Conversion in first century Christianity: Insights from cognitive psychology

Can the cognitive sciences help us understand first century Christian conversion?

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Cognition: Innate and Culturally formed

**Innate**
- Categorization
- Causal thinking

**Culturally formed**
- Categories (colour)
- Causal beliefs (magic)
Affects and Emotions

It is impossible to be afraid and angry at the same time.

- Aristotle (Rhet. 1380a)
Cognitive process of conversion?

• “Conversion” is a family resemblance
    • Intensification
    • Institutional transition
    • Tradition transition
    • 14 clusters, 5 types

• ”Religious commitment” is a family resemblance
Motivations to convert (Lofland and Skonovd, 1981)

- Intellectual conviction (Nicodemus)
- Mystical experience (Paul)
- Experimental curiosity (some Corinthian Christians)
- Communal affection (some Johannine Christians)
- Revivalist mass conversion (1st Pentecost)
- Coercive conversion
No Unified Cognitive Model of Conversion...

...since both religion and conversion are umbrella terms.
Conversion(?) in Roman Antiquity

- Joining a voluntary association (cult or philosophy)
- Becoming a client of a patron God
Christ-believing communities as voluntary associations

- Voluntary associations
  - In honour of deity or hero
  - Voluntary membership by agreeing to the cause of the association
Joining a religious association – what kind of "conversion" is that?

• Invitation, vote and/or initiation ritual

• Syncretism (cults) or exclusive commitment (philosophies)?
  – "Sharing the table of demons"? (1 Cor 8-10)

- Conversion is accepting God’s patronage and benefaction
  - God the patron calls, the convert accepts the invitation
  - God bestows benefactions (*charis*), the convert responds by loyalty (*pistis*) and praise (*epainos*) that gives the benefactor honor (*timē*)
Conversion as loyalty

- Not emotions
- Only partly convictions
- Action
- Loyalty
  (socialisation to a community of faith)
Types of conversion to 1st c. Christ-believing communities

• Case 1: A 1st c. Jew becomes a Christ-believer
  – intensification
  – ... or perhaps institutional transition

• Case 2: A 1st c. non-Jew (gentile) becomes a Christ-believer
  – tradition transition
  – ...or perhaps tradition addition
Social identity theory, self-categorization theory

• Cognition of groups function like other cognitive categorization processes
Intensification, e.g. a Jew joining Matthean Jewish Christ-believers

Ingroup

Sub-group

Sub-group

Towards prototypicality
Institutional transition, e.g. a Pharisee joining Matthean Jewish Christ-believers

Redefining prototypicality
Tradition Transition, e.g. a Gentile who becomes a monotheistic Christ-believer

Radical change of identity and loyalty
Tradition addition, e.g. a Gentile who becomes a Christ-worshipper and still participates in other cults

Just another identity
Two types of cognitive schemata for the social self

• Group-belonging (categorization)

• Roles (network of relations)
The Pauline mission

• Paul: Being a Christ-believer is to belong to an exclusive social category

• Some Christ-followers?: Being a Christ-believers is just one of my social roles
Effects of the leadership’s demand to commit exclusively?

• “You turned to God from the idols” (1 Thess 1:9)

Cultural epidemiology:
• Stability
• Dispersion of the movement
The Paul-paradigm

- Sudden, emotional, and decisive conversion (William James, Arthur Darby Nock)

Paul’s conversion narrative
- Historiography (Acts) is rhetorical narrative
- Autobiography (Paul) is rhetorical narrative
- Autobiographical memory (episodic, semantic) is unreliable and dependent on present self-identity