



Conversion in the Age of Pluralism

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CHAPTER TWELVE

A COGNITIVE PSYCHOLOGY PERSPECTIVE ON RELIGIOUS CONVERSION AS TOLD IN THE GOSPELS

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In this chapter we intend to approach religious conversion from the perspective of cognitive and social psychology, describing those mechanisms and mental processes at the basis of a socially and culturally complex behavior such as that of religious conversion. As a model of conversion we will mainly refer to some pericopes and sayings drawn from the Gospels. Such a choice, besides being suggested by the methodical necessity of limiting the investigative field to the controllable space of an essay, takes into account the fact that the term “conversion,” as it is understood in the ordinary language of English speakers and of European languages in general, derives its semantic characterization first of all from these sources. The chosen textual reference has, therefore, a paradigmatic relevance from a historical-cultural point of view.

Preliminary Considerations

Our research into the mental structures causing human behavior is started by the (cognitivist) conviction according to which the output (the behavior) is richer than the input (the stimulus)—that is to say, than the circumstances that originated it. This conviction is based on the “thesis of the poverty of the stimulus” (Fodor 1983; Plotkin 1997): what the mind represents of the world is not a simple secular representation of reality but its reconstruction, containing more information than that in the material offered by the stimuli. This is certainly evident in perceptive, mnemonic and linguistic outputs. Deaf children in a school where signs and gestures are forbidden, develop a systemic language governed by rules, as Senghas and Coppola (2001: 323) report:

It has long been postulated that language is not purely learned, but arises from an interaction between environmental exposure and innate abilities. The innate component becomes more evident in rare situations in which the environment is markedly impoverished. The present study investigated the language production of a generation of deaf Nicaraguans who had not been exposed to a developed language. We examined the changing use of early linguistic structures (specifically, spatial modulations) in a sign language that has emerged since the Nicaraguan group first came together. In under two decades, sequential cohorts of learners systematized the grammar of this new sign language. We examined whether the systematicity being added to the language stems from children or adults; our results indicate that such changes originate in children aged 10 and younger. Thus, sequential cohorts of interacting young children collectively possess the capacity not only to learn, but also to create, language

(cf. Harris 1998; Schaller 1991; Pinker 2002).

The very phenomenon of enrichment of the stimulus, due to the mental elaboration of the lived experience, is what happens in the process of religious conversion: some historical facts become, for the believer, “disclosure” events, enriching of a meaning that is not immediately referable to the facts themselves (Schillebeeckx 1975, 1990). The conversion route described in the Gospel, leading the believer to professing the Jesus of history as the Christ of faith, is described as a process characterized by the awarding of a new and further meaning of the carried out facts: “Then their eyes were opened and they recognized him [...]. They asked each other, ‘Were not our hearts burning within us while he talked with us on the road and opened the Scriptures to us?’” (Luke 24: 31-32).¹

The conversion route, meant as a product of the mental elaboration of information and facts, is therefore outlined as a process that—being read, for example, through the field theory of Kurt Lewin (1951)—assigns to the totality of the coexisting factors a higher value than the sum of the single elements. This approach of holistic kind, typical of the Gestalt school, in which the structure of the psychological field acquires a new form and defines a new and manifest meaning (*insight*), in some way gives reason to a conversion process that is a manifestation and awareness of a new meaning of reality.

In this respect, the reference to a German legend reported by Koffka (1935: 27) in *Principles of Gestalt Psychology* can be helpful:

¹All scriptural citations are from the *Holy Bible: New International Version*. London: International Bible Society, 1984.

On a winter evening amidst a driving snowstorm a man on horseback arrived at an inn, happy to have reached shelter after hours of riding over the wind-swept plain on which the blanket of snow had covered all paths and landmarks. The landlord who came to the door viewed the stranger with surprise and asked him whence he came. The man pointed in the direction straight away from the inn, whereupon the landlord, in a tone of awe and wonder, said: 'Do you know that you have ridden across the Lake of Constance?' At which the rider dropped stone dead at his feet.

In what environment, Koffka asks, did the behavior of the stranger take place? The question, Koffka insists, will have to say that there is a second meaning to the word "environment," according to which "our horseman did not ride across the lake at all, but across an ordinary snow-swept plain. His behavior was a riding-over-a-plain, but not a riding-over-a-lake." This legend suggests to us, first, that the mental representation of reality (the iced bare patch) not always coincides with its physical characteristics (the Lake of Constance); second, that the awareness of one or the other world is not simply discovered in consequence of a direct and immediate experience of the environment, but is the result of sharing meanings in a social context that transmits them; finally, that the meaning we attribute to reality has a crucial importance for human existence: it either vivifies or kills, bears to the world or withdraws us from it. Therefore, that new and manifest meaning, that *insight* that releases the spring of the conversion process, does not emerge out of a solipsistic re-elaboration of mental processes, but is an additive factor that, as it is narrated in the German legend, is the result of a meeting, the product of a social interaction that determines its shared meaning.

We find this additive principle again narrated even in one among the most famous evangelical pericopes, this time drawn from John's Gospel that, in the image of a miraculous multiplication of loaves and fishes, offers to us the conversion route that the disciples first and the crowd after must cover in order to disclose to that sense capable of satisfying a people's hunger:

When Jesus looked up and saw a great crowd coming toward him, he said to Philip, "Where shall we buy bread for these people to eat?" He asked this only to test him, for he already had in mind what he was going to do. Philip answered him, "Eight months' wages would not buy enough bread for each one to have a bite!" Another of his disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, spoke up, "Here is a boy with five small barley loaves and two small fish, but how far will they go among so many?" Jesus said, "Have the people sit down." There was plenty of grass in that place, and

the men sat down, about five thousand of them. Jesus then took the loaves, gave thanks, and distributed to those who were seated as much as they wanted. He did the same with the fish. When they had all had enough to eat, he said to his disciples, "Gather the pieces that are left over. Let nothing be wasted." So they gathered them and filled twelve baskets with the pieces of the five barley loaves left over by those who had eaten. After the people saw the miraculous sign that Jesus did, they began to say, "Surely this is the Prophet who is to come into the world" (6: 5-14).

To Philip there is only one way to answer Jesus' provocative question about how to obtain that indispensable good for human subsistence (bread): using money. But in this world there is no remedy to poverty: no money, no food. Andrew's intervention redefines the problem and allows us to get to a new interpretation modality through which it is possible to overturn the indigent condition of the crowd into miraculous superabundance. Here the evangelical teaching through the sign of the multiplication of loaves and fishes is clear: a society based on the value of money will not satisfy hungry people, but a society founded on the sharing of goods will be able to transform the little owned by each of us, if shared, into superabundance for everyone. The loaves' multiplication expresses in a narrative and symbolic style that principle according to which the whole is more than the sum of its parts: love, manifest through the solid sharing of one's goods, transforms what to our eyes appears to be insufficient, into superabundance for everyone, provided it is shared.

The goal we set ourselves here is not that of demonstrating the existence of a mental module of God, capable of grasping the sense of the divine in the prosaic facts around us, but that of analyzing some of the mental functions underlying conversion—meant exactly according to the model inferred from the Gospel—if it is considered from a psychological perspective, functions that certainly do not exhaust the reasons for a conversion, but that form the conditions without which such model of conversion would not be "humanly" imaginable. We wish to search for some of those cognitive structures that have been at the basis of the cultural development that has produced that richness of religious symbols and signs through which such idea of conversion is received and negotiated.

Following such analysis, we may even make the hypothesis of a community of universally recognizable elements, that form that "universal grammar" of the "religious man" without which an experience such as that of the World Day of Prayer in Assisi in 1986—where for the first time in history hundreds of representatives of the different religions of the world assembled in a prayer meeting sharing a deep religious experience, lived in

the multiplicity and community of the different faiths—the words of Pope John Paul II when he addressed the Heads and Representatives of the Christian Churches and Ecclesial Communities and of the World Religions would be untranslatable and incomprehensible: “If there are many and important differences among us, there is also a common ground [...]. Yes, there is the dimension of prayer, which in the very real diversity of religions tries to express communication with a Power above all our human forces” (1986: 2).

“Belief in the supernatural and religion” belongs to that list of human universals that encompass those characteristics of culture, society, language, behavior and psyche pointed out by ethnographers in diverse societies that are a sign of the mental modules upon which are founded those complex and innate characteristics of the human mind: “Among the many examples are such disparate phenomena as tools, myths and legends, sex roles, social groups, aggression, gestures, grammar, phonemes, emotions, and psychological defense mechanisms. Broadly defined universals often contain more specific universals, as in the case of kinship statuses, which are universally included among social statuses” (Brown 1999: 382; cf. Brown 1991). X. Tooby and Y. Cosmides (1992: 91) observe similarly that while

[t]here is certainly cultural and individual variability in the exact forms of adult mental organization that emerge through development, ... these are all expressions of what might be called a single human metaculture. All humans tend to impose on the world a common encompassing conceptual organization, made possible by universal mechanisms operating on the recurrent features of human life. This is central reality of human life and is necessary to explain how humans can communicate with each other, learn the culture they are born into, understand the meaning of others’ acts, imitate each other, adopt the cultural practices of others, and operate in a coordinated way with others in the social world they inhabit.

Just as the fact that it is possible to make use of any language to convey any message makes us believe that all languages are made of the same material (Chomsky 1959; Pinker 1995, 2002), similarly the existence of religious universals, making a religious experience translatable and sharable, encourages us accept the existence of universal and innate mental mechanisms which, even in the variety of the social and cultural experiences, make certain specific religious behaviors universally intelligible and sharable.

The comparison between the Gospels and the analysis of cognitive psychology conveys at least two great conversion models, that we wish to

outline here and that, according to the latest observations, we may believe have universal validity. The possible universality of these two models then makes them conceivable as compatible models. However, we cannot exclude their inconceivability, in an alternative sense, if some reciprocal traits are radicalized.

Causality

A first interpretation model of the conversion process as narrated by the Gospels is that according to which there would be a mechanism that involves, as its first step, the acknowledgment of a supreme being at the origin of all that exists. Creator, motionless motor, first cause, demiurge—it has the function of justifying the beginning of every form of life, orienting its existence, and guaranteeing an ultramundane purpose. What surprises us in the study of human cognition is that this capability of picking a causality link is based on an innate system of a knowledge-specific domain leading each human being toward the knowledge of reality since infancy: Hume was certainly right in assuming that our belief in the existence of cause-effect relations was a product of psychological processes and a psychological compulsion to have such convictions—even if some evidences seem to make us reasonably believe that he was wrong in believing that such relations did not belong to the deep causal laws of nature (Plotkin 1997).

Some psychologists of development have formulated an experimental procedure focusing on the length of a baby's visual fixation when it is attracted by various images projected on a screen. Not being able to resort to verbal statements with new-born babies, these researchers have used a procedure that has exploited the curiosity and attention of the baby concerning some events, when the latter manifest infringements of physical laws: the more expected the images presented in a film, that is respectful of physical laws, the more manifest is the habituation effect pushing the baby to turn its eyes elsewhere, getting distracted; by contrast, the more unexpected are the presented images, infringing physical laws, the longer the baby keeps fixing on the unexpected event with curiosity. The age of the subjects was between three and six months, when children do not possess speech, they start stalking and grasping objects, but cannot walk, however they are able to infer information about the movement of objects. X. Leslie (1994: 124) observes, "These findings ... inform us about a specialized learning mechanism adapted to create conceptual knowledge

of the physical world, and to do so at an early period in development when general knowledge and general problem-solving abilities are quite minimal (cf. Baillargeon 1995; Spelke 1994; Spelke and van de Walle 1993).

Certainly one of the most fascinating experiments that has been carried out with infants, again with the method of the length of visual fixation, is one relating to the effect of the movement of an object caused by another object in motion. The babies tend to get distracted when they are shown that an object *a* in motion hitting another object *b* causes its movement; but they are attracted by the infringement of this law, that is to say when they are shown that object *b* starts moving even when object *a* stops just before hitting object *b*. However, when inanimate objects are substituted with human figures, the babies are no longer surprised seeing that object *b* starts moving even if the human figure has not hit the object, not considering this an infringement of the law. The babies, it may be concluded, since they only a few months old, know that the cause-effect relations that govern human beings are governed by different laws from the physical ones (Plotkin 1997; Gazzaniga 1998). Infants do not, however, develop an innate and specific knowledge of all the entities they perceive. They do not seem to have a systematic knowledge of shadows and plants and probably they do not distinguish in their reasoning the actions of human beings from those of other animals (Carey 1985; Premack 1990; Spelke 1994; Spelke, Phillips and Woodward 1995).

The existence of these cognitive structures that appear innate to us may give us reasons for the question why the belief in a supreme being is found in all cultures.² Each human being is well prepared in advance to believe in the possibility that an animated being may be the cause of the existence of all things: in this sense we are born as believers already—at the most we run the risk of dying as atheists. The conversion process, then, does not so much open the mind to the possibility of accepting a metaphysical causality as reinforce it.

²The causal attribution process is functional to the necessity of understanding, explaining and predisposing one's behavior in connection with the context in which one operates. Leaving out of consideration the type of identification process of the causality of the events and of the human behaviors, whether they are based on specific causal schemes (Kelley 1972), turned to identifying the major causes or reasons for the events (Buss 1978) or mainly guided by data and theories (Alloy and Tabachnik 1984), it is chiefly a spontaneous process contributing to supplying reality with sense. Thus, finding causality becomes not only the first agent of the organization of events, but a codification system of reality that defines it and makes it accessible in virtue of its unique meaning—omnicomprehensive and participatory at the same time.

Conversion at the most voices the human capability of picking causality, not only physical causality of real events, but also offering names, rituals, symbols and contents. We are not surprised then that Jesus of the Gospel indicated in children the models of true conversion: “I tell you the truth, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Therefore, whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 18: 3-4). In this saying we may catch two messages describing the vision that Jesus has of conversion: on one side, to become as children is a challenge to leave every claim of power and supremacy over others, but rather becoming the slaves of and dependent on others (Schüssler Fiorenza, 1990), while on the other side, the acknowledgment of the fact that the child has the competence to express an act of faith, because he is capable of understanding.

The fact that the human being may grasp in full the content of the evangelical message not as the outcome of a conversion process involving the adhesion to a formal and structured whole of theological doctrines is a conviction that the Jesus of the Gospels manifests more than once, such as when he states: “I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and learned, and revealed them to little children” (Luke 10: 21). As Plotkin (1997) has well explained, in the world of evolutionist biology the cause-effect relations are both the source of the selective pressures, powerful and pervading, to which all living organisms must fit, and the end or the aim of the psychological sensitivity to those relations that have evolved in animals and that can move in the world and operate in it. And just this psychological sensitivity is at the basis of the mental representations that have then been passed on and duplicated in cultural entities—memos, that in turn have had their own evolutionary routes generating various cultural products which, however, share some common metacultural elements, that are universally recognisable: “Like fish unaware of the existence of water, interpretativists swim from culture interpreting through universal human metaculture. Metaculture informs their every thought, but they have not yet noticed its existence” (Tooby and Cosmides 1992: 92).

Since the time that the human being has resorted to the belief in a supernatural being in order to overcome the anguish of death, to recover a link with his perished relatives and strengthen the clan’s bonds, the mind has already been oriented to supplying an answer to him, a vision of the world from which it is difficult to let God escape. Newberg, d’Aquili and Rause (2001: 171-72) write:

The neurobiological roots of spiritual transcendence show that Absolute Unitary Being is a plausible, even probable possibility. Of all the surprises our theory has to offer—that myths are driven by biological compulsion, that rituals are intuitively shaped to trigger unitary states, that mystics are, after all, non necessarily crazy, and that all religions are branches of the same spiritual tree – the fact that this ultimate unitary state can be rationally supported intrigues us the most. The realness of Absolute Unitary Being is not conclusive proof a higher God exists, but it makes strong case that there is more to human existence than sheer material existence. Our minds are drawn by the intuition of this deeper reality, this utter sense of oneness, where suffering vanishes and all desires are at peace. As long as our brains are arranged the way they are, as long as our minds are capable of sensing this deeper reality, spirituality will continue to shape the human experience, and God, however we define that majestic, mysterious concept, will not go away.

It hence becomes a categorical shift to move from a view that would characterize as a “counter-intuitive thought” that would characterize belief in a “super-natural being” to the supernatural figure to which those powers of the animated being are ascribed, which each infant already knows very well, of being able to move in the distance, beyond contact, beyond sight.³

In Matthew’s narration of Jesus’ meeting at Capernaum with the Roman centurion (8: 5-13), the two interlocutors, different and hostile in culture, education and religion, agree over a common element, a religious universal, linked to social causality. And although they derive from very different religious experiences, the two protagonists of the story find themselves as witnesses of an authentic process of religious conversion: the generalization of social causality and the attribution of this law to a human figure with supernatural powers. Thus the centurion speaks to Jesus: “For I myself am a man under authority, with soldiers under me. I tell this one, ‘Go,’ and he goes; and that one, ‘Come,’ and he comes. I say to my servant, ‘Do this,’ and he does it.” What is more obvious and understandable than this phenomenon? Yet this arouses Jesus’ admiration who will point him out as an example of great faith, as a model to imitate

³Pyysianinen, Lindeman and Honkela (2003: 341, cf. Pyysianinen 2003) “evidence for the hypothesis that persons consider counterintuitive representations more likely to be religious than other kinds of beliefs. In three studies the subjects were asked to rate the probable religiousness of various kinds of imaginary beliefs. The results show that counterintuitive representations in general, and counterintuitive representations involving a conscious agent in particular, are considered much more likely to be religious. Counterintuitiveness thus seems to be an important element in a folk-understanding of religion.

in order to be saved. Jesus does not ask this man to follow him and embrace the new faith—as a matter of fact he dismisses him saying: “Go! It will be done just as you believed it would”—because he has recognized in him that generative religious grammar typical of every authentic experience of faith, on which every religion leans and that all faiths share. Jesus and the centurion have spoken to each other and have understood each other because they have succeeded in communicating about those human universals that are at the basis of each authentic conversion, having become like children again. The acknowledgment of a causal (supernatural) power of Jesus provokes admiration, independently from the fact that this same power in the centurion’s faith will be attributed to a pantheon of animate figures.

The Theory of the Mind

If our rational ability to grasp the cause-effect connection in animate and inanimate objects helps us to understand which mental process can guide the mental representation of an individual converting to the causative force of a supernatural being, religious conversion—at least in its description emerging from the Gospel stories to which we are referring—is much richer and articulate than a simple animist faith in supernatural forces. The conversion process indeed does not reduce itself to the acknowledgment of a causal agent of supernatural phenomena. In the evangelic viewpoint, it is basically a sequel expressing itself in the wish for living with Jesus and the way he does, adopting his aims and cooperating with his mission.

In the story by Mark (5: 25-34) of the recovery of a sick woman subject to bleeding, one example among various possible choices, many are those who “touch” Jesus, to get thaumaturgical benefits from him, but only one bleeding woman is able to get into deep communication with Him and is cured. This communion is the result of a sympathetic exchange, in which the intentions of the believer and Jesus’ intentions are reciprocally shared. Jesus is not a passive agent of life force, but an interlocutor who becomes a trustworthy companion in the believer’s life path. Luke the evangelist summarizes all this at the end of his Gospel describing an archetype like conversion route in the episode of the Emmaus disciples (Luke 24: 13-35). The disciples, at first blinded by their dejection, do not recognize Jesus who becomes their traveling companion. However, as soon

as they feel comforted by the presence of that traveler, they recognize Christ in him and say: “Were not our hearts burning within us while he talked with us on the road and opened the Scriptures to us?” The (re)conversion of these disciples is characterized by re-established syntony, the words of that traveler are reliable, they speak to the heart, they have understood each other.

These aspects of religious conversion, as they have emerged from the Gospel stories, have recourse to some competences of the human kind that characterize it as such and that are at the basis of the social competences, of the verbal and nonverbal communicative skills through which we are able to understand the communicative intentions of others, to recognize their emotional states and their causes. This richness of human social competences, which is part of that psychological equipment of the common sense we implement each time we enter into relations with other people in order to understand their intentions and foresee their behavior, is ascribed by cognitive psychologists to another specialized representation system, already present in children who are a little over one year old, and that finds its cognitive maturity around the age of four, independently of the received education and of the culture to which they belong. It’s that ability which allows us to represent the mental states of other people: the emotions other people feel, their wishes, opinions and intentions, their ways of reasoning, whether they simulate or cheat. This cognitive ability enables us to use such information to interpret what the others say, making their behavior meaningful and anticipating what they will do afterwards. In order to do so, first of all the child must have acquired a certain level of awareness of his own mental states as distinct from those of the others, and that can be originated inside the person from wishes, expectations, beliefs, or as the answer to external events.

Various ways have been worked out to verify whether a child can read the mind. According to one of them the child is submitted to situations involving false beliefs, such as: if the child knows that the money is in the old Chinese vase, but he also knows that the thief thinks it is in the desk drawer, if the child is asked: “Where does the thief look for the money?” he should answer that the thief will look for it in the wrong place, that is to say in the drawer (Dennett 1978). A child of about age four is already capable of passing a test like this (Wimmer and Perner 1983).

Equally important for the interpretation and anticipation of other people’s behavior is the ability to understand the moods, emotions, and wishes felt by the others. From his infancy, the human being shows his nature of social being by expressing himself in his interest for the sensorial experiences provided by the other human beings and in interacting and

sharing meanings and intentions. A child can understand other people's wishes even before their opinions, and already by the age of two, he possesses the clearly frustrating awareness that he may have wishes that do not correspond to those of his parents (Wellman 1990). Infants are capable of distinguishing the facial expressions indicating happiness, sadness, anger and fear, and already by three years of age they can distinguish how situations can influence emotions. Finally, children by the end of their first year can understand make-believe, knowing very well how to distinguish it from reality: they can play feigning mummy or talking on the phone holding a banana, without confusing either their own or the others' identities and roles, or the actual use of objects (Howlin, Baron-Cohen and Hadwin 1999).

But how can a child be able to recognize other people's frames of mind without seeing, listening or hearing them? This capacity of paying attention to the properties of the frames of mind is probably based on a specialized representations system, innate and species-specific (we do not have clear evidence that other animals possess similar abilities); an "intentionality detector," as Baron-Cohen (1995) calls it, that allows us to detect other people's minds and understand that most human actions, including our own, derive from the way we represent the world of the mind (Dennett 1978; Plotkin 1997). The idea that we are born predisposed to the development of such competences and that ontogenic development is determined by the phylogenetic characteristics of each human being, involves the fact that mental states are universally recognized, independently from cultural, linguistic and social differences. As a matter of fact this innate capacity of understanding the social environment urges the child toward understanding the others, which defines and codifies itself in social interaction through a bi-directional involvement in the communicative process between the child, capable of recognizing the feelings and intentions of the others, and the other people (Harris 1989; Dunn 1988).⁴ We may have different opinions about what provokes certain

⁴Our ability to understand the basic aspects of society, of expressing love and attitudes and of being able to distinguish between different actors and social categories is apparent from childhood. For example, various studies have demonstrated that, starting from age five, children show specific attitudes and preferences toward particular ethnic groups (Barrett and Short 1992). The conception a child has of the social categories and the ethnic outgroup, initially based on perceptive aspects, would be subsequently redefined and mitigated when the awareness of the reciprocity of social relations increases (Aboud 1988). From these studies, then, "the evidence of the very high sensitivity of young children to the more primitive aspects of the value system of their societies" (Tajfel 1981: 206) would emerge. Therefore, this human capability of recognizing and distinguishing the differences and social belongings, and of being able to understand and share the

moods in each of us and about how we react to certain stimuli, but the frames of mind are the same, whether or not they are perfectly named in our language with specific words (Ekman and Davidson 1994; Lazarus 1991; Pinker 2002).

According to Gospel stories, conversion unceasingly resorts to this social human ability. Religious conversion is not evangelically referable to an intellectual practice and is not measured by the intelligence quotient, but rather by the capacity of making God's intentions our own: "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven" (Matthew 7: 21). Only mastering a theory of the mind enables us to conform to another one's will as such, because it makes us aware of our intentions as distinct from the others' intentions and, therefore, as potentially sharable. Again we understand why Jesus commends that these truths are hidden to sage and intelligent men and are revealed to the little ones instead; while the theological content of a religion may be an esoteric mystery comprehensible only by the elect, conversion as agreement and sharing intentions in favor of a supreme good is available to anyone who listens and implements Jesus' words (Matthew 7: 24). It is on this community of intentions and not on blood links that the relations of the new human community are based: "'Who are my mother and my brothers?' he asked. Then he looked at those seated in a circle around him and said, 'Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does God's will is my brother and sister and mother'" (Mark 3: 33-35).

The fact that in Gospel stories conversion implies a social competence has as a consequence that the believer's faith is not measured on the doctrinal and magisterial knowledge, but on the empathic ability of recognizing other people's needs.⁵ Conversion is then mainly a solidarity

complex system of norms and reference values through social interaction, provides us with the explicative background of the conversion process in the sharing meaning outlined so far.

⁵Empathy, which is usually considered an element preceding the implementation of behaviors aimed at helping other people (Hoffman 1975), is made explicit through emotional activation associated with a cognitive process in which one assumes the other's perspective. To be able to assume the other's needs implies perceiving similarity between people expressed in a system of rules and shared social norms. The theoretical reflection about empathy as preceding prosocial and altruistic behavior, then, concerns the fact that the individual assumes a definition of himself as an unselfish person embodying and sharing social values of respect and mutual help. Therefore, the self perception as an altruistic individual is emphasized through a social sharing process implying the acknowledgment of one's altruistic dimension even from the others: "who are told that they are the kind of people who like to help whenever they can may infer that prosocial behaviors across a variety of situations are expected of them" (Grusec and Redler 1980:

process. This meaning of conversion—that is to say not as in deference to doctrinal truths, but as the capability of accepting and satisfying the others' needs—characterizes the same behavior of Jesus in the Gospel, a behavior that causes a scandal in those who have made of their agreement to doctrinal and ritual norms the aim of authentic conversion. Simon the Pharisee is shocked by Jesus' acceptance of a sinful woman (Luke 7: 36-39), and those Pharisees gathered in the Synagogue of Capernaum take counsel against Jesus when he makes a deliberate transgression of the sabbath rest by curing a man with a shriveled hand (Mark 3: 1-6). Jesus' disrespectful and infringing behavior has a justification in his construction of the meaning of religious conversion as an act of human solidarity, an act of charity.

If we radicalize the consequences of such an observation, even faith in a universal world cause—that is the first conversion model we have described—can be joined to this type of doctrinal belief. It actually is a type of faith based mainly on experiences of a theoretical-individual kind, namely on the capacity of activating a subjective knowledge leading to an objective and sure grasp of a phenomenon. In other words, a faith modeled according to a scheme in which the relation between the self and the world develops without opaque or uncertain areas. Starting with modern critics (from Hume to Kant), to the idea that reality is available to the subject with total transparency, the phenomenological Husserlian stream has worked long on the subject-object scheme in general, up to putting its validity in a critical position (Husserl 1935-37): the results are, among others, criticism of the ideas that man's fundamental dimension is of a cognitive type (Heidegger 1927); that God must be thought in terms of "being" (Heidegger 1957; Marion 1982); and a repeated comparison with the experience of empathy, which in fact does not allow reduction of the intersubjective relation to a subject-object model (Stein 1917; Husserl 1931). Each subject forms itself in a mature and responsible way thanks to the call of language and responsibility from others:

533). The capability of identifying oneself with the other and of assuaging his suffering in this way become participative modalities in virtue of one's belonging to a sharing social system considering the neighbor as oneself (see Batson 1983; Batson *et al.* 1989).

In interlocution there is symmetry of roles: each “I” is reciprocal with a “you.” But such symmetry presupposes that the subjectivity of the interlocutors is already established; originally [...] the constitution of the subject (objective genitive) takes place through the (asymmetrical) allocation from another already constituted subject: addressing an infant as a “you,” the I, which “originally” is the other, makes possible the development of the subjectivity of the “person” to whom (*alter*) *ego* turns. Only this being made object of allocution makes the subject possible, that is to say thought as self-reference, as I, as *cogito*.

(Olivetti 1992: 140).

On account of this an important trend in contemporary philosophy of religion, pursuing such questioning of reflective and transcendental thought, is turning toward conceiving the religious experience first of all in ethical-practical and interpersonal terms. In this sense, the responsibility toward the other subject and religious conversion form two phenomena that are not immediately distinguishable, because “God” is not describable in terms of a conscience datum, a phenomenon, an object, but is revealed only beyond the categories that structure the knowledge of the world in terms of relation between subject and object, and therefore one “comes to the idea” only in the “epiphany” of the other’s face (Levinas 1982). Religion understood in this way follows the semantic line of *re-ligare*, rather than *re-legere*: it is an appeal to duty, that at least in its essential and fundamental elements does not include theoretical-cognitive aspects (Olivetti 1995).

As some evolutionist psychologists argued, the birth of culture would not be imaginable if the human species had not developed as advanced cognitive mechanisms as those of the theory of the mind. Culture, meant as knowledge shared by the members of a certain society, implies psychological mechanisms that make the human being capable of communicating with the others and of creating agreement. And it’s only when an agreement is reached on the information and the actions, that is to say on concrete things, that it is possible to think about beginning to agree on the conceptual and the arbitrary (Barkow, Cosmides and Tooby 1992; Plotkin 1997). This process, marking human phylogenetic and cultural evolution, also characterizes the development process of religious conversion according to the New Testament narrations. In them religious conversion is never reduced only to a solitary mystic experience of interiority and immediacy of the divine (Fischer 1976; Moiola 1994)—which could have never led to the Christian religion as a cultural product—but to the negotiation of meanings emerging from the community of the experiences. Participation and agreement, then, on shared meanings

revealing themselves in the obedience to a content of faith, the *kerygma*. This first cultural product generates cohesion, expressing itself in the community life. From here, inside a social group, the creation of the incorporeal products of the construction like rites, dogmatic truths, hierarchical roles, etc. may begin.⁶

It is again the account of the Emmaus disciples that dramatizes all these psychological processes in a narration. The Emmaus disciples, once they have understood the meaning of that meeting with Christ in semblance of a traveler and once they have understood the meaning of the conversations they had with him on their way, do not remain in Emmaus, where they had lived that mystic experience, but they return to Jerusalem where the first community dwells. In the narration Luke pays great attention to describing the dynamics of this meeting: before the Emmaus disciples tell the others about what happened, the community announce to him: "It is true! The Lord has risen and has appeared to Simon" (Luke 24: 34). It is in the community that the meaning of the religious experience is negotiated, the community is the mediator of the meanings of the conversion process. The Emmaus disciples cannot announce they have met the One Who Rose from the Dead if they have not previously received from the believers' community those meanings that will confirm their experience as a path of authentic conversion, which they may share and in which they may participate.

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⁶ Even in this ambit it is possible to individuate a process of socio-cognitive nature beneath such meaning of conversion. A theoretical link to this type of process may actually be offered by the *Self-Categorization Theory* of Turner (1987). The Self-Categorization Theory aims at explaining how an individual gets to defining himself as somebody belonging to a specific category or social group. Starting from the process of social categorization, through which one's subjective experience of social reality is organized and defined, the individual would define himself on the basis of his position into specific social categories. The most salient environment, hence the one which is most capable of explaining differences and similarities inside the reference social schemes, would allow for activating the diverse social definitions of oneself. The importance of a new social categorization and the deriving perception of similarity among its members would then serve as a shared basis for the definition of oneself and of one's behavior as a function of a different organization of reality.

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