

RELIGIOUS CONVERSION AND MORAL CONVERSION

How Are They Interrelated?

Louis Roy

NOTWITHSTANDING the usefulness of Bernard Lonergan's distinction between religious and moral conversion, we shall see that the distinction has to be complemented by discussion of a question he did not ask: could we understand not only, as he asserts, moral conversion as dependent on religious conversion, but also—the other way round—religious conversion as dependent on moral conversion? In other words, can a person's strong ethical commitment prepare the way, although not necessarily in explicit intention, for the development of her or his religious sense?

Lonergan's Approach to Conversion

In chapter 1 of *Method in Theology* Lonergan describes human intentionality as a desire to know, respect and enhance what is outside us (people, animals and things): an in-tending of, that is, a reaching out towards, reality. He delineates four levels of human intentionality. They are: 1. experience (perception); 2. understanding (getting an insight into a particular subject matter); 3. judgment of fact (stating what is the case); and 4. judgment of value and decision (discovering what is worthwhile and opting for or against it).¹

In chapter 4 of the same book he introduces religious experience from the perspective of human intentionality, which actively pursues personal self-transcendence. In addition to the *cognitive* levels of self-transcendence (levels 1–3), people can experience an *affective* form (level 4), which consists of both moral and religious self-transcendence

¹ See *Method in Theology*, Collected Works of Bernard Lonergan volume 14, edited by Robert M. Doran and John D. Dadosky (Toronto: U. of Toronto, 2017), 13–14 (subsequent references in the text). For an earlier, much longer and detailed account of intentionality, see *Insight: A Study of Human Understanding*, Collected Works of Bernard Lonergan volume 3, edited by Frederick E. Crowe and Robert M. Doran (Toronto: U. of Toronto, 1992).

(99–104). In chapter 10, he describes three kinds of conversion: religious, moral and intellectual (223–229). In this article I won't introduce the latter, which is required for professional theologians—Lonergan's book is about method *in theology*, not directly about the broader sphere of Christian life—so as to focus on religious and moral conversion.² Let us note that he supposes, without saying so, that religious conversion amounts to religious experience.³

Lonergan's Definitions of Moral and Religious Conversions

What is Lonergan's understanding of *moral* conversion? He writes:

Moral conversion changes the criterion of one's decisions and choices from satisfaction to values So we move to the existential moment when we discover for ourselves that our choosing affects ourselves no less than the chosen or rejected objects, and that is up to each of us to decide for himself what he is to make of himself Moral conversion consists in opting for the truly good, even for value against satisfaction when value and satisfaction conflict. (225–226)⁴

Morally acting is more demanding than defining moral conversion. Thus Lonergan enumerates a series of requirements: discovering one's own various forms of bias; taking account of existing situations; avoiding personal and group decline; fostering elements of progress in one's life and in society; explicating and possibly redressing one's scale of values; listening to criticisms; being ready to learn from others (226).

What is Lonergan's understanding of *religious* conversion? He writes:

Religious conversion is being grasped by ultimate concern. It is otherworldly falling in love. It is total and permanent self-surrender without conditions, qualifications, reservations. But it is such a surrender, not as an act, but as a dynamic state that is prior to and principle of subsequent acts It is interpreted differently in the context of different religious traditions. For Christians it is God's love flooding our hearts through the Holy Spirit given to us (226).

² In *Psychic Conversion and Theological Foundations: Toward a Reorientation of the Human Sciences* (Chicago: Scholars, 1981), Robert M. Doran has enriched the study of the affective aspect of conversion.

³ By contrast, for a justification of a distinction between religious conversion (which is a particular event) and religious experience (which is a pervasive state), see Louis Roy, *Transcendent Experiences: Phenomenology and Critique* (Toronto: U. of Toronto, 2001), 139–140.

⁴ Lonergan's position here is close to Immanuel Kant's, for whom a person's good will is by definition not affected by inclinations and does not pursue pleasure or happiness. Lonergan does not hold that the good person ought never to consider pleasure or happiness; instead, he simply teaches that the good person must opt for 'the truly good ... when value and satisfaction conflict' (226). Of course value and satisfaction do not always conflict.

Perhaps several of my readers have just noticed here a shortened quotation of Romans 5:5: 'Hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us'. Lonergan was fond of this marvellous sentence by St Paul; he referred to it many times in his writings, including six other times in *Method in Theology*.⁵ Lonergan also situates religious experience within his overall conception of human intentionality:

Being in love with God is the basic fulfilment of our conscious intentionality. That fulfilment brings a deep-set joy that can remain despite humiliation, failure, privation, pain, betrayal, desertion. That fulfilment brings a radical peace, the peace that the world cannot give. (101)

In *Method in Theology* we find a hint that suggests Lonergan was not unaware of the moral conversion's influence on religious conversion. He formulates the following question: 'To deliberate about deliberating is to ask whether any deliberating is worthwhile. Has "worthwhile" any ultimate meaning?' (97) This question is not merely theoretical. Thus Lonergan adds: 'The questions arise, and clearly our attitudes and our



Bernard Lonergan

resoluteness may be profoundly affected by our answers' (98). We shall see further on that the psychologist Lawrence Kohlberg entertained a similar enquiry.

In sum, our main question has been: although Lonergan stresses solely the influence of religious conversion upon moral conversion, is it conceivable that their influence might be reciprocal? Thus I will submit that whereas moral conversion is grounded at least in an implicit religious conversion, the latter cannot take place without the former, namely without some exercise of moral conscience.

⁵ See index at 'Romans 5:5'; notice also the references at 'Romans 8:38–39' in the index.

Hints from Newman, Frankl and Kohlberg*John Henry Newman*

For Newman ‘Conscience’—he spells it with a capital C—which speaks in ‘our own mind’, is a channel that carries people towards God.⁶ In two sections of his *Grammar of Assent*, he undertakes to ‘show how we apprehend Him, not merely as a notion, but as a reality’. He endeavours ‘to explain how we gain an image of God’. In the variegated feelings that are associated with conscience (for instance, ‘grief, regret, joy, or desire’; ‘self-approval and hope, or compunction and fear’), he locates ‘the materials for the real apprehension of a Divine Sovereign and Judge’.⁷

He also points out: ‘The feeling of conscience ... is twofold:—it is a moral sense, and a sense of duty; a judgment of the reason and a magisterial dictate Thus conscience has both a critical and a judicial office.’ The first amounts to ‘a rule of right conduct’; the second offers us ‘a sanction of right conduct’.⁸ In Newman’s eyes, then, conscience helps us to picture God as a living Person both as the originator of specific ethical norms (the ‘Sovereign’) and as the one to whom we are accountable (the ‘Judge’).

Newman’s foray into human conscience makes us aware of its moral strength and of its potential impact on a person’s religiousness. Of course the awareness is far from being always patent:

Conscience does not repose on itself, but vaguely reaches forward to something beyond self, and dimly discerns a sanction higher than self for its decisions, as is evidenced in that keen sense of obligation and responsibility which informs them.⁹

Unfortunately there are several modes of deceiving one’s conscience and of evading its presence.¹⁰ None the less, in numerous cases, *moral* conscience does initiate a *religious* consciousness in sinners, whatever the depth of their culpability.

Viktor Frankl

Although in a fashion quite different from Newman’s, the psychiatrist Viktor Frankl emphasizes the transcendent character of conscience. He

⁶ John Henry Newman, *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent*, edited by I. T. Ker (Oxford: Clarendon, 1985 [1889]), 389. I refer to the pagination of the eighth edition, which the editor placed in the margins.

⁷ Newman, *Grammar of Assent*, 104 (see sections 5.1 and 10.1), 105.

⁸ Newman, *Grammar of Assent*, 105, 106.

⁹ Newman, *Grammar of Assent*, 74.

¹⁰ As Newman points out in Sermon 8 of his *Fifteen Sermons Preached before the University of Oxford between AD 1826 and 1843*, 3rd edn (Notre Dame: U. of Notre Dame, 1997 [1872]).

notes: 'Conscience is not only a fact within psychological immanence but also a referent to transcendence; only with a reference to transcendence, only as some sort of transcendent phenomenon, can it really be understood'.¹¹ Notwithstanding this helpful distinction between the psychological and the transcendent, his account of what he calls 'the transcendent quality of conscience'—the title of the chapter from which I have just quoted—remains hazy.

When he writes that 'man's unconscious relation to God is profoundly personal', it is not clear whether his 'unconscious God' is personal or impersonal.¹² As a matter of fact, he does not think it is possible for humans to make accurate judgments about God; neither revelation nor argumentation can achieve real knowledge of the divine.¹³ Consequently his God does not talk and there is no indication in Frankl's corpus that God has established an interpersonal relationship with human beings. So we must wonder what is the *exact* sense of this sentence about the 'religious man': 'He is also aware of the taskmaster, the source of his mission. For thousands of years that source has been called God.'¹⁴

However, the contrast that Frankl draws between the 'irreligious man' and the 'religious man' is useful for our purposes here. He states:

An irreligious man is one who does not recognize this transcendent quality. Needless to say, the irreligious man also 'has' a conscience, and he also is responsible; he simply asks no further—neither what he is responsible to, nor from what his conscience stems.

Frankl then asks: 'what is the reason the irreligious man does not go further?' He answers:

It is because he does not want to lose the 'firm ground under his feet'. The true summit is barred from his vision; it is hidden in the fog, and he does not risk venturing into it, into this uncertainty. Only the religious man hazards it.¹⁵

Even though, according to this description, the 'religious man' appears to be more intellectually persistent and more daring, it is my conviction

¹¹ Viktor Frankl, *The Unconscious God: Psychotherapy and Theology* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1975), 54.

¹² Frankl, *Unconscious God*, 63.

¹³ Viktor Frankl, *The Will to Meaning: Foundations and Applications of Logotherapy* (New York: New American Library, 1969), 148.

¹⁴ Viktor Frankl, *The Doctor and the Soul: From Psychotherapy to Logotherapy*, translated by Richard and Clara Winston (Baltimore: Penguin, 1965), 13.

¹⁵ Frankl, *Unconscious God*, 55–56.

that the 'irreligious man', if conscientious and responsible, is in fact open to transcendence, namely to a potential religious conversion.

Lawrence Kohlberg

Lawrence Kohlberg is well known for his essays on six stages of moral development (the last being called 'a universal humanistic perspective').¹⁶ However, in his last fifteen years he supplemented his scheme with a *seventh* stage, termed 'a cosmic perspective'. While his sixth stage would amount to what Lonergan described as 'moral conversion', the seventh amounts to 'religious conversion'. The transition from the sixth to the seventh stage would be prompted by the transition from the question 'how can we be moral?' to the question 'why be moral?'¹⁷ This latter type of question is by and large the same as the one we noticed earlier in this essay; and it may sometimes elicit, from a moral standpoint, a serious interest in a higher stage, namely 'religious conversion'.

The Influence of Moral Conversion upon Religious Conversion

There can be a presence of religious conversion within moral conversion even when it is not acknowledged by those who do not care about religion. Numerous unbelievers who are *morally* converted—we meet them frequently these days—may also be *religiously* converted. Many agnostics have a sense of transcendence, also termed an absolute, although most of them do not put their vague awareness into words. This peculiar feeling of transcendence presupposes a moral sense that manifests itself in the acceptance of a summons to the implementation of meaning (no muddling), veracity (no lying), loyalty (no treachery), goodness (no hatred), or justice (no unfairness) in particular declarations and actions. (The list could be longer.) Those people then hear and respond to a demanding imperative coming from an unknown Source.

A transcendent experience can be characterized as an event in which individuals, by themselves or in a group, have the impression that they are in contact with something boundless and limitless, which they cannot get hold of and which utterly surpasses human capacities. Whether within their ordinary lives or within Churches and religious groups,

¹⁶ See Lawrence Kohlberg, 'Education, Moral Development and Faith', *Journal of Moral Education*, 4 (1974), 5–16.

¹⁷ See Lawrence Kohlberg, 'Continuities and Discontinuities in Childhood and Adult Moral Development Revisited', in *Life-Span Developmental Psychology: Personality and Socialization* (New York: Academic, 1973), 180–204, here 202.

people of all ages and of various social backgrounds report having had gone through unique episodes that are rooted in a feeling of transcendence, which are interpreted in various ways.¹⁸

For instance, in England the zoologist-philosopher Sir Alister Hardy and his team at Manchester College, Oxford, studied that sense of transcendence. They asked: 'Have you ever been aware of or influenced by a presence or power, whether you call it God or not, which is different from your everyday self?' This question was used in a survey by National Opinion Polls in Great Britain in 1976. In that country, where Sunday church attendance was and is significantly lower than in the United States, somewhat surprisingly the percentage of 'yes' answers was about the same (36 per cent; or 31 per cent according to another survey). Interestingly about 25 per cent of agnostics and atheists answered 'yes' to this question.¹⁹

Consequently, in conversations with unbelievers it matters to recognise their *moral* authenticity along with the values they pursue, at times with considerable losses or sacrifices. When dialogue takes place in friendship and trust, we can also hint at the sense of transcendence they may have, however dimly.²⁰ In terms of human intentionality, there is no watertight partition between the two movements of an intentional consciousness: the movement downwards from religious experience to moral experience, and the movement upwards from the latter to the former. However, since speaking of 'conversions' often smacks of excessive emotion, it may be preferable to speak of moral and religious 'transformations' or 'convictions'.

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¹⁸ I have written two books on this subject. The first draws from aspects of modern philosophy of religion: *Transcendent Experiences*, cited above. The second one is theological and psychological: *The Feeling of Transcendence, an Experience of God?*, translated by Pierre LaViolette and Louise Anne Mahoney (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2021).

¹⁹ David Hay and Ann Morisy, 'Reports of Esctatic, Paranormal, or Religious Experience in Great Britain and the United States: A Comparison of Trends', *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 17/3 (September 1978), 255–268.

²⁰ See Louis Roy, 'Principles of Fruitful Interreligious Dialogue: A Few Suggestions', *Studies in Interreligious Dialogue*, 29 (2019), 159–183.