

IN SEARCH OF A NEW LIFE: CONVERSION MOTIVES OF CHRISTIANS AND MUSLIMS

ABSTRACT

In church practice and missiology, conversion is often understood only in one direction (towards Christianity) and with only one valid motive, namely a strictly religious one. This article reveals, however, that such a view is inadequate. Conversion should rather be understood as a two-way movement and based on combinations of various motives. It concludes with the presentation of a holistic missiological understanding of conversion. Though it applies more adequately to the South African context it may also be of value to any similar situation worldwide. This new understanding of conversion may help to promote better understanding and respect between Christians and Muslims.

1. Introduction

During the 19th and 20th centuries, both Islam and Christianity have increased their adherents worldwide. As a result, Christians and Muslims are meeting each other on a daily basis in almost every corner of the world. The awareness that Christians and Muslims have of each other's faiths has also grown extensively. One aspect common to Christianity and Islam is the fact that believers actively invite other people to become adherents to their faith. This inviting attitude has its basis in their respective Scriptures:

Mt 11:28: "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest."

Surah 16:125: "Invite (all) to the way of thy Lord with wisdom and beautiful preaching; and argue with them in ways that are best and most gracious ..."

There are many Christians and Muslims who are dissatisfied and disillusioned with their own faith for various reasons. Such people are looking for an alternative faith to satisfy their felt needs and in search of a new life. For a variety of reasons it has become more common for people to change their allegiance from Christianity to Islam and from Islam to Christianity.

I have personally witnessed this change of allegiance with many people, both in Africa and Europe. For instance, in the year 2000 there was a public event in Zürich where Muslims presented their faith in an informal and attractive way. In speeches the relevance of Islam for the people in Europe was explained, literature was sold and oriental food was given free of charge. There were Swiss people who had already converted to Islam and many who found Islam very attractive but had not yet made a decision to embrace it formally. Most of these people told me that they grew up in a Christian environment and professed to have been Christians before.

On the other hand, I have met a business man from an Islamic state who told me that he had been a Muslim all his life but converted to Christianity recently. He had secretly obtained and read a Bible in his own language. As he travelled to Europe, visited churches and spoken to Christians, it became clear to him that it is the right step to become a Christian. For reasons of persecutions and fear for his life, it was not possible for him to return to his home country as a Christian. He was prepared to pay the cost of his conversion, to leave his family and business behind and start a completely new life in Europe. This businessman pointed out to me, that he knows of many more people in his home country who are disillusioned with Islam.

There are many more incidents happening today that prove the contemporary relevance of examining the fact of conversion between Christianity and Islam. A number of new publications also underline the importance of this theme, such as Gaudeul (1999) and Al-Sain (2000).

One important question which comes up in this regard is: How do the Christian and Islamic communities respond to this change of religion in both directions? In my experience, both in church practice and in Christian missiology, conversion is usually understood as being only towards Christianity and with only one valid motive, namely a strictly religious one.² I contend that such a view is missiologically inadequate in the context of

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² In chapter 2 of my thesis (Maurer 1999:36-88) I give an outline of various missiological approaches to conversion.

Christian-Muslim relations. It should be acknowledged that conversion moves both ways and is based on a combination of motives. For this we need a holistic missiological understanding of conversion, which can help to promote understanding and respect between faith communities.

2. Psychology of conversion in a religious and cultural pluralistic society

Worldwide, religious pluralism is a fact that no one can any more deny. This poses a new challenge to the Christian church. Kauuova (1997:i) observes that “where the non-Christian religions had been seen as objects of mission and evangelism they are now ‘partners’ in this whole activity. They are ‘share holders’ in the public arena.” It is therefore necessary that a new Christian theology of religions need to emerge. Kritzinger (1991:217f) emphasises the same notion when he says:

We must begin to view other religions also as *missionary* movements. The fact that Christian theologies of religions developed initially in Christian missionary circles often had the result that other faiths were viewed as “target groups” only ... What we now need to do in Christian missiology is to analyse the mission of other religions ... to be able to understand how and why they are growing.

This implies that the churches need an adequate missiological understanding of conversion. In relation to Islam, it will help churches to have more understanding and respect for Muslims. It will also increase understanding for Christians who convert to Islam and for the reasons why Islam is growing. This new understanding will hopefully contribute to better relations between the two faith communities.

The importance of acquiring this understanding is highlighted in what Kritzinger (1991:227) says:

A Christian theology of religions that does not tackle these questions head-on, will quickly become irrelevant to the unfolding new society. Nicolson (1991:81) rightly says that if religious groups are unable to accept religious pluralism, they will be “irrelevant to the establishment of a democracy”.

Often Christians fear that, by accepting other religions as equal and entering into interfaith dialogue, they have to give up their missionary zeal and that they will no longer be “true Christians.” I disagree with this sentiment and would like to emphasise what Kritzinger (1991:223)³ said in this respect:

This does not mean that the content of faith (the *fides quae* in scholastic terminology) is to be regarded as irrelevant in interfaith dialogue ... Dialogue is an encounter of *commitments*, which are firmly (but not arrogantly) held by all the participants. This is therefore not a call to adopt a posture of theological relativism or to create a new “world religion”, but to say farewell to arrogance in relation to people of other faiths.

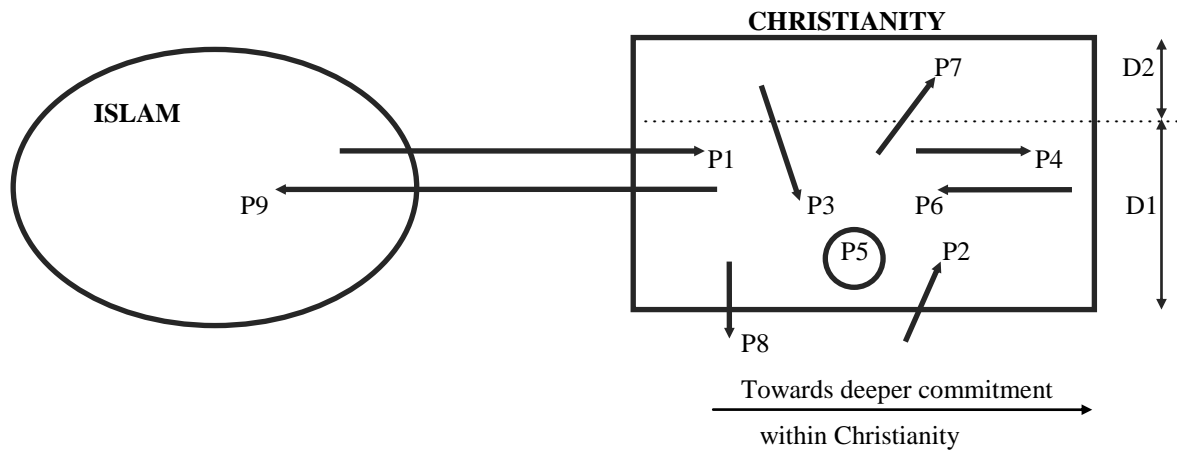
For Bosch both dialogue and mission can be understood only with the meeting of hearts rather than of minds. He proposes an honest seeking after dialogue (Bosch 1991:483-488). This whole issue brings a Christian into a dilemma: “How do we maintain the tension between being both missionary and dialogical?” Bosch observes that “we are dealing here with a mystery” and that Christians need to accept this tension.

Christians need therefore to see conversion as not just a one-way but a two-way movement. Kritzinger (1991:225) goes a step further when he says that “a theology of apostasy should be an integral part of a Christian theology of religions. This is in keeping with the change from a one-way to a two-way theology of religions ... Christian theology of religions will understand Christianity not only as a missionary faith but also as a faith being addressed and challenged by other living religions.”

Conversion happens between Christianity and Islam, in both directions, but it also happens in various ways within the fold of Christianity. In an attempt to clarify the various possible types of conversion, I have developed a diagram to illustrate types of conversion, with special reference to Christianity and Islam:

Diagram 1: Types of Conversion

³ Kritzinger’s arguments are based on two publications of the *World Conference on Religion and Peace* in South Africa (WCRP-SA 1988; 1991).



- P1** = A person converting from Islam to Christianity (this is how churches most commonly understands conversion). Rambo (1993:13) calls this “tradition transition” (cf. Le Mond 1993:4, Neill 1978:205).
- P2** = A person converting from a non-religious background to Christianity. Rambo (1993:13) calls this “affiliation.” Such converts can also be called “first-generation Christians” (Kraft 1979:329).
- P3** = A person converting from one denomination to another (D2 to D1) within Christianity. Rambo (1993:13) calls this “institutional transition” (cf. Conn 1986:7). It is also called “denominational switching” (cf. Hoge 1981, Neill 1978:205).
- P4** = A person converting within the same denomination (D1) of Christianity to a deeper spirituality. Rambo (1993:13) calls this “intensification” (cf. Conn 1986:7-8, Witherup 1994:73, Kraft 1979:329, Neill 1978:205).
- P5** = A person with no actual conversion experience. Often called a “nominal Christian,” who was “born and bred” in the Christian tradition.
- P6** = A person converting within Christianity and the same denomination, having a negative spiritual growth. P6 is a potential convert away from the Christian faith and in opposite movement to P4. This movement is often labelled “backsliding.”
- P7** = A person converting from denomination D1 to D2 within Christianity (P7 is in the opposite direction of P3: according to Rambo (1993:13) termed as ‘Institutional transition’ (cf. Le Mond 1993:4, Hoge 1981).
- P8** = A person converting from Christianity into a non-religious environment. This type of conversion is called “apostasy” or “defection” by Rambo (1993:13).
- P9** = A person converting from Christianity to Islam. In Rambo’s (1993:14) terminology, this is also “tradition transition” (see P1) (Neill 1978:205).

Whereas each of these types of conversion is interesting and significant to study, the special focus of this article is on the conversion movements P1 and P9 (“tradition transition”).

3. An analytical “Grid”

Questions about human motivations have long been raised in missionary circles. Social scientists have brought forward different recommendations on how to classify conversion motives. Rambo (1993:14ff) for example, refers to the suggestions of Lofland and Skonovd (1981) to distinguish six categories of conversion motives:

- 1) Intellectual: A person seeks knowledge about religious or spiritual issues.
- 2) Mystical: A sudden and traumatic burst of insight, as in the case of Saul of Tarsus.
- 3) Experimental: Active exploration of religious options.
- 4) Affectional: Interpersonal bonds as an important factor in the conversion process.
- 5) Revivalist: Individuals are emotionally aroused and new behaviours and beliefs are promoted by the pressures exerted (by using crowd conformity).
- 6) Coercive: Different levels of pressure exerted on the person to participate, conform, and confess.

Such a categorisation is useful as a model for basic consideration. It needs, however, to be adapted to each particular situation. In the context of my research I have identified five operational conversion motives. This analytical grid of five motives was constructed out of my readings in the missiology and psychology of conversion (see chapters 2 and 3 of my thesis; Maurer 1999:36-132) and in dialogue with the findings of my interviews (see chapters 5 and 6 of my thesis; Maurer 1999:157-203).

The Five Conversion Motives:⁴

1) Religious

This motive is sometimes called the “intellectual” motive for conversion (cf. Rambo 1993:14, Robbins 1988:67, Lofland & Skonovd 1981:375). It is the motive which has been traditionally called the “true” motive for conversion (Van Butselaar 1981:112).⁵ The understanding of the religious/intellectual motive is that a person actively seeks knowledge about religious or spiritual issues via literature, television, lectures and other media. In my study it means that a person actively acquires knowledge of the Christian or Islamic faith.

Some converts interviewed were seeking religious knowledge about Christianity or Islam because there was a problem or “crisis” with their experience of their original faith. The main reason given was that of not being able to “understand”⁶ the teachings or rituals. This aspect can be described as the “push” dimension of conversion. Since such persons could no longer understand and agree with the teachings of their faith they felt “pushed” to leave it and explore an alternative religion. Since the new religion was experienced as “better” and more “understandable,” it “pulled” the person to accept it. Therefore, in this religious motive one can often identify both a push and a pull dimension.

2) Mystical

This motive is also discussed by Rambo (1993:15) and Robbins (1988:68) (cf. Lofland & Skonovd 1981). According to Rambo, a mystical conversion experience “is generally a sudden and traumatic burst of insight, induced by vision, voices, or other paranormal experiences.” A “paranormal phenomenon” is usually described as an experience which cannot be easily explained scientifically or rationally (Cowie 1989:896). The prototypical conversion in respect to mystical experience in the Bible is commonly attributed to Saul of Tarsus on his way to Damascus (Acts 9). In religious terminology it has therefore the understanding of the direct intervention of the spiritual divine power. In the conversion narratives described by James (1902), the mystical factor plays a central role. Kroeger (1996:371) is convinced that in such conversions it is the Holy Spirit who “is at work in ways that pass human understanding.”

The term “supernatural” is also sometimes used in this context. Cowie (1989:1291) describes this term as something that “cannot be explained by natural or physical laws” that has its original cause in the “world of spirits.” If people speak about supernatural experiences they usually refer to a significant dream, a vision or an impression. It is an extraordinary happening or event which is usually sudden and unexpected. The level of emotional arousal is extremely high – sometimes involving theophanic ecstasies, awe, love, or even fear (Robbins 1988:68). Raschke (1978:425) discusses the term “revelation” in this context and gives the definition as “an enlightening or astonishing disclosure.” A revelation is therefore an extraordinary disclosure which a person receives. This extraordinary insight enables a person to make a step in a direction which would otherwise not have been easily taken; such as a change in religion.

⁴ I regard all five these motives as of equal importance and treated them impartially in my research. In other words, the sequence in which they are arranged has no significance.

⁵ Van Butselaar (1981:112) calls this the ‘spiritual’ motive for conversion. However, the meaning he attaches to it is very similar to Rambo’s (1993:14) description of the ‘intellectual’ motive.

⁶ I explored this dimension of ‘cognitive dissonance,’ as experienced by my respondents, in chapter 7 of my thesis (Maurer 1999:204-247).

McKinney (1994:149), in her case study among the *Bajju*, pointed to the important role of dreams and visions in conversion. Dreams and visions can serve either to initiate conversion or to confirm it, or both.⁷ Some psychologists have attempted to explain visions as “paranormal” experiences:

Persinger has speculated that individuals within the ‘normal’, ostensibly nonseizure, population who have experienced significant mystical or paranormal religious states might in fact have had what he describes as ‘microseizure’, i.e., slight abnormal electrical discharges of the limbic, emotional brain sufficient to sustain a mystical experience (Brown and Caetano 1992:152).

In their section on “Epilepsy, mystical experience, and conversion,” Brown and Caetano (1992:149) differentiate between two neurocognitive models of religious conversion:

- a) Conversion seen as the result of abnormal experiences which have their origin in a malfunctioning brain.
- b) Conversion seen as an extension of normal mental activity, differing from other mental activity only in its content and perceived significance.

In a footnote they mention a third possibility, which would be that “conversion is an entirely supernatural event, occurring entirely outside of neurocognitive systems.” In my study I did not search for the origin of the mystical experiences reported by the interviewees. I refrained from trying to determine whether a mystical experience comes from within or outside the neurocognitive system. What should be clear, though, is that I do not regard these experiences as the result of a “malfunctioning brain.” It was not my aim to critically assess whether such an experience had in fact taken place. If a respondent reports such an event I accept it as a reality for that person.

3) Affectional

This conversion motive was originally identified by Lofland and Stark (1965). It stresses interpersonal bonds as the decisive factor in the conversion process (Rambo 1993:15). A person experiences affection as being loved, nurtured and affirmed by another person or group (cf. Maslow 1970:20). Van Butselaar (1981:113) calls this the “personal motive” and describes it as the “outgrowth of interpersonal relationships.” Interpersonal bonds are widely viewed as providing “fundamental support for recruitment” (Robbins 1988:69). In my interviews this conversion motive appeared primarily in the form of affection for a person admired for his/her religious activities. Such a person was either a friend or a relative, from the same or the opposite sex.

Described thus far, the affectional motive can be interpreted as a positive “pull” factor, drawing the convert to accept the new religion. However, the affectional motive can also function as a negative “push” factor. Negative affectional factors are often traumatic events such as the death of a family member or a divorce, which constitutes a crisis in the life of a particular person and may push him/her into a conversion process. A convert may therefore enter into conversion due to an affective “push” or “pull” experience.

4) Socio-political

This motive is not mentioned by Rambo. Van Butselaar (1981:112) calls this the “social motive.” It relates to the functioning of the individual within his or her socio-political group. In this category a person is motivated for socio-political reasons to change his/her religious allegiance (cf. Arnold 1974:3). This motive featured strongly in my interviews since many converts mentioned the socio-political situation as a reason for embracing another religion. The political climate in South Africa during the apartheid era “pushed” many black people to look for another religion, since for them the ruling government was experienced as “White Christian oppressors.”

Kritzinger (1980:95) regards the slogan: “Christianity is the religion of the Whites” as representing a “mood of Black consciousness looking for its roots.” He is of the opinion that the reality of racism was responsible to “establish a negative image of the Christian faith in the minds of many black people” and this resulted in a “growing interest in Islam as a religion of Africa.” African people in South Africa began to see Jesus as the author of racism and not the one who died to break down the dividing wall between peoples. Muslims have taken advantage of this situation and have promoted Islam as the “religion based on equal rights and justice” (cf. Maurer 1996:21). Today there are many black Muslims in South Africa, almost all of them coming from a Christian background.

5) Material

⁷ See also Triebel (1976:171-173) who explores the role of dreams and visions in a chapter entitled ‘Conversion and young church.’

This motive is not mentioned by Rambo but Van Butselaar (1981:113)⁸ includes it. It is particularly important for my research since it was mentioned by various converts. There are many poor people who find themselves in such a desperate situation that they will change their religious allegiance if it can somehow improve their lot. Maslow (1970:17) calls this the “physiological need,” which is one of the basic human needs. This motive has sometimes been criticised as an “impure” conversion motive (Van Butselaar 1981:113).

Included in this conversion motive are the desire for benefits such as food, clothes, gifts, housing, etc. I also viewed an offer of employment or a bursary for studies as a material motivation for conversion. Poverty constitutes a crisis which sometimes “pushes” a person into a conversion process leading to a change of religion.

4. Analysis of the conversion motives

In my research I interviewed 20 converts, ten who converted from Christianity to Islam and ten from Islam to Christianity. The narratives reveal that between two and four of the motives I have identified played a role in each conversion process.

From the interviews it appeared that, when more than one motive was operative, the conversion process usually started with one motive but then moved on to the others, sometimes leaving the initial motive behind, especially when the material motive initiated the process. In other cases the original motive persisted as a key factor throughout the process. Various other combinations or constellations of conversion motives were found.⁹

Some comments on each conversion motive

1) Religious: My research findings reveal that 18 out of 20 respondents experienced this motive as a vital factor in their conversion process. The converts acquired knowledge of the new faith and compared the new with the old (Okorochoa 1987:262). If the new faith appeared to them superior then that became one of the motivations towards accepting it. The main issue mentioned by converts to Christianity was the love displayed in the Bible through Jesus and also the warmth in the church among Christians. The converts also found “hope and assurance” which they hadn’t experienced before. In these cases, Islam was perceived as a religion with meaningless ritualistic practices and utterances in Arabic which most people in South Africa did not understand. By contrast, converts expressed their joy at having a “living relationship” with Jesus and guidance from the Holy Spirit.

On the other hand, a number of converts accepted Islam because they said Christianity was not practical and was against common human reason. They experienced it as replete with irrational doctrines such as trinity and incarnation. In contrast, they found Islam to be accommodating to the findings of modern science, which therefore appeared as the only viable option for an enlightened man or woman (cf. Poston 1991:164, Naudé 1978:8).

2) Mystical: It is significant that six out of ten converts to Christianity said that a supernatural experience contributed greatly to their decision to convert, whereas none of the ten converts to Islam mentioned this motive. All six converts emphasised that this supernatural encounter happened towards the end of their conversion process and that it was the “final straw” which convinced them to make a commitment to Christianity. The converts appeared to be convinced that God had spoken to them in a direct way.

3) Affectual: 18 out of 20 converts mentioned this motive as a motivational factor in their conversion process. It can be assumed that the reason why people convert (in both directions) is often not that they are intellectually convinced about the new religion but because a “friend has shown them the way” (cf. Poston 1991:163). Frequently marriage is the reason why a spouse accepts the other partner’s religion. In the Muslim community the non-Muslim spouse is usually expected to convert to Islam.

4) Socio-Political: Five out of ten converts from Christianity to Islam indicated that the socio-political situation in South Africa was a reason for them to convert to Islam.¹⁰ This fact confirms Rambo’s (1993:41) hypotheses: “Indigenous cultures that are in crisis will have more potential converts than stable societies.” Conversion thus becomes an act of revolt against the religion and society in which the converts were born and brought up. It is a break with their past with all its painful memories.

⁸ The similarities between Van Butselaar’s study and mine are probably due to the fact that both were conducted in Africa (Rwanda and South Africa respectively).

⁹ I discuss these combinations in chapters 5 and 6 of my thesis, where I analyse the 20 conversion narratives with the help of my analytical grid (Maurer 1999:157-203).

¹⁰ The apartheid system in South Africa, which caused widespread suffering in black communities, was justified by means of Christian theology. This caused many black Christians to become disillusioned with Christianity, and some converted to Islam as a result of this.

5) Material: This motive appears in five of the conversion narratives. If people see that their basic needs are fulfilled they are often prepared to change their religion. People with serious physiological needs often display a high “availability” for conversion. People who are likely to fall in this category are the unemployed, young people who would like to study but have no money; refugees, and recent immigrants. Many poor people in South Africa have recently become Muslims in order to get food or a job.

Other emerging aspects:

- Converts often have a strong desire to witness to their newly found faith.
- Many converts have to endure opposition and persecution. It is significant that five Muslim converts to Christianity faced persecution compared to only one Christian convert to Islam.¹¹
- The ritual of commitment is seen as a final break with the past and as a public confession of embracing the new faith.¹²

5. Conclusion

My empirical findings suggest that the conversion process is usually driven by a variety of motives. I contend that a human being should be viewed in a holistic way, as a person with different needs, all of which play a role in the movement to conversion. It is therefore questionable to distinguish between “pure” and “impure” conversion motives. According to my understanding, a sound theological anthropology views a human being not only in spiritual terms but as a whole human being, who is situated in a specific economic, cultural, religious and political context. One cannot expect a decision as fundamental as conversion to a new religious community to be made solely on the basis of the truth claims of the new religion.

The conversion door swings both ways:¹³

It is my conviction that the Bible supports a view of conversion that includes a two-way movement. There is no problem to declare a person a “convert” in Christian terminology if this person turns towards Christianity. But can a person also be declared a “convert” if she/he turns away from Christianity? It appears that the Bible uses the term “apostates” (cf. Douglas et al 1962:48, 250-252) in such cases. I propose that it would be to the benefit of missiology to adopt a more holistic view of conversion and include both ways of conversion in its definition.

Apostasy in the Old Testament is described in terms of “turning away” or disobedience to God in a particular situation (e.g. Ex 32:8). The Bible teaches that it began with the transgression of Adam in paradise. God dealt with this sin of apostasy in a radical way (see for instance Gen 3, Ex 21:17, Ex 32:10, 35).

In the New Testament apostasy appears to be a continual danger to the church and there are repeated warnings against it (cf. 1Tim 4:1-3, 2Thes 2:3, 2Pet 3:17). What was the attitude of Jesus towards apostates? He seems to have taken a different attitude, since he did not support the use of the death penalty, as was often the case in the Old Testament. One such account is recorded in John 6:60-71, where many disciples deserted Jesus, since they could not understand his teaching. In terms of the categories used above, one could describe this as a “religious” conversion motive, dominated by a negative or “push” factor. The reaction of Jesus was that he was not afraid of losing disciples (cf. Buttrick et al 1952:574f). He gave them the space to make up their minds, so they were in fact free to leave. The same attitude was revealed by Jesus when he met the “rich young man” (Mk 10:17-22), where it is emphasised that Jesus loved him. As Christians we are challenged to emulate this attitude of Jesus: To show genuine love to those who are in the process of turning from the faith we belong to; not wanting them to leave, but refraining from all coercion to make them stay.¹⁴ Our understanding of conversion *to* our religious community – and consequently the nature of our self-understanding as Christians – is directly related to our understanding of conversion *away* from it.

Conclusion: implications for contextual church praxis

¹¹ One of the reasons for this is that there is a “law of apostasy” in Islamic shari`ah which rules that Muslims who turn their back on Islam should be executed (*Hadith Muwatta Imam Malik*, page 317, quoted in Gilchrist 1986:340). Where Muslims are a minority community this law is not legally in operation, but Muslims nevertheless practise the spirit of this law by putting intense pressure on an ‘apostate’ (*murtadd*) to reconsider his/her actions.

¹² With Muslims it is the recitation of the Islamic creed (*shahadah*) and with Christians it is baptism.

¹³ This title is adapted from a quote by Conn (1986:7).

¹⁴ This does not imply a lame or weak stance. It should include preventive actions like those proposed by Poston (1990). He mentions five reasons why Western converts to Islam prefer it to Christianity: simplicity, rationality, practicality, equality and anticlericalism. Poston gives guidelines on how churches can better address people’s needs by changing their attitudes to these five issues, thus also employing a holistic view of conversion (cf. also Nissiotis 1967).

The theology of conversion proposed in this paper emphasises two dimensions that have often been neglected: the wholeness of the human person and the two-way direction of conversion. This has two consequences: all the conversion motives discussed above need to be accepted as playing a valid part in any specific conversion process; and missiology should give as much attention to those who leave as to those who join.

This understanding of conversion has a number of practical implications. First, it encourages a faith community to take adequate measures to care for new converts who join the community, acknowledging that there is a whole variety of motives “pushing” or “pulling” the person to make such a move. Secondly, a faith community should take special care of people who wish to convert to another faith.

In order to guide converts more meaningfully a few practical steps are recommended to a Christian faith community (cf. Barclay 1963:82-103, Rahner 1978:206-211, Kasdorf 1980:60, Ismail 1983:391, Wells 1989:44-47, Heidemann 1996:12):

- Within each faith community there should be a small specialised group¹⁵ consisting of members trained to welcome new converts from another faith.
- This group should show genuine interest and care for converts and leads them into a deep study of their new faith and its religious practices.
- In due course, the convert should be introduced through this small group to the larger faith community.
- If the convert is a single person, he/she should be “adopted” into a family of the new faith community.¹⁶
- By applying these guidelines the faith community will take care in an organic way of the spiritual and social needs of new converts in their group.
- In addition, this small group should also be trained to counsel and care for people who are contemplating converting away from Christianity to another religion, such as Islam, in the same loving attitude. First, this would mean trying to encourage them to review their Christian faith before converting. Should a person still want to convert to another faith, the group should be sensitive to that desire and even assist him/her in investigating it thoroughly.¹⁷ Finally, when the person converts to another faith, the church should let him or her go in peace and Christian love.

¹⁵ This small group should function in the context of a holistic understanding of conversion, i.e. by taking seriously all the needs and motivations that move people to change their religious allegiance, and by providing care for converts who move towards and away from Christianity.

¹⁶ This applies especially to converts to Christianity from a Muslim background. They are often ostracised by their own relatives and therefore need a ‘new family.’

¹⁷ Many Christians would say that this is going too far, namely to assist people who want to leave the faith community. I disagree with this argument. By assisting a person I mean that I would provide that person with literature about that other religion, I would accompany them to visit people of the other faith and allow them to get information before making a decision, etc. In actual fact I would say that through this process both parties benefit. In my experience, by displaying a caring and loving attitude, certain people reconsidered the situation and did not convert to the other faith. This might also have been the case in the life of convert “C7” (see Maurer 1991:174-175), had a Christian person helped her to make a thorough investigation of both faiths before taking a decision towards Islam.

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