

# Religious Conversion as a Tool for Group Affiliation and Commitment: Ethnographic Research Report

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## Some problems in religious conversion studies

- Scholars are heavily influenced by the modern Protestant concept of religious conversion. Religious conversion is often defined as an autonomous type of change requiring a specific explanation, model or theory.
- Religious conversion models are based primarily on convert accounts. Thus conversion studies are mostly retrospective and conversion models are generalized conversion stories differing from group to group.
- Conversion stories change given various situations and/or contexts.



## Assumptions

- Religious conversion as an affiliation to group or personal change process is not a specific or an autonomic process demanding a specific explanation, model or theory.
- Religious conversion concept is not a necessary or even viable analytical tool for studying affiliation or personal change. Although converts, as members of particular group, need religious conversion for their personal autobiography.
- A convert account is a set of relevant episodic autobiographical memories and personal facts embedded in the semantic conversion schema in the form of a narrative. An approach regarding research in memory and narrative related to individual and the group is needed.
- The group and its members create the conditions of an authentic conversion experience one needs to meet, especially in highly structured and doctrinal religions.

## General Information

- Protestant Evangelical congregation in Brno, Czech Republic. Around 230 members. Ongoing research from February 2012.
- Methods: participant observation and informal interviews.

## Research questions

- What is the role of the conversion in the group?
- What is the conversion group schema?
- How can conversion practices be explained in individual-group relation?

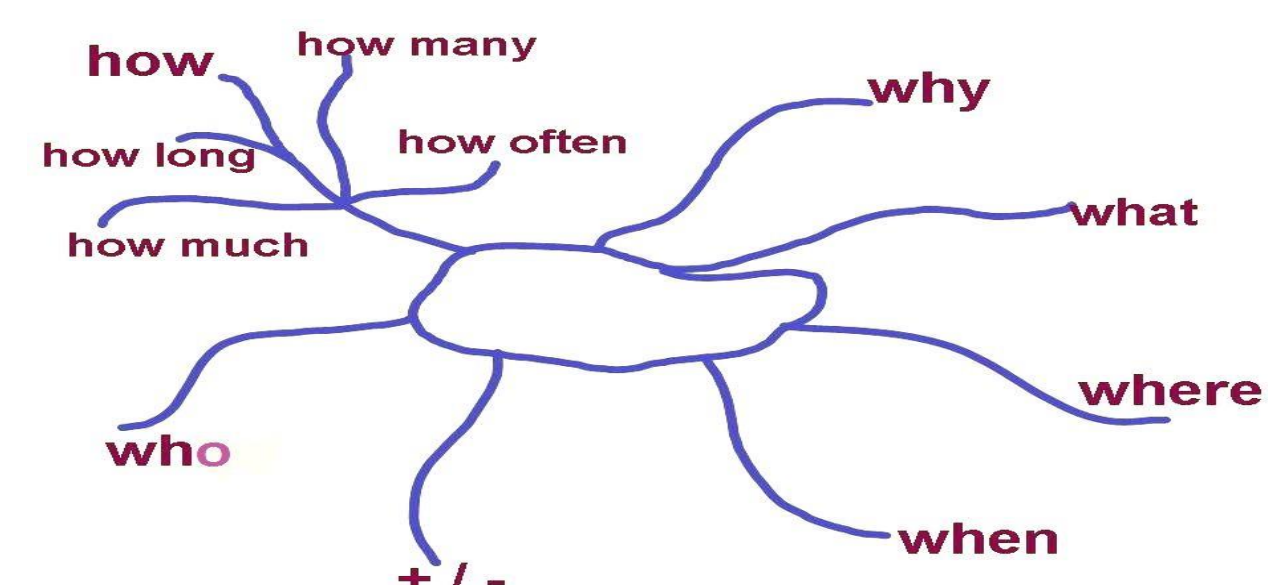
## How conversion works in the group:

- Conversion experience is one of the most important and distinguishing features and group identifiers of a member. Even adolescents who were brought up as Evangelical Christians must have conversion narrative to tell.
- Conversion has to be displayed publicly, often in a ritualized context. Conversion storytelling is part of a witnessing. Witnessing is very common in the group and is very close to collective prayers in structure and performance contexts.
- The neophyte is gradually implicitly and explicitly learning what and how to express her/his authentic conversion experience. Preparatory classes taken by the neophyte before baptism are crucial. Significant concepts such as “new-born experience” or “penitence” are explained and analyzed.
- The displaying of conversion story through witnessing is essential pre-baptism ritual action. The neophyte goes on stage in a front of other members and tells her well-rehearsed born-again experience story. After telling the story, one is baptized.



## Conversion schema

- Events experienced by subject herself only - autobiographical narrative. Experiences are based on quotations, stories and analogies from Bible, textual source around which group is centered. Conversion is a gradual rational becoming aware of the role of the God, Jesus Christ and the neophyte through praying without any apparitions of Jesus or Mother Mary.
- Highly emotional and dramatic content (death of grandmother, final stage of daughter's cancer, bullying in high school, troubles in family, running away from home etc.).
- Confessing one's sins in a front of others (reporting embarrassing personal faults, highlighting one's ignorance and arrogance in relation to God etc.).



## Explaining conversion practice - preliminary suggestions

- The ordering of individual autobiographical episodic memories around shared semantic structures (schemas, models) as other members of the group do, works as a sharing of memories and increases feelings of togetherness in the group (Lambert et al. 2009).
- By telling an appropriate conversion story one is displaying the successful acquisition of group theological knowledge. According to Bulbulia (2009:52-53), acquisition of hard to learn theological knowledge (in a preparatory class the evangelist suggests memorizing Bible verses) is a hard-to-fake signal of group affiliation, since it implies past investments (study of Bible, attending preparatory class etc.).
- By appealing to the emotional content of conversion story, one increases empathy and prosocial feelings in audience toward herself (Eisenberg and Fabes 1990).
- By expressing guilt and atonement in front of others, a subject may increase her own prosocial feelings and behavior towards the group (McKay et al. forthcoming).