christ.³

It is important to state that Nicodemus showed a 'bias', which is typical of an unconverted person. In other words, Nicodemus was speaking from a background which was fundamentally different from the answer he got. Thus, it becomes necessary for us to discuss bias as a basis for conversion. From there, the paper will discuss transformation in Christian thought, the intellectual commitment and consequences of transformation. These represent the three dimensions of transformation – theology, philosophy and result (change or transformation) – which will guide us in our discussion.

I Bias and Conversion

Bernard Lonergan (1904-1984)⁴ has articulated human bias as a basis for conversion. According to him, bias is at the centre of religious reactions: indifference, violence, intolerance, conflicts, etc. To remain in this state is to operate perpetually at the stage of religious 'unreasonableness' and 'irresponsibility'. Generally, bias is understood in the sense of prejudice. Lonergan thinks that it is cognitive, because as Cyril Orji interprets it, 'bias

is fundamentally a cognitive issue that can interfere with the actual process of human knowledge thereby undermining human progress such that attentiveness, intelligence, logic and responsibility are substituted for blindness, dullness, rationalization and inaction.' Lack of knowledge of the truth is a fundamental reason for religious ignorance. As he puts it: bias is 'the infantile beginning of psychic trouble'.⁵

As a cognitive term, bias hampers or distorts intellectual development; it is an aberration of understanding or knowledge, it is a scotosis. Scotosis in relation to bias is an unconscious process that arises, not in conscious acts, 'but in the censorship that governs the emergence of psychic contents'.⁶ In this process, unwanted insights are excluded, which has been found to lead to the emergence of contrary insights. Scotosis therefore opposes understanding, because it is the refusal to ask relevant questions whose answers are suspected to be contrary to one's desired expectation.

This leads to an attempt to ignore, belittle or reject higher values.

Bias blocks insight that concrete situations demand, and makes intelligence seem irrelevant to practical living, from which follows unintelligent policies and inept courses of action that severely distort social and cultural goals (incarnated values).⁷

5 C. Orji, 'Ethnic and Religious Conflicts in Sub-Saharan Africa' in *African Ecclesial Review*, 49/1&2, (March-June 2007): 50.

6 Orji, 'Ethnic and Religious Conflicts in Sub-Saharan Africa', 50.

7 Orji, 'Ethnic and Religious Conflicts in Sub-Saharan Africa', 50.

3 Dzurgba, *God and Caesar*, 51.

4 This section is wholly based on Bernard Lonergan's thought as used by Cyril Orji.

The consequence as Lonergan puts it is that a person begins 'to hate the truly good, and love the really evil'.⁸ This does not happen only at the level of the individual, but also at group or national level. At any rate, it divides humanity into disparate groups with opposed and irreconcilable views.

There are four main ways by which bias is normally manifested. The first is the dramatic bias that results from psychological conditioning, which is absolutely beyond the control of the person. This leads to rejection of available knowledge at one's disposal. This results in the neglect of the development of affective attitudes and behaviour. Thus, the person is most likely to pursue wrong values and ignore or deny truth.

The second is individual bias, which manifests itself in egoism. This has the tendency to distort the development of 'a person's intelligence and one's affective and experiential orientation, leading to selfish pursuit of personal desires at the expense of the common good'.⁹

The third is the group bias, which has been considered to be the 'more powerful and blinder bias'. This kind of bias divides people into social classes: ethnocentrism, race, gender, etc.

The final one is the general bias of common sense. This is the act of finding short-term immediate panacea to perennial or complex problems. Orji sums it up in this way:

Bias... is a scotosis that afflicts the

individual as well as the individual's community, affecting one's existential situation, one's worldview, and the way one's community perceives others different from them. It is a deliberate and conscious refusal to live and act attentively, intelligently, rationally and responsibly. Although it is a conscious refusal to act attentively, intelligently, rationally, and responsibly, it can also be acquired unconsciously through the socialization process.¹⁰

The above situation – bias – is one state of life which can be cured through conversion. Lonergan believes that the antidote to bias is conversion, not just of change of faith towards a religion but essentially a 'turning from' to a 'turning towards' a 'constructive life-creating and fulfilling way of life', thereby rejecting every tendency towards the destruction of life in all ramifications. Conversion therefore is not just an individual event; it is multi-dimensional because a change towards God manifests itself at the personal, social, moral and intellectual levels.

II Types of Conversion

Thus, conversion, which is a long process, helps in overcoming one's biases at the intellectual, moral, affective and religious levels, such that the unconverted are those who still live according to their biases, and are most probably ignorant of them. Conversion can then be viewed as 'a change from unauthenticity to authenticity, a total self-surrender to the demands of the

8 Orji, 'Ethnic and Religious Conflicts in Sub-Saharan Africa', 50.

9 Orji, 'Ethnic and Religious Conflicts in Sub-Saharan Africa', 51.

10 Orji, 'Ethnic and Religious Conflicts in Sub-Saharan Africa', 57.

human spirit: Be attentive, intelligent, reasonable, reasonable and in love.¹¹

Lonerger considers conversion to be developmental, that is, it is an ongoing process. It is generally a movement from a wrong perspective to a correct one which conforms to acceptable moral, religious and intellectual standard. According to Louis Berkhof,

true conversion is born of godly sorrow, and issues in a life of devotion to God.... It is a change that is rooted in the work of regeneration, and that is effected in the conscious life of the sinner by the Spirit of God; a change of thoughts and opinions, of desires and volitions, which involves the conviction that the former direction of life was unwise and wrong and alters the entire course of life.¹²

Berkhof is convinced that there are two sides to conversion: the active and the passive. The former is the act of God, by which he changes the conscious course of human life, and the latter, the result of this action as seen in the observable life of the converted in their course of life and turning to God.¹³ Thus, Lonergan identified three kinds of conversion, to which scholars have added the fourth.

The first is the cognitive or intellectual conversion. Intellectual conversion is a 'radical clarification and, consequently, the elimination of an exceedingly stubborn and misleading myth concerning reality, objectivity,

and human knowledge'.¹⁴ Intellectual conversion helps to cast off false ideas and philosophies which one had imbibed for a very long time.

The second change is the religious, which is an instance of self-transcendence. The transcendent person has the experience of God in an unrestricted manner. It is this level of experience that prompted Lonergan to regard religious conversion as the 'other-worldly falling in love' that manifests itself in 'total and permanent self-surrender without conditions, qualifications, reservations'.¹⁵ Religious conversion is intricately linked with human intellectual and emotional state. That is why religious conversion changes the totality of the person. Orji aptly puts it this way:

What this means in essence is that religious conversion is not simply a process of becoming, say a Christian or Muslim, but a total and radical re-orientation of one's life to God (not religion), that one surrenders, not only oneself, but also one's unadmitted deepest pretence to absolute personal autonomy. Religious conversion helps one embrace what is good, true, noble, and truly humanizing. It is a yes to the mystery of God that finds practical expression in love of one's neighbour, ensuring that one loves unconditionally the way God would have us love.¹⁶

The third type is the moral conver-

11 Orji, 'Ethnic and Religious Conflicts in Sub-Saharan Africa', 53.

12 L. Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Trust, 2003), 483.

13 Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 483.

14 Orji, 'Ethnic and Religious Conflicts in Sub-Saharan Africa', 53-54.

15 Orji, 'Ethnic and Religious Conflicts in Sub-Saharan Africa', 54.

16 Orji, 'Ethnic and Religious Conflicts in Sub-Saharan Africa', 54-55.

sion which is intricately related to religious conversion. More often than not, religious conversion is the basis for moral conversion. Moral conversion removes human and social inhibitions as demonstrated in individual, group and general bias because the basis of one's decisions and actions has changed. 'It consists in opting for the truly good, even for value against satisfaction when value and satisfaction conflict.'¹⁷ In other words, moral conversion engenders a radical drive towards the good as against 'apparent good' that satisfies temporally. It demands a responsible act on the basis of 'vertical freedom' and advances towards authenticity to 'opt for the truly good'.¹⁸

The fourth is the affective which is the 'intentional response to feelings and dramatic experience of being in love.' This is the idea of transformation from 'I' to 'We' consciousness. This affective consciousness works for others genuinely because self has been overcome. In religious thought, affective conversion speaks of faith and love that produce a comprehensive relationship, since 'faith is the knowledge born of religious love'.¹⁹ In fact, 'besides the factual knowledge reached by experiencing, understanding, and verifying, there is another kind of knowledge reached through discernment of value and the judgments of values of a person in love'.²⁰

Therefore, affective conversion is the concrete possibility of overcoming moral impotence, of not only being able to make a decision to commit oneself to a course of action or direction of life judged worthwhile or personally appropriate, but of being able to execute that decision over the long haul against serious obstacles.²¹

The experience of conversion at this level extends love to fellow human beings, the ecosystem and God. Aleaz argues that a saved or redeemed person automatically expresses love at the vertical, horizontal and base levels. He says, 'Salvation is a reality which can be experienced authentically here and now. A redeemed person is the one who lives in harmony not only with fellow beings, but also with the ... earth, God and spirit.'²² This whole concept of conversion has been succinctly summed up by Orji in this way:

Conversion has to be intellectual (repent of the refusal to seek truth and knowledge), religious (repent of the refusal to be unrestrained in love), moral (repent of the refusal to seek the transcendent good of the other) and affective (repent of the refusal to love as God has loved us).²³

These four kinds of conversion are intricately linked; they are not isolated one from the other. They are the

17 Orji, 'Ethnic and Religious Conflicts in Sub-Saharan Africa', 55.

18 Orji, 'Ethnic and Religious Conflicts in Sub-Saharan Africa', 55.

19 Orji, 'Ethnic and Religious Conflicts in Sub-Saharan Africa', 56.

20 Orji, 'Ethnic and Religious Conflicts in Sub-Saharan Africa', 56.

21 Orji, 'Ethnic and Religious Conflicts in Sub-Saharan Africa', 59.

22 K. P. Aleaz, 'A Tribal Christian Theology from India' in *Asia Journal of Theology*, 19/2, (October 2005): 385.

23 Orji, 'Ethnic and Religious Conflicts in Sub-Saharan Africa', 59.

standard by which a genuine spiritual transformation or conversion can be weighed. Thus, the Jesus-Nicodemus conversation could be said to reflect them: intellectual acceptance of Jesus' teaching on conversion that had a corresponding intellectual change of thought which brought about commitment. Even though it cannot be established with certainty that Nicodemus accepted Christianity, his bold identification with the burial of Jesus even when his disciples ran away can be interpreted as being religiously converted. The case of Paul is definitely clear in all the four kinds of conversion. As from the very moment Nicodemus encountered Jesus, even though not much is heard thereafter, he could not have remained morally hypocritical, and his affection was demonstrated during the burial of Jesus.

III Spiritual Transformation in Christian Thought

Two kinds of spiritual transformation appear to be discernible in Christian thought. The first is the conversion which has to do with the change in the here and now. The second has an eschatological dimension, which is the eternal hope of those who experience the spiritual transformation in the here and now. The second does not separate human destiny from the cosmic destiny. This is punctiliously argued by Ted Peters in the following submission.

The resurrection of a spiritual body can occur only at the advent of the eschaton. If there is no cosmic transformation, then there is no resurrection; and if there is no resurrection, then Christian faith is in

vain and of all people believers are most to be pitied (1 Cor. 15:14-19).²⁴

The apostle Paul elucidated the order of this idea of second spiritual transformation. He taught that Christ must first return (1 Thes. 4:16-17). Christ will then 'transform the body of our humiliation, that it may be conformed to the body of his glory' (Phil. 3:21; Rom. 8: 29). This aspect of spiritual transformation does not command our interest in this present enterprise.

The concept of being born again emphatically means the mark of true Christians and way to salvation. Theologian Robert Sproul articulates this view when he says that 'if a person is not born again,... then he is not a Christian.' This line of thought is pursued by the Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary which defines a born again as 'a usually Christian person who has made a renewed or confirmed commitment of faith especially after an intense religious experience'.²⁵

However, such a definition does not essentially align with the biblical conception of being born again because it makes it a personal choice by human effort, excluding the supernatural work of God; biblically speaking, salvation is God's gift rather than human effort. This is substantiated by the Greek rendering of being born again to mean being born 'from above' or 'from heaven'. Thus Jesus used the water and spirit symbols to explain to Nic-

²⁴ T. Peters, *God – The World's Future: Systematic Theology for a New Era* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 23.

²⁵ This definition is retrieved from <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/born-again> accessed 25th August, 2010.

odemus that unless a person is born of water and the spirit, they cannot enter into the kingdom of God. Jesus indeed was referring to baptism and the Holy Spirit, which was demonstrated during his own baptism. It is in this sense that born again means a new beginning in the relationship between God and the baptised, both in water and in spirit.

Akpenpuun Dzurgba provides insight into the dynamics of transformation that is very broad. The concept of being born again is understood as referring to someone who has been converted or has had a religious experience, which informs their change in belief and morality. Conversion therefore is the pre-requisite of being born again. Conversion is an 'act or process of changing from one religion or one religious belief to a different religion or religious belief'.²⁶ As argued by Longergan, the issue of change of religion is secondary; conversion must first and necessarily be towards God, and then religion. This makes conversion an inward change that manifests itself in the outward.²⁷ Although, Nicodemus' conversation with Jesus did not explicitly state that he was converted instantly, we find an unmistakable example of radical or sudden conversion in Paul's spiritual experience.

Paul was a Jewaiser, a lawyer and religious activist who persecuted the early Christians until he had an encounter with Jesus on his way to Damascus. The Damascus experience implies that Paul broke with his 'former life in Judaism epoch, insofar as this epoch had to

do with conscious efforts to maintain a distance from the Gentiles for the preservation and guaranteeing of life as prescribed by the Torah'.²⁸

Paul expressed a manifest change after his conversion in intellectual, religious, moral and affective modes though those who heard of it were at first sceptical. Nevertheless, his activities thereafter showed that he indeed was converted. He changed from being a persecutor to the preacher of the faith he notoriously fought to exterminate. He fought for the abolition of religious racism between the Jews and Gentiles. For him, all he gained was counted lost in order to gain Christ. However, Paul's Judaism's zeal and radicalism were carried over to his Christian missionary enterprise, but with unwavering proclamation of Jesus as the Saviour.

Paul's example of radical conversion represents one aspect. There is also a gradual, subtle conversion. This takes a longer period of time involving devotion, Bible study and catechetical teaching. Even though it is a longer process, it also demonstrates intellectual, religious, moral and affective conversion.

Thomas, one of the disciples of Jesus appears to be a very good example. He did not fully believe in Jesus until he had seen the marks of the crucifixion of Christ as indisputable empirical/intellectual evidence of the validity of the claim of Christ's resurrection, and then his Lordship. No wonder he exclaimed: 'My Lord and my God!' Thereafter, he proclaimed Christ with great passion

²⁶ Dzurgba, *God and Caesar*, 51.

²⁷ Orji, 'Ethnic and Religious Conflicts in Sub-Saharan Africa', 54.

²⁸ B. O. Ukwuegbu, 'St. Paul of the Letters: Setting the Facts Straight' in *The Nigerian Journal of Theology*, vol. 23 (June 2009): 28.

and conviction. Tradition has it that he went on a missionary journey to India, established a few churches in the west coast; travelled to the east where he was martyred at Mylapore in the city of Madras.²⁹

Thus, we can distinguish two transformatory processes; one is radical while the second, which is subtle, takes place within a faith community, especially of those born into a faith family.³⁰

Conversion begins with contrition, 'a heartfelt sense of sorrow for one's sins, and is followed immediately with repentance, a turning away from one's sin and toward a commitment of living justly'.³¹ John the Baptist emphasised repentance as a condition for baptism. Since repentance is the expression of remorse for a wrong action, confession is necessary so that there will be a correlation between what goes on in the internal and the external. Repentance is from the heart and confession is a declaration of the 'working' of the heart.

The idea of repentance is intricately bound with sin. Therefore, the acts of sin,³² transgression – acting against

social behaviour or moral principles; trespass – action which is morally wrong; iniquity – being unfair and evil to other people – demand confession and repentance. It is this that transforms a person into a member of the kingdom of God. 'The coming kingdom requires the spirit of conversion.'³³ As Karl Peschke puts it:

This priority does not connote an exclusion of those who fall short of the law of the kingdom, but it demands from them conversion. The kingdom accordingly requires the transformation of this world in accordance with God's will and with the commandment of love.³⁴

Peschke's argument is born out of his understanding of the Pentecostal congregation, which brought a large population to conversion in the Acts of the Apostles. This is still the demand today in Christian preaching. Peter and other apostles had gathered in the Upper Room where they prayed. There was a sudden sound believed to come from heaven in the form of a powerful

29 P. W. Goetz, (ed.), *The New Encyclopedia Britannica*, 5th ed. vol. 21, (Chicago: Encyclopedia Britannica, Inc, 1990), 1.

30 R. A. Akanmidu, 'Reflections on the Interaction between Religion, Morality and Political Leadership in Nigeria', being a paper presented at the 11th annual convocation of The Nigerian Academy of Letters, (2009): 4.

31 Peters, *God*, 252-253.

32 The concept of sin in the Hebrew connotes different aspects as follows: *Avel* means wickedness, injustice, wrong; *Rasha* means wicked, cruel, evil; *Zadon* means wickedness, evil, insolence, malice. The following root words

have to do with intent. *Avon* is translated as iniquity. *Avah* is its root word, which means to sin, understood in scriptures to be intentional sin. *Fesha* is understood as wilful sin, whose root word is *pesha*, meaning to sin or rebel, especially against God. *Khata-ah* translated as error, has its root from *Khata*, meaning to sin, transgress or miss. It is understood as unintentional sin. See W. J. Morford, *The Power New Testament: Revealing Jewish Roots*, 3rd ed, (Lexington: Shalom Ministries, Inc, 2003), 406.

33 K. H. Peschke, *Christian Ethics: Moral Theology in the Light of Vatican II*, vol. 2, (Bangalore: Theological Publications in India, 1992), 70.

34 Peschke, *Christian Ethics*, 69.

wind. This was immediately followed by flames of fire that rested on those present.

The Holy Spirit gave them the ability to speak in different languages they had previously not understood. This was testified to by those who originally spoke those languages and thought that Peter and his group were drunk. But 'Peter defended the genuineness of the religious experience convincingly'³⁵ which led to the conversion of about three thousand people from different religions to Christianity. They all thereafter demonstrated the salience of conversion.

In the case of Christian faith, the dynamic of being convicted of guilt, making confession, receiving forgiveness and absolution, experiencing cleansing, and then living a life of freedom, peace and joy is the very substance of what it means to be a Christian. It is as this experience is translated and expressed in a national context that something new is introduced to the apparently irreconcilable conflict.³⁶

The underlying principle of spiritual transformation in Christian theological thought is that such Christian experience produces a change in the mental, moral and spiritual nature of the person, engineered by the power of the Holy Spirit, in response to the establishment of a personal relationship with Christ. This presupposes that conversion entails the totality of the person. This leads us to examine

the philosophical strand of spiritual transformation.

IV Spiritual Transformation and Intellectual Commitment

We have examined spiritual transformation through the grid of the biblical/theological concept. It does appear that the transformed person is aided by the Holy Spirit in response to Christ's atoning sacrifice. This forms the justification of the 'born again' claim. And this also represents one aspect of Nicodemus' conversation with Jesus. The other aspect, the philosophical, now engages our attention. The thrust of this section is not to deny the claim of spiritual transformation. It is rather to demonstrate that it is credible and true, and that it does lead to an observable positive manifestation.

Some philosophers argue that all facts are 'theory-laden' and therefore bare facts are meaningless. Actually, the same fact can elicit different meanings when viewed by different people. This makes the claim of spiritual transformation a much more difficult task for Christians. This being so, the crucial task of Christian philosophy is to help the communication process between those who have different beliefs or worldviews.

Beliefs other than Christian are viewed by Christians as a veil, which 'can only be removed by supernatural conversion'.³⁷ This might as well extend to the change from a theistic to an atheistic worldview. Whether this

35 Dzurba, *God and Caesar*, 53.

36 K. R. Ross, 'Asia's Cry for Reconciliation: A Challenge to the Churches' in *Asia Journal of Theology*, 19/2, (2005): 417.

37 N. L. Geisler, and P. D. Feinberg, *Introduction to Philosophy: A Christian Perspective* (Michigan: Baker Books, 2007), 77-78.

transformation will be considered 'a supernatural act of God' remains a matter of argumentation, but it is outside the thought of Christian conversion. The same applies to the naturalists who see everything in the natural realm, thus denying supernaturalism. For the Christian, conversion is required (a change of heart and lifestyle) in order to understand the message of spiritual transformation. As Geisler and Feinberg admonish,

One task of Christian philosophy, then, is to work on a pre-evangelistic level to get the outsider to look around the edges or through the cracks of his glasses, or to take them off and try a set of 'theistic glasses' on for size.... Unless the intellectual ground is cleared and a straight course is cut for the word of truth, it is unlikely that the Christian is truly communicating the gospel of Christ to men of different worldviews.³⁸

The truth of spiritual transformation does appeal to evidence and argumentation. Clearly, when we see change in a person who has been changed, we do recognise it. However, what underlies the change is open to radically different speculations. The claim that encountering Christ changes people's lives requires evidence to authenticate it. However, to propose an alternative explanation on the basis of 'pre-conceived theory, is of dubious profit'.³⁹ As Dodd strongly argues,

But the events that make history do

consist of such 'bare facts.' They include the meaning the facts held for those who encountered them and their reality is known through the observable consequences. In this instance, we may be clearer about the meaning and the consequences than about the 'facts' in themselves, but this would be true of other momentous events in history.⁴⁰

The observable consequences, which Dodd emphasises, are the manifestations of a transformed life. This will constitute the thrust of the subsequent section.

The task of providing evidence is serious. For many philosophers, human persons are natural living beings with a material body. They are animals except that they possess essentially a rational property.⁴¹ The importance of the rational dimension in relation to spiritual transformation is that the mind is the citadel of human personality, and it effectively rules the person. The mind is often thought to be the last aspect of the person to capitulate to spiritual transformation.

Paul understood perfectly that radical commitment must encompass the intellectual dimension of the person who has been converted. Conversion then must first be from the mind. Thus, he urged: 'but you must from the inside continually be changed/transformed into a new form, by the renovation/renewal of your mind, to prove what is the good, pleasing and perfect will of God for you' (Rom. 12:2). The truth

38 Geisler, and Feinberg, *Introduction to Philosophy*, 78.

39 C. H. Dodd, *The Founder of Christianity* (London: Macmillan, 1970), 170.

40 Dodd, *The Founder of Christianity*, 170-171.

41 P. M. Gaiya, *Religion and Justice: The Nigerian Predicament* (Kaduna: Espee Printing and Advertising, 2004), 27.

is that we are more prone to think our own thoughts and ventilate our opinions when they seem to be preposterous to religious thought.⁴² This means in Christian thought that such a mind is yet to be regenerated.

John Stott argues that intellectual integrity as regards spiritual transformation requires submission rather than intellectual arrogance. According to him, the twenty-first century person queries the authenticity, trustworthiness and tenability of the Christian experience. Those who believe in the experience are believed to lack intellectual integrity. Religion is regarded as obscurantism, mental schizophrenia, intellectual suicide, etc. by the modern secular mind. Thus it is irrational to seek to attain spiritual transformation because it is out of the reach of reason, and the sole arbiter of reality in modern times is to ignore the nature of spiritual transformation because it involves a person and a relationship, not an argument, and the transformed, who is also a person, not a computer.⁴³

The quest of the secular mind for evidence backed with reason, it must be said, is not wholly objective. This is because evidence is susceptible to different interpretations.⁴⁴ However, Stott would answer that 'integrity is the quality of an integrated person'.⁴⁵ Since the integrated person is not at war with himself or herself, but at

peace, as evident in the testimonies of respected scientists or outright atheists who have had Christian experience, he concludes that submission rather than rebellion is a demonstration of genuine intellectual integrity.⁴⁶

Ted Peters acknowledges the argumentation surrounding intellectual integrity with regard to spiritual transformation. He suggests that illumination precedes conversion. This is done by the 'Spirit', which symbolised by 'the fire of revelation and the lamp of wisdom begins the transforming work by illuminating the human mind with the knowledge of salvation'.⁴⁷ Illumination is possible by presenting external and objective knowledge of the historicity of Jesus and the Christ-events. He adds:

But the facts are not enough. Illumination adds to external knowledge an internal knowledge, a conviction of the heart, a realization that regeneration makes such turning toward the light possible. Regeneration, which literally means 'rebirth' is the act of grace by which the Holy Spirit makes the living Christ present to the sinner in faith. It is the act whereby the universal saving event of Christ takes effect in a particular person's life, one's particular sins are forgiven, and the power of the new creation is appropriated.⁴⁸

Wesley Wildman and Leslie Brothers, neuropsychologists, observe that the credibility of spiritual transformation can be hampered by the reality of

42 J. Stott, *The Contemporary Christian* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1992), 90-91.

43 Stott, *The Contemporary Christian*, 177.

44 D. Taylor, *The Myth of Certainty: The Reflective Christian and the Risk of Commitment* (USA: Jarrell, 1986), 71, 67.

45 Stott, *The Contemporary Christian*, 177.

46 Stott, *The Contemporary Christian*, 177.

47 Peters, *God*, 252.

48 Peters, *God*, 252.

social and linguistic contexts. In other words, a complication arises from the way people describe their Christian experiences, which largely depends on social and linguistic factors. Apart from that, they hold the view that we cannot know for certain the contents of the minds of other people. This makes it difficult to ascertain whether we are describing the same experiences even when identical descriptions are involved within a single social-linguistic context.

The above might lead to relativism of descriptions but it is not an insurmountable problem. Thus, what is needed are 'sometimes mundane-seeming, sometimes spectacular experiences of conversion and character transformation'.⁴⁹ This implies that in spite of the barrier of social-linguistics to the credibility of spiritual transformation, the 'observable consequences', to use Dodd's term, can help in overcoming it. This is based on the fact that there are certain moral and social behavioural changes that are visible as a result of the experience of genuine spiritual transformation. They conclude:

It is real, and it is doubtless more wondrous and strange than our best and worst guesses. This is the hypothesis that best makes sense of the basic data, including the data of religious experience... it is a powerful idea well attested by mythical

traditions worldwide, as congenial to the natural and social sciences as it is to religion, and well matched to amazing facet of human life that we call ultimacy experiences.⁵⁰

One of the ways of ascertaining this reality is by observation of manifest changes to which we now turn.

V Observable Consequences of Spiritual Transformation

According to Dodd, 'the style is the man'.⁵¹ This he pursues by arguing that in relation to spiritual (Christian) transformation, an encounter with the historical Jesus certainly produces observable consequences. Describing the experience of the apostles, he writes:

Now they were new men in a new world, confident, courageous, enterprising, the leaders of a movement which made an immediate impact and went forward with an astonishing impetus.... It made them new men, but it was also the birth of a new community.... They themselves had passed through death to new life.⁵²

Arthur Pink corroborates this view when he states that genuine salvation brings about true, positive observable transformation. He writes:

Salvation is a supernatural thing that changes the heart, renews the will, transforms the life, so that it is evident to all around that a miracle of grace has been wrought.... A

49 W. J. Wildman and L. A. Brothers, 'A Neuropsychological-Semiotic Model of Religious Experience' in Russell, R. J., Murphy, N., Meyering, T. C. and Arbib, M. A. (eds.) *Neuroscience and the Person: Scientific Perspective on Divine Action* (California: CTNS, 1999), 351.

50 Wildman and Brothers, 'A Neuropsychological-Semiotic Model', 413.

51 Dodd, *The Founder of Christianity*, 37.

52 Dodd, *The Founder of Christianity*, 170-171.

faith that does not issue in godly living, in an obedient walk, in spiritual fruit, is not the faith of God's elect.⁵³

Again, the challenge of a true Christian is thrown forth here. And quickly, true Christians in the real sense of the word, and who authentically qualify to be so called (as in the Antioch experience where the observers were able to discern that the life of the followers of Christ was in tandem with their master and then called them Christians – little Christ), must demonstrate the characteristics and contents of spiritual transformation. The spiritual fruit which arises from repentance and conversion must be practically put into action. This is the distinguishing factor between true and false spiritual transformation.⁵⁴

Dzurgba pointedly states that 'a transparent moral character is to be noticed by the public in respect of the born-again's social life'.⁵⁵ Thus, a true spiritual transformation involves a display of a high moral standard different from the pre-conversion experience. The fruit of the spirit – love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control – must be manifestly portrayed. This must begin from their 'perception of realities, ideas, speech, taste, emotion or feeling, and action'.⁵⁶

So, apart from genuine religious piety, it is expected that spiritual transformation should bring about positive and

enviable qualities in social, economic and political interaction. Akanmidu agrees that the transformatory process, defined as 'a form of change that runs counter to the force of insistence on choices that have the potential of being vices, and not virtues', results in the deepening awareness which makes inroads 'into the character of the individual and performance'.⁵⁷

Peters gives a scintillating example of demonstrable spiritual transformation. In the West, alcoholism was regarded as a matter of will, which made alcoholics morally responsible. Later society despised the alcoholics for wasting their families' income. The most effective cure was considered to be repentance. The Christian revivalists, John and Charles Wesley, prayed for the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, for conversion of heart and for strength of will to stop drinking. 'Those who repented and received the Spirit received the power to cease and desist from drinking alcohol and immediately became loving spouses and responsible parents'.⁵⁸ This remedial method impacted positively on society such that The Woman's Christian Temperance Union and Alcoholics Anonymous changed their views and acknowledged that alcoholism is a matter of personal will, and sought divine power to overcome it.⁵⁹

The foregoing analysis shows that a true spiritual transformation must have a direct tangency with life and ex-

53 A. W. Pink, 'What is Apostasy?' in *The Sword and Trumpet*, LXXVI/12 (Dec. 2008): 4.

54 W. F. Kumuyi, *The Hour of Decision* (Lagos: Life Press Ltd, 1990), 16-19.

55 Dzurgba, *God and Caesar*, 54.

56 Dzurgba, *God and Caesar*, 54.

57 Akanmidu, 'Reflections on the Interaction between Religion', 3-4.

58 T. Peters, *Sin: Radical Evil in Soul and Society* (Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1994), 315.

59 Peters, *Sin*, 315.

perience. This dispels the notion that Christian experience is psychologically induced, or brought about through persuasive and emotional words. This also dispels the conditioned reflex theory that after exposure to Christian thought a person can be caught in the type of spiritual hypnosis which enables the person to react mechanically to certain issues/ways in certain conditions.⁶⁰

This does not however obliterate a psychological benefit of spiritual transformation. McKnight has amply shown that such psychologists as Eric Erickson, J. Piaget and L. Kohlberg agree that our cognitive and moral developments go through stages. This implies that conversion happens in gradual or progressive dimension just as faith grows in stages. Faith, they also agree, develops in cognitive, spiritual, moral and psychological aspects⁶¹ which is in tandem with Lonergan's concept of the intellectual, religious, moral and affective.

Josh McDowell has compiled a compendium⁶² of testimonies of people who experienced spiritual transformation. He thus presents it as an empirical and historical fact of true spiritual transformation. He gave his testimony as an atheist who was converted. The list contains different people from different walks of life whose biographies and au-

tobiographies are true testimonies of spiritual transformation. Among them we can mention Sir William Ramsay who was as staunch sceptic, Frank Morrison, C. S. Lewis, Lew Wallace, and Giovanni Papini, amongst others.

VI A Contextual Critique

Christians are people who have been converted or thoroughly evangelised⁶³ which is not necessarily a literal or sensory experience in which they must have 'received God's revelation and seen glorious things in heaven'⁶⁴ as prerequisite. Dairo's apparent literal and archetypal perception of being born again makes the case that every Christian is supposedly or likely to have the same salvation experience. The authentic baseline of this experience, it seems to us, is to 'identify with the central act of conversion in which the individual consecrates his or her life to Christ, atones for past sins and becomes "born again" or saved.'⁶⁵

This point is supported by Hans Urs von Balthasar, who underscores that the Christian experiences of Christ by Mary, the apostles who lived physically with Christ, and the apostle Paul for in-

60 J. McDowell, *Evidence that Demands a Verdict: Historical Evidences for the Christian Faith* (San Bernardino, CA: Here's Life, 1999), 337-338.

61 S. McKnight, *Turning to Jesus: The Sociology of Conversion in the Gospels* (Louisville: John Knox, 2002), 185.

62 McDowell, *Evidence that Demands*, 341-368.

63 A. Dzurgba, *An Introduction to Sociology* (Ibadan: Centre for External Studies, 2002), 20.

64 A. O. Dairo, 'Born Again Christian Sceptics and Political Democratic Progress in Nigeria: Giving Caesar His Dues' in *ORITA: Ibadan Journal of Religious Studies*, XLI/1, (June 2009): 83-93.

65 R. Marshall, 'God is not a Democrat: Pentecostalism and Democratization in Nigeria' in Gifford, P. (ed.), *The Christian Churches and Democratization in Africa* (Leiden: E. T. Brill, 1995), 244.

stance, are distinctively different. But the integrity of the experiences remain first of all 'an integrating totality and the power of the object of faith' and also 'a readiness for openness to others'.⁶⁶ The essence, therefore, is: 'It is the whole person that God desires. God does not want only man's soul but also, with tantamount importance, man's body.'⁶⁷

VII The Nigerian Experience

What does the foregoing hold for the Nigerian experience of conversion? Much has been said about Christianity in Nigeria as a widespread faith whose spirituality evokes a paradox of faith and action. The high religiosity but low morality displayed by some Nigerian Christians attests to this. The explanations of this paradox are modelled along naturalistic and numinous theories of conversion. The former can further be subdivided into the instrumental, deprivation-fulfilment, 'who-whom' and the intellectual theories.⁶⁸

The naturalists, in their evolutionary thinking, conceive of conversion as a natural phenomenon, which does not take account of the power and work of the Holy Spirit. This arises from their belief that the intervention of the

Holy Spirit is subjective or cannot pass through the 'eye' of empirical verification processes.

Subsumed under the above is the instrumental theory which explains conversion to Christianity, not on the basis of intrinsic value of the faith, but on some advantages accruable from it.⁶⁹ According to Elechi, 'It was the desire for education, coupled with the competition between the denominations, rather than ambition to embrace the new faith, that led to the rapid spread of the Christian churches in Iboland.'⁷⁰

Umejiesi corroborated this view when he recently examined the activities of the Holy Ghost Mission in Igboland, and the responses of the people. Through the instrumentality of education, the missionaries had unhindered access to the people's homes and they (the people) competed in releasing their children just as the missionaries were thriving in giving incentives.⁷¹

The instrumental theory may be supported by the many instances of the prosperity gospel, which do not focus on the core of salvation message, but summon the respondents to the altar on the basis of what they stand to gain physically or materially. It is not difficult to find such messages that do not relate to Christ and his saving message. This partly accounts for the problems associated with the quality and integrity of Christians in Nigeria,

66 E. R. Babor, 'A Review of Balthasar's Theology of Faith and Experience: Leading One to be a True Christian' in *ORITA: Ibadan Journal of Religious Studies*, xl/ii, (Dec. 2008): 67-90.

67 Babor, 'A Review of Balthasar's Theology', 68.

68 M. A. B. Gaiya, "Conversion of the African: A Case Study of an Ngas Prince" in Appiah-Kubi, K. Edet, R. N., Ehusani, G. and Olagunju, J. (eds.), *African Dilemma: A Cry for Life* (N. P.: EATWOT, 1992), 138.

69 Gaiya, "Conversion of the African", 138.

70 F. K. Ekechi, *Missionary Enterprise and Rivalry in Igboland 1857-1914* (London: Frank Cass, 1971), 73.

71 I. O. Umejiesi, 'The Holy Ghost Mission in Igboland (1885-1967): The Shanahan Story' in *AAU: African Studies Review*, 8, (June 2009): 173-189.

and the paradox of faith and action.⁷²

The deprivation-fulfilment theory emphasises that people accept Christianity because of their frustration that has been caused by ancestral/historical curses or evil covenants. This they believe reveals itself in economic, social, political failure. Therefore, they believe they have been limited by those factors and need deliverance or exorcism. This also explains the number of deliverance ministries and activities.⁷³

The 'who-whom' theory states that conversion is dependent on the presenters of the message and the thought and feeling of the respondents about them. This is seen in the aping of the presenters by their converts. It is not infrequent to come across 'Christians' whose only evidence of spiritual birth is to talk, dress, gesticulate or do things generally like their pastors.

The intellectual theory speaks of a conversion from one form of thinking to another, especially from traditional African religion to Christianity. Sometime the message is not presented in an intellectual/logical way and when people leave a particular church for another, it will perhaps be to satisfy a curiosity. However, Moreland and Craig

argue that pastors/theologians must not shy away from a strictly intellectual/philosophical presentation of the gospel message because it will help in engaging the unbelievers in the truth and power of the scripture.⁷⁴

On the other hand, the numinous theory of conversion as demonstrated in Nigeria relates to the power/work of the Holy Spirit in salvation. Here the Holy Spirit also requires the active faith of the individual in response to the gospel. This is understood in the act of self-giving that evokes faith, love and hope or a holistic surrender to Christ who transforms one's life, because 'only this power... can explain the transformation that takes place in the believing person and his total condition which results from it'.⁷⁵

It is within the above scenario that Christians in Nigeria are often classified by such widely varying qualities as 'genuine', 'fake', 'social', 'political', 'economic', 'nominal', 'seating-warming', or 'church-going'- which in fact parallel the western concept of utilitarian, situationist or Kantian Christianity.)⁷⁶ In spite of that, in Nigerian society, we can easily look around and point to great spiritually transformed personalities including W. F. Kumuyi, E. A. Adeboye, S. K. Abiara, D. O. Oyedepo, B. A. Idahosa, Tunde Bakare, to mention a few. They are notable, not just because they preach the gospel, but because they reflect the essence

72 B. O. Igboin, 'The Gospel of Prosperity: An Appraisal of Its Syncretistic Contours' in *EPHA: Ekpoma Journal of Religious Studies*, 6/1&2, (June 2005): 160-181.

73 D. Ayegboyin, '... But Deliver us from Evil...: The Riposte of the MFM and its Implications for the Reverse in Mission' in *ORITA: Ibadan Journal of Religious Studies*, xxxvii, (June & Dec. 2005): 33-64. See also, P. N. Mwaura, 'A Spirituality of Resistance and Hope: African Instituted Churches' Response to Poverty' in *ORITA: Ibadan Journal of Religious Studies*, xxxvii/1&2, (June & Dec. 2005): 65-83.

74 J. P. Moreland and W. L. Craig, *Philosophical Foundations for a Christian Worldview* (Illinois: IVP Academic, 2003), 1-6.

75 Babor, 'A Review of Balthasar's Theology', 73.

76 S. W. Kunhiyop, *African Christian Ethics* (Nairobi: WordAlive Publishers, 2008), 42-43.

of spiritual transformation. There are many others also who are not well known leaders but when we observe and interact with them personally we can see that their experience is also a valid testimony to their transformation.

In review, we can remember that the only constant phenomenon in life and in history has been the constancy of change. Everything changes; and human beings too change from one belief to another. On this basis, we have examined spiritual transformation with the hindsight that a true change brings also about observable changes, especially morally, which serves as empirical and historical evidence to justify it. This change arises from an encounter with Christ. We conclude by agreeing with Kenneth Scott Latourette who says:

Through Him, movements have been

set in motion which have been made in society for what mankind believes to be its best – in the inward transformation of human lives in political order, in the production and distribution of goods to meet the physical needs of men, in healing physical ills, in the relations between races and between nations, in art, in religion and in the achievements of the human intellect. Gauged by the consequences... [and] measured by His influence, Jesus is central in the human story [*and change in human society*].⁷⁷

McDowell adds, 'This is why I believe that Jesus Christ is the greatest revolutionary who has ever lived.'⁷⁸ And we do not believe or agree less.

⁷⁷ Cited in McDowell, *Evidence that Demands*, 338; emphasis my addition.

⁷⁸ McDowell, *Evidence that Demands*, 375.

The Appeal of Exodus

Stefan Kürle

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