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Factors Related to Religious Conversion in the Roman Catholic Church: Stressful Life Events, Faith, and Paternal Relationships

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FACTORS RELATED TO RELIGIOUS CONVERSION IN THE ROMAN CATHOLIC CHURCH: STRESSFUL LIFE EVENTS, FAITH, AND PATERNAL RELATIONSHIPS

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VITA

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

APPENDIX

LIST OF TABLES

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

In the history of psychology, religious practices have often been the object of study. Religious conversion is one form of behavior in which both psychology and religion have found particular interest. Conversion is a life-altering event open to psychological, sociological, religious, and historical interpretation. Psychological interest in this area began with studies almost one hundred years ago. While conversion cannot, and probably should not be reduced to wholly psychological events, the experience is replete with psychological correlates.

Religious conversion is a term which often conjures images of a frenzied revival meeting in a small town or a mystical experience by an ancient saint who converses with God. While these may be the popular notions surrounding conversion, psychological accounts of the phenomenon have been less dramatic. The psychological study of religious conversion can be traced to James (1902, reprinted 1929), Leuba (1896), and Starbuck (1899). These researchers either interviewed converts or had them complete surveys about the experience. These early descriptions have been the starting point for many subsequent studies.

In the early studies on this phenomenon many accounts

were classified as "sudden" conversions (James, 1929; Leuba, 1896; Starbuck, 1899). Sudden conversions were often dramatic and overwhelming experiences which were viewed as "breakdowns" due to overwhelming stress, resulting in subsequent personality reintegration (Johnson, 1959). Sudden conversions are no longer common in the United States, but are frequent throughout the world especially in less technically advanced societies (Muggeridge, 1988; Silverstein, 1988). Even though these experiences are no longer common, very often the popular picture of conversion is of a sudden and dramatic type. As one who underwent a conversion to the Catholic faith said:

> One is liable to be asked precisely how, and in what circumstances, one became a Christian. What is expected is a dramatic account of being converted; something that in the United States became so popular that at one point it almost seemed as though more sinners were being born again than babies born into the world. (Muggeridge, 1988, pp. 13-14)

James (1929) and the other early authors noted that "volitional" conversions also occurred. Conversions of this type were the result of prolonged education about the faith, and participation in it's practices. Volitional conversion was the result of the will of the person who joined a particular faith after repeated exposure to it.

These early accounts of conversion focused exclusively on Christians, but more recently, much of the conversion literature has shifted toward cults and non-traditional religious organizations. Those who have converted to more

traditional religions have less often been the object of study. Because of this trend, it was of interest to undertake psychological research on a traditional religious group. Converts to the Roman Catholic Church were selected for empirical study because research on this group is lacking. Also, there appears to be a large number of individuals converting to the Catholic faith; 2100 during one year in the Archdiocese of Chicago (Chancery of the Archdiocese of Chicago, 1989).

Earlier, it was noted that religious conversion has been studied by both psychology and religion. Often, there is considerable discrepancy between religious accounts of conversion and psychological accounts. James (1929) suggested that psychology and religion can understand conversion in the same light until a point. The point of divergence occurs when an appeal is made to forces which caused the individual to seek redemption or convert. In many psychological accounts, reference to subconscious forces is made, while in theology the forces emanate from God or other spiritual entities. Psychological accounts generally maintain that certain preconditions make it more likely that an individual will change their religion; viewing the decision to join as a result of some force in the person's psyche.

This thesis extends the notion that conversion has psychological correlates which can be explored using

scientific means. This does not deny the role of spirituality, it only augments our understanding of the process. As one author noted:

> ...conversion is both a natural escape from the terror of seemingly unanswerable existential questions and a protuberance of one's self into a social network to satisfy human needs. Although the Christian ideal is spiritual rebirth, does it matter whether perceived spiritual conversion is merely psychological change that fulfills human need? (Bakken, 1983, p. 103)

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

A great deal of controversy surrounding the definition of conversion probably stems at least in part, to the sources of information about the experience. The problem is that those who have undergone the experience have frequently been unable to describe what happened in a way that others could understand. William James (1929) said that: "Neither an outside observer nor the Subject who undergoes this process can explain fully how particular experiences are able to change one's centre of energy so decisively" (p. 193). Even James used a phrase like "centre of energy" to help "clarify" the event, but the terms he used needed clarification themselves.

In the work of James, he concluded from interviewing converts that: "All we know is that there are dead feelings, dead ideas, and cold beliefs, and there are hot and live ones; and when one grows hot and alive within us, everything has to re-crystallize about it" (James, 1929, p. 193).

In James'(1929) work there were several personal accounts of religious conversion. One of the more dramatic was written by Henry Alline in 1775 (James, 1929):

> At that instant of time when I gave all up to him to do with me as he pleased, and was willing that God should rule over me at his pleasure, redeeming love broke into my soul and repeated scriptures, with such power that my whole soul seemed to be melted down with love; the burden of guilt and condemnation was gone...and my whole soul was filled with immortal love, soaring on the wings of faith, freed from the chains of death and darkness. (pp. 214-215)

James referred to changes that occurred following conversion as a change in the "hot place in a man's consciousness, the group of ideas from which he works, call it the habitual centre of his personal energy" (James, p. 193). Analogously in science, we refer to Zeitgeist and paradigms to refer to the prevailing assumptions and beliefs of the period. Thus James' centre of personal energy might be the paradigm or Zeitgeist of the individual.

Despite the loose terminology in James' early work, he did settle on a definition of the experience. In James' (1929) work, the following definition of conversion was used: "...the process, gradual or sudden, by which a self hitherto divided, and consciously wrong inferior and unhappy, becomes unified and consciously right superior and happy, in consequence of its firmer hold upon religious realities" (p.186).

A recent personal account of conversion was given by Muggeridge (1988) and it also furthered the tradition of imprecise accounts. He said that entrance to the Roman Catholic Church gave him: "A sense of homecoming, of picking up the threads of a lost life, of responding to a bell that

had long been ringing, of taking a place at a table that had long been vacant" (Muggeridge, 1988, p.13). With a description like the previous one, it is no wonder that psychology has had difficulty describing and understanding the experience of conversion.

There have been many other attempts in the literature to describe and define religious conversion. Interesting literature on religious conversion came from Mol (1976) who suggested that it is strongly related to identity formation. Mol proposed that conversion is a:

> means by which a new perspective becomes emotionally anchored in the personality, which is unified in the process. The convert feels that he has obtained a new identity.... Conversion then is the adoption of a new orientation, a re-ordering of priorities and values. (Mol, 1976, pp. 50-51)

This description did not say how change occurred, but it addressed what changed. "What changed" was the emphasis of Mol and is consistent with virtually all definitions of conversion; namely, the commencement of a new way of being or behaving. Whether we refer to the change as one of identity, values, beliefs, or commitments, it is clear that the individual who has converted is changed in some way and that the effects are profound. Again, we get the sense from the description that conversion might be akin to a paradigm change in the individual.

Howe (1979) also suggested that conversion not only changes the content of one's beliefs, but it also changes the way that one subsequently interacts with the world:

> any change or growth in faith will involve a realigning of those actions and operations which are most foundational to human beings' coping adequately with the environmental demands: viz. ways of relating to others, groups, traditions, and authority; general patterns of decision-making and the ways of representing meanings in the totality of an experienced world. (pp. 34-35)

Accordingly, there are likely to be many ways in which people realign their value systems and then interact with the world in qualitatively different ways; all these way represent conversion. Accordingly, along with new understanding comes a new way to interact with the world since all actions are interpreted in terms of the new understanding. Howe (1979) said "conversion most often is conceived in terms of the ultimate value systems from which people become loyal" (p. 34).

To bypass the problem of vague and personal accounts, many have taken to "extraspective" descriptions of religious conversion. That is, many characterizations have made reference to forces and abstractions which operate in and on the subjects of study (Rychlak, 1985). The introspective powers of subjects have not been used very often to explain why they converted or what internal changes had occurred. Most psychological accounts have been left to decipher religious conversion from the "outside looking in."

Theologians on the other hand have looked at the role of God or spiritual needs in the process of conversion, something which is difficult or impossible to study empirically. Theological accounts have also used the

descriptions of converts to describe what the experience was about. One problem with these descriptions is that converts generally have their experiences in the midst of a religious ceremony where the surrounding community has helped create a specific situation in which to interpret the experience. If the experience occurred in another situation, it might have a different connotation (Lofland & Skonovd, 1981).

Lofland and Skonovd (1981) shed light on the problem of defining conversion. They suggested that there are three ways to describe an experience, each leading to it's own interpretation. The "first level of reality", is what occurred in reality. The "second level of reality", is what the person described to others (introspection) based upon his or her own subjective biases. The "third level of reality" is the description that scientists give of the experience (extraspective perspective) who also have their own biases.

Each level of reality, or perspective is valid, but only partially valid. Much of the work on conversion written by theologians has stressed the second level of reality, relying on the descriptions of those who underwent the conversion and who have the same set of assumptions as the theologians. So when a convert reports that God showed them the way, a theologian and the convert understand each other. The scientist wants to know more. Scientific work on religious conversion has gone beyond the descriptions to

introduce concepts which those involved would never have articulated. Therefore, the scientist's account and that of the convert will likely differ due to the differences in perspective.

In the literature, several authors have made distinctions between terms to help clarify confusion in the field. Carrier (1965) differentiated "conversion" from "identification" with a church or religious group. Conversion represented the ideological shift, and identification encompassed the behavioral change in joining a different faith. One might surmise that "conversion" is neither necessary, nor sufficient, to result in identification with a new religion. Thus ideological conversion may not lead to formal identification with a particular religious movement. And of course, conversion may not indicate that ideological changes have also occurred.

Greil (1977) and Wallace (1975) also adopted the view that conversion of belief is different than change of religious affiliation. Greil (1977) posited that individuals do not work out solutions to problems in isolation. They rely on solutions provided by institutions and significant others, so-called "reference groups." Orientation toward a new religious reference group as the source of guidance, and solutions to problems, indicated religious conversion from Greil's perspective.

Wallace (1975) suggested that it may be advisable to speak of "change of religious affiliation" rather than conversion. She said that (Wallace, 1975):

> Change of religious affiliation is defined here as a process by which an individual attaches to an organized religion by becoming a member of that religious group, and in this act of affiliation, accepts the teachings of the group. Because this process involves the acceptance of values held by a religious group as well as membership in the group, it is complicated by the social act. (p. 345)

Previously, the views of James and Mol were discussed which suggested that acceptance of beliefs and values was the key to understanding conversion. Wallace and Greil have added that belief change and joining a new faith are two separate things.

In popular culture, the meaning of conversion is varied, and scientists must be clear as to what is implied by the term. Thus, when speaking of conversion in this study, what is indicated is that a behavioral change has occurred which is outwardly manifested by participation in the initiation process of the Catholic Church.

Models of Conversion

As noted in the previous discussion, some authors have described conversion as gradual, while others described sudden conversion. Some have focused on the psychological benefits of the experience, while others have stressed the spiritual significance.

Due to the number of potential factors involved in simply describing a heterogeneous event, models were

developed to help classify and describe similar experiences. These models were generally formulated following interviews with converts who described their experiences to researchers. Many of the models are basically descriptive in nature, but some have attempted to go beyond the verbal accounts and introduce explanatory concepts which were not articulated by the subjects.

Lofland and Stark (1965) proposed one of the first empirically based models of conversion. Their conclusions were derived from interviewing a small number of converts (15) to only one religious group. The subjects were drawn exclusively from the Unification Church. The work of Lofland and Stark (1965) has aspects which are specifically applicable only to the Unification Church due to it's particular initiation process, but the model also addressed factors which can apply across religions. Also, since the numbers were so small, there was no opportunity to examine heterogeneity within that religious group.

The model proposed by Lofland and Stark (1965) has been a useful stepping stone into the study of religious conversion because it was more comprehensive than simply stating that conversions were either sudden or gradual. The authors described seven facets of conversion to the Unification Church:

> (1) enduring and acutely felt tensions, (2) within a religious problem-solving perspective, (3) which results in self-designation as a religious seeker. The prospective convert must (4) encounter the movement or

> cult at a turning point in life, (5) form an affective bond with one or more of the believers (6) neutralize or sever extracult attachments and (7) be exposed to intensive interaction with other converts in order to become an active and dependable adherent. (p. 874)

This description highlighted some important aspects of conversion. These factors are: a sense of stress or tension, a religious quest orientation, a turning point in life, and the influence of relationships.

Fifteen years following the Lofland and Stark model, Downton (1980) proposed another model of conversion based on interviews with eighteen members of the Divine Light Mission, a cult or non-traditional religious group. The author described a total of ten major steps which were involved in the process of conversion to the Mission. The stages of conversion according to Downton's study were:

1-General disillusionment with the conventional values, social organization, and solutions to problems.
2-Deepening or developing faith in a spiritual solution to problems.
3-Growing determination to take a spiritual direction, reflected in the development of a new spiritual ego-ideal and self image.
4-Increasing sense of personal futility, leading to greater psychological receptivity to the appeals of an unconventional spiritual leader or followers who make bold promises of change.
5-Contact and increasing attraction to an unconventional spiritual movement as a result of positive interactions with members of the ideological compatibility with the movement's beliefs.
6-Acceptance of the problem-solving perspective of the movement, strengthening the determination to join.
7-Initiation and conversion: The transformation of awareness resulting from a shift in identity from the personality (ego) to the spirit (life force or God).
8-Surrender to the spirit (God) and to a spiritual leader, characterized by idealization of the leader, identification with him, conformity to his initiatives, and loss of the capacity to criticize

him.
9-Intensification of commitment through increasing investments and sacrifices, greater social communion with members, reduction of social ties in the outside world, and mortification of the ego.
10-Gradual modification of identity, beliefs, and behavior through commitment, which secures the individual's adherence to the movement's norms and practices and therefore insures the accumulation of experiences considered by the movement to be essential for a thorough-going change of character and outlook.

Downton's (1980) model supported the notion that there are many steps in the process of conversion, not a singular event. It also indicated that the social milieu is an important factor in the decision to join a religious movement. Conversion was not limited to a single event, it was a process coming before, during, and after the "conversion experience." Therefore individuals continued to grow and change spiritually following the conversion experience.

In his model, Downton (1980) noted the importance of crises and adoption of new problem-solving strategies sanctioned by the group. Those who were already members of the faith helped the seeker find solutions to problems and provided emotional support. Emotional bonds with members and the leader provided information, social support, guidance, and models for identification.

While Downton's work was descriptive in nature, Heirich (1977) used a more empirical approach to examine certain variables. Heirich studied a large (n=152) sample of converts to the Catholic Pentecostal movement. The

Pentecostal movement is considered to be a fringe group within the Catholic Church. Heirich's subjects completed surveys and were interviewed by trained examiners. Data collection took seven years. Heirich used three definitions of conversion to identify subjects. However, Heirich (1977) only reported the data on the 152 converts who met one definition of conversion, namely those who claimed that they had "received the Holy Spirit."

Heirich believed that the converts had come from unstable or stressful environments and that they had experienced psychological tension in the period prior to conversion. In addition, the author also believed that past and present socialization were important factors in the background of converts. What Heirich found was similar to the descriptive account of Downton, namely that "socialization" factors (friends, trusted associates, relatives, etc. who belonged to the new religion), could account for more than half of the statistical variance in predicting convert status (Heirich, 1977). Therefore Heirich (1977) found that the major attraction of religion was the members of the faith who help introduce and initiate converts to the Catholic Pentecostal movement. Despite this, Heirich (1977) noted that the influence of social factors was important <u>only</u> if the individual was already in search of a religious solution to problems. This is also similar to Downton's description (1980).

Lofland and Skonovd (1981) reviewed many published descriptions of conversion from a variety of sources. They attempted to identify common patterns and descriptions of the experiences which they had scrutinized. From these accounts, Lofland and Skonovd (1981) proposed that:

> ...subjective conversions actually vary in a number of acute, qualitatively different ways which are best differentiated by their respective 'motif' experiences. Motif experiences, then are those aspects of a conversion which are most memorable and orienting to the person 'doing' or 'undergoing' personal transformation- aspects that provide a tone to the event, its pointedness in time, its positive or negative content, and the like. (p. 374)

These authors delineated five dimensions which could be used to rate or assess a conversion experience (Lofland & Skonovd, 1981). "Social Pressure" was the first dimension and referred to the perceived social pressure to convert. "Temporal Duration" accounted for the amount of time spent in the conversion process. "Level of Affective Arousal" referred to the amount of emotional stimulation during conversion, while "Affective Content" referred to the quality of the emotions experienced. "Belief-Participation Sequence" dealt with the order in which the individual accepted the belief system and with actual participation in activities.

Reviews of conversion experiences in light of the previous dimensions, yielded six conversion motifs: Intellectual, Mystical, Experimental, Affectional, Revivalist, and Coercive. Lofland and Skonovd (1981)

suggested that across individuals, denominations, and cultural eras, the prevalence of certain motifs may differ. Thus one motif may be more prominent for a certain type of individual, for a certain denomination, or for a certain period in time. The authors posited that within a denomination, one motif may be more common yet there may be several conversion motifs present. See Lofland and Skonovd, (1981) for a complete discussion.

The Intellectual motif was typified as one where the individual's beliefs largely match those of the group prior to joining. Mystical conversion represented the sudden and dramatic experiences described in history. In the Experimental motif, the individual tries out the practices of the faith for a while prior to joining. The Affectional motif refers to a situation in which the primary motivation to join comes from the close relationships a convert had with members of the faith. In the Revivalist motif, one converts in the midst of an emotionally charged crowd of believers. Finally, the Coercive motif refers to situations which may take place in cults or new religious movements. The primary motivation to join comes from the forceful tactics of the group members.

By now, it should be clear that conversion is not a singular process or event; conversion takes many forms. With the understanding that conversion can appear in a variety of fashions, and can progress through a variety of

stages, it is of interest to examine more closely what motivates an individual to change religious affiliation.

Motivating Factors: Past and Present

Many early descriptions have characterized conversion as a crisis itself, or the result of a crisis. Some have followed in this light, exploring the crises that may lead to or coincided with religious conversion. External crises or events often force one into responding, and depending upon one's ability to handle the situation with existing belief systems, a subsequent change in the systems themselves might occur. Therefore, external-situational crises can lead to crises of belief or faith.

Overwhelming and dramatic conversions were common throughout history, but as societal and cultural expectations changed, so too did the nature of conversion (Lofland & Skonovd, 1981; Muggeridge, 1988; Silverstein, 1988). Since the nature of conversion has largely become more reflective and less dramatic, research has suggested that conversion is in fact a response to some type of crisis which does not overwhelm the individual but motivates him or her to change. As Muggeridge (1988) said: "In my own case, conversion has been more a series of happenings than one single dramatic one" (p. 14).

The notion that conversion occurs in stages or is a process, appears to be the prevalent view in the current literature. From this tenet, crisis may be the decisive

factor or event in a series of changes: "crisis disrupts, in dramatic fashion, the existing cognitive and emotional pattern, and it accompanies the definitive consent which will change all subsequent behavior" (Carrier, 1965, p. 100). Conversion occurs following a crisis or revelation and includes transformation and integration of that which was realized during the crisis.

Ellens (1984) used the term "significant emotional events" to describe the combination of crisis and then resolution which deeply affected the individual. Significant emotional events were the result of insight, relationships, or trauma. Ellens (1984) said:

> When a person experiences a significant new life-shaping insight, relationship, or trauma, that event-experience cuts down through all of the structures and defense processes of the personality structure...and reaches all the way down to the characterological level. There, at that level, the cognitive, psychosocial, and moral-spiritual content of the "significant emotional event," produces a paradigm shift in the value and belief system. The assumptions, commitments, "loves", values or beliefs which have here-to-fore constituted the ground of being and integrating perspective are now all illumined in a new way with the new light of the new "significant event of the psyche." (p. 33)

When previously sound beliefs do not adequately explain current circumstances, a desperate need arises to adopt new beliefs. When the world no longer makes sense, another frame of reference or paradigm is needed. Conversion is one way to help organize a new world view and deal with the external circumstances which may have caused the significant emotional event.

One might say that mild crises or conversions take place all the time as one learns that what was thought before to be true is actually false. This information is assimilated into the existing knowledge structure, or the structure itself is changed. As Johnson (1959) suggested: "... crisis may not be altogether evil. It may be an unusual opportunity to deal with life in a new and creative way. Until problems confront us, we do little serious thinking at all, and only then do we engage in active search for solutions" (p. 108).

Greil (1977) addressed the nature of conflicts of belief and how they may motivate religious conversion. He focused on the development and maintenance of attitudes and "stocks of knowledge" or "conglomerations of solutions to problems encountered in specific situations" (p. 117). Greil (1977) suggested that as long as one's stock of knowledge is able to handle new situations, it will largely be unaltered. However, when a new situation arises and one's existing knowledge is unable to cope with the new environment, the person will "learn something new, work out the answer, or realize that what he thought was true has been wrong all along" (Greil, 1977, p. 117).

Greil (1977) suggested that one's world perspective is more likely to be abandoned when it is viewed as not dealing with the problems encountered by that individual. For instance, it is not particularly comforting to believe that

there is no existence following death. Religion may provide a paradigm which allows one to find comfort in the belief that something more follows death. Thus the problem of what happens following death is solved if one believes or has faith. Conceivably, these types of existential questions may have sufficient import to motivate an individual to convert. For instance a person on death row may have significant reasons to convert based largely on the fear of the unknown. Faith, or belief, helps make one feel more secure in one's environment.

Similarly, work has focused on the cognitive changes which take place before, during, and after conversion. Gartrell and Shannon (1985) based their observations on published information which was collected in other studies in addition to direct questioning of approximately 38 members of the Divine Light Mission in Canada.

Gartrell and Shannon (1985) suggested that converts were rational and active individuals who had examined their own beliefs and needs relative to their current value system or religious tradition. If "imbalance" existed between the current status of beliefs and information which the individual had to deal with, then it was likely that the individual might seek an alternative value system as espoused by a different religion.

For Gartrell and Shannon (1985) converts had weighed the costs and benefits of adopting a particular religious

faith versus maintaining the current belief structure, and decided a change was needed. Gartrell and Shannon (1985) included both social rewards (people who belonged to a church) and cognitive rewards (answers to existential questions and cognitive coping strategies) and how each weighed into the decision to join. The cognitive model of Gartrell and Shannon (1985) was an interesting contribution to religious conversion literature because it clearly articulated what one can gain and lose when changing religious belief and affiliation. It might be an "economics" approach to religious change.

It appears from much of the literature that one in conflict may look toward religion to help alleviate psychic or emotional discomfort. According to Johnson (1959):

> To live is to respond appropriately to the multiple and often confusing demands of internal and external relations. Because no organism is self-sufficient, this life depends upon outreach to resources beyond itself. This outreach is selective not to environment in general, but to that particular resource which will satisfy a specific need. (p. 101)

Accordingly, people seek solutions to their conflicts, but the choice of one solution over another may depend upon: the individual, their particular learning history, current beliefs, personality, needs, and relationships. It would be difficult to ascertain why a given individual might seek a religious solution, while another might seek a psychological solution, while still another might seek a philosophical solution. Ellens (1984) maintained that "conversions" might

involve many different contents, but the process is still the same and that this process can be reduced to psychological and sociological terms.

The decision to join a faith in response to external crises was addressed by Bakken, "In times of distress, it is plain that the lure of satisfaction in religious ideology has a forum within the contemplative individual" (Bakken, 1983, pp. 100-101). For individuals in crisis, religion may become a salient element in the environment which could help alleviate the current state of dysphoria or crisis. As Silverstein (1988) also suggested, "conversion to some form of religious life often seems to be motivated by a sense of dissatisfaction with ordinary life and a search for solutions" (p. 272).

The notion that conversion can satisfy spiritual or psychological discomfort is not new. Many, including James'(1929) accounts have described spiritual and psychological rebirths; from despondent to hopeful. Bergin (1983) said of religious converts in relation to psychotherapy: "the gradual converts to more conventional religiosity are sometimes superior in their life adjustment, and the effects of psychotherapy are not any better by comparison" (p. 178).

Bergin (1983) and others (Silverstein, 1988; Ullman, 1988) have suggested that religious conversion is therapeutic in some ways and is psychologically beneficial

to those who undergo the process. Some have compared the effects of religious conversion to the effects of psychotherapy (Bergin, 1983; Downton, 1980; Levin & Zegans, 1974; Paloutzian, 1981; Sarbin & Adler, 1971; Silverstein, 1988).

Based upon the literature, emotional crises and religious conversion often appear correlated (Eliade, 1987; Heirich, 1977; Johnson, 1959; Leuba, 1896; Silverstein, 1988). It is a common belief that converts had been dealing with psychic anguish or guilt which then motivated them to seek salvation through religious conversion (Ullman, 1982).

Ullman (1982) sought to develop a model of conversion which could incorporate current, as well as remote events. Included in the model were stressful pre-conversion periods, or emotional crises. Ullman (1982, 1988) interviewed a total of 40 individuals who had converted to traditional (Roman Catholic and Jewish) and non-traditional (Hare Krishna and Bahai) religions. She apparently used the same sample in two separate publications. In her studies Ullman examined the antecedents of conversion (1982) as well as the overall functioning, or well-being of the converts (1988).

Ullman (1982) examined cognitive (existential quest and ambiguity tolerance) and emotional (stress or crises, poor interpersonal relationships) antecedents of conversion. The results suggested that negative emotional factors were significantly related to status as a convert, and that

cognitive variables were not. Among the emotional antecedents, Ullman (1982) suggested that poor relationships with parents may leave one with a desire to change religions. Many converts reported that during childhood they had poor relationships with parents. Ullman's (1982) examination found that converts, more often that non-converts, had troublesome relationships especially with their fathers. A surprising finding was that 28% of the converts reported that their fathers were absent from the home while they were children, a rate higher than would be expected for the population (Ullman, 1982).

Ullman (1982, 1988) noted that converts, relative to non-converts experienced: more unhappy childhoods, more traumatic events during childhood, more unhappy adolescent periods, as well as more stress or emotional turmoil in the two year period prior to conversion. Despite these significant results, Ullman's (1982, 1988) studies used rather questionable rating scales. Subjects were asked to rate their childhoods, adolescent periods, and pre-conversion periods using terms like "very happy, happy, fairly happy, very unhappy." This may have been a rather unreliable way to assess early childhood or adolescence.

Overall, the Ullman studies were a valuable contribution to the literature on religious conversion. They supported the hypothesis that stress and lack of a benevolent father figure were found in the backgrounds of

those who had converted. However, upon closer inspection of her methods, the results of Ullman's work is equivocal. In addition to the remarks made earlier, Ullman sought to achieve equal numbers of men and women in her groups. While this may have been done to balance the sample, it may not have accurately represented the population since others have found that more women have converted than men (Heirich, 1977; Salisbury, 1969; Wallace, 1975).

Despite these criticisms, others have found similar results, so Ullman's work should not be dismissed by any means. Silverstein (1988) published a broad review of the available literature on religious conversion and based several conclusions on the available research. Silverstein found a variety of references to pre-conversion periods of cult members which indicated that converts were often depressed, anxious, shy, low in self-esteem, had poor heterosexual relationships, and had an absence of goals or direction.

Similarly, James (1929) reviewed the literature of his era which found that pre-conversion periods indicated: guilt, depression, introspection, and a sense of incompleteness. Descriptions of pre-conversion periods like those of James and Silverstein are common throughout the literature (Downton, 1980; Eliade, 1987; Galanter, Rabkin, Rabkin, and Deutsch, 1979; Paloutzian, 1981).

Like Ullman (1982), Wallace (1975) was interested not

only in the immediate precursors of conversion, but also in factors which had occurred in childhood and adolescence. Wallace (1975) studied 1546 individuals who had joined the Roman Catholic Church following a course on the Church's traditions and beliefs. She used questionnaires to collect data and studied sociological factors which might have motivated religious conversion. Wallace (1975) said that:

> change of religious affiliation can be viewed as a filling of deficiency for the individual who is seeking an integrative force in industrial society. When the terms "deficit" or "deficiency" are used here, the meaning is that something is lacking or that something needs to be supplied. The prescription is considered to be the remedy, so that joining a church is suggested as the "remedy" for individuals suffering certain deficiencies. Thus religious affiliation can be seen as a way of creating a more satisfying sense of integration for persons relatively less rewarded by non-religious roles and statuses. (p. 346)

Wallace operated out of a paradigm created by Durkheim. She examined the "deficiency of consistent life experiences" in converts, others might call this life change or life event stress. Wallace also looked at the deficit of religious activity in childhood and predicted that: "Individuals who have not experienced a sharing of religious values in the family will be either confused about or lacking in knowledge of religious values and will be more likely to look for the kind of meaning in life which religion can afford them" (p. 347). Thus, early deficiencies may have left their mark on the individual's needs and desires.

Another factor examined by Wallace was that people were

more likely to change their religion if they did not possess the same religious affiliation as significant others (friends, spouses, boyfriends, girlfriends). Wallace (1975) suggested that the more deficiencies (the final one being social status, e.g. low income, low level of education, being female, being old) one has, the more likely one is to change religious affiliation. Secondly, when one is likely to change religious affiliation, a relationship with a significant other of another faith makes the change more likely and toward the particular religion of that other.

Wallace's (1975) study was modeled after Durkheim's theory on suicide in an industrialized society. Wallace followed the lead of Durkheim and hypothesized that individuals in industrialized societies have a great need to find meaning in their lives since the society at large does not provide that. Therefore, individuals might change their religious affiliation in order to find an integrative force in their lives. With this integrative force, individuals are able to integrate and understand the events that happen to them in a logical fashion.

Wallace (1975) found that, for those who converted to the Roman Catholic Church, the most important factor was the relationship one had with a significant other who already belonged to the Roman Catholic Church, a finding consistent with the work of Heirich (1977). The other deficiencies, although significant, were found to be not as important as

the relationship with a significant other. Wallace (1975) concluded that her theory had been supported because there were significant deficits in the lives of the converts, and there was a strong relationship between having a significant other and being a convert.

Wallace (1975) noted that data collection on her subjects took place prior to the implementation of the Second Vatican Council reforms. Thus, prior to Vatican II, the Catholic Church was much more rigid in it's adherence to certain doctrines and rules. A study of converts following Vatican II was recommended by Wallace.

In light of the apparent significance of emotional relationships in the decision to join another faith, Bennett, Wolin, and McAvity (1988) made an interesting observation regarding the selection of mates by individuals who come from families weak in tradition and rituals. They said:

> Family identity issues are powerful forces, for example in the child's selection of a mate. Some children try to disengage from their family heritage by choosing a particular spouse; it is as though they are attempting to make an explicit statement to members of their family of origin about their determination to escape. As such couples develop their own family identity, they may emulate the spouse's family culture and/or may rely upon very novel rituals drawn mainly from their general cultural environment... the sources of family identity are especially important when the child has grown up in a family with severe problems. (p. 230)

The previous discussion may suggest that children who grew up without family or religious traditions, may find themselves missing something later in life. Thus the adult

who converts may be attempting to replace something that was never there, a religious identity or sense of belonging.

Similarly, Silverstein (1988) in his review, noted that individuals with strong religious backgrounds were very unlikely to change their religious affiliation. The opposite was true for those who did convert; they had very little religious background or a weak connection with a faith.

By combining the available research on religious conversion, it is possible to generate a speculative model which can address the recent and remote factors which may have motivated one to change religions. A review of the literature suggests that converts came from unstable or unhappy home environments (e.g. Silverstein, 1988; Ullman, 1982). Converts may not have had the opportunity to develop a strong relationship with parental figures. According to the tentative model, this early deficit left a void. Later in life, the potential convert would experience some combination of stressful events which was discomforting. The individuals might have felt that they had done something to deserve the bad things which were causing them stress or they may have simply felt out of control or without direction. Consequently, the converts may have searched the environment for ways to deal with the current crisis; perhaps someone to show the way or model appropriate behavior. Religious participation would be an opportunity

to get a sense of direction and meet people who believed in, and could model "appropriate" behavior as defined by the particular religious group.

This model further suggests that early isolation from the parents, especially the father, could be partially resolved later in life by identifying with church members, leaders, or God. Through identification, the converts were able to follow a path or direction in life which they had been missing since childhood. Psychodynamic theorists would attribute this to a reunification with a paternal figure who protects one in times of personal weakness. This hypothesis will now be addressed.

Psychodynamic Formulations of Conversion

Sigmund Freud was interested in the social and cognitive consequences of conversion as well as religious belief. Subsequent authors have been inspired by his ideas in this area (Johnson, 1959; Levin & Zegans, 1974; Ullman, 1982, 1988). Freud suggested that belief in a god was an illusion, but he did not necessarily dismiss the existence of a god. God is an illusion, he maintained, because the existence or non-existence of God has nothing to do with reality, but everything to do with the needs of people to believe in a god (Freud, 1927 in the Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, 1961). Accordingly, God exists for people because they want or need a deity to exist; the truth or falsity of the matter is

irrelevant to the believer, thus an illusion exists.

In light of Freud's (1927) premise, one might find it surprising that Freud also recognized the benefits of religious beliefs:

> Religious ideas are teachings and assertions about facts and conditions of external (or internal) reality which tell one something one has not discovered for oneself and which lay claim to one's belief. Since they give us information about what is most important and interesting to us in life, they are particularly highly prized. Anyone who knows nothing of them is very ignorant; and anyone who has added them to his knowledge may consider himself much the richer. (p. 25)

Thus Freud felt that belief in religious doctrine helped ground assumptions about oneself and the world, and cause one to feel "much the richer". Freud's description is in line with the cognitive changes resulting from conversion which were described earlier. The framework of religious beliefs or grounding allow one to see things in a different light which can be comforting and illuminating. Earlier, it was mentioned that people may believe in a god because of a psychic need to do so. Freud maintained that belief in deities arose from a fear of the environment since the world can be a frightening and unpredictable place to children as well as to adults. Belief or faith in a protective figure soothed the fears that one had about the environment (Freud, 1927). As children, we believed that our parents were all-powerful, but when we became adults, they seemed less so. In Freud's view, we transferred this belief of the all powerful parent to an all powerful God. Freud suggested

that since fathers are physically more powerful than mothers, we grow up looking toward our fathers for protection. As adults "God" merely embodied the protective father. When external stressors or crises reinforced our feelings of helplessness, the need to believe in an all powerful being was heightened. According to psychodynamic theory the individual who experienced a crisis may have believed that he or she did something to deserve it. Thus, if only a way to appease God could be found, the "punishment" would end. The way to appease the god is to convert and become more religious.

In A Religious Experience (1927), Freud described one external stressor in his account of the conversion experience of a young doctor. Freud's understanding was guided by his prevalent paradigm, the Oedipus Complex.

The subject in Freud's work had seen an old woman's corpse about to be dissected. The doctor experienced a period of questioning as to how God could have let the old woman come to be dissected. After some time, the doctor heard a voice which convinced him to adopt strict religious beliefs. Freud viewed the voice as a hallucination and attributed the conversion to his colleague's subconscious longing for his mother aroused by the old woman. Following this arousal, guilt feelings were provoked. The guilt feelings were eliminated by subservience to the father, in this case "God", and thus through identification with the

father image, the guilt was relieved.

From a psychodynamic perspective then, a family environment may leave an individual with emotional residue which is likely to be unconscious. According to the Freudian view these unconscious forces may become exacerbated at a later date by a combination of external events. Stressful situations like those described above were seen as motivating forces which prompted the doctor to seek resolution to his crisis state, i.e. conversion.

Some have objected to the Freudian or deterministic perspective about religious conversion (Eliade, 1987; Richardson, 1985). Richardson (1985) suggested that we view converts as active, experiential, people who of their own free will chose to change their religion. They were not "forced" to do so by unconscious factors. Despite this objection, proponents of the psychodynamic approach often attempt to find, in correlational data, support for factors which can be integrated into the psychodynamic understanding of religious conversion.

Johnson (1959) presented a view consistent with a psychodynamic understanding of the relationship between parents and children in his examination of religion and psychology. He said that:

> As the growing child admires and fears his parents, he will identify with them and model his behavior after theirs. To the young child his parents seem omnipotent in the ability to gratify his desires, and he seeks to be like them in such traits as will gain him his desires....the child reaches out to identify with the

parent. (Johnson, 1959, p.105)

Johnson (1959) then reiterated the point that parents represent powerful figures to children. When children grow into adults, they may feel the need to believe in powerful beings, and the most powerful beings to them are likely to be the images of their parents. Johnson asserted that the parental images are projected in an illusion of "God" since with adulthood comes the understanding that parents are not actually omnipotent. By transferring this image from parents, to God, we feel safe and protected in adulthood, as well as in childhood, according to the psychodynamic perspective.

Johnson's statement also suggested that we act in accordance with the wishes of our parents in order to gain their approval. One could speculate that as adults, we behave in accordance with religious doctrine to win the approval of the "almighty parent" or "God" (Silverstein, 1988; Ullman, 1982). If we "behave" we are rewarded, if we "misbehave" then we are punished in some form. The psychodynamic view would suggest that converts may feel that they have misbehaved and are being punished with negative life events or stressors.

Confrontation between external crises and existing beliefs was addressed by Johnson (1959) who related this to a dynamic formulation:

> Every person is insufficient in his own isolation. This we learned at an early age and found answers, if

> we were so fortunate, in the sustaining love of our family relationships. But then we clamored for independence and gained a certain pose of self-sufficiency by relying just enough on faithful relations to keep our balance in an unsteady existence. We might do so well for a while as to forget that we are finite and gain a deceptive illusion that we are sufficient and secure.
>
> But when the crisis strikes again, we learn again what had been so easily forgotten. Now we know our need, and after vain efforts to regain the self-sufficient pose, we must turn one way or the other. Either we hide behind the defenses that cannot save but only foil us, or else we must honestly confess our folly and seek with the ultimate concern for Thou. If we turn in that direction, the outcome may be a religious conversion. (p. 108)

Johnson suggested that we learn to rely on those we admire and love for social support. Eventually, when there are no crises, we are safe to explore the environment and achieve independence. However, when crises arise, one can either turn back to support from the family, hide from the crisis using defenses, or one may turn to religion as a source of support and comfort.

In the previous passage, allusion to the family is made. This is very important because, as noted earlier, a variety of other research in the area of religious conversion has suggested that indeed certain types of relationships with one's family may predispose one for a religious conversion.

Ullman (1982) reviewed the psychodynamic perspective and integrated the notions of current conflict as well as maladaptive relationships with fathers. She outlined the perspective that conversion can:

> ...trace its origin to childhood conflicts stirred anew prior to the conversion. From this point of view, cognitive changes effected by the conversion (i.e., changes in what the individual believes is the true nature of reality) are by-products of emotional needs anchored in early childhood experiences and in emotional upheaval prior to conversion. (p. 183)

Ullman noted that an unavailable or rejecting father seemed to predispose individuals for conversion. She said that religious conversion could "be seen as an attempt to gain the approval, protection, or guidance of an authority figure, as suggested by the original psychoanalytic hypothesis" (p. 192). Conversion represented reunification with a "father-figure" who was emotionally or physically absent from the converts' life as a child.

Ullman (1982, 1989) also discussed psychodynamic theory and suggested that religious conversion might be a way of taming sexual or aggressive impulses. Thus individuals may appeal to a higher authority as the source of moral prohibitions rather than rely upon their own conscience.

Conversion is an adaptive experience which may help resolve current crisis states according to Ullman (1982). The crisis itself represented emergence of previous developmental failures or conflicts, which were not sufficiently resolved from childhood. Current emotional crises were often responses to loss, which in turn triggered resurrection of old loss-related crises. Ullman (1982) took the position that "the absence of a benevolent, paternal figure" seemed to underlie the conflicts a great many

converts experienced (p, 321). Conversion might be interpreted as a way to "work through" the loss-related crisis by assimilating a new value system, a new source of social contacts, or a new "paternal" figure. Silverstein (1988) also reported that religious conversion may provide new and more benevolent parental figures such as religious leaders. Religious functionaries may serve as models for identification. According to Ullman's work, one might conclude that the lack of a strong relationship with one's father left the eventual convert with a strong need to identify with this type of figure.

The psychodynamic position regarding religious conversion is strongly tied to the relationship that one had with one's father as a child. It appears that if that relationship was absent or deleterious, the child may be predisposed to seek resolution of that void. While no one would maintain that poor paternal relationships cause religious conversion, it is a conceivable hypothesis that poor relationships with fathers can leave children with needs which may be addressed later in life by religious involvement or conversion.

Faith and Conversion

Conversion has been described exclusively from a psychological perspective up to this point. However, Erik Erikson (1963, 1968) provided an important link between the areas of psychology and religion. Erikson maintained that

societal institutions have developed in accordance with eight "stages" of life, the first of which is trust versus mistrust. In particular, Erikson (1968) felt that to develop into a healthy individual one must have initial trust, which he called the "cornerstone of a vital personality" (p. 97). Trust finds it's way into society through the institution of religion. Erikson (1968) suggested, "Trust, then, becomes the capacity for faith-a vital need for which man must find some institutional confirmation. Religion, it seems, is the oldest and has been the most lasting institution to serve the ritual restoration of a sense of trust in the form of faith" (p. 106).

In addition, Erikson (1968) said that:

> There can be no question but that it is organized religion which systematizes and socializes the first and deepest conflict in life: it combines the dim images of each individual's first providers into collective images of primeval superhuman protectors; it makes comprehensible the vague discomfort of basic mistrust by giving it a metaphysical reality in the form of defined Evil; and it offers to man by way of rituals a periodic collective restitution of trust which in mature adults ripens to a combination of faith and realism. (p. 83)

James Fowler (1978, 1984) presented a comprehensive and insightful look at the various "stages" of what he called Faith Development, which was in the spirit of Erikson, Kohlberg, and Piaget. Based upon Fowler's theory, a project to assess faith development was carried out for the Religious Education Association (REA) of the United States

and Canada (1987). The REA (1987) study defined faith development as "the dynamics by which a person finds and makes meaning of life's significant questions and issues, adheres to this meaning, and acts it out in his or her life span" (p. 6). Faith itself was considered to be "the finding and making meaning of life's significant questions and issues, adhering to this meaning, and acting it out" (REA, 1987, p. 6). The subjects in the REA study largely referred to faith as "one's relationship with God."

Fowler (1978, 1984) suggested that ways to have faith can be classified into levels. Individuals "move" from basic levels of understanding to more complex faith styles. The stages of faith represent ways of knowing or ways of being, verbs not nouns. Consequently, classification of individuals at various stages of faith does not imply a content, but a process of relating in a specific way to the world and to God. Faith development does not attempt to classify the content of one's beliefs, but the process or "various ways open for human beings to construct coherent and meaningful patterns of interacting with environmental demands, including those of what is believed to be a transcendent environment, over the course of a lifetime" (Howe, 1979, p. 25). Therefore, faith development is not religion-specific, although Fowler's scheme has almost exclusively been applied to Christians by himself and others.

Briefly, Fowler's stages of faith will now be summarized. Primal Faith occurs when the infant is unable to speak, and is totally dependent upon others. The infant is remotely aware that others will take care of him or her, and that the caregivers are ultimately powerful. This is not really faith per se, but the rudimentary beginnings of it, because the infant's cognitive abilities have not developed sufficiently to realize its needs are satisfied by another.

Intuitive-Projective Faith, or Stage I, describes the tendency of individuals to adopt the beliefs and value systems of those around them, specifically the parents. At this stage, the individual attends to signs of mystery and power, which may have long-lasting consequences for future development.

In Stage II, or Mythic-Literal Faith, the individual develops new cognitive operations which allow for more stable and coherent interpretations of the relationships between events, although in a simplistic manner. At this stage, the person is concerned with loyalty and group conformity, and relies on the view that "god" is more or less like a "just ruler or parent" (Dykstra & Parks, 1986, p. 29). For an example, this stage would involve the belief that, if one commits an offensive act, God will punish.

Synthetic-Conventional Faith, or Stage III, deals largely with identity formation and the ability to make

decisions based upon internal guidance. At this stage, conformity, and belonging are central themes as we seek the affirmation of others we deem significant. This stage represents a struggle to balance our own internal standards and beliefs, with those of our significant others. We struggle to adhere to "objectively valid norms rather than just one's group standards" (Barnes, Doyle, & Johnson, 1989, p. 415). Individuals synthesize their beliefs with those in the environment to form a unified pattern of belief.

Individuative-Reflective Faith, Stage IV, breaks the balance found in the last stage. The individual in this stage critically evaluates beliefs which heretofore had been implicitly accepted. Logical understanding of the world is abandoned as the relativity of alternative belief systems is realized. It is realized that individuals are responsible for themselves and ultimate authority comes from within the individual. Identity is not made of the roles and relationships one has, rather, they represent one's identity. Symbols lose their magical quality and become representatives of abstract concepts. Concern for all persons becomes paramount thus various perspectives or belief systems are tolerated.

In Stage V, or Conjunctive Faith, the individual is able to find meaning in apparent opposites. Ultimately, it deals with treasuring and valuing alternative points of view, while not siding with one's group standards. The

individual is wary not to proclaim the "truth" but always striving to understand and seek it. "Therefore, faith, in this stage learns to be receptive, to balance initiative and control with waiting and seeking to be part of the larger movement of spirit or being" (Dykstra & Parks, 1986, p. 30).

In Stage VI, or Universalizing Faith, the individual (like Gandhi or Jesus) feels detached and identifies exclusively with the Ultimate Being or Truth. In essence unity exists between the individual and the source of love and ultimate values. Very few individuals ever reach this stage.

Across stages, locus of authority changes from beyond the individual to within the individual. A second important change is that a narrow view of important others becomes more inclusive such that the advanced stages of faith are able to take on the perspectives of others and examine them, even transcend them.

According to Fowler's stage theory, conversion can precede, follow, or accompany stage transition (McLean, 1986). Only the content of one's beliefs necessarily changes with religious conversion but the way in which one conceives of god does not necessarily change. Stage theory indicated that change between religions does not necessarily imply a "vertical" change of faith. Like previous theorists, there is a distinction between conversion of belief, and conversion of reference group. Mclean (1986)

suggested that conversion is most likely to occur if the individual's faith style is between Stages II and III. This supposition was made because identification with reference groups is very important at these stages. Therefore, in the study of religious conversion, the predominant style of faith of a particular individual, or of a particular religious group, may be important factors to consider.

Individuals at these stages view God as a figure who keeps track of good and evil that one does. This is important because it relates to other variables which have been found in conjunction with religious conversion. Recall that many studies have shown that stressful life events often preceded conversion, and that guilt is a common feeling which also preceded conversion. If one has a faith system oriented around the idea that if you do something bad, or immoral, you will be punished, it does not take much inference to hypothesize that individuals who convert may do so because they believe that they have been living immorally and they are being punished with stressful life events. By converting, they hope to adopt a new way of life which will be less immoral and thus appease the "punisher."

Research has not directly addressed the previous issue. However, one past study did examine some of the same variables in a study on faith development. Recall that one of the factors thought to play a role in religious conversion was the lack of a relationship with a benevolent

parental figure. In the report prepared for The Religious Education Association of the United States and Canada (1987), an unexpected finding was that:

> the negative parental group overall had higher faith stages scores (with 70% in the 4 to 5 range, compared to 59% in the positive parental group...It may be that problematic parenting helps contribute to the development of faith, especially if one is compelled to come to terms with self and relationships to others apart from (or in spite of) family history. (p. 52)

The "negative parental group" reported a mother or father who was "either absent or not available to them or who was strongly controlling, manipulative or abusive" (p. 52). With the great similarity between this description of parental relationship and those reported by religious converts, this leads to an interesting question: Does the lack of stable and secure early relationships predispose individuals to seek a religious solution to their questions about the nature of reality? While only a longitudinal study could directly address this issue, a correlational approach could yield information about areas to address in further research.

Another finding of the Religious Education Association (1987) was similar to the factors related to religious conversion which were previously discussed. Crisis situations, or life transitions were consistently found to precede changes in faith development. Clearly, it is indicated that there are consistencies between religious conversion and advanced stages of faith. These correlations

between conversion and advanced stages of faith are: a crisis state preceding change, and early relationships with parents who are not benevolent or emotionally available.

Based upon the previous discussion of faith, it appears that parental relationships may affect development of the styles of faith. If we are to believe the results found in the Religious Education Association Report (1987), it seems as though negative parenting can leave the individual not only with a need to idealize someone, but also a strong need to make beliefs logically consistent and internally guided in terms of faith. These types of individuals would be viewed as using a more complex or advanced style of faith. Fowler's theory affords the social scientist a valuable opportunity to examine religious issues while using empirically testable constructs.

Summary and Hypotheses

This study was largely an extension of the ideas promulgated by Ullman (1982, 1989) and Wallace (1975), and of the research on faith development. The assumptions made were that individuals who convert will likely report that their paternal figures were either absent or emotionally unsatisfactory. This early priming interacted with a current crisis or stressful state, highlighting the isolation that the convert felt as a child. Because poor relationships with parents may be important in the development of faith, the faith development of the subjects

would seem to be of interest.

Several hypotheses were generated from this model and previous research on religious conversion and faith development.

Hypothesis 1: Religious converts will report that their fathers were less emotionally satisfying during childhood, relative to non-converts.

Hypothesis 2: Religious converts will have experienced more psychosocial stress in the period prior to conversion than individuals who have not changed their religion.

Hypothesis 3: Religious converts will report more advanced stages of faith than will non-converts.

CHAPTER 3

METHOD

Subjects

This study employed two groups of subjects. The first group consisted of 22 converts to the Roman Catholic Church, all of whom had joined the previous Easter, the time when individuals are formally initiated into the Catholic Church. The Rite of Christian Initiation for Adults (RCIA) is the formal title of the process through which potential converts go in order to be received into the Roman Catholic Church. Members generally meet once per week for a period of about six to eight months. The groups are led by a priest and or a nun. Issues from meeting to meeting vary, but many are involved in teaching the potential converts about the history and teachings of the faith. Members must have a sponsor, or member of the Catholic faith, who also is expected to attend the meetings. The sponsor also helps the potential convert by providing a role model and source of information about the Catholic faith. During the Lenten season, the decision to join the faith is formalized, and those seeking membership to the Church are seated in special areas during Mass. Those seeking membership are introduced to the church-community during Mass. Also at the beginning

of the Lenten season, those wishing to become members of the Roman Catholic faith attend a special service conducted by the Archbishop. During this service, the members of the RCIA formally acknowledge their desire to join, and their sponsors state that they are ready to help them join. Those seeking membership in the Roman Catholic Church are formally initiated during the Easter Vigil Mass. The RCIA generally continues to meet for a few weeks following that service, although participation is extremely variable. All subjects were sampled within a few months following Easter, thus some bias due to attrition may have been involved in the current sample.

The members of the non-convert group had been raised as Catholics by one or both parents who had been Roman Catholics. Both groups of subjects were selected from seven parishes which had active RCIA programs following Easter, 1990 in the Chicago area.

All subjects were at least 18 years of age, and all participated voluntarily. There were 13 men and 9 women who comprised the convert group; 12 men and 12 women comprised the non-convert group. The average age of the subjects was 28, with a range of 19 to 51. There was no significant difference between the groups in terms of age. The mean age of converts was 27.6, while the mean age of non-converts was 28.3. There were three Hispanic non-converts, two Oriental non-converts, and twenty Caucasian non-converts in the

sample. The convert group was comprised of one East-Indian, one Oriental, one African-American, two Hispanic, and seventeen Caucasian subjects.

The level of education for the subjects is shown in Table 1. Most converts were concentrated in the "Some College" and "College" level of education while non-converts were virtually all college graduates or had advanced degrees.

Measures

Demographic Variables. Open ended and checklist items were used to collect information on age, gender, education, race, and whether or not the respondent was attending school.

Religious Involvement. Previous research (e.g. Silverstein, 1988; Wallace, 1975) has suggested a relationship between various types of religious involvement and conversion. The following types of religious involvement were assessed using seven-point scales with anchors ranging from "once per day" to "never" (See Appendix A): Attendance at Mass and other religious services during the past two years; between the ages of 7 & 12; between the ages of 13 & 18; religious service attendance of the mother and father. In addition, forms of religious education at various levels from elementary through college at church affiliated schools as well as education from other sources such as Bible study classes and Sunday school were assessed

Table 1

Highest Level of Education

	High School	Some College	College	Grad School
Converts n=22	1	8	10	3
Non-Converts n=24	0	1	16	7

using checklist and open-ended items.

Childhood Environment. Because childhood environment has been addressed as an important factor in the religious conversion literature, the subjects were asked to report if, and when, their parents had died or divorced. The subjects were also asked to report if they were as close to their mother and father as they would have liked.

Motivation to join the Roman Catholic Church. The converts were asked to complete open-ended and forced choice questions about their motivation to join the Roman Catholic Church. They were asked if their decision to join was influenced by anyone, including a romantic partner. Finally, the converts were asked to report, in essay fashion, why they had converted to the Catholic Church.

Parental Warmth/Rejection. The subjects also completed the Adult PARQ: Parental Acceptance-Rejection Questionnaire (Rohner, 1990). The PARQ was developed cross-culturally to assess how children experience their parents in terms of Parental Warmth. There are four subscales which comprise the total scale. The following four scales make up the PARQ: Warmth, Hostility/Aggression, Indifference/Neglect, Undifferentiated Rejection. The items are rated by subjects who rate how true the item was in reference to their mother or father. An item from the PARQ is: "My mother made it easy for me to tell her things that were important." The subject then indicates if that statement was Almost Always

True, Sometimes True, Rarely True, or Almost Never True.

The PARQ may be used with adults who complete the instrument for the period when they were between the ages of 7 and 12. Rohner (1986) indicated that this period is the most important in a child's life. During this time, parental warmth has its greatest effect on subsequent development. The manual for the PARQ (Rohner, 1990) presented the results of a factor analysis and multiple correlations involving the adult form of the PARQ in support of it's construct validity. In the factor analysis, two factors emerged, Acceptance and Rejection, not the four subscales which were previously reported to exist. Grotevant and Carlson (1989) also noted that the PARQ may actually measure a single acceptance-rejection construct since the correlations between subscales were high in their review of the literature on the PARQ. The child form of the PARQ has received the greatest empirical work while the adult PARQ has been used, albeit with a limited sample.

In the PARQ manual (Rohner, 1990), the standardization sample for reliability and validity was a group of 147 undergraduate students ranging in age from 18 to 43 years. The mean age was 23. Cronbach's alpha for the four subscales of the PARQ ranged from .86 to .95. Correlations between the four subscales and criterion measures to establish validity ranged from .43 to .90. According to Grotevant and Carlson (1989):

> The instrument demonstrates promising discriminant and construct validity for the American sample and appears well founded in theory. The standardization sample and reliability/validity data are based on undergraduate students in the United States, which may be unrepresentative of parent populations.... High interscale correlations suggest that the scales are not independent but represent factors of a single acceptance-rejection construct. (pp. 463-464)

Given Rohner's (1990) own data, the sum total of all four scales were used in statistical analyses, rather than using the individual scale scores since it appear that a single construct is being assessed by the PARQ.

Life Stress. The subjects completed a Life Experiences Survey adapted from Sarason, Johnson, and Siegel (1978). The survey was designed to assess the impact of various psychosocial stressors in the past year. For this study, the retrospective framework was extended to cover the two years prior to joining RCIA, in the case of converts, and the previous two years in the case of non-converts. The Life Experiences Survey (LES) has been used widely in other research and it's reliability and validity are established. Sarason et al. (1978) found that the LES was relatively free from the effects of social desirability and that it demonstrated adequate test-retest reliability in studies involving undergraduate students. The LES has been used in a large number of studies since it's publication. The LES was demonstrated to correspond significantly with a number of stress related dependent measures in the original studies conducted by Sarason, Johnson, and Siegel (1978).

The LES was scored by summing the weights assigned by subjects to the events which were reported to have occurred in the previous two years. Three scores can be derived: positive life-change, negative life-change, and total life-change. There are 47 items for all subjects and three spaces to list other events which were not covered by the instrument. In addition, there are 10 more items which applied only to students such as failing an exam or receiving a failing grade.

Faith Development. The subjects also completed a modified Fowler Scale of Barnes (1990). The instrument was received via personal communication from Barnes (1990), the primary author of a publication which employed the original form of the Fowler Scale (Barnes, Doyle, & Johnson, 1989). After the 1989 study, Barnes made some modifications of the scale based upon further review of the data from (Barnes, Doyle, & Johnson, 1989).

The original instrument was recently developed and partially validated to assess levels of faith based upon the developmental theory of James Fowler. The Fowler Scale (Barnes, Doyle, & Johnson, 1989) was developed as a method to gather quick data regarding faith development, as opposed to the lengthy interview used by Fowler's original works.

Barnes et al. (1989) tested the validity of their instrument by correlating stages of faith with levels of symbolic or literal interpretation of religious statements.

They predicted, and found, that individuals who exhibited lower stages of faith preferred literal interpretations of religious teachings, while those more advanced in faith preferred symbolic interpretation of those teachings. This is consistent with Fowler's theory (Barnes, Doyle, & Johnson, 1989).

The authors also examined the validity of the instrument by determining if distinct clusters of individuals existed. Barnes et al. (1989) found that 65% of their sample responded in a manner consistent with a clear preference for a single stage of faith, while 29% of the sample spread their preferences across two or more stages of faith. The authors interpreted this as support for their scale and Fowler's theory. In the original scale, there was an option which represented the inability to express a preference between the items in a pair of responses. This option was eliminated in the revised version of the scale in order to force subjects to choose between stages of faith.

The subjects in the current sample were not administered the original Fowler Scale, but one revised following the study of 1989. It was acquired from the original authors via personal communication (See Appendix B). Subsequent to the 1989 publication, Barnes (personal communication, 1990) conducted an item analysis on the data and discovered that several items were not related to others supposedly measuring the same stage of faith. These items

were either reworded or replaced by the original authors to yield a new scale. Thus the scale used in the present study was a revision of the scale published in 1989.

To assess faith development, subjects read nine pairs of statements and selected the one which they preferred out of each pair. In each pair, the statements represent different levels of faith. Since stages one and six are theoretically very rare, items representing these stages are not represented by statements. Thus the subject selects between two statements a total of nine times. The following is an example of one pair of statements, each represents a different stage of faith development: "God's revealed truth is meant for all people everywhere" and "No set of religious beliefs is the whole and final truth for everyone." Thus to score the revised Fowler scale, all endorsed statements are grouped according to the stage of faith they represent. The stage of faith for the subject is found by determining which statements representative of one stage were endorsed most often.

Procedure

To sample converts, the investigator initially contacted RCIA leaders at each parish and gained permission to attend a meeting. A letter which outlined the nature of the study was sent to the RCIA leaders and presented, by the leader to the subjects, prior to data collection. The letter briefly introduced the researcher and the nature of

study being undertaken. It also outlined what would be required of the subjects, basically their anonymous completion of a paper and pencil questionnaire. The subjects were made aware that individual responses were not of interest, merely trends found within the group, thus individual feedback was not available.

The author then attended an RCIA meeting at the parishes which had members who were interested in participating in the study. The author again introduced himself and the nature of the study, in addition to the tasks required of the subjects. Participants read and signed informed consent forms which were collected separately from the data to help preserve anonymity. The subjects were asked to complete the forms while the investigator was present in case any questions arose. Most subjects were tested in the presence of the author. However, some (6) converts were only willing to complete the surveys at home. These were returned to the author directly or left with the RCIA leader in sealed envelopes and then collected by the author.

The names of the subjects appeared only on the informed consent forms. Following the session, any questions or comments of the participants were addressed.

Some converts (3) were identified through a snowball method by the author who knew through personal acquaintances that they had recently joined the Catholic faith. These

three subjects completed the materials at home and returned them to the examiner. These converts were tested to increase the sample size since it was difficult to find active RCIA programs following Easter. Even if there were active programs, many had extremely high dropout rates following formal initiation. Thus, many converts stopped attending the RCIA after they had become formal members of the faith, even though the meetings were to continue for several weeks.

The non-convert sample was gathered by contacting individuals who attended the RCIA groups at the Catholic churches where the converts attended. Thus many (16) of the non-convert group were sponsors of those joining the faith. Of this group, nine completed the surveys in the presence of the examiner. In addition, eight Catholic non-converts were also contacted via snowball sampling. These subjects were contacted by the examiner who knew that they were practicing Catholics and tested in his presence.

The data were analyzed using the SPSS-X statistical package, Release 3 (SPSS Inc., 1988). The exceptions to this generalization were when Fisher's Exact Test was performed. This formula was computed by hand, by the examiner.

CHAPTER 4

RESULTS

In the present study, three factors were hypothesized to be related to religious conversion. The first hypothesis suggested that converts would report that their fathers were less emotionally available than the fathers of non-converts. The second hypothesis was that converts would report a great deal of stressful life events in the period prior to conversion. Finally, it was predicted that converts would score more highly than non-converts on a measure of faith development. The results of the analyses assessing these hypotheses will be examined, followed by an examination of some exploratory data.

Paternal Relationship

The hypothesis that converts would report that their fathers were often absent or emotionally unavailable was tested in a number of ways. First, subjects were asked to respond "yes" or "no" to the following question: "Were you as close to your father as you would have liked while growing up?" A chi-square analysis yielded a significant difference between the groups, $\chi^2(1) = 7.06$ (with Yates correction), $p < .008$. Thus converts reported less often that they were as close to their fathers as they would

have liked. See Table 2.

The second test of Hypothesis 1 employed the PARQ-A. It was predicted that the converts would score higher, indicating less warmth, than non-converts. The mean scores for the converts and non-converts were 115.79 and 100.48 respectively. The analysis of variance was not significant but a trend in the data was indicated, $F(1,41) = 2.94$, $p < .094$. The scores reflected less warmth in the fathers of converts, relative to the fathers of non-converts.

It was suggested by previous research that the fathers of converts were often physically absent from the home (Ullman, 1982). In Table 3, note that none of the non-converts were physically without their fathers during childhood, as opposed to 55% of the converts. For the converts, five of the subjects lost their fathers due to death and seven ceased to live with their fathers due to divorce. Fisher's Exact Test was performed to assess the association between convert status and the presence or absence of the father during childhood. These results were significant, $p < .00002$, indicating that the observed pattern of responses was likely not due to chance.

The previous results provide qualified support for the prediction that the fathers of converts were less emotionally available than the fathers of non-converts. The results of the PARQ suggested only a trend toward significance, but the other assessments of the first

Table 2

Felt Close to Father

	Yes	No
Converts n=22	6 (27%)	16 (73%)
Non-Converts n=24	17 (71%)	7 (29%)s

*p< .008

Table 3

Father Present During Childhood

	Yes	No
Converts n=22	10 (45%)	12 (55%)
Non-Converts n=24	24 (100%)	0 (0%)

*p< .00002

hypothesis did yield significant results, suggesting that converts were more often than non-converts: 1-not as close to their fathers as they would have liked, and 2-physically separated from their fathers.

Life Stress

The second hypothesis predicted that converts would report more stressful events, over the past two years, than would non-converts. The LES scores (positive, negative, and total) were divided by 60 or 50 dependent upon whether the subject was a student or not respectively. This transformation of scores was done to account for the spurious variance caused by the fact that students have an additional 10 potential items to endorse which are unique to being a student (e.g. failing a test or course). These transformed scores were used in the analysis of the data.

The prediction that converts would report more stressful events than non-converts in the previous two years was supported by the results of a MANOVA. Positive and negative life change scores, divided by 50 or 60 depending upon status as a student, were the two dependent variables in the analysis.

The adjusted means for positive life-change scores for converts and non-converts were .24 and .13 respectively. The adjusted means for negative life-change scores were .25 and .13 respectively for converts and non-converts. The raw LES scores and the adjusted values appear in Table 4.

Table 4

Raw and Adjusted LES Scores

	Raw	Adjusted
Positive		
Converts n=22	12.96	.24
Non-Converts n=24	7.17	.13
Negative		
Converts n=22	13.41	.25
Non-Converts n=24	7.42	.13

MANOVA $p < .001$

The main effect of convert status in multivariate tests indicated a significant overall effect, $F(1,43)$ (Wilks) = 8.36, $p < .001$. For positive life-change scores, the effect of convert status in univariate tests of significance was significant, $F(1,44) = 6.89$, $p < .012$. The results of a univariate test of significance for negative stressful events was also significant, $F(1,44) = 10.96$, $p < .002$.

As predicted, convert status did have a main effect on the LES scores, indicating that converts reported more life change, both positive and negative, than non-converts in the past two years. Thus, the hypothesis which predicted this effect was supported.

Faith Development

The final hypothesis suggested that converts would score higher on a measure of faith development than would non-converts. This prediction was tested using a modified Fowler Scale of Barnes (1990). In the current sample, approximately one-fourth, or 26% of the subjects did not respond in a manner which could be categorized according to the scoring procedures. That is, subjects often selected an equal number of responses which represented two or more stages of faith. In most cases, the selections were from adjacent stages, (i.e. 3 and 4, or 4 and 5), but there were responses which equally preferred items from stages 3 and 5, or equally preferred items from stages 3, 4, and 5. The subjects who did not express a clear preference for items

which represented one stage of development were included in statistical analysis as a discrete category called "Mixed." This resulted in four categories as reflected in Table 5: Stage 3, 4, 5, and Mixed. Barnes et al. (1989) encountered the same problem with their data; that is a large percentage (29%) responded in a manner which did not clearly identify with a particular stage of faith. Barnes et al. (1989) saw this effect as consistent with Fowler's theory of faith development.

Therefore, the hypothesis that converts would endorse items indicative of higher stages of faith was not supported, $\chi^2(3) = .732$, n.s. (see Table 5). In addition to the problem of scoring, one item was probably not appropriate for this sample. One of the responses was "People have to make their own best choices about religion, as conscientiously as they can" and the alternative selection was "It is good for a person to be loyal to the religious tradition in which the person was raised." In this sample of 46 subjects, 44 endorsed the former selection, thus this item was essentially unable to help discriminate between stages of faith. This item was not eliminated from the possible responses when scoring since it would have reduced the total possible items representing stages four and five.

While there are possibly a number of reasons for the former situation, the reason that subjects overwhelmingly

Table 5

Stage of Faith

	Stage of Faith			
	3	4	5	MIXED*
Converts n=22	3 (14%)	5 (23%)	7 (32%)	7 (32%)
Non-Converts n=24	4 (17%)	6 (25%)	9 (38%)	5 (21%)

*Indicates that the responses were equally divided among two or more faith levels, thus not able to be classified into a stage of faith.

endorsed the item in the manner they did is probably due to social desirability. The subjects in this sample had either personally changed their religion or knew the study involved subjects who had changed their religion, thus the former selection was obviously more preferable than the latter.

Supplementary Results

Consistent with previous research which had suggested that a lack of religious activity or church attendance in childhood was related to religious conversion, (Silverstein, 1988; Wallace, 1975) this sample suggested that converts attended religious services less frequently while growing up than did non-converts. The results are contained in Table 6.

Fisher's Exact Test was performed on the data for ages 7 to 12, and for ages 13 to 18 to determine if the pattern of responses was unlikely to be due to chance. The responses were collapsed into one group if the respondents indicated that they attended church "once per week" or more often; the other group was composed of those who responded "more than once per month" or less often.

The results of these analyses were significant for both age groups, 7 to 12, $p < .00000003$, and for 13 to 18, $p < .0000001$. These results indicate that converts attended religious services less often than did non-converts during childhood and adolescence.

There are many formal methods of being instructed in

Table 6

Church Attendance

	Once/ Day	>1/wk	1/wk	>1/mo	1/mo	<1/mo	Almost Never	Never
Converts n=22	0	1	6	1	1	0	5	8
	(0)	(1)	(2)	(3)	(1)	(0)	(4)	(10)
	0	**4**	**14**	**2**	**0**	**2**	**0**	**0**
Non-Converts n=24	5	4	14	1	0	0	0	0
	(2)	(5)	(15)	(2)	(0)	0	(0)	(0)
	3	**3**	**15**	**1**	**1**	**1**	**0**	**0**

Note: Data referring to ages 7 to 12 appear in regular type. Data referring to ages 13 to 18 appear in (parentheses). Data referring to the past two years appears in **bold face type**. religious doctrine, other than attending religious

services. For this reason, the subjects were asked to report if they had ever attended a school with a religious affiliation. The results are contained in Table 7. Consistent with the trend toward less religious participation in converts, it was found that converts tended not to attend religious schools in the same frequency as non-converts. However, it appears that the converts were exposed, through schooling, to religion much later than were the non-converts. This should not be surprising since one would expect that the Catholic parents would likely send their children to Catholic grammar schools and high-schools.

The final way to assess the religious background of the sample was to inquire about religious education from some other source, such as bible study groups, Sunday School, or other education specifically aimed at religious beliefs and practices. The backgrounds of the subjects with these sources of religious education are presented in Table 8. These results are also consistent with the pattern of decreased religious participation and education in converts.

The data in Table 9 are consistent with previous research which suggested that emotional relationships with members of a faith are often involved in exposing non-members to that particular faith (Heirich, 1977; Wallace, 1975). Observe that 82% of the converts reported that they were either married to, or dating, a Catholic (see Table 9).

Table 7

Attendance at Schools with Religious Affiliations

	Elementary	High-School	College	Grad School
Converts n=22	1 (5%)	3 (14%)	10 (45%)	2 (9%)
Non-Converts n=24	20 (83%)	19 (79%)	16 (67%)	10 (42%)

Table 8

Religious Education

	Childhood	Adolescence	Adulthood*
Converts n=22	7 (32%)	0 (0%)	2 (9%)
Non-Converts n=24	9 (38%)	12 (50%)	3 (13%)

*Note: The RCIA was not included as a source of religious education for the converts, since all were members.

Table 9

Dating and Marital Status

	MC	MNC	DIV	DC	DNC	ND
Converts n=22	3 (14%)	0 (0%)	1 (5%)	15 (68%)	0 (0%)	3 (14%)
Non-Converts n=24	5 (21%)	1 (4%)	1 (4%)	7 (29%)	3 (13%)	7 (29%)

MC = Married to a Catholic
MNC = Married to a Non-Catholic
DIV = Divorced
DC = Dating a Catholic
DNC = Dating Non-Catholic
ND = Not Dating

This compared with 50% of the subjects in the non-convert group. Thus most converts had significant emotional relationships with members of the faith which they had just joined. Most (12 out of 15) of the converts who reported that they were dating a Catholic person indicated that they were planning to marry that person. Also, none of the converts were married to, or dating, a non-Catholic.

In addition to religious participation of the subjects, the religious participation of parents was of interest. Individuals are likely to adopt many of the same behaviors as their parents. Religious participation is one form of behavior which children learn from their parents therefore,the religious participation of the parents was surveyed. The results of the responses appear in Table 10. It is clear from the results that the parents of converts attended religious services less often than the parents of non-converts. Fisher's Exact Test was performed on the data referring to mother's of the sample, and on the data referring to the father's of the sample. The ratings were combined from "once per week" and more often into one group, and from "more than once per month" and less often into another group.

The results showed that the mothers of the converts attended religious services less often than did the mothers of the non-converts, $p < .000002$. Fisher's Exact Test also showed that the pattern of scores reflected that the fathers

Table 10

Religious Participation of the Parents of the Subjects

	Once/ Day	>1/wk	1/wk	>1/mo	1/mo	<1/mo	Almost Never	Never
Converts n=21	0 (0)	1 (1)	3 (2)	2 (2)	0 (0)	1 (1)	6 (6)	9 (9)
Non-Converts n=24	0 (0)	4 (1)	17 (15)	0 (1)	1 (0)	0 (1)	1 (4)	1 (2)

Note: The attendance of mothers appears in regular face type. The attendance of fathers appears in (parentheses).

of converts attended religious services less often than did the fathers of non-converts, $p < .0004$.

Another area of interest was the relationship that converts had with their mothers. The subjects were administered the PARQ-A in reference to their mothers as well as their fathers. The results of an analysis of variance indicated that the converts and non-converts did not score significantly different on the PARQ-A in reference to their mothers, $F(1,45) = .259$, n.s. The mean scores were 96.8 and 92.6 for converts and non-converts respectively. Therefore the converts, relative to non-converts, reported more rejection in their mothers, but not significantly more. These scores were less than those reported for the fathers of converts and non-converts. Recall that the mean scores in reference to fathers were 115.79 for converts and 100.48 for non-converts. Thus converts perceived less warmth, relative to non-converts, from both their mothers and fathers yet only the differences between ratings of fathers were significantly different.

The subjects were also asked to report if they were as close to their mothers as they would have liked while growing up. The results suggested no significant differences, $\chi^2(1)$ (with Yates correction) $= 2.40$, $p < .121$.

Also, only two converts and one non-convert reported that their mother had died. One convert reported that her mother had died when she was 15, the other when she was 31.

Thus the differences between converts and non-converts, and their respective relationships with their mothers were not significantly different in terms of warmth, closeness, or physical availability.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION

In the current study it was predicted that religious converts to the Roman Catholic Church would report less benevolent paternal relationships than would non-converts. Also, it was predicted that converts would report more psychosocial stress than non-converts in the prior two years. And finally, it was predicted that converts would score higher than non-converts on a measure of faith development.

The hypothesis that the fathers of converts were less emotionally available than the fathers of non-converts was somewhat supported. The hypothesis that converts would report more psychosocial stress than non-converts was strongly supported by the data. The hypothesis regarding faith development was not supported.

Paternal Relationship

The paternal relationships of converts and non-converts were analyzed in a number of ways and the results were somewhat supportive of the hypothesis. The converts reported significantly more often that they were not as close to their fathers as they would have liked while growing up. Converts also reported significantly more often

than non-converts that during childhood, their fathers were absent from the home due to divorce or death. Thus these two results are in support of the psychodynamic model in which converts came from homes in which the father figure was emotionally unavailable.

Analysis of the PARQ scores indicated only a trend in the data for converts to have reported less warmth from their fathers, as opposed to non-converts. The adult form of the PARQ has only been used a few times in previous research and the effects of biased recall have not been clearly explicated. The PARQ may have been unduly biased by current mood state, as is the problem with retrospective measures. Also, lack of warmth may not be the critical variable in the process of eventual religious conversion. The data about childhood experiences might also reflect that the period of interest was long ago, thus the effects are probably quite small given the amount of time which had passed and all of the possible intervening variables. Finally, this sample was small and thus the likelihood of finding a significant effect reduced.

Life-Stress

The results of this study strongly supported previous research which had suggested that pre-conversion periods are often replete with psychosocial stressors (Galanter, Rabkin, Rabkin, & Deutsch, 1979; James, 1929; Silverstein, 1988; Ullman, 1982). One might simply interpret these findings to

mean that during times of stress, people search for meaning or guidance, and thus turn more readily to organized religion. However, one might suspect that psychosocial stress may be a necessary, but not sufficient factor in the conversion process. A psychodynamic model would focus on the dearth of positive paternal relationships in the lives of converts and how this is exacerbated during stressful times, resulting in a search for a new paternal figure.

Another interpretation of these data fits strongly with Wallace's (1975) sociological perspective. This approach would focus on the deficits in religious education, the importance of psychosocial stressors, and a significant relationship with a member of the Catholic Church. This approach would focus on the previous deficits, and how they might make one open to seeking an integrative force in life.

Although Wallace's (1975) model was not directly tested, the deficits in social status which she discussed did not appear in this study. Wallace suggested that those more likely to convert would not have a high level of education. Also, Wallace's work implied that the elderly and women are lower in status, thus more likely to convert. This was not the case in the data.

Many of the essays written by converts about why they converted sounded similar to what Wallace (1975) hypothesized; namely the dearth of religious background and the importance of a significant other who was Catholic.

For example, a thirty-five year old male convert said,

> I have had a keen interest in religion since I was young. I grew very disappointed with my parents' church and consequently was never baptized. Between the ages of 21 and 32 I pursued various philosophies and religions, but never felt I found a home. About 6-7 months ago, I met my fiance who really caught my interest because of her passion for her religion. She led me to Catholicism, and my conversion followed, quite naturally.

Faith Development

It was predicted that converts would endorse items which were indicative of more advanced stages of faith, relative to non-converts. Unfortunately, the data did not support this prediction. As mentioned above (See Results) there were significant problems with the revised Fowler scale. One item was almost exclusively endorsed in a particular direction, thus making it's powers of discrimination limited. Also, subjects often endorsed items in such a way that it was not possible to categorize them into one stage of faith, thus the prediction of McLean (1986) was not supported either; namely, that converts would be represented in the second and third stages of faith development.

Barnes, Doyle, and Johnson (1989) viewed the fact that a large percentage of their sample endorsed items across levels of faith as consistent with Fowler's theory. Thus stage of faith might not be a discreet category which represents a qualitative shift in organization, but rather a continuum where organization changes minutely. However, if

stages of faith do represent qualitative shifts in grounding or organization of meaning, then one should not be "spread" across adjacent categories. Given this interpretation, the need for a more accurate measure of faith development might be indicated.

It may also be that style of faith is not an important dimension in the decision to join a particular religion. Perhaps the Roman Catholic faith is attractive and accessible to individuals who are at very different "places" when it comes to their understanding of God and religion. Since this is only the first study which, to the author's knowledge, empirically addressed the relevance of faith to religious conversion, it is hoped that others will view this as possible venue to integrate psychological and religious inquiry. However, McLean's view that conversion is most apt to occur around stage two or three is interesting because it implies that people convert because they feel that they have offended God in some way, and that by converting, they are making amends for the ills that they have committed.

Summary/Conclusions

At best, the results are equivocal in their support of the psychodynamic model of religious conversion. The results which can be explained with a sociological model (e.g. Wallace, 1975) appear much more salient than those which can easily be incorporated into a psychodynamic framework.

Bakken (1985) said that "Religious functionaries notably strive to provide converts with love and a sense of belongingness" (p. 158). For an individual who lacked this sense early on, religious organizations can be powerful forces. Thus, a sociological perspective would focus on the effects of identifying with a group and with a religious leader, not due to unconscious longings, but due to the attraction it provides by itself; namely, a sense of identity and belonging. Perhaps those who have missed out on a strong relationship with their father would desire this type of relationship in their adult lives. Although Wallace (1975) focused on the lack of stability in the lives of converts immediately prior to converting, it is not unreasonable to assume that instability in childhood might also play a role in conversion.

The current results are consistent with many aspects of the work of Wallace (1975). Wallace called attention to the lack of stability in the lives of converts in the period prior to conversion, the lack of a religiously involved childhood, and the importance of emotional relationships with current members of the convert's new faith. These notions were supported by the data of this study. Converts reported a high incidence of being married to, or dating Catholics. Converts reported significantly more life event change than non-converts for a similar amount of time. Finally, converts were much less religiously active in

childhood and adolescence than were non-converts.

The family systems perspective of Bennett, Wolin, and McAvity (1988) might view conversion as a rejection of the converts' family of origin. A family who failed to provide a strong sense of religious identity through participation, and thus a weaker family system, is more open to change. Bennett, Wolin, and McAvity (1988) examined the role of myths and rituals in families and how these behaviors help solidify the growing child's sense of family identity. The authors addressed family systems whose use of myths and rituals were strong, and those families who did not have a strong sense of traditions, rituals, or myths. Bennett et al. (1988) said:

> In contrast are those families whose ritual performances are casual and infrequent. These families also limit the options for passing on their heritage in the late phase, since they have conveyed relatively little in the way of traditions and values to their children. When the children face their own task of selecting mates and starting the family cycle anew, they may legitimately ask of their family of origin, "What were you people all about anyway?" (p. 218)

Similarly, Erikson (1950) remarked on individuals who do not pass on religious education and faith to their children:

> Each society and age must find the institutionalized form of reverence which derives vitality from its world-image- from predestination to indeterminacy. The clinician can only observe that many are proud to be without religion whose children cannot afford their being without it. (p. 251)

This fits nicely with Wallace's hypothesis that individuals who grow up without a strong sense of religious

identity may go looking for it in the future. Again, many of the essays seemed to support Erikson's and Wallace's ideas. One twenty-five year old male convert said, "The Catholic Church has given me a sense of family and meaning which I have been in search of for a long time."

A twenty year old male said of his conversion,

> I never had a religion or was religious while growing up. Since coming to [place of worship deleted] I have learned much about Catholicism so I decided to learn more. After inquiring about the process of conversion, I decided to become a Catholic through the influence of my girlfriend at the time, and [a priest]. My decision was finalized by me, no one else.

It appeared that many converts were aware that they had not been active in a religion, and felt that this was not satisfactory. Several converts expressed concern over their own lack of religious upbringing and did not want to repeat the pattern of inactivity with their own children. Changing religious affiliation may have represented a formalization of a religious identity. One conversion account of a twenty-five year old female may have typified many other essays.

> First, I must say that I am marrying a Catholic and feel it is essential to raise children in an environment in which both parents share the same religious beliefs. My fiance and I both believe in the fundamental teachings of Christianity. My fiance feels strongly about the Catholic faith. I do not have strong ties to the Methodist Church. I find that although the Catholic faith has more "rules" and different applications, both Catholicism and Methodism share Christianities fundamentals. I enjoy the traditionalism of the Catholic faith.
> The above, coupled with the fact that I was tired of being stuck between two Christian faiths led me to my conversion.

It was unexpected to find that more men than women had converted. This does not support Wallace's (1975) claim that since women have lower status in society, they might more strongly desire an integrative force in their lives. Perhaps the family systems literature can help explain this finding. From this view, male children are more likely to disengage from the family of origin and seek their identities in their profession and the lives they form for themselves. Maybe the proportion of men joining was due to chance since our sample was small, but maybe it reflects this trend for men to find their identities outside of their families of origin. It might be interesting to study the role of mate selection; namely, was there a systematic process involved in finding a mate who was not of the religion of origin?

An attempt was made to include the notion of faith development in a study of religious conversion. While the results were not significant, future research must attempt to keep an eye toward psychological and theological concepts. It would be disheartening indeed to reduce religious conversion to a psychological construct. The style of faith, along with other developmental aspects seems a viable way to combine psychological and theological understanding.

Critique of the Present Study

Several aspects of this study were an improvement over

previous research. The instruments used in data collection were an improvement over those of previous studies. Most instruments have been used in previous research and have demonstrated reliability and validity. However, the results of this study using the PARQ yielded only a trend in the data. While this may be encouraging, further studies need to replicate this finding, or determine what are the critical dimensions of the paternal relationship. Perhaps warmth and rejection are not the critical factors but a sense of identification or belonging. It would be prudent to examine these and other family factors which may have affected the lives of eventual converts.

Second, this study used only converts who had formally joined the faith within a few months of data collection. Previous studies had used converts who had joined several years prior to data collection. Even though the data are largely retrospective, all subjects were asked to reflect on the period of only two years prior to report stressful events in their lives.

The retrospective nature of the adult PARQ is intrinsically open to bias. But, perhaps it is more important to get at the subjective, current perceptions of what occurred during childhood, rather than a factual account of what occurred. What one believes to have occurred might have a stronger effect on current behavior than what actually occurred.

Third, the data were collected on members of one of the world's largest traditional religions. This type of study has not been conducted in the past, with rare exception. Many psychological studies focus on the unusual or rare, while neglecting the more ordinary.

The results of the current study must be tempered with some criticism. First, the subjects were all members of one faith, so generalization of results to other faiths is not possible without further research. Also, the size of this sample is small, so generalizations even within the Catholic faith are tentative at best. Third, the data collection process was not completely standardized (some subjects completed the instruments at home). In addition, this study is a "one-shot" design which makes any assumptions about causality extremely tenuous.

In the future, studies might take a more longitudinal stance when it comes to the study of religious conversion. Following individuals throughout the RCIA process might shed light on what aspects are "therapeutic" to the converts. Also, it seems a natural question to ask how permanent the changes are following conversion. That is, how dedicated are religious converts to maintaining the choices they have made?

It was hoped that this research would accomplish two goals. The first was to help highlight issues that may be worth considering when dealing with religious converts. The

second goal was to expand the body of research available on religious converts to a mainstream American church. The factors which seemed particularly relevant to the study of religious conversion in the Roman Catholic Church were as follows: a deficit in early paternal relationships, psychosocial stressors in the period prior to conversion, parental inactivity in religion, lack of strong religious background, and emotional relationships with a member of the faith. It appears that sociological and family systems theories would be most adept at lending meaning to these types of results.

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Appendix A

Demographic Information Sheet

Age_____
Race: Caucasian_____
African-American_____
Oriental_____
Hispanic_____
Other(Specify)_____
Sex: Male Female
Highest Level of Education: (Please Circle)
Grade School/ High School/ Some College/ College Degree/ Advanced Degree
Are you currently attending school? Yes No

What religion(s) were your parents when you were a child?
Mother:_____ Father:_____

If either parent has died, please write how old you were when that occurred, and which parent died.
_____

Have your parents divorced? Yes No
If so, please write how old you were when that occurred.
_____
With whom did you live following the divorce?
Mother
Father
Other (Specify)_____

Were you as close to your mother as you would have liked while growing up? Yes No

Were you as close to your father as you would have liked while growing up? Yes No

Have you ever attended a school with a religious affiliation?
Yes No
If so, during what period?
_____elementary school
_____high-school
_____college
_____graduate school)?
_____Other (Specify)_____

Have you ever attended something specifically for religious education? (Bible study classes, C.C.D., seminary, etc.)

Yes No

If so, please list which activities and how old you were.

_____

Please list any groups you belong to as a result of your involvement with this church? (Bible study, volunteer, choir, etc.)_____

How often have you usually attended mass in the past two years?

___more than once per day
___once per day
___more than once per week
___once per week
___more than once per month
___once per month
___less than once per month

How often did you attend religious services from age 7 to 12?

___more than once per day
___once per day
___more than once per week
___once per week
___more than once per month
___once per month
___less than once per month
___almost never
___never

How often did you attend religious services from age 13 to 18?

___more than once per day
___once per day
___more than once per week
___once per week
___more than once per month
___once per month
___less than once per month
___almost never
___never

How often did you attend religious services after age 18?
___more than once per day
___once per day
___more than once per week
___once per week
___more than once per month
___once per month
___less than once per month
___almost never
___never

How often did your mother attend a house of worship while you were growing up?
___more than once per day
___once per day
___more than once per week
___once per week
___more than once per month
___once per month
___less than once per month
___almost never
___never

How often did your father attend a house of worship while you were growing up?
___more than once per day
___once per day
___more than once per week
___once per week
___more than once per month
___once per month
___less than once per month
___almost never
___never

Are you currently:
____Married to a Catholic. For how long?_____
____Married to a non-Catholic. For how long?_____
____Divorced. For how long?_____
____Separated. For how long?_____
____Dating a Catholic person. For how long?_____
____Dating a non-Catholic person. For how long?_____
____Not dating. For how long?_____

IF YOU HAVE ALWAYS BEEN CATHOLIC, STOP HERE

If you have converted, what was your former religion?

_____

Were you religiously active in that faith prior to joining RCIA?

Yes No

Was the decision to convert influenced by a romantic relationship with someone who was already Catholic?

Yes No

Do you plan to marry this person? Yes No

Was there any special person who influenced you, directly or indirectly, to convert to the Catholic Church? Yes No

If so, whom?_____

In the remaining space, please write a brief statement about why you converted to the Catholic Church.

Appendix B

Revised Fowler Scale

Pick whichever of the two statements you feel more at home with, even if you do not agree with it completely. The two statements of each pair are not necessarily on the same topic. Even if you like both statements in each pair or dislike both, nonetheless pick the one with which you are more comfortable (or less uncomfortable). Circle the appropriate letter for each pair of statements, and use the following key when responding:

A: I Strongly Prefer Statement A
a: I Prefer Statement A
b: I Prefer Statement B
B: I strongly Prefer Statement B

---

1) A a b B

A: Those who do what God wants are given special rewards.
B: God grants comfort and strength to those who are loyal and faithful.

2) A a b B

A: God can do whatever God wants.
B: It is important to try to make sense out of how God acts and why.

3) A a b B

A: A good way to relate to God is to do what God wants, so that God will help you in return.
B: The word "God" stands for the ultimate meaning of life, which people seek in different ways.

4) A a b B

A: True religiousness lies mainly in a sense of sincere and devoted loyalty to God.
B: It is important to reflect on one's beliefs to make them reasonable and logically coherent.

5) A a b B

A: Belonging to a religious group is like having an additional family.
B: Most people in the world are doing their best to live decent lives.

6) A a b B

A: God's revealed truth is meant for all people everywhere.
B: No set of religious beliefs is the whole and final truth for everyone.

7) A a b B

A: It is important to follow religious leaders whose words and example can inspire sincere religiousness.
B: Religious leaders must be reasonable, consistent, and objective in their interpretation of doctrines.

8) A a b B

A: It is good for a person to be loyal to the religious tradition in which the person was raised.
B: People have to make their own best choices about religion, as conscientiously as they can.

9) A a b B

A: There are moral teachings which are objectively valid for all people everywhere.
B: The purpose of moral teachings can only be to guide people towards the one ideal of care for every person.

APPROVAL SHEET

The thesis submitted by Kevin Wayne Miller has been read and approved by the following committee:

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The final copies have been examined by the director of the thesis and the signature which appears below verifies the fact that any necessary changes have been incorporated and that the thesis is now given final approval by the Committee with reference to content and form.

The thesis is therefore accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.

October 18, 1991
Date

Patricia A Rupert
Director's Signature